

2011 Environmental Quality Incentive Program

Local Work Group Summary for the Lovington Field Office

Introduction:

The Lovington Field Office services Lea County, located in the far southeastern corner of New Mexico. The Lea Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) encompasses approximately 2.8 million acres. Of this acreage, 1,470,460 acres are deeded, 873,748 acres of State Trust lands, with the remainder (466,952 ac) being Bureau of Land Management. Approximately 68,947 acres are irrigated and 46,780 acres are dry cropland. There are about 16 dairies in the county, varying in size from 200 to 4,000 cows.

The rangeland in Lea County lies within two Major Land Resource Areas. The southern end of the county is classified as Southern Desert. The northern end, on top of the caprock, is High Plains. Rainfall varies from an average of 10 inches in the south to over 16 inches in the north. Cattle are the predominate livestock raised in the county. Irrigation water is pumped from the Ogallala Aquifer, which is declining at the rate of 1.5 to 2 feet per year. All of the soils in the county are classified as Highly Erodible to wind erosion. Predominate crops include cotton, peanuts, corn, alfalfa, wheat and vegetables.

Local Work Group:

A Local Work Group Meeting was convened by the Lea Soil and Water Conservation District on September 22, 2010. Attendees included representatives of the NRCS, Sureste R C & D, Lea SWCD, BLM and local cooperators.

Priority Resource Concerns:

The local work group determined Categories that needed to be addressed in Lea County which consisted of: Plant Condition (Grazingland), Water Quantity (Irrigated Cropland), Water Quality (AFO/CAFOs) and Wildlife. The resource concerns we will focus on within these major categories are Noxious and Invasive Plants on Grazingland, Aquifer Overdraft on Irrigated Cropland, Excessive Nutrients and Organics in Groundwater on AFO/CAFOs and Wildlife Habitat Improvement. Minor resource concerns include soil erosion, air, plants, and animals.

Funding Considerations:

EQIP funds allocated for 2011 will be used for the land use for which it was originally allocated, with the flexibility to use unobligated funds towards other land uses and resource concerns. Unused funds from any concern will be used towards other land uses and resource concerns. Funding requests will be ranked according to the ranking criteria developed for each land use and assigned to the EQIP funds that were received for that land use. It is projected that the total funding requests will exceed the available funds. The LWG decided to request matching monies for two special initiatives. Those being the watersheds

for the Landreth Draw for predominately mesquite spraying and the East Lea County for the no till incentive on irrigated cropland.

The EQIP funds will be approximately allocated as follows:

- Rangeland: 43 %
- Cropland: 20 %
- Wildlife: 2 %
- AFO/CAFO 5 %
- No Till Watershed 15 %
- Landreth Watershed 15 %

These percentages may change if the EQIP funds received by the state are allocated differently than in 2010.

Individual practices will be capped at \$50,000 per contract for all land uses. Exceptions to this rule are as follows:

- Brush Management capped at \$100,000 and Micro-Irrigation capped at \$75,000 per application.

Applicants who self-certify that they meet the requirements of limited resource producers (LRP) will be eligible for 90% cost share on all planned practices. Cost share rates for those applicants who self-certify that they meet the beginning farmer/rancher criteria will be 15 % higher than the rate established for non-BF/BR applicants, not to exceed 90%.

Payment for Prescribed Grazing (643) was approved to enhance Lesser Prairie Chicken habitat if there is an active breeding lek within 2 miles of the pasture or to initiate a rotation grazing system (528A).

Declining Ogallala Aquifer concerns will be addressed through drip irrigation (441), sprinkler systems (442), by converting irrigated cropland to perennial native vegetation grass (645) or to go from double cropping to single cropping (449).

In keeping with this Local Work Group's proactive approach to natural resource conservation, it has elected to continue the Wildlife Habitat conservation program in 2011. As stated earlier, 2% of the funds received this year will be targeted to this resource concern. The objective of the program is to enhance and restore wildlife habitat in and around the county's playa lakes. Active habitat management is essential for restoring and sustaining populations of many obligate grassland and shrubland bird species. Healthy playas have also been shown to play a key role in recharging the Ogallala Aquifer. This aquifer has been on a steady decline.

