



Natural Resources

Conservation Service

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West National Technology Support Center

Second Quarter Report FY 2011



A Message from the Director

This is our second quarterly report for Fiscal Year 2011. The budget uncertainty that existed in the first quarter continued through the second quarter. However, very few assistance projects had to be cancelled or rescheduled and we hope this pattern holds through the rest of the year.

All of our discipline specialists have been fully committed to assistance projects this quarter. The Ecological Site Description Acceleration has been picking up speed (no pun intended) and we have been working with the newly hired team in Lincoln and the MO specialists to develop a common understanding of procedures and begin projects to develop guidelines. The effort to develop prototype riparian ESD's is progressing well. We also have been responding to State requests for assistance on preparing State Resource Assessments.

There was a concerted effort to develop 30 new or revised Practice Standards for energy conservation. These should be issued in final form in May. Our specialists were also involved in helping to develop a new strategy for nutrient management.

Staffing has been stable although two specialists announced that they plan to retire in June – Wendell Gilgert, Wildlife Biologist, and Charles Zuller, Environmental Engineer. With the current freeze on hiring it may be a while before we can fill these positions.

We hope that you find this report useful. As always, please let me know how we can better serve you.

Bruce Newton



CORE TEAM HIGHLIGHTS

Fast Track Lesser Prairie Chicken Conferencing

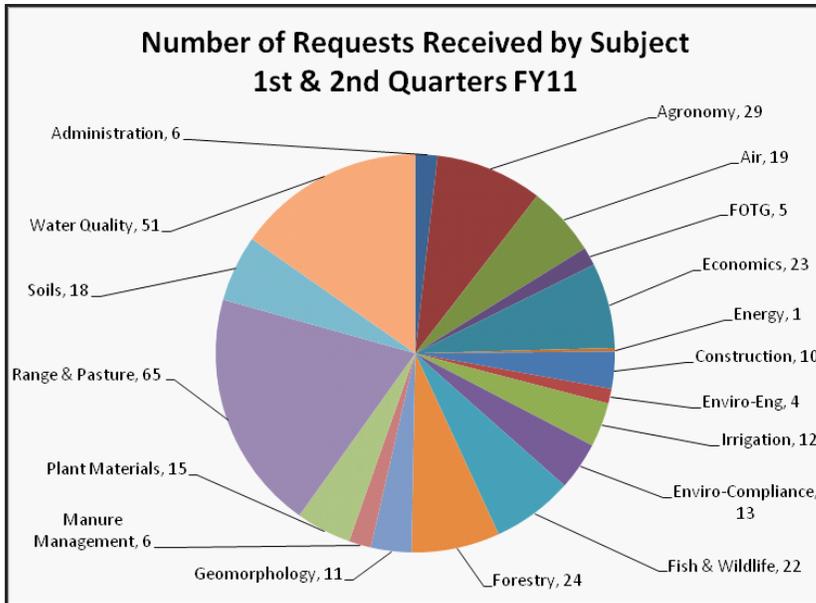
As an element of the five states Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative, NRCS is working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to develop a conference opinion that will allow NRCS to continue to provide conservation planning, design, and implementation assistance through Farm Bill Programs. **Meg Bishop, Ecologist and Wendell Gilgert, Wildlife Biologist**, are part of a team of NRCS state and regional specialists and conservationists who are following FWS protocols to develop narratives for the conservation practices that will be commonly utilized for the initiative. Like the conferencing process engaged for the Greater Sage-Grouse, this process is on a fast track where completion is scheduled for early this summer.



Photo by Gary Kramer

Helping People Help the Land

An Analysis of WNTSC Assistance Second Quarter FY 2011



Count of Requests by Location 1st & 2nd Quarters FY 11	All Requests	>20 Hrs.
West Region States	183	120
Central Region States	22	17
East Region States	19	15
All States/National	81	60
NHQ/NEDC	39	28
Total	322	240

1st and 2nd Quarter Status:	Number:
Completed	185
In Progress	133
Not Started	11
Total	329

For more information on Assistance Requests, please contact Russ Hatz, WNTSC National Technical Specialist at russ.hatz@por.usda.gov or 503.273.2428.

CORE TEAM HIGHLIGHTS CON'T.

