



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

# Benefits of Conservation Planning Landowner Profile



***“...NRCS provides cost sharing, but it’s more than the cost-sharing. They provide their expertise, and that’s worth a lot.”***

**— Amarjit Sohal**

## Conservation Programs:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Farm and Ranch Solid Waste Cleanup and Abatement Grant Program

EQIP is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to promote agricultural production and environmental quality. For beginning farmers, the cost-share rate is usually 75 percent and can be more for some practices.

SCRCD partners with the California Integrated Waste Management Board to provide funding for clean up of illegal refuse dumped on local orchards. In some cases, clean up grants can also provide landowners with security gates and fences to prevent future illegal dumping.

## Conservation Practices Used:

- Microirrigation Systems
- Irrigation Water Management
- Nutrient Management
- Pest Management
- Air Quality Management
- Conservation Cover
- Forest Slash Treatment
- Farm Clean Up and Fencing

## Conservation Programs Can Help Beginning Farmers

Amarjit Sohal of Yuba City is a young farmer who loves agriculture. And although he has a full time job in town, he finds time to manage his fruit and nut orchards in Sutter County.

His father has farmed in the area for over 40 years, mostly growing peaches and prunes. Sohal grew up helping his father with the family orchards and acquired a passion for the business. After he graduated from college and started working for Sacramento Valley Farm Credit, Sohal’s enthusiasm for agriculture led him to acquire land and start farming his own orchards.

“I was born and raised in agriculture,” said Sohal. “We’re predominantly peach and prune farmers. But we’re moving into almonds and walnuts at this point, just to add some diversity. Everything’s working great so far.”

Initially, Sohal wanted to improve water efficiency in his orchards and make other improvements. But the expense involved was daunting, especially for a relatively new enterprise.

Sohal knew about assistance available from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). His father had worked with NRCS and participated in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). So in early 2005, Sohal signed up for EQIP cost-share assistance and developed a conservation plan with NRCS staff. Through EQIP, he was able to install a micro-sprinkler irrigation system on 126 acres used for almond and walnut production. The system saves him a lot of water and money. And because he qualified as a “beginning farmer,” he was able to get a higher cost-share rate on the project.

“I’m very open to learning,” said Sohal. “My father was kind of skeptical of transferring from flood to microjet irrigation, just because he doesn’t like a lot of change. But once we converted our first field he was a big believer. Now he’s very happy with all of our irrigation projects.”



**Amarjit Sohal**



*Monitoring soil moisture helps Sohal increase yields while saving water and money.*

Sohal said that he and his family have done about eight projects with NRCS. These projects include not only the irrigation system and practices in his almond and walnut orchards but also installation of additional micro-sprinkler irrigation systems on more than 63 acres used for peach and prune production as well as irrigation, nutrient, pest, and air quality management practices.

Water management practices, including monitoring of soil moisture, help Sohal to adjust water use to the needs of his crops. He maintains soil moisture within the range for optimum plant growth for optimum production without excessive water loss.

Sohal said that conversion from flood to micro-sprinklers has had many benefits. "We're saving an acre to an acre and half foot of water annually," he explained. "We've got the microjets on a rectangular pattern, so the water is only coming about 3 feet away from the tree. That way we can keep the middle dry." The system also helps Sohal to prevent frost damage. "During an early frost we had the water running and it saved the crop," he said. "If you were flooding the fields, there's no way you'd get that frost protection and save your bloom."

Nutrient and pest management practices allow Sohal to schedule applications of nutrients and any needed pesticides for optimum crop yields and tree health, while minimizing or eliminating movement of nutrients and pesticides to surface water and groundwater.

"Now we're not just fertilizing for the sake of fertilizing, but we're putting on amendments that the trees and soil need," Sohal said. "The resulting production has been phenomenal. We do all the fertilizing through the irrigation system, so we're not wasting any fertilizer. We're actually cutting back by 30 percent."

Another program that has been of great assistance to Sohal is the California Integrated Waste Management Board's Farm and Ranch Solid Waste Cleanup Abatement Program, which provided grant funding through the Sutter County Resource Conservation District (SCRCD). Sohal applied for a grant to clean up a two-acre site where he wanted to plant walnut trees. Through SCRCD the cleanup program provides funding for clean up of illegal refuse dumped on local orchards.

Sohal said that the remote, vacant area had too much access from other properties and people had been using it as a garbage dump. "People were leaving all kinds of junk and debris on the property: concrete, car parts, wiring, tires and lots of other stuff. It was a real mess," he said. "It was going to cost me a lot of money to clean



*Sohal wanted to expand his orchard into a vacant, two-acre area, but illegal dumping had filled the site with junk (left). A farm clean-up grant, available through SCRCD, enabled him to prepare the site for planting (below).*



it up. But I was able to get a grant." Sohal said that the grant also helped to fund a fence around the site to minimize access and prevent future dumping.

Sohal is active in helping and informing other young farmers. Through the Yuba-Sutter County Farm Bureau he serves as Chair of the Young Farmers and Ranchers Program, in a local chapter he helped establish to teach Ag leadership and management skills and to educate members on legislative issues and new technologies.

Sohal is also serving a three year term on the USDA Ag Advisory Committee on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers. He was appointed to the 20-member committee in 2008 (the only member from California) and went to Washington D.C. to discuss the new Farm Bill and some of the benefits throughout the nation that can help beginning farmers.

"With my job at Farm Credit we assist beginning farmers and ranchers," said Sohal. "I meet a lot of young farmers through my job and also through these committees. And I'm happy to say that there's a lot of interest in Ag. It's nice to hear that I'm not the only one! In our meetings we talk about NRCS and the benefits they can provide," he said. "In my experience there are two main benefits: expertise and the cost sharing. The cost-share on my 126-acre field was a huge dollar amount. And working with NRCS staff has educated me and actually made me a better farmer."

Sohal added, "People always ask the question, 'would you do this project if funding wasn't available?' The truth is, I wouldn't be able to afford to put these irrigation systems in without the cost share because of the expense involved."

"The way I look at it, NRCS provides the cost share but it's more than the cost share, Sohal said. "They provide their expertise, and that's worth a lot."