

## SUCCESS THROUGH OUTREACH



NRCS in Texas continues to impact landowners and rural and urban communities through outreach. Three recent events have resulted in reaching more than 1,250 farmers, ranchers and community leaders. The Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley hosted a two day workshop in partnership with the Texas-Mexico Border Coalition Community Based

Organization focused on empowering small-scale agriculture producers with options to improve their operations. The two day workshop concluded by building a high tunnel to extend the growing season of their fruits and vegetables, while providing fresh produce to families in need. The service area for the Food Bank is comprised of Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron Counties.

The national Community Garden Initiative resulted in the construction of three urban community gardens at Drew Academy in Houston, along with Paul Quinn College and TJ Rusk Middle School of Dallas. Efforts like Drew Academy's community garden can address a critical need in urban communities and neighborhoods across the country, such as the lack of fresh, available and affordable food. USDA is trying to reverse this trend by teaching urban youth about gardening, resource conservation and sustainability. A total of \$14,000 in grant funding provided the necessary technical assistance and guidance in developing the garden sites.

Additionally, our recruitment efforts have included NRCS's presence at West Texas A&M University, Tarleton State University, Texas State University, and Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where a total of 290 students received information about job opportunities. This included one USDA onsite recruitment event at Texas A&M University- Kingsville where 71 students applied for 31 Pathways Program recent graduates and student internship positions.

## MEETINGS STATE CONSERVATIONIST IS SCHEDULED TO ATTEND

**Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association Meeting - Fort Worth, TX, April 7 - 10, 2016**

**National Employee Development Center Board of Directors Meeting - Fort Worth, TX, April 13 - 15, 2016**

**MAFO Conference - Austin, TX, April 24 - 27, 2016**

**National Employee Development Board Meeting - Fort Worth, TX, April 12-13, 2016**

**Red River Compact Commission Annual Meeting - Austin, TX, April 26, 2016**

**Trinity River Authority Meeting - Arlington, TX, April 28, 2016**

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

**Private Lands Advisory Council Meeting/ Texas Lone Star Stewards Awards Banquet - May 18 - 20, 2016**

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## State Board Activity Report

### March 2016

## MESSAGE FROM NRCS STATE CONSERVATIONIST SALVADOR SALINAS



Conservation Partners, thank you for your support and patience as NRCS worked through the FY2016 budgeting process.

We operated under the constraints of a Continuing Resolution (CR) through most of the first quarter of FY2016, and although the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016 was enacted Dec. 18, 2015, we continued to operate as if under a CR until the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) appropriated the funding to NRCS. Texas received its' allocation letter Feb. 17, 2016. This was an arduous time for NRCS operations. We persevered and are now fully functional and ready to assist Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and Texas producers and other conservation partners.

The Texas budget empowers NRCS to fill numerous personnel vacancies on the books, including hiring 26 additional entry level employees and 15 summer trainees. With the assistance of the new national Administrative Services Team, I believe staffing will reach a

full time employee number of 785 as we were a few years ago.

Included in our discretionary allocation was funding for watershed rehabilitation, national resources inventory, plant materials centers and our on-going soil survey work.

Our mandatory (Farm Bill) funding allows for addressing high-priority resource concerns, landscape initiatives, and other program initiatives such Organic, On-Farm Energy, and High Tunnels through EQIP. Landscape initiatives include Lesser Prairie Chicken, National Water Quality Initiative, Longleaf Pine, and Working Lands for Wildlife for Monarch Butterfly habitat improvement, all with EQIP funding.

Other EQIP funded initiatives include the Joint Chiefs Texas Forest Ecosystem Improvement Project, a future directions proposal with the Texas Corn Producers Partnership Project, Climate Change Mitigation, StrikeForce, Beginning Farmers and Ranchers and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers.

Fiscal year 2015 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects were also fully funded for fiscal year 2016. Additionally, applications for fiscal year 2017

RCPP pre-proposals are now being accepted, with a May 10, 2016 deadline.

Conservation Stewardship Program applications are currently being worked, and all of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program funding has been fully expended.

A priority of Chief Weller is to expand conservation partnership efforts to urban centers, and through the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), \$1.0M will be made available to Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) through a competitive process.

Chief Weller, also is offering training for 50 SWCD employees at the NRCS Conservation Planning Bootcamp. Texas SWCDs should stay tuned for this training opportunity for their District employees.

Texas NRCS is fully positioned to work collaboratively with SWCDs, the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, and the Association of Texas SWCD. I look forward to an exciting and successful conservation program in Texas for FY2016.

## FARM BILL

The Fiscal Year 2016 program guidance has been provided to the field for implementation of all Farm Bill financial and easement programs. EQIP has added three new proposals recommended by the State Technical Advisory Committee which include projects from the Northern Plains Groundwater Conservation District and Edwards Aquifer Authority. A third project is set to mitigate wildfire damage in the west central portion of the state. Additionally, other mandatory program initiatives set by the administration have also been added for priority conservation measures this fiscal year.

EQIP Guidance has been sent to the field for implementation of the program for this year. The initial ranking cutoff date is rapidly approaching – March 18th. All applications received by that date will be

evaluated and ranked for funding. Texas was allocated \$66M in total funding. Funding for the program is expected to be very competitive. If a second ranking cutoff is needed, it will be May 13th. All funding for EQIP will be obligated by July 1st.

The ACEP state's allocation on five new easements to protect agricultural and wetland areas. The state allocation for FY 16 was just over \$11M which was matched by program participants or other entities to ensure the acquisition of the land parcels. We are working through the process of surveying, title work, and appraisals currently with restoration scheduled after the signing of the agreements.



CSP has been open for new enrollment since January. The 2016 application deadline is March 31st. Texas was allocated over 300,000 acres for new participants. Funding decisions will be made as soon as applications are ranked and evaluated. We expect all acres allocated to be under contract in late April or early May.