Forestland Ecological Site Descriptions training held for California field staff

Craig Ziegler, Forester, traveled to southern California to assist in training California field staff on developing Forestland Ecological Site Descriptions and the benefits of having the descriptions. The session took place on Palomar Mountain of the Peninsular Range in the southern half of MLRA 20 (Southern California Mountains). A very diverse set of ecological sites were visited; dry coast live oak, White fir-Incense cedar-Live oak, and White fir-Incense cedar-Canyon live oak-black oak. Two proposed forested riparian ecological sites were also looked at that occur in the agricultural lands. Riparian zones, especially in low precipitation areas, are extremely important to wildlife, providing terrestrial and aquatic habitat.

Forested ecological site descriptions can be a valuable tool in forest management planning. An ESD can include the effects of drought (e.g. increased beetle kill,



Lyn Townsend, ACES forester, discussing sampling methodology at the dry Coast live oak site.

extreme wildfire hazard, etc.) that can hit southern California forests, and describe how to mitigate the effects.

Template for National Job Sheet delivered to Western States

Giulio Ferruzzi, Conservation Agronomist, delivered a national template for the 595 job sheet to the western states in the second quarter. The spreadsheet appears

to be well received and is gaining acceptance in several states. The 595 job sheet was also distributed to the CNTSC and ENTSC for distribution to their constituents. Giulio is currently assisting Alaska, Arizona, Colorado and California in finalizing state specific versions.

Organic Conservation Specialist provides training and assistance

Since coming on board with the agency approximately six months ago, **Sarah Brown, Joint Organic Conservation Specialist, WNTSC and Oregon Tilth**, has been very busy responding to state requests and juggling organic trainings during the recent Organic Initiative sign-up. After first completing an agency-wide survey to gauge interest and experience with organic production systems, Sarah began working with state staff directly to design and coordinate trainings. Due to the wide array of requests and needs, Sarah works with the agency's technical specialists to prioritize areas of focus: organic agriculture technical assistance, supporting outreach efforts to the organic community, facilitating relationships between NRCS and organic NGOs, and assisting states with the selection of standards and development of payment schedules for the Organic Initiative.

Sarah has traveled to Wisconsin, Virginia, West Virginia, Oregon, and Alaska to facilitate 1-2 day trainings for state and field office staff. She has provided various assistance including a one-hour presentation on Organic Nutrient Management for an Animal Waste Management Workshop in Oregon to fully organizing and implementing a two-day session on organic production in Alaska. Field office staff have been very eager to learn about organic agriculture practices and over 97% of respondents report that the knowledge gained from these trainings will help them perform their job better. On a daily basis, Sarah regularly responds to questions on organic standards and production from state and field office staff over the phone and email.

For the coming months, Sarah is working on requested training for Kentucky, Mississippi, Oregon, Hawaii, Arizona, and Maine. With limited staff travel budgets, she is working with states to develop single day trainings that can be repeated across numerous state areas. Additionally, she has scheduled a series of four Organic Production Webinars with David Lamm of the ENTSC to provide NRCS staff with brief overviews of different organic technical topics from national experts. Organic payment schedule assistance has been very regularly requested and she is working with states to schedule time for thorough evaluation and assistance

with cost data development before the FY2012 sign-ups.

“With so many tasks pulling staff in different directions, I am hoping I can work with states to sit down and provide a thorough overview and revision of how they are approaching organic producers. There seems to be ample opportunity to improve organic cost data, build local partnerships and improve outreach, and develop a deeper understanding of organic systems and the opportunity they have to impact conservation.”

New Mexico provides Prescribed Burning workshop

Pat Shaver, Rangeland Management Specialist, conducted a Prescribed Burning workshop for New Mexico NRCS employees and others in Milnesand, New Mexico the week of March 7th, 2011. Pat was assisted by Chuck Stanley, Rangeland Management Specialist, CNTSC. There were a total of twenty-one NM NRCS participants along with employees from the NM Department of Game and Fish, local Volunteer Fire Departments and two ranchers. Topics covered in the classroom at the Milensand Community Center included fire history and ecology, fire characteristics and behavior, planning consideration and smoke management, safety procedures and policy. On Tuesday, the wind was in excess of 40 mph, so no burning was attempted and Wednesday the winds were light and variable, producing very unsafe wind



conditions, so no burning was attempted. Thursday, the winds, and other weather parameters, were just right, so a burn was conducted on a CRP field of sideoats grama. The wind was a very steady 10 – 15 mph from the SSW so a backfire was used along a disked line on the north side to install a 100' wide blackline. A flank fire was then installed along a disked area with a wet line from a pumper truck on the east side. When the containment crews had everything under control, a flank fire was started along the west edge and the same time a head fire was set on the south side. The de-briefing at the end of the mop up indicated a successful burn

that should meet the conservation objectives of grass vigor and reduction of broom snakeweed as well as a good training burn and opportunity for the employees.

