

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts Newsletter

October 2009



NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE OKLAHOMA ASSN. OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

STATE BUDGET WOES CONTINUE. STIMULUS AND BOND EARNINGS FILLING THE GAP FOR NOW.

As of this writing, state revenue collections continue to come in under estimates. Current trends are pointing to a 5% reduction in funding for the Conservation Commission and districts for the remainder of the fiscal year. This is on top of the 7% reduction from last year's budget.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that with the work being done in Oklahoma due to the funds made available from the federal stimulus package passed by Congress and the conservation bond issue approved by the Oklahoma legislature, the Conservation Commission is earning additional funds for administering contracts for NRCS. These monies in turn will help plug the holes in the budget created by the shortfall in state revenue. Because of these funds, we are hopeful we can make it through the year without employee furloughs or reductions in district allocations.

All that being said, we have to start focusing now on the budget the legislature will be crafting this next spring.

**NOW IS THE TIME TO CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATORS AND LET THEM KNOW
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVATION!!!!**

Your OACD Executive Board and the Board of the Conservation Commission have been working on a budget to present for approval at the Area meetings. We feel we have a strategy that will again keep conservation moving forward and will keep conservation dollars on the ground in Oklahoma, but to make this happen we need your help. If you have not contacted your representative and senator and told them we need their support this spring, please do so. Make sure they know we have to have the full bond payment included in the budget of the Conservation Commission this coming year. If we have our bond payment covered, we should be able to limp through next year with program funds and with no furloughs.

LET'S START WORKING NOW TO MAKE SURE WE HAVE SUCCESS IN THE LEGISLATURE THIS SPRING!!!!!!!!!!!!

OACD AREA MEETINGS ARE JUST AROUND THE CORNER!!

It's that time of year again. The OACD area meetings will soon be here. We are in the process of finalizing the details for each of these gatherings and we hope to have a great turnout at each location. The current dates are as follows:

Area 1: October 29 at the Dewey County fairgrounds in Taloga.

Area 2: November 17 at the Expo Center at Highway 177 and Leo Street in Shawnee.

Area 3: November 10 at the Faith Freewill Baptist Church on Highway 75 on the south side of Bartlesville.

Area 4: November 5 at the Great Plains Coliseum on the fairgrounds in Lawton.

Area 5: November 19, the Mary Herron Community Conference Center at 812 E. Lincoln Rd. in Idabel.

We are also putting together the schedule of programs for the meetings. Issues we are looking at range from the current state budget and our policy initiatives for the upcoming Oklahoma legislative session, to the new CSP signup in Oklahoma, to sessions highlighting the successes many conservation districts have had through local initiatives.

If you have any ideas for topics we might cover at the area meetings or at the state meeting in February, please contact Clay Pope at claypope@pldi.net. Stay tuned for more updates concerning the areas meetings in the next few weeks!!!

WESTERN FARMERS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE AND OACD TO AGAIN PARTNER ON STATE CONSERVATION YOUTH AWARDS

As part of their continuing commitment to the youth of Oklahoma and the Conservation of our state's natural resources, Western Farmers Electric Cooperative (WFEC) and the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) today announced that they will again partner together in presenting the WFEC Conservation Youth Awards. These awards will go to the winners of the OACD poster, essay and speech contests at the district and state level. Last year over 1,000 students from throughout Oklahoma participated in these contests.

“We are honored to again have WFEC as a partner in recognizing the outstanding achievements of our states youth,” Trey Lam, President of OACD said. “These students work hard in preparing their speeches, posters and essays. The support of WFEC gives us a chance to better recognize their achievements.”

Open to students from all areas of Oklahoma, the WFEC Youth Conservation Contests include categories for both high school and grade school students. These contestants research the conservation topic chosen each year and then write essays, develop speeches or create posters to expand on the conservation theme for that year.

“WFEC is proud to assist in supporting these youth awards. After all, these youth are the future of our country,” commented WFEC CEO Gary Roulet.

In existence for over 68 years, WFEC is a generation and transmission (G&T) cooperative that provides essential electric service to 19 member distribution cooperatives, Altus Air Force Base and other power users. With three generating plants located at Mooreland, Anadarko and Hugo, WFEC has a total power capacity of more than 1,470 megawatts when the purchased hydro power is included.

“This is a great partnership, WFEC and OACD,” Clay Pope, executive director of OACD said. “By sponsoring these awards, WFEC is helping us recognize the youth of our state and encouraging our students to have a better appreciation for our natural resources. WFEC is truly committed to helping the next generation of Oklahomans conserve and protect our soil, water, air and wildlife habitats.”

