

CONSERVATION EFFORTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By Kay Ledbetter Amarillo Globe-News

Hartley, TX, July 11, 2004 – The Taylor Ranch in Hartley County sustained a wildfire about five years ago and did without grazing for the next three or four years.

Just getting the rangeland back into shape has been a major conservation project, said Jenny Pluhar, a range consultant from Canyon. They've installed water pipelines, drilled livestock water wells, implemented brush control of sand sagebrush and cross-fenced the ranch, Pluhar said.

"I'm looking for ways to enhance our current stewardship program on the ranch and improve our overall management," she said. Conservation efforts, Pluhar said, make a difference in the amount of cattle the ranch can support, it affects the livestock distribution and "it just helps take better care of the land."

Pluhar, who works closely with the Snead Cattle Co. of Dalhart in the management of the ranch, said ranch owners are interested in a new program being offered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The new Conservation Security Program is unique, said David Guest, Natural Resources Conservation Service district conservationist in Dalhart, because "no other program recognizes and rewards farmers and ranchers for ongoing conservation they are already doing."

CSP is being administered on 18 watersheds in the nation, including the Punta de Agua-Tramperos Watershed, which crosses state boundaries from northeastern New Mexico into the western Panhandle of Texas. In New Mexico, the watershed includes portions of Harding, Quay and Union Counties, and in Texas, the area covers primarily Hartley County and small portions of Dallam and Oldham Counties.

The watershed eventually empties into the Canadian River and that is where Bob Perry, NRCS program liaison in Amarillo, said is the true value. "Good conservation practices keep silt out of the Canadian River and helps sustain the life of the lake (Meredith). It serves as a filter system and puts cleaner water into the Canadian," Perry said.

Additionally, he said, if land operators do their own brush control and keep high-water-using brush species such as mesquite under control, they reduce the amount of water held in the watershed. "If the natural resources of the United States are a benefit to the public, they need to be responsible for some of the cost," Perry said.

Guest said applicants accepted will receive four payments based on their current level of stewardship, existing conservation practices and an

enhancement payment. The applicant will fill out paperwork to help determine which tier of coverage it will fall under.

Tier 1 requires water and soil quality conservation on part of the operation. The contract is limited to five years.

Tier 2 requires water and soil quality conservation on all of the operation, plus the applicant must agree to address one conditional concern.

Tier 3 requires all resource concerns to be addressed on all of the operation and additional activities must be agreed to.

Tier 2 and 3 contracts can be from five to 10 years in length, Guest said. Interested operators should make appointments with NRCS staff sometime before July 30, which is the end of the CSP sign-up period, Guest said.

Funding will be announced and the contracts finalized from Aug. 1 through Sept. 15 and the checks will be disbursed by the end of September, he said. All applicants in Texas will be channeled through the Hartley NRCS and all applications in New Mexico should go to the Clayton office, he said.

Guest said there is a considerable amount of paperwork involved and interested persons should allow time to make sure they can get it all done. "Don't wait until the last day," he said, "because it can't be done in one day."

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