Wyoming holds interactive Soil Survey and Spatial Data session

Steve Campbell, Soil Scientist, taught *Using Soil Survey Data and Other Spatial Data for Ecological Site Description Development and Correlation* training in Casper, Wyoming on March 1-3, 2011. The session focused on using soil survey tabular and spatial data, in combination with other spatial data such as climate and elevation, to help develop and correlate ecological site descriptions.

This training session was “hands on” because each participant was required to work through a series of ten modules at their computer, as the instructor demonstrated each step. The modules included:

- A Method to Query the Soil Survey Spatial Data to create an Ecological Site Extent Map.
- Using Soil Data Viewer for Ecological Site Development.
- Using the Soil Survey MS Access Database to Create Reports for Ecological Site Development.
- Using PRISM Climate Spatial Data in Ecological Site Development.
- Spatially displaying Soil Taxonomic Moisture and Temperature Regimes.
- Using Digital Elevation Model (DEM) Data to Evaluate Ecological Site Elevation Ranges.
- NASIS Reports for Developing the Soil, Physiographic, and Climate Features Sections of Ecological Site Descriptions.
- A Method for Creating an Ecological Site Extent Map using NASIS Reports.
- Using SSURGO Access Database Queries for Ecological Site Development.
- Merging the Tabular and Spatial Data for Multiple Soil Survey Areas into a Single Dataset.

There were 14 participants in the training session, including rangeland management specialists, soil scientists, GIS specialists, and the State Agronomist.

Pollinator Conservation

Winter is an excellent time for planning and preparing for planting pollinator habitat. This winter, the new CRP Pollinator Enhancement (CP42) dictated much of Xerces’ technical support for the agency via a contribution agreement with the WNTSC. Close to 40,000 acres of pollinator habitat were contracted through CRP during the 2010 sign up. Many of the states with the largest sign-ups, including Colorado, Minnesota, North Dakota, Washington, and Idaho, contacted our technical staff to get help reviewing pollinator plant lists and seeding specifications. **Mace Vaughan, Joint Pollinator Conservation Specialist, WNTSC and Pollinator Program Director for Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation**, also conducted a webinar for Colorado NRCS and their partners on managing CRP CP42 pollinator plantings (Colorado has about 19,000 acres contracted!).

The Xerces pollinator conservation team also provided technical support to the NRCS Plant Materials Program. Jim Briggs incorporated Xerces Society technical staff in a training he organized at the Lockeford, California in January, 2010 where he reviewed the diverse pollinator demonstration projects currently underway at several of the western PMCs. These projects include trials on best plants for pollinators, the most effective techniques for establishment, effective seed mixes, weed management, technical documentation, and more.

Xerces staff also helped review pollinator habitat field trials under way at the Manhattan, Kansas PMC. Staff reviewed a fantastic pollinator conservation technical note coming out of Pullman, WA, and have provided support to several pollinator habitat demonstration plantings that are to be incorporated into the NRCS display and conservation field exhibits at the 1st annual Land and Wildlife Expo at Opryland in Nashville, TN.

Information was provided to four large organic farm conferences on how NRCS programs can be used to provide pollinator and other beneficial insect habitat. These conferences included the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) conference in Wisconsin – the largest organic agriculture meeting in the U.S. – the Minnesota Organic Conference, the Missouri Organic Farming Conference, and Organicology, in Portland, OR.

In the coming months, the WNTSC is helping to sponsor full day pollinator conservation planning short courses in New Mexico, Colorado, Idaho, Washington,

and Maryland. These training are in addition to other short courses occurring in Indiana, New Jersey, Maine, Missouri, Minnesota, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Utah in the next few months.

