

Financial Assistance to Keep Your Land in Agriculture

The USDA Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and Other NRCS Programs to Conserve Private Land

My name is David Manzanares. I'm the RC&D Coordinator, that's Resource Conservation and Development. I'm a Federal employee on loan to a non-profit organization in Española. We're called the Northern Rio Grande RC&D (Resource Conservation and Development). We were established in 1964 by President John F. Kennedy as a pilot project, and we started as ten areas throughout the nation. We had ten pilot projects throughout the nation; we're one of the first, in 1964. As of today, we have 375 areas throughout the nation. In New Mexico, we're fully covered. We have eight councils in New Mexico. Our council in Española covers the counties of Los Alamos, Santa Fe, Taos and Rio Arriba, so that's my area. I've been on loan to the field office here in Taos for the last six months as a District Conservationist.

We have many programs available to the farming and ranching community. Our non-profit works with rural communities such as Canjilon, Tierra Amarilla, La Puente, El Prado and others. I passed out an information sheet called "The Farm Bill 2002 Farm and Ranch Lands Protection

Program" (see Appendix D). It falls right into today's agenda. If you have any questions, you can call Pearl Armijo. She's going to be the new District Conservationist here in Taos coming this Monday. Her phone number is 758-3863, ext. 3.

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You see along the scenic corridors--for instance, along the Rio Chama and Rio Grande--not only here in New Mexico but throughout the nation, where everybody wants to have their house--a nice house, three or four acres of land, and maybe put a couple of horses on it. And that's nice, that's the American dream. But what it's doing is cutting down the farmers' and ranchers' acres of production land in that process of urbanization. It brings a lot of problems. In the

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place that I live, in Rio Chama north of Española and Abiquiu, along that corridor of the Rio Chama, we have thousands of homes, thousands of septic tanks, thousands of wells. That's a big problem. I don't know how we're going to fix it. We have some programs in place in Rio Arriba County, as far as infrastructure, but basically, this program is to keep those farmlands intact, or as many as possible. The benefit nationwide, so far in 2002, is the protection of 170,000 acres. Well, you say, that's not a whole lot of acres. No it's not, but it's very expensive to buy those easement rights. And that's why you see those areas aren't as big. The U.S. Forest Service has a similar program. It's called the Forest Legacy Program. They want to do the same thing, but this is on upland, or higher elevation pieces of land, owned by ranchers. How is the Forest Service getting involved on private land? Well, they work through the New Mexico State Forestry Service. Because the Forest Service works on public lands, State Forestry works on private lands. There is a continuation of funds that comes from the U.S. Forest Service, through State Forestry, to the private landowners. It's called the Forest Legacy program, which is basically the same kind of program as this one.

So there are two programs there that you can work with. What this program does is to

acquire conservation easements from landowners. The landowners agree not to convert their land to non-agricultural uses and development, and they implement a conservation plan. The NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service), our agency, works with the farmers to develop the conservation plan. It's all on a voluntary basis. To participate, the landowner submits an application to the estate entity--a tribal, a local government, or a non-government entity. Then there is a cost-share stipulation where NRCS cannot subscribe more than 50 percent of the cost of the easement. The other 50 percent must come from the entity, part of it from the landowner, or a combination of both. So NRCS cannot fund more than 50 percent of the easement.

They do an appraisal on the piece of land to see if it qualifies under those restrictions. There has to be the threat of urbanization to that piece of land before it can be qualified or be approved. I can tell you right now, there is quite a bit of competition for that money, for not a whole lot of money comes down from Congress. Again, this is a nationwide program. If there is some interest, then you can get that conservation plan in place, or that easement plan, and show the threat that comes along with it. It is then submitted to the State Conservationist, Mr. Rosendo Treviño out of Albuquerque.

The handout asks, "What is

the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program" and kind of identifies what it is. Then it asks a series of questions.

One of the major changes that the Farm Protection Program had this year is that it makes farm and ranch lands containing historical and archaeological sites eligible. That's a big plus for some of these places. Most of the ranches in northern New Mexico probably are archaeological or historical sites. We bought a place up in Tierra Amarilla and we applied for what is called an EQIP for a cost share, and I'll talk about that later. In order for us to get the money for conservation work, we had to go through an archaeological clearance. We have to make sure we protect those sites.

