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# State Board Activity Report May 2016

## MESSAGE FROM NRCS STATE CONSERVATIONIST SALVADOR SALINAS



### Conservation Partner:

Since our last meeting, NRCS has diligently been focused on prior year contracts and agreements.

Staff are working conservation plans, assessing financial assistance programs applications, and helping producers implement conservation practices. Statewide, we planned and executed the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) funding announcement by Assistant Chief Kirk Hanlin, rolled out the NRCS Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Project and the new Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative national commitment 2.0 strategy.

Additionally, valuable collaborations continue between NRCS, the TSSWCB and local SWCDs on Watershed Rehabilitation Program projects. NRCS continues to assist local sponsors in finalizing Damage Survey Reports and contractual agreements relative to May 2015 flooding and EWPP Texas funding. It's also time for another round of Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) proposals for FY 2017 and NRCS is providing assistance to prospective program partners.

As NRCS's conservation programs and initiatives portfolio expands, so does the outreach efforts to inform its traditional and non-traditional clients. Outreach events and clinics are on-going in all areas of Texas. I encourage SWCD Directors and employees to attend.

The national Soil Health Initiative remains a top priority with the Chief. To lead Texas' Soil Health Initiative, I hired Nathan Haile from Weatherford. Nathan will soon reach out to SWCDs and other conservation partners to plan and execute on-the-land soil health demonstrations and practices. Improved soil health leads to systemic improvements in soil carbon sequestration, increased resilience to drought, heavy rainfall and extreme temperature variability, water holding capacity and infiltration.

Slow, but sure progress continues in respect to the NRCS Administrative Services Transformation. Texas NRCS has had numerous critical vacancies and priority vacancies are finally being filled. It will take time, but soon you should be seeing new employees in your area. I ask for consideration and patience as we work our way through this new employment process.

I am also pleased to report that I was invited by the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC)

to attend and present at a bi-national workshop on *Building Partnerships to Promote Monarch Conservation in Priority Habitats along the Migratory Route in Mexico and the United States*. The event was held in Monterrey, Mexico, in early May. I spoke on the NRCS Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Project on private lands, briefly described the TSSWCB Monarch Habitat Improvement Project, and explained the NRCS cooperative conservation relationship with Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Again, another example of the NRCS expansion of its conservation portfolio.

And finally, an NRCS priority is helping its clients to easily access their NRCS field office and employees. Please take a look at information provided on page 3 about Conservation Client Gateway (CCG). I strongly encourage SWCD Directors to sign up to use the CCG and to help inform other producers about this facilitating tool. Access to CCG is at [www.nrcs.usda.gov/clientgateway](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/clientgateway). NRCS employees can provide additional information and assist with the sign-up.

Thank you for the support, partnership and conservation leadership in Texas and I'm sending a big congratulations to all the Area award recipients.

*Salvador Salinas*

## HISTORIC STATE PARK RECEIVES FUNDING FOR FLOOD DAMAGE CLEANUP

Good things are in store in the near future for Mother Neff State Park. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) officials received word in early April that their application for funding through NRCS's Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) had been approved. The funding will go towards debris clean up and removal of a log jam caused by extensive flooding.

Since 1921, this historical park has grown to be a popular destination for generations of families and friends to relax, have fun and make memories. Located in central Texas southwest of Waco, the park offers prime hiking, fishing and camping opportunities with the Leon River coursing through the scenic property.

In May 2015, torrential rains caused heaving flooding in the area resulting in a large log jam piling up just shy of a county road's bridge that travelers use to reach the park's entrance. The log jam hindered stream flow, making the area susceptible to subsequent flooding events that occurred in October 2015. The original part of the park near the Leon River has remained closed due to flood damage since May 24, 2015.

The Mother Neff State Park project is part of recent national EWPP funding totaling \$93 million dedicated to post-disaster recovery efforts in watersheds in 18 states. The park's significant log jam served as the back drop for the national announcement made by NRCS Assistant Chief Kirk Hanlin.



“Funded through the Farm Bill, EWPP allows NRCS to work with local and state governments to help recover from natural disasters – floods, hurricanes, and forest fires,” Hanlin told the crowd of project partners gathered at Mother Neff State Park. “The EWPP program differs from the way we normally work with private landowners in that it allows us to work directly with state and local governments, with them providing 25 percent of the cost and NRCS putting in the other 75 percent.”