Rounding out second quarter activities, Xerces staff worked with local conservation district staff to launch several projects within the WNTSC's own neighborhood, including consulting on a "meadowscaping" initiative of the West Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District. The project, designed to help landowners develop alternatives to traditional turf-grass lawns with mixtures of low growing native grasses and wildflowers, is generating early praise from local agencies for its potential to improve water quality and support wildlife.

Finally, a Mid-Atlantic Pollinator Habitat Restoration Specialist based out of the Cape May, New Jersey NRCS Plant Materials Center was hired. This joint position with Xerces and the NJ NRCS is funded through a contribution agreement with NJ NRCS and the Cape May PMC. A contribution agreement was signed with the East National Technology Support Center resulting in the future hiring of a Pollinator Conservation Specialist to be based out of the ENTSC. Both of positions are complimented by a third Pollinator Conservation Specialist position which will be based in the Upper Midwest, to provide support to the NRCS, using non-federal funds. Recruitment for both the Upper Midwest and ENTSC position will take place in spring 2011.

These new hires and positions join a team of five core pollinator program staff who are providing technical support to the NRCS. This team met in March 2011 in Portland, OR with Wendell Gilgert (WNTSC Wildlife Biologist) for a full day in-house training session on bee identification, NRCS conservation planning, project implementation, and monarch butterfly and milkweed conservation.



The NRCS and Xerces Pollinator Conservation Program continue to build their capacity to support the creation and protection of wildflower rich habitats that support pollinators and other beneficial insects, nationwide!

TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT TEAMS

AIR QUALITY AND ATMOSPHERIC CHANGE TEAM:

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently developed new or revised air quality regulations that could have significant impacts to agriculture and natural resource management. The Air Quality and Atmospheric Change (AQAC) Team at the WNTSC has been providing significant input in terms of expertise and regulatory language to the Department and EPA on several of these issues, and especially regarding 1) how EPA defines manure with regard to its use as a fuel, 2) the role of fire as a basic and integral part of ecological systems, in EPA's revision of its fire/smoke policy and report to Congress on Black Carbon, and 3) how greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from biologically-based (biogenic) sources are accounted for in EPA's GHG-related rule(s). They also have provided input to EPA's proposed revision of the National Ambient Air Quality Standard for coarse particulate, including participation in EPA's regional PM10 hearing session in Spokane on March 9.

For the first time, several states will be offering Comprehensive Air Quality Management Plans (CAQMPs) in their conservation portfolio for FY2011. The AQAC Team developed the guidelines and criteria for the new CAQMP, as well as the certification requirements for potential CAQMP Technical Service Providers (TSPs) and are now working with a couple of states in getting some certified TSPs this year.

A new version of the official USDA on-farm GHG accounting tool, COMET-VR, was rolled out in December 2010 (COMET-VR 2.0). Hundreds of users, both within NRCS as well as the general public, have been using the new version that provides estimates of carbon storage changes, as well as nitrous oxide emissions, resulting from land management changes. Educational sessions have been conducted showing the features of the expanded tool, and a new brochure is being developed. The AQAC Team serves as manager of the COMET project at Colorado State University, including the COMET-Farm project that will provide an expanded tool capable of estimating the full suite of GHG emissions and carbon sequestration at the farm scale.

The AQAC Team has started providing training and consulting to states on the four new AQAC practice standards that were rolled out in 2010. Training on

potential applications of the Combustion System Improvement practice was offered in March 2011, with more than 30 states participating.



The Air Quality and Atmospheric Change team.

Your AQAC Team and primary focus areas: Adam Chambers (GHGs/carbon), Susan O'Neill (PM, ozone, smoke), Greg Zwicke (livestock emissions), and Greg Johnson (Team Leader).

<http://www.airquality.nrcs.usda.gov/>

ENERGY TEAM:

The Energy Technology Development Team has worked diligently in Q2 to support the Chief's goal to integrate energy resource concerns into EQIP for FY12. The overall plan involves training, outreach, tool development, and program implementation. The Team is working on each of these elements but, because almost everything hinges on the timely issuance of energy conservation practice standards, practice standard revision and development have been the primary team focus this quarter.

Thirty new or revised Conservation Practice Standards that address energy have been posted to the Federal Register for a 30-day comment period before final issuance. Of these, 10 include a purpose to "Develop Renewable Energy Systems", 17 include a purpose to "Reduce Energy Use", and three include both of these purposes. Once the practices have been issued States may begin the process of adopting them for use in their FOTGs.

