2003 Minnesota Report
Natural Resources Conservation Activities

Land, Water, People

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Friends in Conservation:

Fiscal Year 2003 was a banner year for conservation in Minnesota. Higher funding levels for existing programs and new programs made conservation an easier and more accessible choice for Minnesota's private landowners.

This past year our agency business plan and goals were achieved in basically all programs. While a major part of our work effort was directed to Farm Bill program implementation, much was accomplished in our ongoing Soil Survey, Watersheds, RC&D, and Conservation Technical Assistant Programs. Especially noteworthy was our success with the revamped, more locally led, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). NRCS worked closely with the Minnesota Association of Conservation Districts and Cooperative Extension staff to roll out a successful Local Work Group training program to NRCS and SWCD partners state-wide. This training provided the necessary groundwork to make locally-led conservation process work extremely well in Minnesota. Despite the short implementation timeframe placed on the local field offices, our field staff and conservation partnership signed up over three times as many EQIP contracts compared to Fiscal Year 2002. FY-2003 brought forth the implementation of a new effort involving greater use of Technical Service Providers in Farm Bill program implementation.

Another good example of excellent partnership work in Minnesota is the Wetland Reserve Program. By working hand-in-hand with Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we were able to leverage even more dollars for wetland restorations. An example that shines brightly in northwestern Minnesota is the Glacial Ridge Project. Glacial Ridge is the site of the Nation's largest wetland and native grassland restoration project in North America. A total of 26 partners and private landowners have shown that by working together a great deal, more can be accomplished.

WILLIAM HUNT
State Conservationist

NRCS Mission

To provide leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, improve, and sustain our natural resources and environment.

NRCS Vision
Harmony between People and the Land

A Partnership for Good Stewardship

NRCS works closely with our 91 Soil and Water Conservation Districts in Minnesota. NRCS employees in 83 field offices provide conservation technical assistance to owners and operators of private lands to assist them in making sound land use decisions.

Minnesota NRCS has a total of 310 employees. There were 22 students under the Student Career Experience Program and Student Temporary Employee Program and two Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) students. Participation in the HACU program is noteworthy as this is a way that NRCS can recruit Hispanic students to Minnesota. NRCS continues to make recruitment efforts at several institutions of higher education. Recruitment accomplishments continue to be made from the 1890 schools and 1994 Tribal Colleges.

NRCS employees work in 83 local USDA Service Centers across the state of Minnesota.They are resource conservationists, soil conservationists, engineers, biologists, agronomists, and soil scientists who work hand-in-hand with local land users to conserve natural resources on private lands.

This is the foundation of our conservation programs, and we are committed to providing training and technical assistance support to meet the changing challenges in natural resource management.

Program Summary

This NRCS annual report covers accomplishments from October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2003. The following is a partial listing of some highlighted program accomplishments. More information about NRCS programs in Minnesota can be found at: **www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov.**

On May 13, 2002, President George W. Bush signed and enacted the 2002 Farm Bill, which represented our nation's strongest commitment to conservation ever. NRCS administers and manages programs which are outlined in the Conservation Provisions, Title II, of the Farm Bill. Increased cost-shared funds translate into more voluntary programs.

Soils

Soil surveys provide a field-based scientific inventory of soil resources, including soil maps and data about physical and chemical properties of soils as well as information on the potentials and limitations of each soil. NRCS is the lead Federal agency responsible for soil mapping on private lands. Many other state and local agency partners also contribute both staff and money to the national cooperative soil survey mapping effort.

For more information about soil surveys in Minnesota, click onto the Minnesota NRCS web site at: www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov

Accomplishments

- During FY 2003, Minnesota soil scientists mapped almost 1 million acres.
- Currently, 31 Minnesota counties meet Soil Survey Geographic Database (SSURGO) standards which is the most detailed geographic database.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

This Farm Bill conservation program helps land users address serious threats to soil, water and related natural resources including soil erosion and water quality degradation. EQIP offers financial and technical assistance to help landowners install or apply structural, vegetative and management practices called for in conservation contracts.

Local Work Groups (LWG)

Locally led conservation was highlighted and prioritized in the implementation of the 2003 EQIP. Local Work Groups, based on Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) boundaries, chaired by the NRCS District Conservationist and facilitated by SWCD staff and board members, held meetings to identify natural resources concerns and recommended EQIP 2003 priorities. National natural resource concerns and others identified locally were then utilized with a scoring worksheet to score and rank EQIP applications. This same process was also used on a regional basis for groups of counties coinciding to the seven NRCS/SWCD area boundaries.

Allocations were also made to each of the 91 SWCD boundary levels and to Area boundaries. This allowed local and area NRCS personnel to fund contracts in ranked order focused on their local and area priorities. This system yielded EQIP contracts in 85 counties. This compared to only 40 counties receiving contract funds in previous years when a State level scoring and application process was in place.

