



V. Conservation



USDA programs support conservation efforts to achieve cleaner water and provide funding to local communities and tribal organizations for safer drinking water.

Commission Recommendations: In its report, *A Time to Act*, the Commission recommended that the Natural Resource Conservation Service and other appropriate agencies conduct local educational seminars for small and traditionally underserved farmers and ranchers for the purpose of explaining agency programs, including the environmental and economic benefits derived from the programs.

The Commission also recommended that farm policy should reward responsible stewardship and care of natural resources including the land, water, and air.

AGENCY HIGHLIGHTS

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

CONNECTICUT

- NRCS in Connecticut reports a unique success story in the town of Woodstock. Woodstock citizens, town officials, and agricultural interests recently held a town meeting and agricultural forum to figure out how to protect the cultural characteristics of the town. About 450 Woodstock residents showed up to unanimously vote yes for 1) a right to farm law, and 2) adding language to their open space acquisition ordinance which would allow them to preserve farmlands. NRCS has assisted the Woodstock Initiative since its inception. NRCS participated in the Agricultural Forum with local leaders and other partners and is using Conservation Technical Assistance to continue to help the community address their natural resource concerns and quality of life needs while ensuring a viable farming community.

GEORGIA

- A stream bank erosion-control project along an important river system, using a new and innovative method for treatment, has been completed in Dawson County, in northern Georgia. The project was installed on a farm



located on the Etowah River. Past attempts have seen limited success and were very expensive. In this case, the 400-foot stretch of bank 14 feet high would have cost as much as \$80,000 to protect using conventional methods. The new method, known as “Tree Revetments,” was completed for a cost of less than \$10,000. This method has been used in North Carolina and proven to be an effective way to protect eroding stream banks. The reduced cost makes it attractive for use on small farms.

IDAHO

- NRCS and the Three Rivers RC&D Council are working with tribal leaders to study pesticide/nutrient uses on the reservation. A video and brochure were developed during the first phase of this multi-year project to help integrate tribal values into program strategies. The RC&D Council received a grant from the Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Council to explore and implement sustainable agricultural practices and outreach on the reservation for the protection of groundwater. In addition, farmers on the reservation signed up 16,000 acres into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for the first time.



NRCS and local Resource Conservation and Development Councils work with tribal leaders to study pesticide/nutrient uses on the reservation.

- NRCS Plant Materials Center at Aberdeen is providing assistance to the tribe in developing a wetland plant nursery. Staff is providing training to tribal members on how to collect wetland plant seeds, clean the seeds, and produce wetland plant plugs.
- The Idaho Association of RC&D Councils sponsored a series of five workshops throughout Idaho to provide training for those concerned about farmland protection. Funding for the workshops came from the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education professional development program, American Farmland Trust, and Idaho Rural Partnership. Over 250 people attended the workshops, which were held in Preston, Idaho Falls, Twin Falls, Caldwell, and Moscow. Participants included county commissioners, city and county planning and zoning commissions, local land trusts, concerned citizens, county agents, soil conservation district supervisors, and NRCS district conservationists.
- Workshop cosponsors included NRCS, Idaho Association of Counties, Association of Idaho Cities, Idaho Planning Association, Idaho Smart Growth, Idaho Soil Conservation Commission, University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System, and local RC&D councils. Topics covered included the importance of agricultural land and open spaces, identifying land use issues including economic and demographic changes, how to estimate citizens’ preferences and attitudes toward land use trends, and understanding tools and techniques available in Idaho to accommodate development while protecting open space and farmland.

INDIANA

- The Miami Nations American Indian tribe received \$5,000 from NRCS to bring back the native grasses that they use in their religious and celebration ceremonies. They have been working with the local Soil and Water Conservation District to implement this grant.



KENTUCKY

- Equipment was purchased for use in Wayne County to introduce improved production practices for small vegetable producers. This equipment is still operational and continues to be used throughout the county. A second part of the project was to design and develop erosion plots on a highly erodible site on the Kentucky State University Land Grant Program (KSULGP) farm to measure the erosion and run-off associated with different vegetable cropping and mulching systems raised on erodible lands. This location has served as the site of several water quality research initiatives and projects as well as educational tour stops for field days. Numerous cropping systems and vegetable species/variety trials have been conducted on this site.

Information generated has resulted in refereed research journal articles and informational handouts. The erosion plots have become an integral part of KSULGP's water quality research efforts, measuring not only soil run-off, but pesticide and chemical run-off as well. The plots will provide the test site for a new USDA Capacity Building Grant initiative, which addresses the development of a botanical insecticide as a substitute for synthetic pesticides. The site will allow the monitoring of the field applied botanical insecticide. The site may also provide the initial site for growing the plant species from which the botanical insecticides will be extracted; thus the plant species can be monitored as a potential crop for limited-resource farmers as well as for its insecticide properties.