Texas will receive \$21.2 million in conservation funding through the EWPP to repair damages in 17 Texas counties affected by severe flooding

caused by heavy rain, up to 20 inches in some locations, that occurred in May 2015.

“In order for us to get work like this completed, it is critical for local governments to have a federal partner,” Hanlin said. “The federal match to local dollars actually makes it possible to do this.”

The flooding damage that occurred at Mother Neff State Park is an example of one of the 55 EWPP projects being funded in Texas, with 3 of those being in State Parks with TPWD as the project partner.

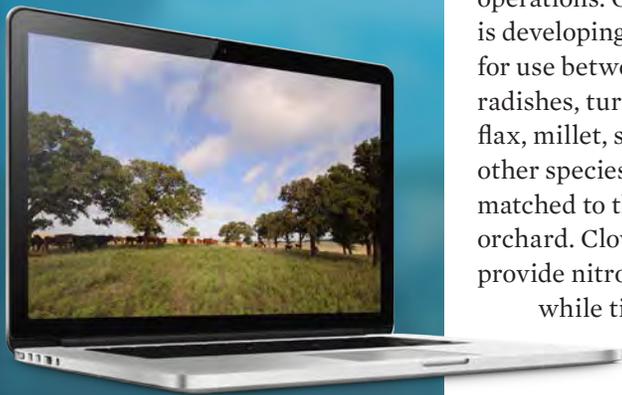
**“Take care of the land and the land will take care of you.”**

**Hugh Hammond Bennett**

## CONSERVATION ASSISTANCE IS JUST A CLICK AWAY!

Conservation Client Gateway is a secure NRCS website which provides online access to conservation assistance for farmers and ranchers. Landowners can access conservation plans, practice implementation schedules, financial applications and contracts, documents and payment information. This online web tool also offers opportunities to request assistance from field office staff and the ability to sign NRCS documents.

NRCS staff are still available in field offices to work one-on-one out on the land with producers.



With Conservation Client Gateway you can also:

- Apply for financial assistance through the Farm Bill's conservation programs
- Review and sign conservation plans and other documents
- Document completed practices and request practice certification
- Request and track payments for completed contract items
- Store and retrieve your conservation files, including documents and photographs

## EXPANDING OLIVE INDUSTRY IN TEXAS EMBRACES CONSERVATION

The olive industry continues to expand in Texas despite the challenges faced by growers such as unpredictable weather, irrigation water issues, and high production costs. This is where NRCS is stepping in to voluntarily help olive growers improve their land, soils and natural resources through conservation planning and technical assistance.

NRCS specialists are providing technical assistance to help growers overcome challenges and providing site specific plans tailored for their operations. One of the newest efforts is developing diverse cover crop mixes for use between orchard rows. Tillage radishes, turnips, clover, cereal rye, flax, millet, sunflowers, and a host of other species are being utilized and matched to the individual needs of each orchard. Clovers and other legumes provide nitrogen for the system, while tillage radish and turnips are excellent choices to reduce compaction.

Many cover crop species have an added bonus of providing valuable pollinator habitat for bees and butterflies as well as food for dove, quail, and other wildlife species.



Above all, cover crop blends offer an opportunity for olive producers to provide a missing ingredient – organic matter – in many of their clean-tilled systems. The addition of organic matter not only allows for better moisture and nutrient holding capacity, but during the cover crop growth period weeds are suppressed and the ground may be significantly cooled during the normally scorching South Texas summer. Cooler soil temperatures are one way to significantly reduce evaporation and potentially reduce irrigation water use.

Irrigation efficiency is another key area where the NRCS has assisted olive producers. Pumping costs for irrigation continue to rise, and some areas have imposed limits on irrigation use. NRCS engineers can survey individual systems and assist with the design of more efficient systems.

## SNELLS RECEIVE CONSERVATION FARMER OF THE YEAR

The Mustang SWCD has presented the 2016 Conservation Farmer of the Year Award for Martin County to Matt and Marion Snell. The Snells farm over 5,000 acres using no-till farming practices with high residue crops which allows the soil to hold more moisture due to increased organic matter. They moved away from the traditional dryland cotton farming to be more innovative and sustainable for the future of their farm. The Snells were presented their award during the 3rd Annual Ag Day Luncheon held in Stanton.



