

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Beginning farmers improve water quality, bottom line through conservation program

It's said that farmers are one of America's "dying breeds." But the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is working to breathe new life into America's agriculture through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Gurmeet Singh, a beginning farmer in Whatcom County, is one of a number of new producers who hopes to add to the rich history of American agriculture – and conservation.

"I started farming last year with my wife Ranbeer and family," said Singh. "My farming roots stretch all the way back to India." Singh farms 20 acres of organic blueberries outside of Lynden. Soils on the farm vary from very deep, poorly drained, silty clay loam to somewhat poorly drained loam.

"Friends told me that my blueberry field has drain tiles and that it needs proper drainage," said Singh. "They said that NRCS could help solve my field drainage problems and assist me with my irrigation concerns as well."

"NRCS provided technical assistance to address Mr. Singh's field drainage concerns," said Travis Bouma, NRCS



Gurmeet Singh and Ranbeer Déaliwal installed a drip irrigation system to precisely control watering in their blueberry fields through EQIP.

soil conservation technician in Lynden. "NRCS determined that his field was prior converted farmland which had old drain tile lines that were not functioning properly," he said.

When providing technical assistance, NRCS develops a conservation plan that identifies resources problems and solu-

tions while keeping with the landowner's objectives. "Mr. Singh's property is lined by drainage ditches and a salmon bearing creek, so runoff concerns needed to be addressed," Bouma said. "Mr. Singh was selected for participation in the EQIP program because of his water quality and water quantity issues," he said.



Gurmeet Singh discuss conservation goals and objectives with Travis Bouma, NRCS soil conservation technician.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, I would give the NRCS a 10,"
Gurmeet Singh

According to Bouma, EQIP is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, plants, animals, and related natural resources on their land. "Beginning and limited resources producers are eligible to receive up to 90 percent cost-share assistance for conservation practices through EQIP," Bouma said.

EQIP provided the opportunity for Mr. Singh to develop his farming operation and to improve irrigation and water quality concerns. To address the field runoff concerns NRCS will install grass filter strips along the edges of his field and a shrub and tree buffer strip next to the creek.

Buffers provide food, cover, and shelter for wildlife while screening out noise and dust and in some instances improve the landscape.

"Filter strips reduce the amount of excessive nutrients from entering into the drainage ditches," said Bouma, "A buffer planting along the stream will prevent nutrients from entering into the creek," he said.

Currently, irrigation is provided to the blueberries from a historic well system. "Conversion to a drip irrigation system is more efficient and will provide the precise amount of water to the blueberries," said Bouma, "This irrigation system will conserve water and reduce leaching of nutrients along with runoff."

An irrigation pond will be the source of water for the drip irrigation system. According to Bouma, the pond will hold 950,000 gallons and be fed naturally from rain water and a seasonal high water table.

"NRCS provided technical and financial assistance through their EQIP program," said Singh. "On a scale of 1 to 10, I would give the NRCS a 10. They have helped answer all of my questions...I am very satisfied with the EQIP program," he said.

NRCS is committed to making sure technical assistance and program activities reach beginning and limited resource producers to enable them to maintain and develop economic viability in farm productions, according to Bouma.

"I didn't have any hesitation in requesting assistance from NRCS and I will tell others how NRCS has been very helpful and honest with me," said Singh. "If producers need technical assistance with field drain tiles, an inefficient irrigation system, or have water quality and concerns to contain runoff... talk with the friendly staff at NRCS," he said.

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