## MINORITY LANDOWNER MAGAZINE NATIONAL CONFERENCE A RESOUNDING SUCCESS

San Antonio was the host location for the 10th anniversary of the Minority Landowner Magazine Annual Conference. This is the second year in a row that the USDA- NRCS in Texas has served as lead host of this national three-day event. The event focused on agricultural diversity and production opportunities on and off farms and ranches. Upwards of 250 landowners attended from more than eight states. Topics ranged from USDA programs and StrikeForce, Succession Plans and Farm Longevity, Connecting Youth to Agriculture and Webinar Technology.



## REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROJECT (RCPP)

Ann Mills, USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, joined NRCS State Conservationist, Salvador Salinas, and partners in February at the University of Texas at Austin Lady Bird Wildflower Center in Austin. Mills had traveled to Austin to announce an “Improving Working Lands for Monarch Butterflies” Regional Conservation Partnership Project, or RCPP. She also took the opportunity to announce two other state RCPP projects.

Mills highlighted the investment as a targeted conservation effort to protect monarch habitat on working lands. USDA has made investments of \$220 million on more than 80 new, high-impact partner-led projects across the country, including the three in Texas. This investment, which builds on the \$370 million invested for 2014 and 2015, will help conservation partners and agricultural producers conserve natural resources, leading to cleaner and more abundant water, healthier soil, enhanced wildlife habitat and many other benefits.

Texas NRCS will invest \$7.9 million along with Texas partners' who are investing \$21.4 million. RCPP is a partner-driven, locally-led approach to conservation. It offers new opportunities for NRCS to harness innovation, welcome new partners to the conservation mission, and demonstrate the value and efficacy of voluntary, private lands conservation.

Mills also took the opportunity to announce two other state RCPP projects the Fort Hood Private Lands Conservation Initiative which is a partnership between the Compatible Lands Foundation and the United States Army to preserve 22,000 acres of grazing lands adjacent to Fort Hood Army Base in Coryell County, Texas, and the Limited Applied Irrigation Assistance Program led by the High Plains Underground Water District which will address inefficient use of irrigation and moisture management concerns within the Ogallala Aquifer.



## GOLIATH WREAKS HAVOC FOR TEXAS PRODUCERS

Winter storm Goliath hit the Southern Plains in late December leaving record amounts of snow fall in parts of Texas, power outages from ice accumulations of over one inch in parts of Oklahoma, and freezing rain and sleet in Kansas. Record flooding occurred throughout the Southern Plains making December 2015 the wettest on record for most of the region. Texas cattle ranchers, feedyard operators and dairy operations assessed the damages and livestock death losses caused by the historic storm. NRCS monitored the situation closely through local field office staff, industry partners and state response conference calls. The NRCS was ready to respond as needed to assist farmers and ranchers if necessary. As reported to NRCS National Headquarters, producers in the impacted region did not request help from the NRCS. The full impact of the storm continues to be reviewed, and currently it's been reported that almost 30,000 dairy cattle and 12,000 beef cattle were killed in Texas alone. Most of the reported losses were from dairy operations in the following counties: Deaf Smith, Parmer, Castro, Hale, Lamb and Bailey. The effects from these and other losses will have long ranging impacts for producers.



## FLOOD CONTROL STRUCTURES WITHSTAND EL NINO GENERATED STORM WATERS



### ERODED AUXILIARY SPILLWAY AT ELM FORK SITE 7A IN COOKE COUNTY, AS A RESULT OF MAY 2015 FLOODING.

Areas of Texas continued to experience their fair share of El Nino related weather events as 2015 came to a close. Some areas of Texas had already received devastating historic rainfall totals in May and October and then along came late December rains. Once again lands became saturated, water bodies filled to capacity, creeks swelled and some landowners and communities were faced with the prospect of flash flooding.

It's during extreme rainfall events when the benefits of NRCS assisted flood control dam structures are realized by landowners and communities.

“It is events such as the December rains that highlight the critical need for properly operating flood control dams. Without these

structures protecting property, lives, communities and the landscape as a whole, the outcomes can be devastating,” said NRCS State Conservationist Salvador Salinas.

The residents in the Texas counties of Collin, Grayson, Fannin, Hunt, Cooke, Montague, Denton, Lamar and Red River quickly learned in December just how critical the role of properly functioning flood control dams play in protecting lives, property and communities during weather events. Over an estimated three day period, more than 5.7 inches of rain fell in these nine counties.

Numerous watersheds were impacted by the flooding rains. An estimated 13 creeks within those counties flooded and flood control dams quickly filled. The financial benefits realized, due to the 281 functioning flood control dams with these watersheds, was upwards of \$18 million. Economic data was derived from factors such as housing, infrastructure and farm lands.

## DISTRICT'S MASTER IRRIGATOR PROGRAM SECURES EQIP FUNDS



Through a partnership agreement by the North Plains Groundwater District and NRCS, an estimated \$1.6 million in funding through EQIP has been setup to support the new Master Irrigator Program. Participants who complete the course and receive their Master Irrigator Certification will have priority access to the North Plains

Groundwater District EQIP funding.

The program is an irrigation management curriculum made up of 32 hours of intensive irrigation education conducted over three one-day sessions to inform producers about advanced irrigation management and conservation practices that work together to save water, conserve energy and build healthy soil.

Participants will gain a better understanding of the latest irrigation

management tools, technologies and practices such as pivot conversions, variable frequency drives, conservation tillage methods, irrigation water management and more. The program objectives prepare participants to know what tools and strategies are available for water savings, to understand how and why they work, and ultimately to choose and effectively apply them to maximize their return on investment for every drop of water they use.