**THE MASTER IRRIGATOR PROGRAM IS UNDERWAY**

Education classes for the Master Irrigation program through the North Plains Groundwater District (NPGWD) have begun in Dumas. Twenty-five participants registered for the course and upon completion will receive their Master Irrigator Certification to include priority access to the NPGWCD Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding.

NRCS State Irrigation Engineer Keith Sides and NRCS Field Engineer Jake Maenius are enrolled in the course as agency representatives. Each session is designed to focus on different aspects of irrigated farming. Session topics include irrigation scheduling such as soil moisture monitoring, agronomy, irrigation systems and more.

Two of the four classes have been completed. The remaining classes are scheduled for July 13-14 and July 20.

Sides said, "It's bringing farmers from across the district's region and other ag industry people together to learn about products, new technologies and better ways to implement old technologies."



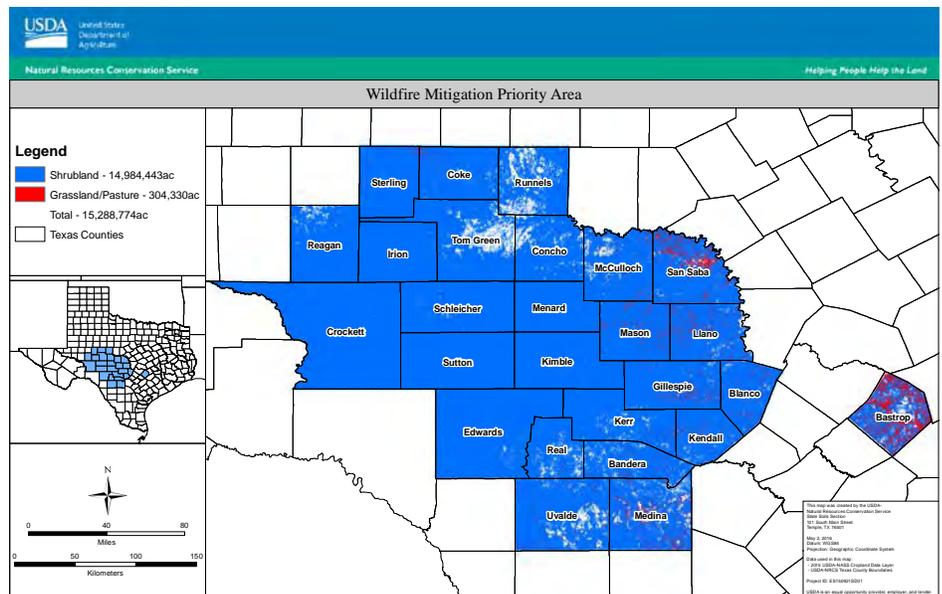
**Master Irrigator participants dig into conservation tillage methods. Instructors from Othman explain benefits of using strip till methods.**

**TEXAS NRCS WILDFIRE MITIGATION TARGETED EFFORT**

Over the past four years, Texas has experienced some of the most drastic weather fluctuations in recorded history, from the greatest single year drought on record in 2011 to record precipitation in 2015. Recent drought years have led to millions of acres of wildfire, resulting in property and economic losses in the billions of dollars. Economic losses to wildfire in 2011 alone were over \$340 million. In 2015, in just eight counties in west central Texas, over 65,000 acres of grazingland were negatively impacted by wildfire.

The rainfall Texas received in 2015 and spring of 2016 has resulted in large volumes of fine fuels throughout most of the State. These conditions set the stage for another potentially catastrophic season for wildfires spreading over the Texas landscape causing damage to property and life. In an effort to mitigate the potential for the spread of wildfires in strategic locations, NRCS in Texas has developed a focused strategic plan to mitigate wildfire and its spread. This area consists of 26 Texas counties that have a high ratio of wildland urban interface, increased amounts of volatile fuels, and the capacity to implement mitigation practices. The installation of effective fire breaks is the primary mitigation practice that will be used in this priority project. Conservation Practice (394) Firebreak has two purposes: 1) to prevent the spread of wildfire and 2) to control prescribed burns. This conservation practice not only serves as a boundary for burn units, it aids in the firefighting if a wildfire occurs. The second mitigation conservation practice will be the safe application of prescribed burning (338) to reduce fuel loading. The Texas A&M Forest Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have outstanding expertise and have assisted and partnered in the planning of this mitigation effort.