OKLAHOMA CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP BREAKS GROUND ON FIRST STIMULUS-FUNDED UPSTREAM FLOOD CONTROL DAM IN THE NATION

With the turn of a shovel and the clicking of camera shutters, The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, the Turkey Creek Conservancy District and the Garfield County Conservation District today broke ground on the first upstream flood control dam in the United States to be built with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), better known as the Federal Stimulus plan. The dam will be the first of several new conservation projects throughout Oklahoma and the nation made possible by the passage of the stimulus act,

said Trey Lam, President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD).

“This new dam signifies the first step in what promises to be a huge investment in the conservation infrastructure of Oklahoma and the Nation,” Lam said. “The dollars made available by the stimulus plan will help us not only build new upstream flood control structures like the one we broke ground on today, but they will also provide much needed assistance in repairing aging flood dams throughout Oklahoma and the nation and will provide funds for other conservation initiatives as well. This groundbreaking is a great way to kick off this new wave of investment in natural resource protection.”

Located west of the City of Enid, the new flood control dam, designated Turkey Creek # 3, will reduce flooding on over 500 acres of cropland, protect 6 county bridges and roads located below the structure and provide wildlife mitigation all for the construction cost of \$510,998. Awarded to the construction company of C. Watts and Son Inc., the construction project will be funded completely by Federal Dollars from the stimulus plan. The dam will be the second of eleven dams to be built in the 244,000 acre Turkey Creek watershed. When all dams are completed, the project will reduce flooding for the 6,000 residents in the eight small communities in the watershed.

“Without the stimulus funds we would have a hard time getting this project on the ground,” Lam Said. “We hope with this kick start of funding will start a process that will continue until we get the entire watershed system finished.”

The NRCS in Oklahoma have received nearly \$2 million in funds from the Stimulus plan to build new flood control dams. In addition, another \$14 million in stimulus funds have been earmarked to the Oklahoma NRCS for flood control rehabilitation and repair. \$2 million in stimulus funds have been received by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission for Water Quality work and another \$100,000 has come to conservation districts in North West Oklahoma for work on controlled burns. \$308,000 in stimulus funds have also been earmarked for carbon and methane credit work by OACD statewide. All of this adds up to a significant investment for conservation in Oklahoma according to Matt Gard, Chairman of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.

“We are excited about this investment in Oklahoma Conservation by the Federal Government,” Gard said. “It will provide new jobs for construction projects, new investment in the economy of rural Oklahoma and additional protection for our natural resources. This groundbreaking ceremony today signals the kickoff of what promises to be a new area in conservation work in Oklahoma and we are excited to be a part of it.”

OKLAHOMA CONSERVATION LEADERS PRAISE CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION SUPPORT OF VOLUNTARY WATER QUALITY PROGRAMS.

A recent joint letter sent to the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by the Oklahoma congressional delegation expressing concern that the agency is moving away from successful voluntary water quality programs and toward more regulation shows strong support for the efforts being made by landowners to protect the environment, said Trey Lam, President of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD).

“This action by our members of congress shows real support for the efforts of farmers, ranchers and other landowners to address natural resource concerns through voluntary, locally-led means,” Lam said. “We have been getting some very troubling signals from the EPA lately as to their stance on voluntary efforts to control issues such as non-point source pollution in water. This shift in attitude signals what could be a new emphasis on additional regulations for agriculture. This action by our delegation is strong stand in favor of the voluntary work done by landowners to address water quality issues.”

In a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson dated September 17, 2009, the Oklahoma Congressional Delegation expressed support for the Clean Water Act Section 319 program, a voluntary water quality program that is utilized largely in Oklahoma as a cost-share program to help producers undertake best management practices to address non-point source pollution. Through the use of this program, farmers, ranchers and other landowners, in cooperation with their local conservation district, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and with additional technical assistance from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) have been able to reduce the level of non-point source pollution in several state watersheds. Examples include a reduction of roughly 66 percent of the phosphorus levels in Beaty Creek, a tributary to the Eucha-Spavinaw watershed, the primary water supply for the City of Tulsa, and a 69 percent reduction in phosphorus and nitrogen in the Peacheater Creek subwatershed of the scenic Illinois River.

"Through voluntary, cooperative action that addresses water quality problems while respecting private property rights, several additional streams have been removed from the 303(d) list for bacteria, sediment and pesticide pollution," the letter states. "We are concerned, however, that EPA has neglected funding for section 319 (the polluted runoff program in the Clean Waters Act) and may be considering altering current regulations to mandate certain nonpoint source pollution reduction efforts. We believe such efforts would fail to take into account the already successful reduction of nonpoint source pollution in Oklahoma."

According to Clay Pope, Executive Director of OACD, this strong statement of support for the conservation efforts of farmers and ranchers comes an opportune time.

