

2014 Environmental Quality Incentive Program

Clovis Field Office

Introduction:

The Clovis Field Office is located at 918 Parkland Drive in the city of Clovis, New Mexico. The local NRCS Field Office works in conjunction with the Central Curry Soil and Water Conservation District to provide technical assistance to producers within Curry County and the panhandle of Roosevelt County. Curry County is located on the High Plains of central eastern New Mexico. The area includes dry cropland, irrigated cropland, and rangeland. All cropland has been designated as highly erodible. The irrigated cropland is primarily located in the southern portion of the county and is served by the rapidly declining High Plains Aquifer. The past 15-20 years have resulted in an influx of dairies from other parts of the country which capitalize on the advantages of an arid climate and abundance of locally grown feed. Cash receipts are generated from the production of corn, wheat, grain sorghum, cotton, hay, cattle, and related dairy products. Average rainfall for the area is 17.5 inches with 180 frost free days.

Local Work Group:

The Local Work Group (LWG) is comprised of individuals from the Central Curry SWCD, FSA County Committee, The Nature Conservancy, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico Department of Game & Fish, New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, local producers, and staff from NRCS. The LWG meeting was held on September 11, 2013. The meeting was attended by 21 individuals with the goal of gathering input and recommending any changes with regard to the FY 2014 EQIP program. The minutes and attendance sheet from the Local Work Group meeting may be provided by local NRCS personnel upon request.

Priority Resource Concerns:

Several resource concerns will be addressed under the following land uses; irrigated cropland, dry cropland, and grazing lands.

The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on irrigated cropland include:

- Insufficient Water - inefficient use of irrigation water
- Soil Erosion – sheet, rill & wind erosion
- Soil Quality Degradation – organic matter depletion, compaction
- Degraded Plant Condition – undesirable plant productivity & health
- Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife – habitat degradation

The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on dry cropland include:

- Soil Erosion – sheet, rill & wind erosion
- Soil Quality Degradation – organic matter depletion, compaction
- Degraded Plant Condition – undesirable plant productivity & health
- Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife – habitat degradation

The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on grazing lands include:

Degraded Plant Condition – undesirable plant productivity & health, and excessive plant pest pressure

Livestock Production Limitation – inadequate feed & forage, inadequate livestock water

Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife – habitat degradation

The LWG desires to address resource concerns related to livestock manure management as a result of the 21 permitted Animal Feeding Operation's/Confined Animal Feeding Operations within Curry County. Applicable conservation practices will primarily address the resource concern of Water Quality Degradation - excessive nutrients in surface and ground waters.

The LWG also wishes to identify the following resource concerns on any of the aforementioned land uses accomplished exclusively through the installation of windbreaks located adjacent to farmsteads, fields and dairies or other livestock facilities:

Soil Erosion – sheet, rill & wind erosion

Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife – habitat degradation

Livestock Production Limitation – inadequate livestock shelter

Inefficient Energy Use – equipment & facilities

The LWG also recommended the continuation of an additional ranking criteria/funding allocation which addresses Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife – habitat degradation. The primary objective of the program is to enhance and restore wildlife habitat in and around the area's playa lakes. In addition to wildlife habitat, the buffer zone around playa lakes is an important point of recharge to the High Plains Aquifer. Curry County has numerous playa lakes which are primarily located on rangeland. These playa lakes present a unique opportunity to do conservation planning with producers and develop alternatives which focus on wildlife benefits and underground water quantity and quality rather than strictly utilizing playas as a source of forage production for livestock. The area surrounding playa lakes is characteristically over grazed due to the increased productivity and forage species which are present. In certain instances, sediment delivery can compromise the manner in which playa lakes function. Wildlife biologists have demonstrated the necessity of improving functioning playas to provide critical habitat for migratory birds as well as resident wildlife. Healthy playas are considered keystone ecosystems that serve as critical sites of biodiversity in an area otherwise characterized by semi-arid rangelands and intensive agriculture. Active habitat management is essential for restoring and sustaining populations of many obligate grassland and shrub land bird species which have been identified as declining in numbers.

The wildlife ranking criteria will target playas on rangeland. Upland wildlife habitat management will accomplish the desired objective of improving habitat. A specific grazing deferment period as reflected on the ranking criteria will be required. Producers will be offered an incentive payment for the acreage which encompasses the playa itself and a surrounding buffer area of 150 feet. In addition, producers could receive a lesser payment rate for the adjacent rangeland acreage, with the payment rate on the upland acres not to exceed \$21,000 per contract. The payment will be offered for a period of three years.

Due to the critical rate of decline of the Ogallala Aquifer, the Local Work Group has determined that replacement of existing pivots which have exceeded their lifespan by new pivots will be not allowed. New pivots will be only be eligible for cost share if the application is selected for contract funding through the ranking process, land has been irrigated 2 of the last 5 years and water has been applied down the crop furrow in prior years.

Funding Considerations:

The LWG discussed the allocation of funds to the priority resource concerns. Consensus was met with funds to be allocated as follows:

- Irrigated Cropland – 26.5%
- Dry Cropland – 36%
- Rangeland – 25%
- Livestock Manure Management – 5%
- Windbreaks – 5%
- Wildlife Habitat Improvement (Playa lakes) – 2.5%

In the event that dollars remain in any category, the remaining funds will be adjusted and reallocated to fund additional applications in land uses where the demand for dollars is greatest.

