



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

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Farm Bill Makes Conservation History



Conservation provisions will assist farmers and ranchers in meeting challenges

The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) made history when it was signed on May 13, 2002 by being the single most significant commitment of resources toward conservation on private lands in the chronicles of this nation. The Farm Bill is a landmark act in terms of funding for conservation and for focusing on environmental issues. The conservation provisions will assist farmers and ranchers in meeting environmental challenges on their land including soil erosion, wetlands, wildlife habitat, and farmland protection. This act simplifies existing programs and creates new programs to address high priority environmental and production goals. Impacts of the Farm Bill on two major programs are:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- Reauthorizes the program through 2007 with greater funding resources.
- Eliminates geographic priority areas.
- Allows for expenditure of funds in the first year of the contract.
- Eliminates the cap on large confined livestock operations.
- Provides an overall payment limitation of \$450,000 per producer, regardless of the number of farms or contracts, over the authorized life of the 2002 Farm Bill.
- Specifies contract length, from a minimum of one year beyond completion of the project to a maximum of 10 years.
- Prohibits the process of bidding-down (competitive cost share reduction among program applicants).

Farm Bill (continued page 2)



Welcome to the **Natural Resources Reporter**

by Rosendo Trevino III

The **Natural Resources Reporter** is a new quarterly newsletter about and for

agriculture producers and other citizens concerned with conservation of New Mexico's natural resources. I am pleased to introduce you to its first edition. I hope you find this publication informative and a showcase for the many conservation efforts supported by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service and its partners. It is our desire that the successes of others may help you in finding solutions for your own natural resource practice and management challenges.


News items and suggestions for this publication will be most welcome as we strive to bring you the best publication possible. Please send you information and ideas to our public affairs specialist, Barbara.Garrett@nm.usda.gov. Thank you.

Natural Resources Reporter

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Farm Bill (continued from page 1)

- Allows up to 90 percent cost-share for beginning or limited resource farmers and ranchers, with cost share rates for all others up to 75 percent.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program reauthorized in the Farm Bill.
- The Farm Bill has expanded funding available to WHIP. The program provides additional tools for habitat protection, and places an even greater emphasis on establishing conservation practices that benefit habitat of threatened and endangered species.
- Provides for up to 15 percent of annual WHIP funds for increased cost-share payments to producers to protect and restore essential plant and animal habitat using agreements with a duration of at least 15 years.
- Eligible lands under the program are privately owned land, federal land when the primary benefit is on private or Tribal land, state and local government land on a limited basis, and tribal land.

New programs of interest in New Mexico are the Conservation Security Program, Grassland Reserve Program, and Forest Land Enhancement Program.

Conservation Security Program

- This program will provide funding for landowners who agree to carry out a conservation plan that meets minimum guidelines for resource conservation. It will be available to farmers and ranchers in FY 2003.

Grassland Reserve Program

- This program will protect sensitive grasslands for conservation purposes. Landowners who qualify, will either receive a rent payment or a payment for an easement to protect grasslands.

Forest Land Enhancement Program

- This new program will provide funding to assist private landowners to establish, manage, maintain, enhance, and restore private forest land. This includes thinning of forests for wildfire management.

For additional information contact Ken Leiting, Albuquerque, (505)761-4425.

Chaining Saves Mescaleros Conservation Dollars

The Mescalero Apache tribe saved as much as \$200 an acre by purchasing 300 feet of anchor chain to remove brush from grazing land. The process, known as chaining, entails dragging a ship's anchor chain between two bulldozers to pull up juniper that is invading grazing land. Woodcutters are then allowed to harvest firewood from the downed trees. Where thinning with chain saws can range from \$95 to as much as \$235 per acre, the chaining cost the Mescalero tribe \$20 per acre. The chaining was a portion of a larger project undertaken by the Mescalero Apache tribe, and funded in part through the Great Plains Conservation Program.

The Mescalero tribe was faced with the need to improve its 430,000 of grazing land. This required forest stand improvements, prescribed burns, brush management, and fencing. Their natural resource personnel were waging a constant battle to keep meadows from being overtaken by juniper. Small alligator junipers were invading meadows and mountain grasslands. In the pinon-juniper woodlands this species was more aggressive than the pinon, and was overpowering large, older pinon. In addition, the current drought and overcrowded stands of pinons were allowing the Pinon Ips Beetles to kill the pinons by the thousands

on the reservation and throughout the Sacramento Mountains.

