



Hugh Hammond Bennett (right), first Chief of the Soil Conservation Service.

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## New Buzz Words, More Conservation 2002 Farm Bill Advances Technical Service Providers



The current staffing levels of NRCS are insufficient to adequately meet the increased need for technical assistance under the conservation programs authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill. So where do we turn?

Enter technical service providers.

In 1994, responsibilities for conservation programs were transferred to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To meet its responsibilities, NRCS uses its technical expertise to help farmers and ranchers make land management decisions. When a farmer or rancher applies to participate in a conservation program, NRCS helps them evaluate the condition of their land to determine the most appropriate way for them to meet their conservation objectives. Through its conservation planning process, NRCS helps the farmer or rancher develop a conservation plan, and depending upon the availability of funds, provides financial assistance to implement identified conservation practices.

The 2002 Farm Bill expanded the

availability of financial and technical assistance funds for the implementation of conservation programs. The resources of NRCS may fall short, however, of being able to meet the conservation planning needs. The 2002 Farm Bill responds to this potential shortfall is to expand the availability of technical assistance by encouraging other private providers to deliver technical services. To ensure high quality technical services are available to all farmers and ranchers, the Secretary of Agriculture is establishing a system for approving individuals and entities to provide technical assistance to carry out programs under the Farm Bill and establishing the amounts and methods for payments for that assistance.

NRCS wants to ensure that technical service providers are available to farmers and ranchers. It is encouraging all sources of technical service providers to participate in the delivery of conservation programs.

NRCS, also, wants to ensure that technical service providers that do

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continued page 2)**

## 2002 Farm Bill Offers New Opportunities



Rosendo Trevino III  
State Conservationist

The 2002 Farm Bill brings us many changes, and with these changes opportunities.

One of the most significant changes for NRCS in how we do business is technical service providers. The 2002 Farm Bill offers many more opportunities for us to put conservation on the ground. Technical service providers give us the vehicle we needed to do that.


This issue of **Natural Resource Reporter** also examines the many opportunities we have to enhance private land for wildlife as an integral part of a farming or ranching operation. Several Farm Bill programs can be used to support farmers and ranchers who want to develop wildlife habitat.

I know the drought has weighed heavy on our New Mexico farmers and ranchers. Fortunately, conservation planning and development of options are as close as the nearest NRCS office. We continue to be here to support farmers and ranchers as they decide on what conservation measures are best for them.

### Natural Resources Reporter

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## Technical Service Provider (continued from page 1)

work for New Mexico farmers and ranchers meet the quality standards that these farmers and ranchers have come to expect from NRCS. The 2002 Farm Bill requires that all technical service providers must meet standards. In particular, all technical services provided by technical service providers must meet applicable NRCS standards and specifications. NRCS national standards, and state standards and specifications, may be found through links at the Web site <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.

To assist NRCS with its quality assurance process, the 2002 Farm Bill requires that the technical service provider sign a written certification that the technical services provided for a particular practice or plan complies with all program requirements, legal requirements, and NRCS standards and specifications. This requirement makes it clear that a technical service provider is responsible for the quality of the assistance provided to either the farmer, rancher, or Department of Agriculture.

In February, NRCS unveiled the new Technical Service Provider Registry, called TechReg, that is an Internet application that makes it easy for technical providers to register and become certified, and for NRCS customers to find certified providers. Tech Reg is on-line and available at <http://techreg.usda.gov>. The Website provides a technical service provider locator, information about certification categories and criteria, on-line certification, and technical service provider progress reporting.

These are exciting times in conservation. They bring with them the challenges of a new avenue for doing business in NRCS. Technical service providers promise to help us meet our goal of prompt, quality services that help New Mexico farmers and ranchers meet their conservation goals. The results we look forward to are more environmentally and financially sound operations for our farmers and ranchers.

## 2003 Water Supply Outlook Bleak *Great Need for Conservation Continues*

Even with the above average precipitation across New Mexico in February, the state water supply outlook continues to be bleak. The water supply forecast for New Mexico through the spring snow melt season ranges from slightly above normal in the upper Pecos Basin to well below normal on the Rio Grande and upper San Juan River.

Flow volume for the Rio Grande is forecast to range from 61 percent of normal into Cochiti Lake to 53 percent into Elephant Butte Reservoir.

Forecast flows range from near 110 percent of normal on the upper Pecos River to 65 percent of normal on the Rio Chama and 62 percent for the Rio Ruidoso. Navajo Reservoir is expected to have 59 percent of normal inflow while flow in the Animas River is forecast near 65 percent of normal.

This year's March runoff forecast is much less dire than the one that was issued in March 2002.