Texas counties in the proposed wildfire mitigation priority area are: Bandera, Bastrop, Blanco, Coke, Concho, Crockett, Edwards, Gillespie, Irion, Kendall, Kerr, Kimble, Llano, Mason, McCulloch, Medina, Menard, Real, Regan, Runnels, San Saba, Schleicher, Sterling, Sutton, Tom Greene, and Uvalde. These counties constitute 15,139,190 acres of rangeland and pasture. These acres are highly susceptible to wildfire and hold a high risk of property loss. These counties were selected based on all or some of the following criteria - volume of fine fuels and volatile fuel densities, high risk of property loss due to wildland urban interface and capacity to implement the practices due to knowledgeable and certified contractors, prescribed burn associations, etc.



## RURAL COMMUNITIES LEARN MORE ABOUT STRIKEFORCE

Recent outreach meetings in the Texas High Plains featured rural growth and opportunities through USDA's StrikeForce Initiative. The NRCS, Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Rural Development (RD) coordinated efforts and worked with partners to deliver informational presentations in the region.

Texas State Outreach Coordinator Bertha Venegas with NRCS planned and organized events in Hereford and Crosbyton working through the local USDA service centers and the NRCS zone office in Lubbock to better serve poverty communities and socially disadvantaged farmers.

Each USDA agency representative presented an informative program providing opportunities to learn and network with local and state experts in agricultural lending, farming and housing.

Venegas said, "The state projects have come from participation in both technical and financial assistance helping communities that have had 20 percent persistent poverty for more than 30 years."



Participants request USDA handouts at the 2016 StrikeForce Outreach meeting in the Texas High Plains region.

**Today, one in six Americans lives in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau—and 90 percent of counties with the highest poverty rates are in rural America.**

## SUPPORTING PARTNER'S POLLINATOR EFFORTS

NRCS is providing support in Texas through a Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) awarded to Texas Tech University's departments of Plant and Soil Sciences, Natural Resources Management, and Biological Sciences for approximately \$300,000 to provide demonstrations of pollinator conservation practices and an outlined plan for regional implementation on the Southern High Plains.

According to Texas Tech, several insect groups including butterflies and moths, social and solitary bees, beetles, and flies contribute to the pollination requirements of over 90 percent of the 250,000 species of flowering plants worldwide, with the global value of pollination services at \$212 billion. For agricultural production in the U.S., the value of pollinators has been estimated at approximately \$3.1 billion annually. It has also been suggested that one in three bites of food eaten by humans is directly attributed to pollinators.



Pollinator conservation efforts are being supported by USDA-NRCS and their partners.

## EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

### SALINAS HONORED

Texas NRCS State Conservationist, Salvador Salinas, was recently honored in Austin with the Government Employee Leadership Award for NRCS' partnership work with the MAFO National Farmworker Conference. Salinas was recognized for his tireless efforts on behalf of private landowners; local, state and federal agencies; non-governmental organizations; Tribes, and other community organizations and groups to ensure local resource problems are resolved and that USDA and NRCS goals are successfully met. More than 300 attended the annual conference which is a national partnership of farmworker and rural organizations working together to improve conditions for farmworkers. NRCS has been a strong partner with the organization focused on creating awareness of NRCS services and programs for socially disadvantaged producers and those who work with them.