A variety of control practices that included both prescribed burns and mechanical removal of brush were applied to more than 22,000 acres of tribal land. The tribe began controlling small juniper on hundreds of acres by treating individual plants that were up to about head high with herbicides. Chain saws were used to thin diseased pinon and thick juniper. This helped restore watersheds and improved forage.

The tribe then purchased an anchor chain from the San Francisco Bay area to do the chaining. Several hundred acres of the area chained were re-growth that had originally been chained in the 1960's. The re-growth ranged in height from 10 to 20 feet tall.

Maintaining as much edge, or transition zone, between grassy areas and forested lands to maximize the wildlife value was one of the project's goals. The tree stands were thinned to simulate conditions that had existed when the area burned every six to fifteen years. This equals about 19 - 25 trees per acre. Another goal was to maintain watershed health and improve spring flows.

For additional information contact Dan Abercrombie, Alamogordo, (505)437-3100.



Transition between mountain meadows and grassy plateaus needed attention.



Transition between mountains and grasslands restored and now provides valuable wildlife habitat and open healthy forest.

Conservation Plans Valued During Drought

New Mexico farmers and ranchers are facing less water for irrigation and less grass for livestock because of the Drought of 2002. And, it will take substantial amounts of moisture to make up the existing deficits.

The predicted 2002 runoff shortfall in the Rio Grande Basin is enough water to:

- ◆ Put the state of Rhode Island under 9 inches of water, or
- ◆ Fill "The Pit" at the University of New Mexico 17,600 times, or
- ◆ Raise the present level of Elephant Butte some 30 to 40 feet.

The forecasts for the other basins in the state are much the same.

Based on its snowpack measures, NRCS has predicted spring runoff in the Rio Grande Basin to be 60 to 16 percent of average.

The impact of the Drought of 2002 goes beyond the farm and ranch. It has contributed to an early start to our fire season, means less drinking water for domestic use, and seriously affects the food supply for wildlife. There is less water for maintaining critical habitat for endangered species. And recreational interests are impacted, including the skiing industry, river rafting and boating, and sports fishing. Reoccurring drought is common in New Mexico, but the state's rapidly expanding population has put increased demands on our limited water resources.

While we may pray for a good snowpack, wise management of our water resources is essential. The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District is a prime example of farmers and ranchers responding to the need. Good river management by farmers in the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District will help agriculture production, and the district's commitment to maintain a minimum flow in the river to protect

endangered species this summer. The conservancy district will utilize a rotation system that will move water from ditch to ditch and may restrict irrigation to every 14 days if needed.

"We want to work with farmers and ranchers to write conservation plans," Ken Scheffe, Natural Resources Conservation Service state soil scientist, said. "They need a plan for adapting to drought conditions during dry years and that can take advantage of more moisture during wet years. The rancher needs a plan to be able to adjust grazing schedules should his summer pasture fail."

"Most of our farmers and ranchers in their fifties or sixties do this naturally," Scheffe said. "But we have new people coming in, and we can buy them some experience they would not normally have by working



Rich Armijo, NRCS snow surveyor, measuring snowpack

with them and writing conservation plans.”

NRCS and its partners help farmers and ranchers gain flexibility by planning for both the dry and wet years, and ensuring the resources are in place to adapt to different conditions. This may be critical to New Mexicans because 60 percent of the time we experience conditions referred to as drought.

New Mexico is dependent on winter snowpack for irrigating cropland during the summer. Most of the state is semi-arid, which contrary to popular belief does not mean predictably semi-dry. Semi-arid climates are borderline, sandwiched between arid regions and humid areas - and in some years will act like their arid neighbors and occasionally like their humid ones. The other thing critical about New Mexico’s precipitation is timing. When it rains or snows may be as

important as how much precipitation is received. A wet October does not help the rancher who needs rain for his range in the summer. New Mexico’s optimum moisture pattern includes good snowpack, and early monsoonal rainfall during the growing season.

“Different farmers and ranchers face different drought situations,” Scheffe said. “Some who are directly dependent on the snowpack runoff feel it immediately. Others who irrigate off reservoirs may not be impacted until a few years of drawdown.”

However when an expected water shortfall can fill 7.5 million average size swimming pools, it is clear that those farmers and ranchers who develop conservation plans are better prepared to make their enterprise a sound operation. For additional information contact Ken Scheffe, Albuquerque, (505)761-4433.



Jemez Mountains east of Cuba on March 27, 2002 showing bare ground where average snowpack should be four feet.

Cane Bluestem: Large, Robust Grass Released

Cane bluestem can be a rancher's dream. It is a large, robust, high protein, and drought-tolerant grass according to Ramona Garner, agronomist at the USDA's New Mexico Plant Materials Center in Los Lunas.