However, in February four of the thirteen reservoirs in the state had storage levels that continued to drop. These were the Heron, Abiquiu, Conchas, and Navajo Reservoirs. Heron Reservoir storage has not been this low since March of 1979, and Abiquiu Reservoir is at a twenty-year low. In the San Juan River Basin storage sits at its lowest level since May 1968 at the Navajo Reservoir.



Automated snow survey site at Wesner Springs near Pecos, New Mexico

Total reservoir storage in the state is at 45 percent of average.

Early in February warm and dry conditions persisted, and the snowpack started experiencing some meltout. Uncontrolled streams in the upper reaches experienced an increase in flow. At the end of the month cooler and wetter conditions helped slow down the meltout of the snowpack, and flows decreased. Streamflow forecasts for the Rio Grande are still well below average. The Pecos and streams in the Sangre

de Cristos are expected to flow near normal this spring as well as the Zuni/Bluewater basin and the San Francisco.

The bottom line is that snow runoff forecasts are warning of a continuing drought. The clear message is that farmers and ranchers need to continue with conservation planning to give themselves options in these tough times. Conservation planning assistance is available at the nearest Natural Resources Conservation Service office.



# 2002 Farm Bill Offers Multiple Ways to Address Wildlife Concerns

## *Local Work Groups Have Options*

There is more than one opportunity to address wildlife conservation under the 2002 Farm Bill. In addition to the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the ranking criteria for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provide two scoring opportunities for wildlife concerns. There is also a Conservation Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program that can be used to protect wildlife habitat.

To NRCS at-risk species are natural resources that are to be considered in the funding process, just as are eroded land, invasive weeds, or any other resource concern. The goal, according to David Seery, NRCS wildlife biologist, is to protect and support at-risk species to assure they do not become threatened and endangered.

Two such species that have gained attention are the lesser prairie-chicken and black-tailed prairie dog.

The lesser prairie chicken is an uncommon grouse of the southern Great Plains. In April each year it congregates on mating grounds (leks) scattered throughout the countryside. Their mating dance is not only a memorable sight but also a memorable sound, like numerous cross-cut saws, “wobbling” melodiously. It is a candidate to be



Lesser prairie chicken

listed on the National Threatened and Endangered Species list, and is a national priority under NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

The Portales Field Office, lead by Joe Whitehead, has experience in managing contracts that accommodate the lesser prairie chicken. The ranchers cooperating in these projects are using deferred grazing as their primary tool to help bolster the population of these grouse. The resulting taller grass is

benefiting the nesting habitat, providing better opportunities for the brooding of young.

The black-tailed prairie dog is another species that is a candidate to be listed on the National Threatened and Endangered Species list, and a national priority under EQIP. Although they may be abundant in some locations, their numbers have declined during the past century.

Black-tailed prairie dogs live in colonies or towns. To maintain the size of their town or to increase the

acres of active towns, a key management tool is burning or mowing tall grass around the edge of the town. It is here that predators hide and stalk the prairie dog that is not alert. Some in New Mexico also have created artificial burrows to establish new colonies.

Establishing and maintaining prairie dog colonies is best accomplished on a large ranch for they can transmit the plague to humans by the bite of an infected flea or by handling infected animals. While the risk of contracting plague from prairie dogs is small, awareness and avoidance are keys to protecting humans from exposure.

Towns can be restricted by planting tall grasses or shrubs to create a barrier. Also, net wire fencing can be buried in the ground.

Grazing does not interfere with prairie dog towns.

NRCS has several programs that can be used to help support at-risk species such as the lesser prairie chicken and black-tailed prairie dog.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) assists landowners to improve habitat for wildlife. One of the main advantages of this program is that it provides funding not only for agriculture land, but also lands that may have other uses - such as forestlands or open spaces.

EQIP can be used to apply conservation practices that will benefit wildlife on agricultural land. In the

2003 New Mexico Ranking Criteria, for example, conservation practices that benefit animals (including wildlife) on grazing lands or irrigated lands are scored. The conservation practices the producer selects may impact more



Black-tailed prairie dog  
Photographer: Don MacCarter/New Mexico Game and Fish

than one resource concern (such as soil erosion, water quantity, etc.), and wildlife is one of the concerns to be considered. The EQIP ranking process also takes into consideration at-risk species under other considerations. There is an opportunity here to provide for action that will benefit at-risk species. The local work groups in each NRCS district establish the

number of points that will be awarded in each EQIP ranking criteria worksheet. This enables the local work group to have the flexibility to respond to its specific resource concerns, and gives them the tools they need to address the wildlife concerns in their area.