Accomplishments

Statewide, 1,527 applications were received for a total of $18,126,000 in EQIP requests.
$15,661,000 of EQIP funds were obligated with Minnesota producers in 1,210 contracts for an average contract value of $12,943.

52% ($8,127,000) of the total EQIP funds were used to addressated to animal livestock natural resource concerns.

The additional funds were used for other natural resource concerns 41% ($6,430,000).

$626,000, or 4% was obligated to forestry, wildlife, air and other natural resource concerns.

Non-livestock related water quality practices accounted for 3% or $470,000.

In addition to obligating this new $15.7 million in FY-03, hundreds of practices were implemented from previously funded EQIP contracts.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is the Nation's premier Wetlands restoration program. It is a voluntary Farm Bill program that offers landowners the means and the opportunity to protect, restore and enhance wetlands on their property. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) manages the program as well as provides technical and financial support to help landowners who participate in WRP.

Accomplishments

- In Minnesota in Federal fiscal year 2003, 108 WRP easements were obligated on 13,700 acres for $21 million. These are located in 24 counties across the State
- An 1,800 acre $2.1 million wetland/prairie project near the town of Uhlen in Clay and Norman Counties in NW Minnesota was funded. The 10 landowners in this project will restore nearly a 3 mile corridor that, in addition to wildlife habitat, will provide water quality and flood prevention benefits.
- Three Carver County landowners in the Minnesota River floodplain will restore 275 acres of riparian woodland and grassland habitat. This area will link two existing US Fish and Wildlife Service units and will ultimately be a part of the Minnesota Valley Refuge system.
- Linking 1,750 acres with 14 Marshall County landowners in the Lower Snake River watershed near its confluence with the Red River of the North was also funded. This project has obligated $1.6 million and will complete nearly 6 miles of riparian buffer along the Snake and Red Rivers and provide wildlife, water quality and flood remediation benefits.
- 44 previously funded landowners had their easements perfected in fiscal year 2003 on over 4,000 acres.
- In addition, thousand's of acres of wetlands and associated uplands were restored to their pre-drained/cropped condition. This included restoring hydrology, grass, forbs and shrub vegetation.
- NRCS continued to be a full partner in the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) Funded Wildlife Habitat Corridors Project. Ducks Unlimited has contracted with Wetland Specialist and technicians to help implement WRP in these corridors.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Field work, seeding recommendations, planning and monitoring for these multi-year contracts are performed by NRCS, SWCD and Technical Service Providers (TSP) as part of an on going workload in Minnesota.

Accomplishments

General Sign up 26:

- A total of 2379 offers were accepted on 79,415 acres for the 26th General CRP signup. These acres were planted to native grasses, trees and wildlife habitat.

Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP)

Fiscal year 2003 continued to be a strong program year for CCRP in Minnesota. Total acreage enrolled in CCRP between 1997-2003 was 526,822 acres.

Accomplishments

- Fourteen practices were used to protect the state's soil, water and wildlife resources. Priority practices included: Wetland Restoration (19,403 acres) and Filter Strips (10,107 acres) which accounted for the most acreages.
- Other conservation practices included: Riparian Buffers (4554 acres), Farmable Wetland Buffers (4,321 acres),Farmable Wetlands (1,683 acres) and Field Windbreak Establishment (1,469 acres).

Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program (PL-566)

Since 1954 when USDA enacted the PL 566 Small Watershed Program, 17 projects have been completed in the state providing over $38 million in federal cost share dollars to the economic, social, and environmental well being of rural Minnesota. Four new projects—the Bear Creek and the Whitewater Projects in SE Mn; the Kanaranzi Little Rock in SW MN; and the Snake River Flood Control Project in NW MN have obligated an additional $24 million cost share dollars.

Accomplishments

- Watershed planning activities were initiated within the Upper Pelican River Watershed District, the City of Detroit Lakes, and the Becker County Soil and Water Conservation District to reduce non point, total phosphorous run off into Detroit Lake.
- In FY 2003, handicapped accessible construction plans and specifications for improvements were completed for Del Clarke Lake (formerly PL 566 Structure R-1, Canby Creek Watershed Project 1974) in Stone Hill Park, Yellow Medicine County, MN.
- At the 2003 National Watershed Conference held in Council Bluffs, IA, Mayor Richard Nelson of Warren, MN, was honored as Watershed Man of the year for his local leadership roles in both the planning and construction activities ongoing in the Snake River PL 566 Flood Control Project in Marshall County.

Outreach

NRCS is committed to ensuring that its programs and services are accessible to all our customers, fairly and equitably, with emphasis on reaching the undeserved and socially disadvantaged farmers. Minnesota continues to make great strides in sharing outreach information across all of Minnesota which has increased NRCS's ability to reach more of the underserved and socially disadvantaged farmers and clientele.

Accomplishments

- The State Outreach Coordinator has coordinated outreach work with numerous DC's in Minnesota that have Native American Indian Reservations and minority landusers in their counties.