Training: The Energy Technology Development Team and the WNTSC Water Management Engineers teamed up in February to deliver a workshop on renewable energy systems in Utah. A webinar on the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's Bioenergy Atlas was presented to both the Energy State Contacts and Air Quality Contacts in March, 2011. A recording of the webinar has been posted to the WNTSC Energy SharePoint site: <https://nrcs.sc.egov.usda.gov/st/wntsc/energy/> under training/web meetings/March_24_11_Bioenergy atlas. Additional webinar presentations on various energy topics are being scheduled for delivery to NRCS in Q3 and Q4. These will also be recorded for employees to replay at their convenience.



Kip Pheil discusses geothermal opportunities at Utah renewable energy systems workshop.

Work to update the Energy Estimators began in Q2 and will continue in Q3. The energy tools will eventually be housed on a server in Kansas City. Meanwhile, broken links are being repaired, inconsistencies are being corrected, databases are being revised, and bugs are being addressed. We are also redesigning the NRCS Energy Web Page and SharePoint site. A series of energy fact sheets planned for Q3 will be posted on the energy page as well as the SharePoint site for easy access.

As always, the Energy Technology Development team is available to answer question states may have regarding energy technologies and implementation plans for the agency. Please contact: Stefanie Aschmann, Stefanie. aschmann@por.usda.gov.

WATER QUALITY AND QUANTITY TEAM:

The Water Quality and Quantity Team had a busy second quarter with more than 10 training sessions delivered across the country covering topics that spanned from irrigation to river restoration. We were also active fulfilling direct assistance requests from California to Maryland. One of the major accomplishments was

completing a new version of WIN-PST.

The Windows Pesticide Screening Tool (WIN-PST) is used by NRCS field staff to evaluate pesticide risks to water quality. An update to WIN-PST was cleared for distribution. Version 3.1.2 is being automatically installed on the 10,935 NRCS work stations that currently have WIN-PST installed. The new version of the software will automatically check for pesticide database updates and it adds pesticide toxicity data for pollinators. This update also fixes a number of issues that users identified in the last version. WIN-PST 3.1.2 is also compatible with the Windows 7 operating system that is widely used by TSPs and other NRCS partners. Please see the WIN-PST webpage for more information as well as software and database downloads for outside users: <http://www.wsi.nrcs.usda.gov/products/W2Q/pest/winpst31.html>

One of the other highlights was the selection of Pat Willey to the National Conservation Drainage Management Team. Pat will be sharing his expertise on agriculture drainage management as the team tackles many of the persistent issues including nutrients and sediment in the Mississippi River Basin.

The WQQT assisted with the design and analysis of two major river restoration projects in the second quarter. The first is the Teanaway River in Washington State. This restoration addressed multiple compound scalloped meanders that were eroding the streambank and causing multiple resource concerns including erosion and the loss of aquatic habitat. In partnership with the Multi-State Design Team, natural stream channel restoration alternatives were analyzed and recommendations addressing the natural range of variability were presented.



Water Quality and Quantity staff conduct field reconnaissance on the Teanaway River with state staff.

The second restoration project was the Green and Weber Rivers in Utah. In this case the rivers are

experiencing high width to depth ratios with a significant loss of riparian vegetation and associated streambank erosion. Again the natural channel restoration recommendations included the re-introduction of wood into the channel system in the form of wood-toe revetment with a reconstructed bankfull bench (floodplain). Stream and river restoration activities are on the increase throughout the western states, with assistance requests following these trends.

Water Quality and Quantity Team Appreciates Earth Team Volunteer



Ken Pfeiffer, retired agronomist from the West National Technology Support Center, has been busy volunteering with the WQQT for the last 2 years. Twice a week Ken has been writing, editing and organizing the updates for the National Water Quality Handbook.

Recently Ken put the finishing touches on Part 601, the Resource Management Framework and Part 603, the Water Quality Assessment. Ken's extensive background in SCS and NRCS along with his leadership skills have been critical to updating these important National Handbooks. We feel extremely fortunate to have Ken's expertise and insight help keep these projects moving forward. In a time of contracting budgets, there would be no way we could hope to employ a consultant with Ken's background and credentials. The WQQT along with all of us here at the WNTSC want to thank Ken for the hundreds of hours in contributions to conservation and the future.