

Southern Conservation District

Long Range Plan

2016

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INTRODUCTION

GENERAL INFORMATION

Southern District is a very diverse area of the state. Coal, timber, gas, agriculture, and tourism are important resources in this area. According to WV Center on Budget and Policy's December 2013 report, 75% of private land in Wyoming County is corporate owned followed by 62% in McDowell, 48% in Raleigh, 44% in Fayette, 14% in Mercer and 7% in Summers. In total, corporations own approximately 799,000 acres within the Southern District. These corporate owned lands are being utilized for coal, timber and gas production, the major commodities within the District. Wyoming County ranks 10th in the state for gas production while Raleigh County is #5 in coal followed by Wyoming #9 and McDowell #10. While our counties are in the top 10 in these resources, they are in the low end of the ranking for agriculture. There are approximately 173,463 acres in agriculture divided in to 1347 farms, which makes the average farm size about 128 acres. The majority of the farmers that operate these farms are part time farmers. Cattle is the predominant enterprise on these farms with Summers County having approximately 5,900 head, Mercer with 4,800, Raleigh County with 3,200 head, Fayette County with 2,200 head and Wyoming County with 200 head. The counties within the District also raise approximately 2100 head of sheep and goats, which make up 5% of the state's sheep and goat total. Fayette, Raleigh and Wyoming contribute approximately 1.7% to WV's agricultural sector, while Mercer and Summers contribute 3.1%, (these values are based on total agriculture commodities). Vegetable production has grown over the past few years within our District, especially with farmer's markets and farm to school projects. Currently this District has 48 farms growing a variety of vegetables on 72 acres. With these numbers growing and the push for fresh, local foods, this is an area of interest for this District.

POPULATION

Raleigh County has the highest population with 78,859, followed by Mercer with 62,264, Fayette with 46,039, Wyoming with 23,796, McDowell with 22,113 and Summers with 13,927. With the decline in the coal and railroad industries, the area's largest employers, the poverty levels within the region have increased. 2014 data shows that 34.9% of the population in McDowell County are at the poverty level based on income, followed by Summers County with 25.8%, Wyoming County at 22.8%, Mercer County at 20.5%, Fayette County at 21.4% and Raleigh County at 18%. The state average is 18.9%.

The Southern District is drained by the Greenbrier River in Summers County, Tug Fork in McDowell and Upper Guyandotte in Wyoming counties, while the majority of the District is within the New River Watershed system. There are several watershed projects within the Southern District, these include: Arbuckle Creek, Dunloup Creek, Meadow Creek, and Upper Meadow River in Fayette County, Piney Creek, Little Whitestick Creek, Cranberry Creek, Soak Creek, and Upper Marsh Fork in Raleigh County, Brush Creek, Dave's Fork/Christian Fork and Upper Bluestone River in Mercer County, Meadow Creek and Upper Meadow River in Summers County, and Rock Castle Creek in Wyoming County.

Southern WV also has 10 State Parks encompassing 15,963 acres and the New River National River System which includes Grandview National Park that encompasses over 72,000 acres. Associated with this is the large white water rafting experience, festivals such as Bridge Day, and skiing at Winterplace resort making Southern WV a tourism hot spot. The park system alone boasts over 1 million visitors per year.

Soils

Wyoming and McDowell counties (MLRA 125) are dominated by very steep, rugged sideslopes which are broken by strongly sloping to steep ridgetops and very narrow bottoms along streams. The soils in the mountain uplands are Matewan, Pineville, and Guyandotte soils, which are medium textured, skeletal soils with greater than 35% rock fragments throughout the profile. Fiveblock and Kaymine are soils on reclaimed mountaintop removal mines. Most of the population is in the bottomlands, which are made up Chavies or Chagrin soils in an Urban land complex.

Fayette, Raleigh, Summers and Mercer counties (MLRA 127) are more gently to moderately sloping high plateau areas, with very steep, deeply dissected gorges. Soils on the plateau, such as Nallen, Fenwick, Gilpin, and Lily, are moderately deep and medium textured. The soils in the steep gorges, such as Layland, Dekalb, Guyondotte, are medium textured, skeletal soils with greater than 35% rock fragments throughout the profile. Some areas of heavy textured red clay soils, such as Pipestem, form in the Mauch-Chunk geology within the New River Gorge drainage. Alluvial soils along the New River include Chavies, Potomac, and Pope.

Geology

Cyclic beds of sandstone, siltstone, clay, shale, and coal of Pennsylvanian age form the bedrock in most of this area. Coal mining is the major industry in MLRA 125.