“Now, more than ever, it is refreshing to see our elected officials supporting the work agriculture producers do to protect our natural resources,” Pope said. “With the pressure our state and federal regulators are under, it might be tempting to take the approach of forcing landowners to take action instead of working with them in a cooperative manner to solve these problems. We are extremely grateful to our delegation for taking this strong stand on this important issue. We are especially grateful to Senator Tom Coburn for helping to organize this effort by our elected representatives in Washington.

The letter was signed by Republican Sens. Jim Inhofe and Tom Coburn and Reps. John Sullivan, Frank Lucas, Tom Cole and Mary Fallin and Democratic Rep. Dan Boren.

OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO DEFEND OVERSIGHT OF CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

(From newswire reports)

Administration officials will give an update this week on their implementation of the conservation programs included in last year's farm bill.

The hearing will be before a panel of the House Ag Committee and is part of a series of hearings to check on implementation of the 2008 farm bill. The panel held a similar hearing last week to review the research title.

Conservation programs received \$4 billion more over five years under the farm bill that lawmakers approved last year.

The conservation programs in the farm bill are large in scope. Together, their budget each year is more than twice that of the entire Fish and Wildlife Service. The largest land retirement program, the Conservation Reserve Program, covers 32 million acres -- more than all of the National Wildlife Refuges in the lower 48 states.

Advocates who track the programs expect a major area of emphasis at the hearing will be the Conservation Stewardship Program, which saw the most significant change under the farm bill. Lawmakers created the new conservation program by overhauling a previous program that was started in the 2002 farm bill but never really got off the ground.

The Obama administration has been more aggressive in launching the new Conservation Stewardship Program, and farmers have responded enthusiastically. The Agriculture Department launched the \$1.1 billion program in August with a sign-up that required farmers to try to apply by the end of September.

But even with the short sign-up time, some USDA officials have estimated they may have received more than twice as many applications for the program than they have funds available. The department plans to enroll 12.8 million acres this year.

The Conservation Security Program provides financial and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers that want to maintain existing conservation activities and adopt new practices to conserve and enhance soil, water, air and related natural resources on their land.

FY 10 FEDERAL AGRICULTURE APPROPRIATIONS BILL NEARS PASSAGE

(From NACD)

Last week, House and Senate negotiators completed work on a conference agreement on fiscal year 2010 (FY10) Agriculture Appropriations. Under the conference agreement, the Conservation Operations account, which includes Conservation Technical Assistance, is

funded at \$887.629 million, an increase of \$34 million over FY09. The question regarding the manner in which Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D) are funded FY10 was resolved, with RC&D funding maintained under its own line item. Farm Bill conservation programs retained their full authorization in the conference agreement, with the exception of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Under the conference agreement, EQIP is funded at \$1.18 billion for FY10, which is \$270 million below authorized levels in the Farm Bill but an increase of over \$100 million above FY09.

The House and Senate are expected to approve the Agriculture conference agreement as early as this week before sending the final bill to the President for approval.

NRCS ANNOUNCES STRONG INTEREST IN NEW CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)

(FROM NRCS)

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Dave White today announced that NRCS has received 21,300 applications to participate in the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). These applications cover an estimated 33 million acres, nationwide.

“NRCS has received enough applications to carry out conservation activities on more than twice the number of acres Congress authorized for CSP this year,” White said. “This incredible response shows that conservation-minded producers and landowners want to attain higher levels of conservation stewardship.”

Congress capped the annual acreage enrollment nationally at 12,769,000 for each fiscal year. The final national and state-by-state numbers on acreage nationwide will be available in November 2009.

CSP provides financial and technical assistance to eligible agricultural and forestry producers to conserve and enhance soil, water, air and related natural resources on their land, and encourages producers to voluntarily implement more conservation practices and improve, maintain and manage existing ones.

Lands accepted into CSP include cropland, pastureland, rangeland and non-industrial private forestland—a new land use for the program—and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe. Individual landowners/operators, legal entities, corporations and Indian tribes are eligible to apply for CSP assistance.

Those who are not approved for funding through this first sign-up will have the option to participate in the second sign-up period, which will be held from Oct. 1 through January 2010.

NEW OACD WEB SITES UP AND RUNNING

After months of waiting, we now have our new OACD web sites up to help provide more information to our members.

For updates and info about OACD, our meetings, legislative issues and other items check out okconservation.org

For information on the Oklahoma Carbon Initiative, what is happening in carbon sequestration and where we are with this new program, check out okcarbon.com

We are just getting the hang of these new sites, so there may be a few bugs yet to work out, but we hope to have them up and running at full speed to help provide our members with the best and most timely information possible!!!!

That's all for now---we look forward to seeing you all at the upcoming area meetings!!!!

Thank you
OACD