The program will target playas on rangeland but also include pivot sprinkler corners. Restoration and Management of Rare or Declining Habitats (643), requiring specific deferment periods, will be the main focus and incentive payments will be used. An incentive of \$100.38 per acre for the playa itself and a surrounding

buffer area of 150 feet will be offered. In addition, an incentive of \$7.61 per acre will be offered for the adjacent acreage up to a maximum of 320 acres. The incentives will be for three years.

Sprinkler pivot corners will be eligible for the program with the \$100.38 per acre incentive as well as cost share for converting cropland to native vegetation. In addition to the above practices, any eligible applicant wanting to restore wildlife habitat on their property with regular EQIP practices will be included under this resource concern. The Local Work Group set the ranking in such a way that rangeland playas will be highest priority.

Cost Share Rate Factor:

The cost-share rate factor for the most commonly used practices in the payment schedule is expected to be 75%. The LWG decided to use the EQIP Cost Share List prepared by the East Area.

Please refer to the FY 2011 EQIP cost list for final practice payment rates.

Ranking Criteria:

There are no changes recommended. The LWG elected to use the same issues and points as FY 2010. Ties on all grazing and dry crop applications will be broken using the Soil Erodibility Index (EI). The application with the highest EI will be funded first. Ties on irrigated crop applications will be broken by the greatest change in irrigation efficiency as determined using FIRS. Ties on wildlife applications will be broken by the total amount of acres draining into a playa. Ties on AFO applications will be broken by the age of the dairy; with older dairies receiving higher consideration.

Please refer to the ranking criteria links for specific information.

Watershed Initiative:

The LWG decided to apply for two watershed initiatives:

1) Landreth – Monument Draw Watershed Initiative Focusing on Brush Management

The joint effort between the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and NRCS has again been authorized to address the problem of encroaching brush species in southern Lea County. This encroachment of mainly mesquite, but also shinoak, creosote bush, broom snakeweed and other noxious weed species has led to a deterioration of the range condition and a loss of key habitat areas for the Prairie Chicken and Sand Dune Lizard. The NRCS State Office has designated funds that will be used to match funds set aside by the LWG. Lea County LWG decided to set aside \$100,000.00 of their rangeland allocation to be used in this special watershed. Only applicants whose land lies within this watershed and south of the Hobbs to Carlsbad highway (US 62-180) will be eligible for this special project. A new ranking sheet does not need to be developed to address the concerns in this special area as all brush management applicants within this area will be considered high priority. All other rangeland applicants will be low priority.

2) East Lea County Watershed Initiative Focusing on No Till Farming Practices

The 2011 LWG has again decided to request matching funds for the watershed initiative focusing on the adoption of No Till farming techniques. The resources being addressed by this initiative are: water quantity - aquifer overdraft, soil erosion - wind, fish and wildlife - inadequate cover and soil condition - organic matter depletion. These resource concerns will be treated by the application of the following conservation practices: Residue Management - No Till or Strip Till and Access Control. Only the above mentioned practices will be eligible for this fund pool. Other irrigated cropland practices will be applied for under the cropland fund. Eligible land within this watershed area will be irrigated cropland that lies within an area bordered by the Texas state line on the east, NM state highway 206 from Tatum to Lovington and NM state highway 18 from Lovington to Hobbs to Eunice. Applicants will be limited to enrolling 240 irrigated acres. The NRCS State Office has designated funds that will be used to match funds set aside by the LWG. Lea County LWG decided to set aside \$100,000.00 of their initial allocation to be used in this special watershed. A new ranking sheet does not need to be developed to address the concerns in this special area as only No Till applicants within this area will be considered high priority. All other cropland applicants will be low priority.

Small Acreage Initiative:

LWG elected to not request this initiative due to the fact that most of our small acreage farms and ranches do not meet the limited income requirements.