Resource Conservation and Development

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) helps communities improve their economic, social, and environmental conditions throughout the state of Minnesota. By using locally led, grassroots efforts, local residents identify problems and establish goals and objectives, develop alternatives, and implement solutions.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has eight approved RC&Ds covering 64 counties in Minnesota. A ninth-Coteau des Prairies RC&D in southwest, Minnesota –is seeking USDA authorization as an official RC&D area. This proposed area covers nine counties in southwestern Minnesota. RC&D Council's throughout Minnesota have carried on with the "Mimnesota nice" tradition of helping the new council.

Four counties in East Central Minnesota have banded together to start the intial process of formulating an RC&D council. Sherburne, Wright, Benton and Stearns County encompass this newly forming area.

Accomplishments

- RC&D activities include many varied projects throughout the state of Minnesota such as educational projects, recreation and tourism projects, woodland management, and fire protection and prevention. RC&D's in Minnesota work extensively with the state's 11 Tribal nations.

Technical Service Providers (TSP)

Technical service providers (TSPs) are individuals, entities, or public agencies certified by NRCS to provide direct technical assistance and deliver quality conservation activities to landowners participating in conservation programs. The use of TSPs was authorized by the 2002 Farm Bill and provides producers with a choice of provider of technical service, NRCS or a TSP. Through the Technical Service Provider Registry (TechReg), an internet application, individuals interested in becoming TSPs can register and become certified as a TSP.

Accomplishments

- Registered 90 Technical Service Providers for Minnesota. Of the TSPs listed for Minnesota, 64 registered as individuals, 21 as agencies, and 5 as businesses. 80 percent of the TSPs registered in Minnesota are located within the state while 16 are located outside of MN, representing eight states.
- Minnesota has registered TSPs located in 53 cities within Minnesota.

  Successfully scheduled over $700,000 in private sector TSP work in 2003 Environmental Qualities Incentive Program (EQIP) contracts.

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program

In the spring of 2001 and the summer of 2002, rainfall events caused flooding in Minnesota that was determined to be eligible for the EWP program. Congress made funds available in the fall of 2002. The major work items have been bank stabilization, debris removal, sediment removal, and repairs to small dams.

Accomplishments

- Grant agreements exceeding $1.4 million prepared with sponsors in Minnesota
- Repairs beginning in 2003 are nearing completion.

The Minnesota Grazing Lands Conservation Intiative

The Minnesota Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative continue to be a voluntary effort which is designed to enhance the state's privately owned grazing land by increasing technical assistance at the field level. The use of demonstration projects and educational programs are utilized state-wide. Currently, GLCI has one full-time and one part-time Grazing specialist. Four full time grazing specialist positions were added in FY-2004.

Accomplishments

- Grazing specialists in Minnesota prepared 42 grazing plans on 4587 acres.
- 14 workshops/seminars were conducted involving 296 producers and 108 agency people.
- 6 field days were conducted involving 190 producers and 33 agency people.

Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary program that helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program provides matching funds to State, Tribal or local governments and non-governmental organizations with existing farm and ranch land protection programs to purchase conservation easements. FRPP was reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill). Minnesota NRCS became involved in FRPP during FY 2003.

Accomplishments

- NRCS in Minnesota advertised a Request for Proposals for the FRPP and received one application from Dakota County. This application met FRPP guidelines and was funded with $1,268,000.
- As Dakota County enters into conservation easements for Farmland Protection, NRCS will pay up to 50% of the value up to the amount funded in FY-03.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

This is a voluntary Farm Bill program that assists landowner in enhancing area that provide needed food and cover for many different species of wildlife. The goal of WHIP is to 'Maintain a healthy, diverse ecosystem through the improvement, enhancement and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat, in cooperation with private agricultural landowners." The WHIP program promotes wildlife habitat restoration and management on private lands through cooperative endeavors between landowners and Federal, state and local conservation partners.

Accomplishments

- Minnesota-NRCS received a total of 150 WHIP applications during FY 2003 of which the total dollar value of applications exceeded $12,000,000.
- Funded 68 WHIP contracts to enhance over 2000 acres at a cost-share of over $350,000.
- Practices included: 470 acres of native grasses and forbs, 540 acres of native trees and shrubs, 600 acres of brush management, 700 acres of prescribed burning and 300 acres of timber stand improvement. Additionally, 40 acres of wetlands were restored.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is a newly implemented voluntary Farm Bill program that helps landowners and operators restore and protect grassland, including rangeland and pastureland, and certain other lands, while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. The program emphasizes support for grazing operations, plant and animal biodiversity, and grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under the greatest threat of conversion.

Program priorities were producers who had existing grazing systems. Priority was given to sites with existing or restored native prairie plants, and sites under the greatest threat of conversion from grass to some other land use. FY-2003 was the first year this program was offered. Program final rules are being developed in Washington.

Accomplishments

- Requested: 328 applications on 53,506 acres for a total requested dollar amount of $12,639,418.
- Approved: 19 applications on 2,372 acres for $797,987