Climate

The average annual precipitation is mostly 45 to 60 inches. Almost half of the annual precipitation falls during the growing season. Rainfall typically occurs during high-intensity, convective thunderstorms in summer. Snow may occur during winter in the northern part of the area and at the higher elevations. The average annual temperature is 50 to 60 degrees F. The freeze-free period averages 200 days and ranges from 170 to 225 days.

LOCAL WORK GROUP MEETING

The Southern District held a local workgroup meeting on March 10, 2016 at the Beckley Area Office conference room. District supervisors, WVU Extension Service, FSA, and WV Division of Forestry personnel were in attendance. Several resource concerns were evaluated and the top 9 were selected. A summary of these concerns will be addressed in the following pages. The main concerns that were brought out in the meeting were the need to address grassland issues, mainly water, and brush control within the District. The District would like to have this program work in conjunction with their program, AEP, to address as many issues with as many farmers as possible. The next most pressing concern in the District was trying to establish more high tunnels and work to provide more produce to the local schools. High tunnels have been a popular practice in the last few years, and with the push for more fresh, local foods in the school system, and with the District having 4 strong FFA chapters, the District would like to create a program involving FFA students providing fresh produce to the school systems. Partnerships for possible proposals have been established and they include: WV Division of Forestry, Elk Foundation, WV Department of Vocational Education, FSA, WVU Extension Service.

SOUTHERN DISTRICT RESOURCE CONCERNS

1. Excessive nutrients/organics in surface water
 2. Plant Condition- Productivity health and vigor
 3. Plant Condition- Noxious and invasive species
 4. Plant Condition- Forage Quality and Palatability
 5. Fish and Wildlife – Inadequate food and cover/shelter
 6. Domestic animals – Inadequate stock water
 7. Soil Erosion – Sheet and rill erosion
 8. Insufficient water- Inefficient use of irrigation water
 9. Degraded plant condition – Undesirable plant productivity and health
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1. Excessive nutrients/organics in surface water is a concern in this District due to the number of farms feeding livestock close to a stream or waterbody. This concern is more prevalent within the New River watershed. There is also a concern with access to streams by livestock and poor cover on pastures resulting in runoff into waterbodies. This concern can be evaluated by existing TMDL testing. This resource concern can be addressed using practices in EQIP such as fencing, nutrient management, prescribed grazing and water developments.
 2. Plant condition- productivity, health and vigor is a concern on grassland systems due to lack of proper grazing management, improper soil health due to inadequate nutrient management practices and inadequate water within the pasture. This concern can be measured by tons of forage produced utilizing pasture condition scoring and soil testing. This concern can be addressed using EQIP practices such as prescribed grazing, water developments, nutrient management, and reseeding practices as well as fencing.
 3. Plant condition – noxious and invasive species is a concern in this District mainly in pasture situations. The presence of invasive species limits the production of desirable species and deters the proper growth habits of forages needed to adequately stabilize the pasture and provide adequate nutrition for the livestock. Pasture condition scoring could be used to monitor success.
 4. Plant Condition- forage quality and palatability is a concern on grassland systems due to lack of management, poor nutrient management practices, and unadaptable plant species to soil types. This concern can be addressed through EQIP practices such as pasture and hayland planting, and nutrient management. Plant tissue analysis, pasture condition score, and regular soil tests can be the monitoring system for this concern.

5. Fish and Wildlife– inadequate food and inadequate cover and shelter– are 2 resource concerns that are soon to be a bigger concern in our area. With the upcoming reintroduction of Elk in Wyoming and McDowell counties it is increasingly more important to identify areas that can be improved for habitat, to minimize the competition with livestock for forages on farmland. EQIP can address the issues needed through food plots, reseeding, tree planting, and other habitat improvement practices. WV DNR would assist in monitoring these activities for effectiveness.
6. Domestic Animals– inadequate stock water– is a resource concern in this District. Pastures are inadequately grazed due to lack of water dispersed throughout the pastures. Livestock have to travel too far for water and therefore the pastures are severely underutilized. This could be overcome by placing watering facilities at a maximum of 800 feet apart within the grazing boundary. EQIP water development practices could be utilized. Pasture condition score and getting the pasture situation to RMS level could be measurement tools for this concern.
7. Sheet and Rill erosion– we are looking at this concern for high tunnel crop production. With most of the high tunnels being put in crop fields there is a significant amount of water that runs off the structure and causes erosion problems in the cropping areas. This can be addressed with guttering or splash pads around the structures. Gutters also allow the possibility of using the runoff as part of an irrigation system.
8. Insufficient Use of Irrigation Water– In cropping systems, such as high tunnels, mismanagement of irrigation is causing decreased plant growth, and inability to produce quality produce. The irrigation management standard as well as micro irrigation can alleviate the effects of this resource concern.
9. Undesirable Plant Productivity and Health is a resource concern among vegetable producers in the area. With climate, pests, and improper nutrient management being the main factors, we are seeing an inability of vegetable producers to have product for the early and late markets. With the use of EQIP practices such as seasonal high tunnels, micro irrigation, pest management, water harvesting catchment, roof runoff and nutrient management, this resource concern can be addressed.

