

2014 Environmental Quality Incentive Program

Local Work Group Summary for Las Cruces Field Office

Introduction

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Las Cruces Field Office is located within the Chihuahuan Desert of Southern New Mexico. The field office provides assistance to the Dona Ana Soil and Water Conservation District and the Dona Ana County agricultural producers. The land area of the county is approximately 2,435,000 acres or 3,804 square miles. Approximately 1,822,000 acres (75%) of the total acres in Dona Ana County are managed by the BLM or other federal agencies and approximately 287,000 acres (12%) are administered by the New Mexico State Land Office. The deeded or private land in the county is around 326,000 acres (13%). Dona Ana County averages 8 to 10 inches of annual precipitation, the majority of which falls during July, August and September through high-intensity, short duration thunderstorms. The Mesilla Valley of Dona Ana County is the primary area for irrigated crops with approximately 90,000 acres under irrigation. Primary crops grown in the county are alfalfa, silage corn, cotton, chile, winter and spring vegetables, sorghum, and pecans. There are also working cow/calf cattle ranches and numerous dairies in Dona Ana County.

Local Work Group (LWG)

The Local Work Group (LWG) met on September 5, 2013 at 1:00 pm in the USDA Service Center conference room at 2507 N. Telshor Blvd., Las Cruces. Invitations were sent out on August 23, 2013 to federal, state, city, and local agencies, local organizations, and individuals who were thought to have an interest in this meeting.

Those in attendance were:

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| Adrian Tafoya | NRCS, District Conservationist |
| Kristi Justice | NRCS, Soil Conservationist |
| Flora Van Tol | NRCS, SCT |
| Joe Delk | Dona Ana SWCD Supervisor |
| Steve Wilmeth | Dona Ana SWCD Supervisor |
| Mary-Esther Grider | Dona Ana SWCD Supervisor |
| Gilbert Garcia | Farm Service Agency, CED |
| Ray Lister | BLM |
| Juan Gamon | BLM |
| Stephanie Walker | NMSU- COOP Extension |
| Ed Provencio | Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers of America |
| Eduardo Medina | Small Farm and Ranch Outreach Coordinator for Cooperative Extension |

The Agenda of the LWG was to discuss local parameters for the 2014 program year. FY 2013 total dollars allocated and the numbers of contracts in Dona Ana County were both presented to the LWG.

New Mexico's FY2014 EQIP/WHIP Schedule of Activities/Deadlines was passed out with the announcement that the deadline for FY 2014 EQIP applications will be December 20, 2013 and a proposed obligation date of April 4, 2014. Other items on the agenda included: how funds were allocated in the Las Cruces Field Office (irrigation, grazing, AFO/CAFO and small acreage producer initiative); review of FY 2014 proposed cost cap per practice; incentive payments; ranking criteria; and criteria for proposed Small Acreage Initiative in Dona Ana County.

Priority Resource Concerns

Irrigated cropland major resource concerns are:

The LWG reviewed the priority resource concerns developed for FY 2013 and identified/determined that a few changes are required for FY 2014. Therefore, the priority resource concerns for 2014 include:

*water quality degradation – excess nutrients in surface and ground waters
excessive salts in surface and ground waters*

insufficient water - inefficient use of irrigation water

soil quality degradation – tith, compaction, organic matter, and concentration of salts or other chemicals

degraded plant condition – undesirable plants, productivity and health

inefficient energy use – farming/ranching practices and field operations

soil erosion – wind erosion

air quality impacts – emissions of particulate matter PM and PM precursors

Grazing Land major resource concerns are:

inefficient energy use – farming/ranching practices and field operations

soil erosion – concentrated flow/sheet and rill

animal/livestock production limitation – inadequate livestock water

degraded plant condition – undesirable plants, productivity and health

fish and wildlife - inadequate water

AFO/CAFO major resource concerns are:

water quality degradation- excessive nutrients in surface and groundwater

inefficient energy use – equipment and facilities

air quality impacts – emissions of particulate matter PM and PM precursors

insufficient water - inefficient use of irrigation water

degraded plant condition – undesirable plants, productivity and health Funding Considerations

LWG recommended allocating EQIP funds as follows (**100%**):

- Irrigated Cropland – 60%
- Grazing Lands – 15%
- AFO/CAFO – 5%
- Dona Ana SWCD West Mesa- Lower Rio Grande Watershed Initiative – 15%
- Small Acreage Producer Initiative – 5%

Any sub-funds left unobligated in one of the above categories may be moved to any of the other categories to fund the next highest ranking applications.

