

NRCS Brings Wetland Mitigation to Forefront

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The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wetland Compliance Team in North Dakota is incorporating a new skill into its wheelhouse – wetland mitigation. Wetland mitigation provides agricultural producers an option to move wetlands that get worked, seeded, and sprayed to a different location. This option affords the producer to better manage his or her cropland while still meeting the conservation provisions of the farm bill and contribute to the nation’s conservation goal of wetland conservation.

While mitigation is nothing new for NRCS, it has been a lower priority workload than assisting USDA participants in identifying wetlands on their property, subject to the wetland compliance provisions. However, with the backlog in Certified Wetland Determinations continuing to decrease, it has allowed NRCS to bring mitigation to the forefront and begin focusing some

of the staff’s efforts in developing mitigation plans for farm program participants. The quickest and most cost-effective plans to implement are those that incorporate the restoration of prior-converted and farmed wetlands. Many producers opt to create a wetland, even though this generally takes additional time due to the more intensive field investigation required to find a suitable site. Costs for wetland creations tend to be more, due to the associated excavation costs. Many producers have reported paying \$8,000 to \$10,000 per acre to have a contractor complete the work. These costs can be lessened by completing the work themselves if they have the appropriate equipment.

With costs aside, mitigation plan requests continue to be submitted to NRCS field offices. NRCS currently has 55 requests, with new requests coming in weekly, prioritized by the date received. NRCS is not the only

WETLAND CREATION: Pictures taken during the construction phase and following spring of a mitigation site in southeast North Dakota.



entity that can develop a wetland mitigation plan. Producers who would rather not wait through the NRCS priority system can hire a consultant to develop a plan for their operation. There are several qualified consultants in the state that have completed successful plans. Contact your local USDA Service Center for names of consultants in your area.

MITIGATION SUCCESS STORY

Ward County producer Roger Neshem is reaping the benefits of a recently installed mitigation plan on his property. “We have been able to stay in compliance with the farm bill by mitigating wetlands where we have enhanced drainage and enhanced our overall yields,” Neshem explains.

As tile drainage continues to expand westward across the state, it brings additional benefits to producers’ operations, in the way of water management and increased habitat, among others. “Mitigation has allowed us to increase production on areas of our farm through water management, leading to increased production of our field crops and overall habitat,” he says. “Pairing water management and no till on our farm gives us the highest return possible. Mitigation is the only tool available right now that is close to economical in order to maintain farm program eligibility,” Neshem says about the future of wetland mitigation on his operation and in the ag industry as a whole. “The wetland credits that are around are often priced so high they are not feasible.”

With few mitigation banks currently available, it often falls on producers to incorporate mitigation on their own acres. Neshem’s advice for other producers interested in wetland mitigation is, “get after it and get it done. The more we as producers employ this practice, the more streamlined the process will become. In my area it is

new and none of us are very familiar with it, but once you do a project, it is not so bad. Working with the dirt is the easiest part. Getting to that part can be the longest and sometimes the most frustrating part, but practice makes perfect. That goes for both the producer and NRCS.”

MITIGATION BANKS

In January, NRCS announced it would make \$9 million available for individuals or entities willing to develop wetland mitigation banks, with priority given to proposals establishing banks in states with a great number of high-compliance projects, such as North Dakota. Successful proposals would receive up to \$1 million in funding for establishing or modifying existing banks to serve agricultural producers. These banks would give farm bill participants more wetland conservation options so they can find the best solution for their land and circumstances. Mitigation banks work by selling credits, which are gained by restoring and/or creating wetlands. Currently, there is only one mitigation bank operating in North Dakota, and it is serving the counties that fall within the Red River watershed. Although funding decisions have not been made for these projects, it is hopeful that this program can augment the current wetland banking opportunities in North Dakota.

For more information regarding wetland mitigation in North Dakota, visit the NRCS Conservation Compliance web page at <http://www.nd.nrcs.usda.gov> or visit a local USDA Service Center.



MITIGATION WETLANDS: A wetland restoration (left) and creation (right) used to offset wetlands drained by a tile system.

