

Earth Team Volunteer Helps O'Neill NRCS Workload

By: Joanna Pope, Nebraska NRCS Public Affairs Officer

The primary purpose of the Earth Team is to expand NRCS services by using volunteer time, talent and energy to help accomplish the NRCS mission - assisting landowners with conserving natural resources on their farms and ranches.

Nationally, over a half-million Earth Team volunteers have provided over \$330 million worth of time helping NRCS with its conservation mission since 1985. In Nebraska, over 25,000 Earth Team volunteers have contributed over 595,000 hours.

One of Nebraska's Earth Team volunteers is Kraig Fahrenholz from O'Neill, Neb. A typical small town kid, Kraig enjoys the outdoors with hunting, fishing and motorsports as his favorite hobbies. Although he lives in town, he has developed a good agricultural background through FFA, working on his grandparents' farm and ranch, and his current job with a local seed supply company.

While working at the seed company, he got to know John Ludwig, soil conservationist at the O'Neill NRCS

field office. Kraig expressed an interest in volunteering with NRCS. Kraig was able to squeeze time from a busy high school schedule during his Junior year to assist John with projects in Antelope, Brown and Holt counties. From October 2013 to February 2014 Kraig donated 80 hours to the Earth Team.

Kraig lent a hand on a variety of NRCS conservation activities, including assisting with surveying several irrigation water management projects including an irrigation pipeline and irrigation water storage pits. He assisted with several conservation practices



O'Neill High School student Kraig Fahrenholz volunteered 80 hours to Nebraska's Earth Team.

installed through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which included irrigation and livestock management practices.

After working with Kraig as an Earth Team volunteer, John realized the value of the Earth Team program, not just for the volunteer, but also for the mentor. He said they spent a lot of time discussing the projects and the reasons for doing them.

"Kraig asked a lot of great questions about these projects to get a better understanding of them. You could see the light come on when he understood the reasoning. He indicated that he really enjoyed the experience a lot. He said that he had better insight of land management and what NRCS does as an Agency. He said it showed him what was out there and helped give him a few more ideas and possible job options that he never would have thought about.

"Overall, this was a good experience for him, as well as for me. I really think that Kraig's realization of what we do as an agency - to take care of and protect the land resource - is what he came away with the most." John said.

John was also impressed with Kraig's commitment to the job as an unpaid volunteer.

"I remember several occasions when it was real cold, and one day when the wind was gusting at 62 mph, I asked him if he would be interested in doing another project inside, and he said that he was fine finishing this one.

"His overall enthusiasm and positive attitude came through on a daily basis. He told me that I have a pretty awesome job and get to see "a lot of cool stuff" that a lot of people would never get to see otherwise. That made me feel good about what we do as an Agency," John said.

Nebraska is always looking for more Earth Team volunteers. Anyone at least 14 years of age is eligible. To learn more about the Earth Team Volunteer Program, visit your local NRCS field office, go to: www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov and click on "Volunteer with Nebraska NRCS" or call (toll-free) 888-526-3227. ♦

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