

## Conservation Takes Pressure Off Pumpkin Creek

By: Joanna Pope, Public Affairs Specialist

When Leo Hoehn bought his Banner County farmland in 1989 it came with 1,300 acre-feet of surface water rights out of Pumpkin Creek. He used this water for irrigation, but just four years later the creek was dry.

To continue irrigating Hoehn drilled wells and installed center pivots on his cropland. Hoehn's experience was not unusual in the Pumpkin Creek watershed. Many neighboring farmers also drilled wells to continue irrigating. Soon, groundwater levels along Pumpkin Creek also started to decline.

The Panhandle of Nebraska has been experiencing drought conditions for the past eight years. The drought has prompted farmers to depend more on irrigation. But as drought conditions persist groundwater and surface water levels continue to drop.

To help reduce the pressure on the watershed the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) initiated a program to encourage farmers in the Pumpkin Creek watershed to use less water. Pumpkin Creek was designated a "special initiative area" through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Through this program, and leverage from the North Platte NRD, irrigators were offered an incentive payment to convert their irrigated cropland to dryland.

The goal of this program was to get enough acres converted back to dryland farming that the watershed could be restored. Farmers were offered \$450/acre to make the conversion. This amount is based on the difference in land value of irrigated vs. dryland cropland.

Scottsbluff NRCS District Conservationist Dallas Johannsen worked with other NRCS staff and partner agencies to get the program off of the ground.



Joanna Pope, NRCS  
*NRCS District Conservationist Dallas Johannsen (left) and NRCS Resource Conservationist Kathy Buttle (right) worked with Banner County landowner Leo Hoehn (center) on converting his irrigated cropland to dryland through EQIP.*

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*"Should we just keep pumping the groundwater until there's no water left, and then go back to dryland? Or should we be proactive now and restore the watershed?"*

**- Leo Hoehn,  
Banner County Farmer**

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"There is an excellent opportunity to restore and reclaim the hydrology of the area. It isn't too late – yet," Johannsen said.

Johannsen is hoping to get about 20,000 acres converted to dryland through EQIP. So far 3,000 acres have been enrolled into the program, and other water saving strategies have been developed.

When Hoehn heard about the EQIP special initiative program he decided to participate. He felt something needed to be done. He's been troubled by the dramatic changes on his property, which sits just to the south of Nebraska's scenic Wildcat Hills.

"When the (Pumpkin) creek ran, there was so much wildlife – deer, antelope, birds and trout in the stream. Now I rarely see any wildlife out here. It's like a desert," Hoehn said.

Hoehn's son Mike also farms, and Leo wants his son to have the same opportunities he's had to farm and raise livestock. But the changes they've seen in Banner County over the past few years have Leo concerned.

"People need to think long-term. Should we just keep pumping the groundwater until there's no water left, and then go back to dryland? Or should we be proactive now and restore the watershed?" Hoehn asked.

Johannsen said that is the goal of EQIP – to be proactive.

"There is a very good chance that irrigation water will not be available in much of the Pumpkin Creek watershed in the near future if something is not done to reduce the amount of water leaving the system," Johannsen said.

Several producers have already seen their irrigation wells reduced to only pumping a few inches during the year. EQIP offers farmers an incentive to switch to dryland farming now, before they may have to switch to dryland farming later and not receive any compensation.

Hoehn said that he and his neighbors are learning to farm differently. They are learning how to plant more drought resistant crops, or irrigate with less water than they ever thought possible, and EQIP has helped them adapt.

EQIP offers additional ways for farmers in the area to conserve water. EQIP also offers an incentive payment for farmers to no-till their crops. EQIP has also provided financial incentives to convert cropland to grassland. All of these measures through EQIP work together to help reduce the amount of water pumped from the Pumpkin Creek watershed.

“This is a good program. It is a fair program. NRCS has been the lead agency heading this entire effort up. They’ve been the main source of information and education to landowners about this issue. Hopefully more folks will take advantage of this opportunity,” Hoehn said. ♦



Joanna Pope, NRCS

*The channel of Pumpkin Creek is now nearly completely dry, as show here in this field just south of the Wildcat Hills in Banner County. EQIP provides incentives to landowners to reduce the amount of water being drawn out of Pumpkin Creek, which will help restore the watershed.*

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