Payment Rates and Practice Caps:

Cost share rates of 75% (historically underserved rate is 90%) for all conservation practices will be used in the computation of a payment schedule developed on a regionalized basis for New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. The payment schedule will be available on the web at the New Mexico NRCS home page (Section I of the Field Office Technical Guide).

The LWG is recommending the continued three year payment for prescribed grazing (528) when applied to enhance habitat for the Lesser Prairie Chicken. The incentive will be awarded if a confirmed lek site is within two miles of EQIP contracted acreage and pastures are deferred from grazing for a time frame specified as August 1 through June 1.

The LWG is also recommending the continued three year payment on dry or irrigated cropland for producers who apply the practice of Residue Management, No-Till or Strip Till (329). It is a stipulation that if a payment is received for no-till/strip-till, crops such as grain sorghum, wheat or other high residue crops may not be baled, grazed, or harvested for ensilage on contracted acres. If crop residues are removed, the objective of increased soil organic matter will not be achieved. Soil quality as well may be compromised due to the increased possibility of limited stand establishment when compaction occurs due to livestock grazing. However, grazing will be allowed only on planted wheat acres. Producers rely on the revenue generated from grazing livestock from November 1 through March 15. The LWG is recommending the practice be limited to no more than \$50,000 per contract for the application of the practice on contracted acres for three consecutive years for dry or irrigated cropland. Producers are eligible for this payment only once and this stipulation applies across county boundaries.

Producers currently applying no-till/strip-till, or who have previously received cost share payments for this practice are not eligible.

Payment rates and criteria to address the resource concern of Insufficient Water/inefficient use of irrigation water may be offered through the approval of the multi-state Ogallala Initiative if the program is funded for FY 2014.

Payment rates offered under the Wildlife Habitat Improvement ranking criteria for Upland Wildlife Habitat Management will adhere to the Regionalized Payment Schedule and will not to exceed \$21,000 per contract for upland acres.

The EQIP for 2014 will continue the payment for waste transfer (634) for the Central Curry SWCD. The practice would include application of organic fertilizer from manure or compost and could be applied to both irrigated and dry cropland with the resource concern identified as Soil Quality Degradation/organic matter depletion. The practice would require that a soil analysis be completed during the ranking process and the organic fertilizer applied according to Nutrient Management standards and specifications. The payment rate will adhere to the Regionalized Payment Schedule. One of the goals is to eliminate the potential for over application of organics on land adjacent to dairy facilities and to give producers within the county the ability to utilize the resource on a broader basis. Eligibility for the waste transfer incentive may be met if organics have not been applied to the land in the last 5 years. The payment rate for waste transfer (634) will have a practice cap of \$40,000 per contract per producer per year.

Producers may also apply for Herbaceous Weed Control (315) to treat Class A or Class B noxious weeds. This practice is applicable to rangeland and is targeted primarily to treat Musk Thistle which has been identified as an invasive species which is occurring with increased incidence in the county.

Maximum cost share payment is limited to \$50,000 per contract per year for brush management (314) or fence (382). In addition, a maximum cost share payment is limited to \$75,000 per contract per year for micro irrigation system (441). Practice 328 (conservation crop rotation is capped at \$100,000 per contract)

Ranking Criteria:

The local ranking criteria questions are utilized for land use categories. Points are assigned based on the resource concerns the LWG wishes to address by priority. The higher priority applications will be awarded contracts until funds are exhausted. Tie breakers and qualifiers are established as follows:

Irrigated Cropland – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI.

Dry Cropland – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI.

Grazing Lands – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI. The ranking criteria will remain the same as 2013. As in 2013, infestations of brush below the

minimum threshold indicated in the ranking will result in an application of low priority. Ranking criteria will remain the same as 2013.

Livestock Manure Management – Ties will be broken by the age of dairy with the older dairies having priority. Ranking criteria is developed at the State level.

Windbreaks – The tie breaker will be determined by the length of the windbreak with the longest windbreak having priority. Ranking criteria remains the same as 2013.

Wildlife Habitat Improvement – Ties will be broken by the size of the playa bottom in acres with contracts awarded based on the greatest number of acres. Ranking criteria remains the same as 2013.

Blackwater Draw Watershed – Ties will be broken and applications funded based on highest Soil EI.

For all land use categories, applications will be identified as high priority if conservation practices such as brush management (heavy infestation), fence, water development or range planting are planned. All other applications will be identified as medium priority. Grazing land applications with low infestations of brush species below the identified threshold as determined in the ranking will be low priority. All applications received will be ranked.

State Watershed Initiative:

The Local Work Group is requesting a local watershed initiative (non CCPI) for the Blackwater Draw. The targeted watershed encompasses approximately 250,000 acres of irrigated and dry cropland in the southeastern portion of Curry County and corresponds to the area of the county where the soils are most susceptible to soil erosion. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on for the Blackwater Draw Watershed include:

- Soil Erosion – sheet, rill & wind erosion

- Soil Quality Degradation – organic matter depletion, compaction

- Degraded Plant Condition – undesirable plant productivity & health

The identified resource concerns will be addressed by application of the three following conservation practices: Range Planting, No Till or Strip Till, and Waste Transfer, as well as other identified conservation practices which provide benefits to the resource base. Funding in the amount of \$100,000 will come from Field Office funds with a matching amount requested from State Office funds.

State Small Acreage Initiative:

The LWG is not requesting a small acreage initiative. Small farmers have not had difficulty competing against larger producer with multiple resource concerns. Funding has been adequate in recent years to fund the majority of applications, with size of the operation or number of resource concerns not being a determining factor.