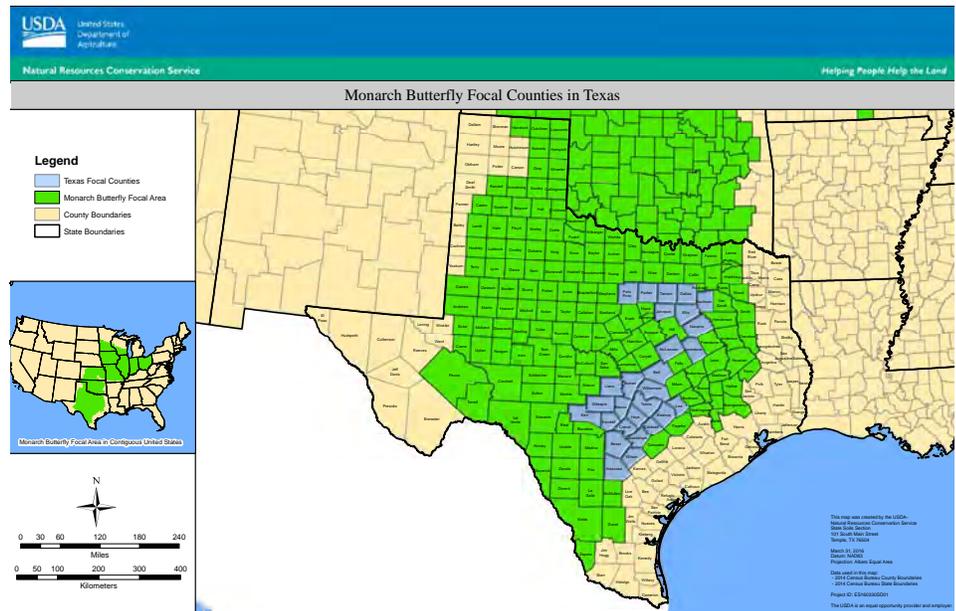


## MONARCH BUTTERFLY HABITAT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Monarch butterflies have experienced a significant decline in the past 20 years. Today, population totals hover around 34 million, down from 1 billion in 1995. In an effort to restore and enhance Monarch habitat in Texas, the NRCS is offering financial and technical assistance to help landowners and conservation partners develop butterfly-friendly improvements on private lands. Through a systems approach, NRCS will help landowners on the conservation and enhancement of diverse native plant communities and ecosystem management to encourage the production of important plant species required for brooding and nectar during migratory periods. Eligible landowners can receive technical and financial assistance for voluntarily installing conservation practices that develop pollinator and wildlife habitats essential to the Monarch.

Twenty-eight Texas counties have been selected as focal areas for Monarch butterfly habitat development because of their strategic location within the butterfly's flight zone during spring and fall migrations. These counties also offer great potential for Monarch habitat improvements on private lands. Counties include Palo Pinto, Parker, Tarrant, Dallas, Kaufman, Johnson, Ellis, Navarro, McLennan, Limestone, Bell, Burnet, Williamson, Llano, Lee, Gillespie, Blanco, Travis, Hayes, Bastrop, Caldwell, Guadalupe, Comal, Kendall, Bexar, Wilson, Kerr and Atascosa.

Partners in this habitat restoration and enhancement effort include the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State of Texas Comptroller, Xerces Society, University of Texas at San Antonio, Non-Governmental Organizations, as well as local Soil and Water Conservation Districts.



NRCS is also working alongside the TSSWCB through its recently launched Monarch Program. The Board's program is inherently important to the survival of the Monarch butterfly

and is an important component of the US Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Strategy. Local SWCDs will administer the Board's program.

**“Today, the iconic monarch butterfly is under pressure. Habitat loss has led to a steady decrease in their numbers.”**

**Jason Weller, Chief,  
Natural Resources Conservation Service**

## CONSERVATION PLANNING, DIRECT RESULT OF EARTH DAY TEXAS

Tarrant County District Conservationist Michael Brooks is already working on developing conservation plans from landowners that visited the NRCS booth at Earth Day Texas held in April in Dallas. One landowner who visited with NRCS at the event has 22 acres on the banks of the Trinity River. He is wanting to develop the property into an agri-tourism destination with walking trails, garden areas and grazing animals. Brooks is working with him on planting pollinators along the trail as well as incorporating grazing management into his plan.

Paul Quinn College Farm Manager James Hunter also approached Tanika Connesero Sanchez, NRCS soil conservationist in the Arlington field office, when she was working the booth at the event about developing seasonal high tunnels on the college's farm property. Brooks followed up and is currently working with Hunter on a conservation plan to incorporate high tunnels into the college's farming program.

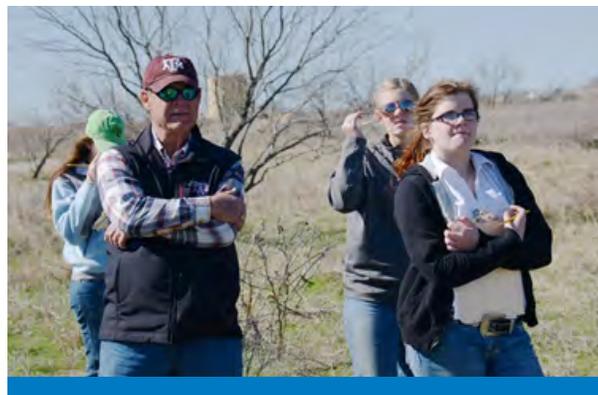
"USDA has opened up a lot of doors to smaller producers, and now that they are aware of it, they are more receptive to coming up and visiting about opportunities available to them through NRCS," Brooks says.