Feel free and look at that handout that I gave you. One of the other programs that I wanted to talk about was the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). This is through a 2002 farm bill. It's been around for the last couple of years. There have been other programs that we've had before cost-share, but this one is really nice because in New Mexico, we're probably going to get between \$12 million and \$15 million this year. In each county it is distributed based on how many acres of private land and tribal land are within that county. Moises Gonzales awhile ago stated that in Rio Arriba County, most of our land, 70%, is federal, which hurts the allo-

cation that Rio Arriba County gets. Same thing with Taos; we lose a lot of money. But even if we get \$250,000 or \$300,000, that's a lot more than we'd been getting before to do conservation work.

The EQI program is a cost-share program for conservation work on your land for farming and ranching, for irrigation, and even for wildlife enhancement. We work closely with the Game and Fish department on that. The EQI program is accepting applications until February 13, the cutoff date. That's an important date to remember. Go to our office at Alta Vista Road, next to the Forest Service, and they'll take in your application. After your application is received, a technician or one of our conservation folks will go visit with you at your place to see what you actually want and what's needed out there. It has to be a compromise between what's needed and what's wanted. Sometimes people want to dig a well for two cows. A well's pretty expensive--you're looking at \$20 per foot. For two cows. Well, the landowner says, that's my livelihood. But there has to be a real need, for say, 600 cows. So that's where the compromise comes in.

The really nice thing about that program is that it cost-shares up to close to 75 percent. We'll pay 75 percent, the landowner will pay 25 percent. But it has to meet our specifications and designs. If it doesn't, you don't get paid. New

landowners and new farmers--let's say you bought a piece of land this year, and you want to do a conservation plan. But you'd like to get some of this conservation money for yourself. If you qualify as a new farmer or rancher, you can get up to 90 percent cost-share. Nowhere in the world are you going to get 90 percent cost-share to do work on your private piece of land. You can go to a bank, and you're going to have to pay that money back. Here it's 90 percent--basically free. It does come with the stipulation that you have to manage the place. We're hoping that you don't overgraze it. If it's into ranching, we work and develop a conservation plan, and we want to keep that place intact as a farm or ranch. We have programs for irrigation--irrigation pipelines, turnouts, acequias--just about everything and anything that involves irrigation. But again, it has to be managed. We're not going to just give you the money and then you go sell the land. It's your piece of land to sell, but we're hoping that you'll keep it for some years to come.

We've been in a drought. I was in the Forest Service some years ago. People think we've been in a drought for the last three or four years, but we've actually been in a drought for almost 12 to 13 years already. Back in about 1998, even before that, in 1996, I was working with an allotment west of Santa Fe that's called Caja

del Río grazing allotment. Well, those folks, in 1995, were already going through a drought in that area. They have wells that are 600 feet deep. They have deep wells, and they're going dry. So at that time, they took a 60 percent voluntary reduction. That was in 1995. We're thinking we've been going through a drought as of last week, but it's been around for a while. So one of the reasons that we emphasize our program is to conserve as much water as we can. There are different programs we can work with. We can work with other entities, with New Mexico State Forestry for example. They have a program as well, called the Forest Relief Program. That program is to plant trees around buildings to conserve energy or to control soil and water erosion. They have a \$3,000 grant that comes around in about September every year that can be applied for. We applied for and received a couple of those grants through the RC&D. We planted trees around the Health Centers of Northern New Mexico there in Ojo Caliente, so we were able to get a grant. We planted trees around the clinic, basically to provide shade for the folks who go visit the clinic. The clinic is kind of small, so sometimes you have the gentleman taking his wife, or vice-versa, and the gentleman will wait in his car for his wife and it gets pretty hot out there. So we planted trees around that building and land-

scaped it. We're going to put a couple of tables out there so they can enjoy their stay a bit longer. Flowers and trees help your health sometimes. When you see a building that's barren of everything, and then you see a building that's got flowers, trees, things like that, we've been told that people feel better when they come out of there, or when they go in there. It's more pleasing. So we work on projects like that.

We have the WEP program, the Wildlife Enhancement Program, the same thing as EQIP, that works more with the ranching entities to improve the wildlife habitat. We asked them to get ahold of the local Game and Fish office and work with them, as far as developing some of those conservation programs. That also is a cost-share program.