LOUISIANA

- Through the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), NRCS personnel in Louisiana have worked with community leaders and others to conduct numerous field days on grazing land management with socially disadvantaged agriculture producers to help them with their individual operations. Throughout Louisiana many small-scale agricultural producers are participating in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The CRP is giving



landowners a lifeline—a way out to save their farms. Also, many of Louisiana's small-scale, forest landowners are applying for and participating in the Forestry Incentives Program (FIP) that helps them restore forestland areas.

NRCS has provided direct assistance to small scale farmers through every one of the programs it administers: conservation operations, soil surveys, RC&D, plant materials, watershed construction, river basin studies, EQIP, WRP, CRP, FIP, and WHIP.

MAINE

- The District Conservationist from Washington County, in eastern Maine, and his staff made a series of presentations to approximately 150 small-scale blueberry growers who have been contracting with one of the large blueberry packers in the State. The vast majority of these producers have had little or no experience with USDA programs. Specifically, the District Conservationist discussed Integrated Crop Management (ICM) practices for blueberries and explained the availability of EQIP funds for adopting this management practice. Many of these producers expressed an interest in participating in the EQIP program in the following fiscal year.



- The NRCS and Conservation District staff in the Fort Kent field office in Aroostook County, in northern Maine, have made a concerted outreach effort to the growing number of small-scale beef producers in the northernmost area of Maine. The Soil Conservationist, the grazing specialist for that part of the State, has made a series of presentations at beef producer meetings hosted by a local chapter of Heifer Project International. Funds from both the GLCI and EQIP are being made available to assist producers in adopting best management practices for grazing management and animal waste management.

MARYLAND

- A great deal of effort is placed on small farms in the Maryland Water Quality Improvement Act of 1998, because it affects every landowner having at least \$2,500 of gross income or 8 animal units. NRCS, the State Soil Conservation Committee, and Soil Conservation Districts have placed a high priority on assuring that small farmers are able to cope with the regulations. As one example, NRCS has developed new standards for temporary storage of manure to reduce the cost. In one county, NRCS worked with the district to purchase equipment, and leases it at a low cost to small farmers.



OREGON

- NRCS has implemented a highly successful Oregon Small Acreage Outreach Effort in order to reach the State's small acreage farmers and rural residents and provide conservation information applicable to their property. This program has facilitated various educational products directed towards the needs of small farmers and ranchers, including:
 - (1) attendance of 2,540 landowners at 42 voluntary conservation workshops,
 - (2) distribution of 50,000 fact sheets entitled *Tips for Land & Water for Small Acreages in Oregon*,
 - (3) development and distribution of 20 *Small Acreage Fact Sheets* over the web, and
 - (4) showcasing of 5 table top displays at county fairs, libraries, and farm supply stores.

NRCS has been a partner in developing and hosting 42 voluntary conservation workshops for 2,450 rural producers and small acreage landowners held across Oregon. Initially, EQIP Education funds were used to develop the project and workshop materials. Once organizations and landowners realized the success of this effort, partnerships were formed along with assistance from numerous other agencies.

- The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, and the Washington County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) have also contributed in-kind services. In addition to the financial contributions, Extension Service Small Farms Program, Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Watershed Councils, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils, and agribusiness groups provided presenters for the workshop.

This outreach effort has formed strong partnerships throughout the State and united agencies to move toward education and outreach for the small acreage owner. These workshops took participants through the first four steps of the planning process in a group setting. They



were then made aware of the opportunity to develop a conservation plan. Landowners learned the benefits of conservation, the processes involved, and actions to plan and implement conservation planning and best management practices (BMPs). They learned BMPs in relation to healthy watershed issues, including how to make a positive impact on critical salmon habitat and water quality. Each workshop was centered on “Voluntary Conservation on Your Land” binder packets that were issued to each participant and are currently available in both English and Spanish.

PENNSYLVANIA

- A project started through USDA’s Water Quality Initiative in 1991, targeting 135,000 acres in the Pequea-Mill Creek Watershed, is located in central Lancaster County in south central Pennsylvania. Dairy is the dominant agricultural enterprise with over 55,000 dairy cows in the watershed. The project area is made up of approximately 1,000 mostly Amish farmers mainly operating on less than 50 acres. The project’s goal is to reduce sediment and nutrients in streams and protect the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Partnerships working together have taken water that even the cows could not drink back to limestone streams that support “put and take” fishing, which were stocked for the first time this year. To date, 624 farmers have installed at least one conservation practice. Amish farmers continue to be involved in conservation activities to clean up the water affecting the Chesapeake Bay and to provide more green space, healthier cows, and wildlife habitat for their children.
- Project Grass is a cooperative effort by local farmers and county conservation districts with assistance from NRCS and other Federal agencies to improve agricultural productivity in 18 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania. The organization’s second objective is to “Improve the economic position of Pennsylvania farmers, particularly farmers working on small farms.”
- NRCS provides technical assistance to the farmers, which helps them plan grazing rotations; determines what will work best on each farm; and coordinates pasture walks



and field days. At the field days, farmers are able to talk to each other about what’s working and what’s not. NRCS has also committed a full-time employee to coordinate the program and work with farmers and conservation professionals to insure that the most advanced technology is available to the farmer.