Cane bluestem

Cane bluestem is a warm-season bunch grass with plants that reach heights of 1.5 to 2 meters. It appears to be remarkably drought tolerant, and has been scientifically improved for arid environments. That means it will grow well in near-desert conditions.

It has been classified as fair-to-good forage for cattle and wildlife. Under dryland conditions, cane bluestem has produced yields of approximately 4 metric tons per half-acre annually. When green, the total protein of cane bluestem forage is about 10 percent, and when dormant protein may drop to 4.5 percent.

When grown under similar conditions, cane bluestem and switchgrass compared favorably. However under drought conditions, cane bluestem produced more forage than switchgrass.

The New Mexico Plant Materials Center that developed the cane bluestem is run jointly by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and

New Mexico State University's Agricultural Science Center. The Center is constantly coming up with new varieties that allow producers to put grasses in places that either never had grass before, or in places where planters always found it extremely difficult to grow grass. Emphasizing the use of native grasses to solve conservation problems, the Center collects seed from superior indigenous plants for testing, selecting, and releasing to commercial growers. They also develop and perfect production and management technology.

The development of the cane bluestem is a case in point. NRCS field office staff originally collected the cane bluestem in 1982 from stands in New Mexico and Arizona. By selecting seed stock from many locales, the agronomists could ensure that their final product would be a grass that would grow in a broad geographic area. After testing and selecting, cane bluestem was released in 2001 for commercial use.

The Center releases new grass varieties through the New Mexico Crop Improvement Association to certified growers, who in turn cultivate the new varieties and sell them to retailers.

"Some of the grasses we develop can also be used as buffer strips around crop fields," Garner said.

Grasses suitable for buffer strips may prevent wind and water erosion, and filter run-off from croplands.

For additional information contact Gregory Fenchel, Plant Material Center Manager, (505)865-4684.



Field with cane bluestem

Joe Whitehead: Being Part of the Community

“Have you ever seen prairie chickens drum during mating season?” Joe Whitehead asks. “It’s pretty spectacular.”

The ability to work with an extremely diverse coalition is a talent Whitehead brings to his passion for the lesser prairie chicken, as well as his position as district conservationist at the Border and Roosevelt Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

The group that Whitehead is working with to enhance nesting areas for the lesser prairie chicken reads like a who’s who list of ranching and environmental interests. The group includes ranchers, environmentalists, Audubon Society, Isaac Walton League, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, New Mexico Agriculture Department, New Mexico Natural History Institute, New Mexico Game and Fish Department, New Mexico State Land Office, USDA-Farm Service Agency, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and soil and water conservation districts. Being a part of such a group for Whitehead, is being part of the community - a characteristic of a good district conservationist.

Whitehead is part of the community in other ways. Born and raised in Los Alamos, he graduated with two degrees from New Mexico State University which has produced so many of New Mexico’s district conservationists. He joined the Soil Conservation Service as a cooperative student in Mountainair in January 1977. He developed under leaders like Ben Creighton and Don Alam, and graduated from New Mexico State in 1980. After graduation he worked in Artesia, then took a position as a range conservationist in Estancia and Mountainair. He served over 17 years in Clovis before accepting his present position as district conservationist in Portales.

Whitehead’s job as district conservationist for the Border and Roosevelt Soil and Water Conservation District enables him to apply his interest in area farming and ranching. He serves as designated conservationist for the LEPA (low energy precision application)

EQIP Geographic Priority Area. LEPA irrigation systems apply water from pivot systems very efficiently. This task builds on Whitehead’s years of experience of trying to help farmers and ranchers make more efficient use of the irrigation water from the Ogallala aquifer.



Joe Whitehead, District Conservationist for the Border and Roosevelt Soil & Water Districts

Whitehead also is working with youth in the Border and Roosevelt SWCDs. At the Floyd School, in cooperation with the USFWS, he is aiding in the development of an outdoor classroom. The outdoor classroom is a pond for which NRCS is providing plantings that come from the New Mexico Plant Materials Center in Los Lunas.

Another school project is at Elida where, with a state grant, trees are being planted around a baseball park.

Joe Whitehead and his wife, Jill, give back to their community. Their son, Dusty, is involved in his high school soccer and basketball teams; while son, Clay, is a sophomore at Texas Tech.

It is a good life for Joe, Jill, and the boys in eastern New Mexico, where you can ask, “Have you ever seen prairie chickens drum during mating season?”

For additional information contact Joe Whitehead, Portales, (505)356-4465

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