Financial Assistance Cap of \$100,000 per practice in a contract was again recommended by the LWG.

Management practices will be contracted or offered.

Cost Share Rate Factors:

LWG reviewed recommended payment rate of 75%.

Please refer to the FY 2013 EQIP payment schedule for final practice payment rates.

Ranking Criteria

LWG recommended adopting the ranking criteria from FY 2013 for FY 2014. A local ranking criterion was developed for the proposed Watershed Initiative.

Please refer to the ranking criteria links for additional information.

Screening Criteria

Low Priority – Previously terminated contract.

Irrigated Cropland:

High Priority – Drip/Micro-irrigation, Sprinkler, and/or 26 percent or greater increase in irrigation efficiency.

Medium Priority – 11 percent - 25 percent increase in irrigation efficiency.

Low Priority – Less than 11 percent increase in irrigation efficiency

Grazing Lands:

High Priority – Brush Management

Medium Priority – Water/fence development and a positive increase in Rangeland Health

Low Priority – Continuous grazing and/or no increase in Rangeland Health and/or less than 25 percent of Local Issue Points in ranking criteria.

Tie Breakers

Irrigated Cropland

- Highest change in efficiency (FIRS and/or WINSRFR)
- Distance to surface water
- Depth to ground water

Grazing Land

- Highest percent of deeded land in contracted area
- Highest positive change in rangeland health
- At risk species habitat that will be benefited

Animal Feeding Operations

- Distance to surface water
- Depth to ground water

Small Acreage Initiative

LWG recommended continuing the Small Acreage Initiative (SAI) allotting 5% of the total Las Cruces Field Office allocation to the initiative. The LWG would like criteria for SAI to remain the same as FY 2013 that read: Eligible Acreage, Income, and Practices – LWG will only allow producers with total farm acreage, including any leased land, of 20 acres or less of irrigated land apply for this pool. Household income must be \$60,000/yr or less. LWG will initiate a financial assistance cap of \$10,000 per contract (operation). The same ranking criteria, priority levels, and tie breakers for irrigated land will be utilized for the initiative. Conservation practices allowed in this initiative are 428 concrete lined ditch, 430 series irrigation pipe, 442 sprinklers and 587 high flow turnouts, metal check gates, ports, alfalfa valves, or corrugated pipe.

Dona Ana SWCD West Mesa-Lower Rio Grande Watershed Initiative

LWG recommended establishing a Dona Ana SWCD West Mesa-Lower Rio Grande Watershed Initiative. This initiative will service grazing land west of the Mesilla Valley/irrigated lands within Hydrologic Unit Codes 13030202 and 13030102. The purpose of this initiative will be to address 3 categories benefiting Plant Condition-Productivity, Soil Condition-Rangeland Site Stability, and Soil Condition-Rangeland Hydrologic Cycle. Proposed practices will be included that address plant condition, soil erosion, water quantity or energy. The LWG adopted the FY 2013 CCPI-AZ-NM Borderlands ranking criteria with minor changes to both State and Local questions (attached). Ranking criteria was established to address the resource concerns identified by BLM, SWCD, and work group participants and any dialogue about effectiveness of the proposed practices.

The LWG will commit 15% of the service center allocation to this watershed initiative. Outreach efforts will be made at the local level to inform potential applicants.

The LWG is willing to sustain this effort/commitment for up to three years. Measurable improvements would complement on-going efforts in the Paso Del Norte Watershed Restoration Initiative to address impairments of the Lower Rio Grande River. The Mimbres portion would complement all the watershed restoration efforts in the adjacent SWCD that have been accomplished under EQIP and CCPI in partnership with BLM and NRCS.

This larger area, which includes portions of 2 HUC 8 watersheds adjacent to each other, would allow for maximum flexibility to address resource concerns in areas with the highest potential for restoration. It would also maximize the ability to address resource concerns through restoration projects with willing applicants and partners in both watersheds.

The entire area west of the Rio Grande River is located with the BLM's proposed "Southern Desert and Borderlands Focal Area" to receive funding under BLM's Restore NM and Healthy Lands Initiatives. BLM has initiated restoration actions within both watersheds under the BLM Restore NM Initiative. Opportunities exist to expand upon these restoration efforts with willing partners within high potential areas.

Establishing an initiative would give the BLMs proposed focal area a higher priority for consideration.

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ADRIAN D. TAFOYA
District Conservationist