

2014 Environmental Quality Incentive Program Proposal

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 producing milk 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 specialty crops.

Local Work Group: The Lea Soil and Water Conservation District convened a Local Work Group Meeting on September 12, 2013. Attendees included representatives of the NRCS, Lea SWCD, and Lea FSA COC.

Priority Resource Concerns: The local work group determined Categories that need to be addressed in Lea County consist 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 2014 will be used for the land use for which it was originally allocated. However, the LWG retains the flexibility to use unobligated funds 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 Monument Draw for cholla cactus control on rangeland. The LWG has again requested to be included in the RFP for both the AWEP and CCPI components of EQIP.

The EQIP funds will be approximately allocated as follows:

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|--------------------|------|
| Rangeland: | 43 % |
| Cropland: | 20 % |
| Wildlife: | 2 % |
| AFO/CAFO | 5 % |
| Monument Watershed | 15 % |
| Landreth Watershed | 15 % |

These percentages may change if the EQIP funds received by the state are allocated differently than in 2013.

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 \$50,000 except for mechanical cactus railing which will be capped at \$20,000 and Micro-Irrigation capped at \$75,000 per application.
- Cholla Control Practices associated with the Monument Draw Watershed Initiative will be capped at \$20,000 per practice.
- Practices associated with the wildlife playa lakes initiative will be capped at maximum of \$2,500 per year not to exceed \$7,500 for the three years.
- Brush control in the CCPI area capped at \$150,000.

Applicants who self-certify that they meet the requirements for Historically Underserved will be at least 25% higher than non-HU (up to 90%).

Payment for Prescribed Grazing (643) has been 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 conservation initiative in 2014. 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. Payment will be available per acre for the playa itself and a surrounding buffer area of 150 feet will be eligible. If approved, a per acre payment will be available for the adjacent area. These payments will be for three years.

Sprinkler pivot corners will be eligible for the program with a 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 agreed to use the EQIP Cost Share List as prepared for our region.

Payment Schedules: NHQ is currently working to develop a national payment schedule. Details are not available at this time.

Ranking Criteria: There were some changes recommended. The LWG elected to require the use of deep breaking, manure and cover crop on No Till applications. Changes will also be incorporated into

Irrigation Sprinklers. LWG decided to allow replacing an existing pivot with a new one. The criteria will be such that the corners must be established to permanent native vegetation. The existing pivot must be greater than 15 years old. There must be a documented (FIRS rating) increase in efficiency. The pivot must be LEPA or LESA with a computerized panel. There cannot be an end gun to gain more acres. Ties will be broken based on total gallons per minute that the pivot operates at. The higher gpm get picked first. Points will be assigned so that applications going from surface applied water to subsurface drip will be highest, then from surface applied water to a pivot will be ranked higher than those going from pivot to pivot. Ties on all other applications will be broken using the Soil Erodibility Index (EI). The application with the highest EI will be funded first.

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 will, hopefully, designate funds that will be used to match local funds set aside by the LWG. Lea County LWG decided to set aside \$200,000.00 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) Monument Draw Watershed Initiative Focusing on Cholla Cactus Control

The 2013 LWG is requesting matching funds for the watershed initiative focusing on the mechanical control of cholla cactus thru dragging or railing. The resource being addressed by this initiative are plant condition – noxious and invasive plants. This resource concern will be treated by the application of the following conservation practices: Brush Management - chaining or railing, Prescribed Grazing, Fence, and Water Development. Eligible land within this watershed area will be rangeland that lies within an area bordered by the Texas state line on the east, NM state highway 380 from Texas, thru Tatum to Caprock and NM state highway 82 west from Hobbs. The NRCS State Office will, hopefully, designate 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 applicants treating cholla cactus within this area will be considered high priority. All other rangeland applicants will be low priority.

Small Acreage Initiative: LWG elected not to request this initiative because most of our small acreage farms and ranches do not meet the limited income requirements.

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI): The CCPI is another component of EQIP which was successfully utilized in New Mexico in FY 2009 and 2010. CCPI can be used to treat all NRCS approved resource concerns. We anticipate there will be a national RFP for in-state and multi-state proposals.

Ogallala Water Conservation Initiative: The program objectives are to treat water quality and water quantity resource concerns. Ogallala funds do not come out of the county's EQIP allocation, they are additional funds.