The above listed resource concerns will be addressed in the following categories:

PASTURE IMPROVEMENT

1. Excessive Nutrients/Organics in surface water
2. Productivity, Health and Vigor
3. Noxious and Invasive Species
4. Forage Quality and Palatability
6. Inadequate Stock Water
7. Soil Erosion

As stated in the resource concern narratives, pasture improvement is one of the biggest resource concerns this District has. Farms are mainly part time producer run, and overstocking, and forage/feeding mismanagement are noticed on most all farms visited. With Summers County and Fayette County being the strong livestock areas in the District, our focus will be along the New River Watershed first and then focus on smaller watersheds including Bluestone in Summers and Gauley in Fayette. Our goal with this item would be to get 30 farms to the RMS level of grazing management in each area. EQIP practices will include: fencing, water developments, critical area planting, and pasture and hayland planting to name a few. Partners with this project will include Southern Conservation District, WVU Extension and FSA.

WILDLIFE HABITAT

5. Inadequate Food and Inadequate Cover and Shelter

This is an exciting project for this District. With the restocking of elk in our area of WV, this opens up a lot of possibilities and partnerships to work in an area of the District that, due to the lack of farms, NRCS has not had a large presence in. These being McDowell and Wyoming counties. The focus would be the adjoining private acres surrounding the Wildlife Management Areas that are to be utilized for elk. The purpose will be to assist landowners in developing habitat or enhancing the habitat for this species. This project will utilize EQIP practices to accomplish our goal of establishing habitat over 1,000 private acres surrounding the stocking areas of McDowell and Wyoming counties. Partners will include; Elk Foundation, WV DNR, WV Forestry, and Southern Conservation District.

SEASONAL HIGH TUNNELS

7. Soil Erosion
8. Inefficient Use of Irrigation Water
9. Undesirable Plant Productivity and Health

This project will be utilized in several areas of the District focusing on FFA student producers and Farm to School as well as looking at food desert areas such as Glen Daniel, Bolt, and the Rhodell communities in Raleigh County. There are 3 main FFA/VO-AG programs in this area, Shady Spring, Liberty in Glen Daniels, and Fayette in Oak Hill. The focus of this portion of the project will allow students and their families to utilize high tunnels for the students work projects, with the products of their projects being utilized in school lunches. The goal of 30 high tunnels would be attainable from all school programs. We will be able to utilize EQIP high tunnel practices to accomplish this project. Partners include State FFA director and staff, School boards of Raleigh and Fayette Counties, FSA loan program, WVU Extension Service. The above mentioned food deserts would be the main focus areas since Strikeforce is in the other counties of the District. An attainable goal of 25 additional tunnels would be the goal.

CONCLUSION

With the extreme dynamics of this District, putting good conservation on the ground is both a challenge and a priority. Even though agriculture in this area may not be as big of an income base as other counties in the state, there still are significant resource concerns that need to be addressed. NRCS in this District has a strong partnership with several local, state and federal partners. These include; Farm Service Agency, WVU Extension Service, Southern Conservation District, WV Division of Forestry, Local Elk Foundation, and WV Department of Education. Other partnerships may be developed as needed depending on the resource concerns to be addressed and the proposals that are submitted.

The list of resource concerns listed on previous pages can be addressed through the EQIP program, and with the demographics showing a higher than average poverty level in this area, financial assistance will ensure that good conservation on our farmland gets applied, where as it may be overlooked due to the financial burden. One of the biggest hurdles NRCS has had to overcome has been educating landowners to the effects of bad conservation and helping them to match the resources on the farm with the enterprise they are trying to profit from. Local media as well as newsletters, dinner meetings, and field days from NRCS and our partners will serve as our outlets for promoting our programs.

In selecting proposals to initiate, we will work closely with LWG and partners to establish proposals based on what resource concerns in an area we feel can be addressed with the most participation. Participation rates will vary across the District and that will become the final deciding factor in submitting proposals. With the strong partnerships that we have in this District, I feel that we will have a strong backing with any proposal that is submitted. Staffing will depend on the number and size of approved proposals. This will have to be evaluated at a later date. Once NRCS and LWG decide on proposals to submit, we will determine partnerships needed and prioritize all submissions.

There is a strong ag community in certain parts of the District, albeit small compared to other counties in the state, but the potential for success in focused areas of the District as well as focusing on key resource concerns is high.