Another program in the 2002 Farm Bill that can be used to protect wildlife habitat is the Conservation Reserve Program. The Conservation Reserve Program is used to protect highly erodible soil and provide wildlife habitat. Under this program planting native vegetation to replace crops results in additional wildlife habitat. Prairie counties in eastern New Mexico can have significant improvements to prairie chicken habitat by restoring mid to tall grass communities using this program.

Finally, the Wetland Reserve Program can be used to restore wetlands that have been degraded. In an arid state, such as New Mexico, natural wetlands are extremely valuable for wildlife. Long term easements can be purchased

from landowners to ensure wetlands are preserved for a 30 year term or permanently. Another option is cost-sharing with the owner to restore the wetland without an easement.

The 2002 Farm Bill's many programs reflect NRCS's concern for at-risk wildlife. In cooperation with our partners we can use these tools wisely to support New Mexico's wildlife resources.



# High Demand for Native Grasses Bares Cupboards

A recent surge in demand for native grass seed is stressing the supply at the Los Lunas Plant Material Center. The commercial seed industry in the southwest is currently experiencing a boom in demand for native grass seed. This boom is being fueled by the seeding of areas devastated by recent forest fires, land disturbed by new highway construction and reconstruction, and areas effected by drought. The Plant Materials Center propagates native grass seed, shrubs, and trees for use in conservation projects throughout New Mexico and the surrounding high desert area.

The breeder stock the center maintains is that which is most true to type of the original grasses developed by the center. The breeder stock is used by the center to establish production fields, also known as foundation seed. The seed from the production fields is sold in turn to commercial enterprises, through the New Mexico Crop Improvement Association, that use it to grow seed they can sell commercially.

As a result of this chain of production, the center must maintain both breeder and foundation seed for each plant material variety. Maintaining breeder and foundation seed-fields is labor intensive because the fields must be kept nearly weed free.

While the sudden upsurge in demand is good news because it means more conservation and native grasses are being applied to the land, this same demand is stressing the resources of the plant material center. To respond to this demand, the plant material center will be increasing their production in 2003 with the addition of more new fields.

Demands in the native seed industry ebb and flow. Responding to these fluctuations appropriately is a significant task, and a challenge the center is ready to meet. The process of getting fields into production takes time, and the patience of commercial producers. Working together, the cupboards can be replenished and the promises of native grasses realized.



Foundation seed nearing short supply at Los Lunas Plant Material Center



Cane bluestem, a native grass, being grown at the Los Lunas Plant Material Center for use in highway right-of-ways, rehabilitation of burned over lands, and range improvement

# District Conservationist Helps American Indians Utilize Farm Bill

Like many Navajo people, Claudia Willetto introduces herself by identifying her heritage.

I am Claudia Willetto of the Navajo clan born for the Red Bottom People and Zuni Clan, she says.

As the district conservationist in Crownpoint, Willetto is able to combine this proud heritage and her training and skills to support farmers and ranchers in the area in conserving their natural resources.

“The Farm Bill has provided financial assistance to American Indians, among others, in my area to install conservation practices,” Willetto said.

“One example is an elderly producer in my area that has about 28,000 acres. Because of the Farm Bill this producer got a well drilled, and tank and trough installed. This individual is now looking at doing cross-fencing, and later plans on clearing rabbit brush. All of this is being done to improve rangeland.”

The Farm Bill is bringing numerous improvements to American Indians in Willetto’s area, including:

- Fences
- Livestock pipeline
- Wells
- Brush management
- Erosion control, such as rock and brush dams
- Livestock ponds
- Range seeding in native grasses

Working around the Crownpoint area and with her native people is at times unique for a district conservationist, a task that Willetto takes in stride.

“Some of the producers here only speak Navajo, so it is important that I help them with interpretation if that is needed,” Willetto said. “Also, land ownership is complicated.”

Farm and ranchland in the Crownpoint area may be under the jurisdiction of the state of New Mexico, Bureau



Claudia Willetto  
Crownpoint Area

of Land Management, tribal trust, or Indian allotment. Then there are tribal ranches that are owned by the tribe but leased to tribal members.

Willetto says that working with her own people is the most enjoyable part of her job - and not just being in an office but going out in the field and trying to make improvements. She sees her work as having a tremendous amount of responsibility, particularly the 2002 Farm Bill and efforts to emphasize local control.

Claudia Willetto, like so many NRCS staff in New Mexico, gained her education at New Mexico State University. She holds a master’s degree from NMSU in agriculture and extension education and minor in range science. In 1992 she joined the Soil Conservation Service in Gallup as a soil conservationist. In 1995 she accepted the district conservationist position in Crownpoint.

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