**Paul Quinn College Farm Manager James Hunter visiting with NRCS Soil Conservationist Tanika Connesero Sanchez at NRCS booth during Earth Day Texas event.**

## A CONTEST FOR THE RECORD BOOKS

Blue skies and golden rangeland greeted 348 contestants as they stepped off their school buses for the 60th Annual Jack County Land and Range judging contest. Hosted by the Jack Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), it is the longest running land and range judging contest in the state.



Students participated in Range Ecology, Plant ID, Land Judging and Homesite Evaluation contests on the historic Richards Ranch, just outside of Jacksboro, Texas. Joe Ray Burkett, district technician with Jack SWCD, credits the Jack SWCD board for understanding the importance of educating young people. They annually recruit over 20 volunteers to help run the event. Most of the volunteers have been coming 10 years.

Many of the teams that compete in this contest go on to participate in the annual National Land and Range Judging Contest held in Oklahoma City in May.

"Out of the last 60 years, 20 percent of the national champions have come from this contest," says Jerry Henderson, Jack SWCD board chairman. "That says a lot about this contest."

Henderson is quick to thank NRCS employees for their help putting on the contest. "Support from the NRCS is crucial to this contest," he says. "We couldn't do it without their technical support. They are so good to come out here the day before and set everything up with us and then help the day of the contest when we need them."

## WICHITA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION BOARD HOSTS SOIL HEALTH FARM TOUR

Nearly two dozen wheat, barley and canola farmers from Victoria and South Wales, Australia, recently visited Terry McAlister's farm near Electra, Texas. The farmers were on a tour of American farms practicing no-till management. Their particular interest in McAlister's farm was his use of cover crops to improve soil health.



"I have been no-till farming nine years now," McAlister explained to the group. "I felt like there was still more I could do to reduce my inputs and make my soil even more productive. "

McAlister began reading up on the benefits of cover crops and sought input from James Billbrey and Eileen Vale, natural resource specialists with the NRCS in Wichita County where most of McAlister's farm land is located. Billbrey assessed McAlister's soil conditions, discussed the cash crops he was wanting to grow and put together a mix of cover crops that would help him meet his management goals.

**PROGRAMS REPORT**

**EQIP** – Staff are working applications that were received prior to the first ranking deadline of April 15. It is anticipated that all funding allocated to the field for local resource concerns will be fully obligated in this initial ranking period. We continue to accept applications for program assistance. We have made a request to National Headquarters for additional funding. If we receive all or a portion of the requested additional funding, we will fund those applicants who show a willingness to apply conservation measures. As of May 4, Texas has a demand of \$103M in program applications and only \$66M to address those concerns.

**CSP** – We received a total of 541 applications during the open sign-up period for FY16 CSP funding. We expect to complete this workload by the first of July.

**ACEP** – We received \$11.4M in funding for ACEP and have agreements in place to obligate all of this funding prior to the end of the fiscal year. We are working with cooperating sponsors who are matching funding amounts from NRCS to get easement agreements, surveys, restoration (if needed) and closings scheduled. This is a time consuming process and we expect to complete the easement acquisitions by the end of the year.



Program	Applications	FY 16 Funding	Program Demand	Amount Obligated	Program Balance
ACEP	15	\$11.4M	\$25M	\$11.4M	\$0
EQIP	5807	\$66M	\$103M	\$0	\$66M
CSP	541	300,000 Ac. (Texas Goal)	156,000 Ac.	156,000 Ac.	144,000 Ac.

**MEETINGS STATE CONSERVATIONIST IS SCHEDULED TO ATTEND**

**2016 National Mitigation & Ecosystem Banking Conference,**  
Fort Worth, TX - May 9 - 13, 2016

**CEC Meeting on Monarchs,**  
Monterrey, Mexico - May 10 - 13, 2016

**USDA Deputy Secretary Scuse (Tentative)**  
Houston, TX - May 31 - June 2, 2016

**Dr. Joe Leonard Conservation Tour (Tentative),** Houston/San Antonio, TX - June 20 - 24, 2016.

**Trans-Pecos Wildlife Conference,** Alpine, TX - August 3 - 5, 2016.

**South Central NACD,** Arkansas - August 8 - 13, 2016.



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**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE**

*Helping People Help the Land*