- Over 100 small farms have installed grazing systems, which have ultimately increased their bottom line. By implementing intense rotational grazing plans, farmers can reduce their feed costs. One farmer added water to a paddock grazing system and increased milk production by four pounds per cow per day in his 90-cow herd. Cost-share on projects provides additional help for farmers. Additional counties are slated for participation in the project.

PUERTO RICO

- The Culebrinas SCD and the Fields Office staff in coordination with the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture (PRDA) held a meeting with small coffee producers at Pezuela Ward, Lares. The purpose of the meeting was to coordinate a pilot program between NRCS and the PRDA to promote coffee planting using the recommended conservation practices.



TEXAS

- The USDA programs benefit a broad spectrum of Texas residents. The outreach efforts are paying off in increased applications from small farmers, ranchers, and socially disadvantaged producers. More of their applications are being approved, which has brought about an improvement in the local natural resources base. For example, NRCS records indicate a 5-percent increase of EQIP applications from small farmers, ranchers, and socially disadvantaged producers, with a 19-percent increase in their applications being approved.

The WRP program data points to a 25-percent increase in applications from small farmers, ranchers, and socially disadvantaged producers. The data also show that approximately 21 percent of the CRP and EQIP participants are minorities and women.



UTAH

- The Utah RC&D program continues to work with small farming communities to develop new and value-added products and tourism. The program encourages businesses that are compatible with the culture of a community. EQIP dollars are used to assist tribes in basic conservation. Program information continues to be discussed with small farmers. There is an initiative in the State to discuss conservation methods with persons buying land for a small farm that previously may not have been farmed. One grant has been requested from the Outreach Division in order to accelerate this initiative.

VIRGINIA

- Natural Resource Conservationists in an NRCS Service Unit covering nine counties in central Virginia recognized that a large number of minority landowners were clear-cutting their timberlands and not replanting. NRCS partnered with the local SWCDs including Piedmont, Lake Country, Peter Francisco, and Southside to address the resource concern of deforestation. Although landowners would receive an immediate payment for their timber, clear-cutting would result in long-term negative effects for the landowners' economic returns and for the natural resource base. Part of the reason for this phenomenon was landowners' lack of awareness about the economic benefits of replanting versus natural re-growth, and the cost share available through the Forestry Incentives Program (FIP). In order to provide information to the target community, the service centers mailed over 1,600 letters to minority farmers describing the program.

This activity addresses several State and regional strategic goals, including working with underserved customers to remove participation barriers, increasing participation of underserved individuals in USDA programs, increasing diversity of program participants, and ensuring that farm bill programs are fully implemented. As a result of this targeted outreach effort, 16 minority and women



NRCS often partners with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) to provide sound natural resource management, technical assistance, market conservation, and program cost sharing to traditionally underserved small farmers and ranchers.

landowners signed up for FIP and are reforesting their land with cost share and NRCS technical assistance. Since these 16 landowners applied late in the signup period, the initial FIP State allocation had been depleted. Through persistence by the District Conservationists and contract reconstitutions by the FIP Manager, funds were found to cover these contracts.

Under the FIP program, 785 acres will be treated. Landowners will receive cost share on tree planting and site preparation in the amount of \$22,645. Through the diligence of the local members of the conservation partnership, landowners received education about NRCS, forestry management, stewardship, and cost share. The partnership was able to provide sound natural resource management technical assistance, market conservation, and program cost sharing to traditionally underserved clientele. Although these 16 participants represent a major accomplishment, based on the names in the database, a large effort remains. Marketing NRCS programs will continue with these and other small farmers.

WYOMING

- A full-time resource conservationist is headquartered at Fort Washakie, Wyoming, to serve the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe tribes on the Wind River Indian Reservation. The Wind River Indian Reservation, located in Fremont County in central Wyoming is an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Priority Area.

This EQIP Priority Area shares a dual priority-irrigated lands and grazing land resources on the reservation. EQIP funding in the amount of \$202,308 was provided to the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapahoe tribes, and other land users on the reservation to improve range condition, riparian area health, and wildlife habitat, and to reduce water quality concerns. The financial and technical assistance through this program will improve the ability of small, limited-resource farmers in the area to establish and maintain economically sustainable operations.