There is another program to protect the corridors of the creeks and the rivers within the ranch. One of those programs helps them even to build a fence along the creek on either or both sides. The program helps ranchers by paying for the materials, and it helps them pay for maintenance of those materials on a yearly basis. Plus, it pays them a certain amount for the number of acres that were removed from grazing. So if you had a riparian area, let's say Tierra Amarilla Creek or any one of those creeks in La Madera or one of those places, you can fence out the creek and keep the cows from going in

there. You can also create a place for the cows to go in and drink water--but they don't need to drink water from the whole creek. You can sacrifice a small area for the animals to come in and out, for the vehicles to go across, but you can also protect the rest of it. We did such a program in Coyote, up in Gallina, on Cecilia Creek. We put up a log-and-pole fence there. We got vigas--about six inches in diameter--peeled them and placed them as a fence. It looks very pleasing. People really like it. When folks take their families up there with little kids, there's not that barbed-wire fence that kids get caught on. We put little entrances for the livestock to come in and out and drink water, but we protected the rest of the stream. The fisheries improved. The willows, the stream banks--everything else just improved. It's amazing what a little protection can do.

If we do leave our stream banks wide open as we've done in the past, it has a detrimental effect on our quality of water. More animals in the water means giardia and other unwanted parasites. The stream banks start eroding. So these programs offer many benefits.

RC&D has another program. We got a grant through the state legislature about four years ago for \$125,000. The purpose of that grant was to install "dry" fire hydrants. A dry fire hydrant is an apparatus to help the local fire departments

respond to fires in rural communities. They are made out of six-inch diameter plastic pipes. They can be used in ponds, creeks and lakes. Let's take the Rio Fernando Fire Department here. We'd go along the Rio Fernando and we'd put in dry hydrants along the river, in places where the trucks would drive up to it. Picture a six-inch diameter pipe, placed into the creek. It has a screen at the end, and it comes out of the creek with a hydrant head on top, which is the only thing visible. The fire department connects their hoses to these hydrants and draws water from the creek back to the trucks, making it unnecessary for them to go back into town to reload the trucks with water.

We placed about 90 of those throughout the counties. We placed some in Taos, Rio Arriba and Santa Fe counties. It's also helped us to decrease the insurance rates. The community of El Rito had an ISO rating of a "nine." Through their good response and training on some of these dry hydrants, they brought their ISO rating to a "seven." So insurance rates went down for everyone in the community.

After we put in those 90, everyone said, "Well, that's nice, man. That's a lot of hydrants you put out there." But, there were at least 50 or 60 communities out there where we couldn't put any, because there was no water source available. You go up to

Canjilon up there, Cebolla, and say, "Boy, those guys live up in the high country. It's beautiful, it's lush. Well, no, it is dry. So we weren't able to put dry hydrants in those communities. They also need the help, so we came up with the idea to purchase a storage tank. Now we're going through the state legislature. We have a couple of bills being introduced by our State Representatives, and the idea is to purchase 10,000-gallon, or even 30,000-gallon, fiberglass storage tanks. We're going to bury those things, and we're going to put a fire hydrant on that. We already did one in Coyote, in Mesa Poléo. Mesa Poléo is out in the boonies. Coyote is at the base of the mesa. If you have to go up this steep incline with a fire truck, you're going to have a hard time getting up there. Once you're up there, you're surrounded by woods, surrounded by trees, Ponderosa pine. It's all basically forest with a few hundred acres of private lands. They need protection as well.

We were able to work with the Forest Service there in Coyote. They donated that storage tank, and we equipped it with a dry hydrant. The local soil and water conservation district there from Española provided us with support--they provided us with what we call "bedding sand." The area where we're putting in the storage tank had a lot of rock in the soil. They dug the hole, and we brought in some sand to protect

the storage tank. The sand protects the tank from the rock. That's how we're providing fire protection to those folks.

That's one of the bills we have pending now at the legislature. Hopefully we can get it passed. Right now, we have a list of about 40 to 50 communities that could use one of those tanks. It'll probably cost us about \$500,000 to get it going. Last year we went for the whole \$500,000 and got shut down completely. This year we're going small. We're going to try to get three or four storage tanks. If we get funded, we're going to get our senators and representatives over to show them how it works. We have engineers on staff in our Albuquerque office. We have professional engineers who help us design all these things, so it's a real charge to the community. When we go in and work with a community to put in one of those storage tanks, one of the

things that we look at is easements. We have to have an access easement to install that storage tank. And you also have to provide an easement for the local fire department to use that storage tank. Sometimes, there isn't a water right that we can tap from, so we try to tap into the existing water rights to fill that storage tank. It takes awhile. Ten thousand gallons--that would probably take about ten truckloads of water. Hopefully some lives and homes will be saved by doing that. Those are some of the problems we face in our agency.

If you want more information, you can check out our website at www.NRCS.com, or call our office here in Taos at 758-3863.

