

EQIP Helps Merrick County Farmers Improve Farm Operations

By: Joanna Pope, Nebraska NRCS Public Affairs Officer

During tough economic times every penny counts. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has programs that are helping farmers in Merrick County pinch those vital pennies while conserving natural resources.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides technical assistance and financial incentives to farmers and ranchers who conserve natural resources on their land. According to local NRCS Resource Conservationist Tom Schleif, EQIP is a very versatile program.

“The incentives available to landowners through EQIP are really diverse, which helps us meet the needs of a lot of landowners and operators,” Schleif said.

Two Merrick County farmers have recently participated in EQIP, but used the program to accomplish very different objectives.

Tim Williams is a fifth-generation corn and soybean farmer. He used EQIP to help him install a pivot irrigation system on his cropland. According to Williams, the assistance provided through EQIP made it possible for him to purchase the pivot.

“I had been trying to get a pivot installed for over 20 years, but I couldn’t come up with the down payment. EQIP helped me do that. Once the pivot is installed, it pays for itself,” Williams said.

According to Schleif center pivot irrigation is up to 80% efficient, and is about 20% more efficient than gravity irrigation. This means that irrigators save in overall pumping costs. The greater level of efficiency can reduce the amount of water pumped by 1/3. That provides some important water-saving measures for the area.



NRCS Resource Conservationist Tom Schleif (right) assisted Merrick County farmer Andy Faeh with transitioning to organic farming through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Helping People Help the Land



“The Central Platte Natural Resources District has been designated as an over-appropriated district. This means that no new acres can be brought into irrigation within the NRD. Installing pivot irrigation helps mitigate this problem by greatly reducing the amount of groundwater pumped. Pivot irrigation also reduces runoff and provides a more uniform water application across the field. When water is applied more uniformly it reduces the leaching of chemicals such as nitrate into the groundwater. All of these things are a plus for Merrick County and the entire Central Platte NRD,” Schlieif said.

Williams installed his first pivot through EQIP in 2004. He was so happy with the results that he applied again for the program in 2008. This time Williams wanted to install a linear pivot on two of his odd-shaped fields. He worked with Schlieif on the design and installation of the pivot systems. The pivots were in operation during the past growing season, and Williams liked the results.

“My main motivation was to improve irrigation efficiency and save labor. In Merrick County, our soil is so sandy that it’s really tough to keep up with the crops’ water usage. If you get behind it’s about impossible to catch up again. Using pivot irrigation helps prevent that from happening. My yields have reflected that higher level of irrigation efficiency,” Williams said.

Fellow Merrick County farmer Andy Faeh used the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install five pivots on his cropland, but Faeh also used the program to convert some of his cropland from conventional to organic agriculture.

NRCS, through EQIP provides an organic transition incentive payment for farmers and ranchers who make the transition from conventional to organic agriculture. Incentive payments vary across the state – east vs. west, irrigated vs. dry land, and cropland vs. rangeland - but Schlieif says the EQIP incentive payment is effective in helping producers make the switch.

“In Merrick County through EQIP we offered first time organic growers an incentive payment of \$50 per acre for up to 160 acres. This incentive rate now varies, but it continues to give farmers encouragement to make the transition to organic ag, and it provides



NRCS Resource Conservationist Tom Schlieif (left) worked with Merrick County farmer Tim Williams to install a center pivot on his cropland through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

a safety net while learning a new farming system,” Schlieif said.

It takes three years of growing crops chemical-free by organic standards to become certified as an organic grower. According to Faeh, the three-year transition period is the biggest hurdle in converting to organic agriculture.

“During the transition from conventional to organic yields can go down. Plus you don’t receive the premium organic price for your crops until you’re actually certified organic. EQIP helps make the transition period less risky,” Faeh said.

So, with the risk during the transition period, and all of the paperwork and oversight associated with certifying organic, why do farmers make the switch? For Faeh it came down to being a good steward and pure economics.

“Obviously the premium price paid for organically grown crops was very appealing to me. I can farm less and make the same amount of profit. Plus I just really like the farming practices. I don’t like to spray poison on things. I don’t even like to spray on my non-organic fields because you kill all of the good organisms with the bad. Chemical farming sterilizes your soil,” Faeh said.

Faeh has been so pleased with the acres he switched to organic farming that he has plans to eventually convert all of his cropland.

NRCS is also working to provide education to more producers interested in farming organically. The Organic Farming Statewide Project is a three-year, statewide education program to help farmers and ranchers transition to organic production. The project is partially funded through a grant from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and will be carried out in nine Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) areas statewide.

The project is designed to provide information at the local RC&D level from experienced organic farmers, supported by three organic farming technicians. Farm tours, information meetings, and statewide gatherings will provide farmers the knowledge-base and social environment needed to decide if their operation is suited for organic farming.

The nine RC&D's in the project include: Northeast Nebraska RC&D in Plainview, Nebraska Loess Hills RC&D in Oakland, PrairieLand RC&D in Madison, Nebraska Great Plains RC&D in David City, Five Rivers RC&D in Tecumseh, Trailblazer RC&D in Red Cloud, South Central Nebraska RC&D in Doniphan, Panhandle RC&D Scottsbluff, and Loup Basin RC&D in Ord.

To learn more about EQIP, transitioning to organic agriculture, RC&D's and the additional assistance available from NRCS contact your local USDA Service Center or visit www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov. ♦