



Conservation Conversation

Information for and about Oklahoma's Conservation Districts

Volume 48 No. 11, November 2003

Reduced funding, changes in board meetings stimulated discussion

2003 OACD Area Meetings

The 2003 Area Meetings of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts, cosponsored by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, were held across the state in November. Oklahoma's 88 conservation districts are grouped into five areas, each represented by a Conservation Commissioner on OCC's governing board and by an area director on OACD's executive board.

Mike Thralls, OCC executive director, discussed the challenges in funding conservation programs and services in light of state budget reductions over the last two years. Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director, explained the origination of a state Senate Interim Study to investigate financial savings that might result from changes to the number and boundaries of conservation districts

(see below). Darrel Dominick, state conservationist in Oklahoma for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, while not at liberty to discuss an effort from NRCS national headquarters to reduce the number of field offices nationwide, assured participants that the NRCS state office would do everything possible to maximize technical assistance with the resources available.

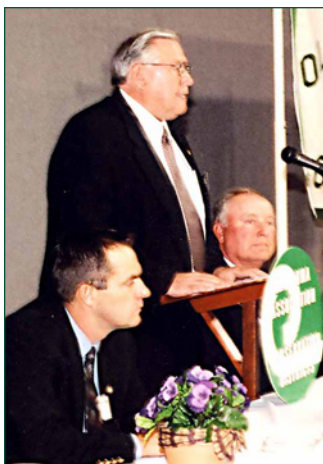
Federal requirements under the Freedom of Information Act, as well as privacy requirements stipulated in the 2002 Farm Bill juxtaposed against the requirements of the Oklahoma Open Meeting/Open Records Act, have mandated changes in the ways boards conduct business. Lisa Knauf, OCC District Services director, and Les Connor, NRCS assistant state conservationist for field operations, explained that boards are now required to enter executive session routinely to maintain confidentiality during discussion of individual conservation plans and contractual documents for participation in federal Farm Bill Programs. Boards must resume regular session to vote on approval of the plans. Knauf and Connor fielded questions from district directors and employees desiring clarification of these new procedures.



Sen. Richard Lerblance

Mark Harrison, OCC information officer, provided a preview of a forthcoming book, "Out of the Dust - The History of Conservation in Oklahoma in the 20th Century," and Cheryl Cheadle, OCC Water Quality division's state Blue Thumb coordinator, presented an overview of recent activities in the Blue Thumb Program.

Legislators made appearances at several of the meetings to address issues impacting conservation. State Senator J. Berry Harrison and Representative Joe Sweeden spoke at the Area III Meeting in Hominy on Nov. 5. Before being elected to their respective positions, Sen. Harrison had served on the board of the Osage County Conservation District and as president of OACD, and Rep. Sweeden had been employed as Osage County CD district manager. Mike Sharp, OCC Information Technology director, presented an overview of the McNeely Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Project within the Tar Creek Superfund area. Shanon Phillips, OCC



(From left) Rep. Joe Sweeden, Sen. J. Berry Harrison, and OACD Area III Director Scotty Herriman

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The History of Oklahoma and Conservation are Intertwined

Our vision:
 Responsible care for Oklahoma's natural resources

Our mission:
 To conserve, protect and restore Oklahoma's natural resources, working in collaboration with the conservation districts, on behalf of the citizens of Oklahoma.

*Never test the depth
 of the water with
 both feet.*

Conservation Calendar

2nd National Conference on Grazing Lands
Nat'l Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative
Dec. 7-10, Nashville, Tenn.



Tulsa Farm Show
Dec. 11-13, Tulsa Fairgrounds


NoTill and Sustainable Cropping Systems
Jan. 16, 2004, SOSU Conference Center
Weatherford, Oklahoma
Great Plains RC&D office at 580-832-3661


NACD Annual Meeting
Feb. 1-5, 2004, Big Island, Hawaii


OACD Annual State Meeting
Feb. 22-24, 2004, Biltmore Hotel, Oklahoma City


Conservation Day at the Capitol
March 10, 2004, Oklahoma City


"Forestry on the Grow" 9th Annual Forest
Utilization Conference & Equipment Exposition
April 27-29, 2004, Wagoner OK
Ouachita Mountains RC&D, (918) 423-2479

District Dateline

Cimarron County CD held its annual poster and essay contests Oct. 9 with 162 entries from the four county schools **Texas County CD** took the Texhoma FFA team to the Northwest Land Judging Contest in Woodward Oct. 21, and held the local Land Judging Contest in Guymon Oct. 23 and a Women in Agriculture and Small Business Forum in Guymon Nov. 20, and assisted with the OPSU Land Judging Contest Nov. 13 in Goodwell

All Conservation Districts: Please mail, email or fax one-line items about district activities to Mark Harrison/OCC for District Dateline. Thanks!

In Our Thoughts

Emil Loosen, former Blaine County CD director and father of current director Clay Loosen, passed away Nov. 22.

Dale Dupy, Noble County CD director 1954-1958, passed away Nov. 25 at the age of 88.

Arnold Hamilton, NRCS resource conservationist at Claremore TSO, lost his son Trevor Hamilton, age 15, in a car accident Nov. 8. Trevor's sister, Julie Blasi, is NRCS soil conservationist at Caney Valley CD/Dewey FO.

Thank You

Julie and I would like to thank each and every one of you for your thoughts, prayers and words of encouragement. During this very difficult time it is friends and coworkers like you that make the trip to healing much easier. Again thank you and we appreciate your sincerity and support. Arnold Hamilton and Julie Blasi

Please inform **Mark Harrison** at OCC of district directors or employees who have been ill, passed away or had babies. **Please include dates!!!!!!!**

Area Meetings, continued from page 1

Water Quality senior technical writer, provided an update on water quality issues of interest in northeast Oklahoma.



Sen. Owen Laughlin

Sens. Owen Laughlin and Robert M. Kerr, as well as Rep. Elmer Maddux, spoke at the Area I Meeting for northwest Oklahoma, held in Fairview on Nov. 6. Tom Lucas, High Plains Resource Conservation & Development coordinator, discussed efforts to find economic uses for the eastern redcedar invasive plant species, as well as the generation of electrical energy from wind power.

In Duncan on Nov. 13 at the Area IV Meeting, Dan Lowrance updated participants on Small Watershed Upstream Flood Control Program activities including operation and maintenance, rehabilitation of aging dams and new construction.



Rep. Terry Harrison

Lowrance is a Stephens County CD board member, vice president of OACD and chairman of the National Watershed Coalition. Lowrance introduced Dan Sebert, recently-retired director of OCC's Conservation Programs division, who encouraged districts to continue their efforts in the watershed program that "leaves a visible footprint of conservation across the land."

At the Area II Meeting for central Oklahoma held in Oklahoma City Nov. 18, Sen. Kathleen Wilcoxson discussed a Senate Interim Study, conducted at her request, to investigate what financial savings, if any, might be achieved by consolidation of districts along county boundaries. She stated that it was a learning experience for her and she appreciated a recent tour in East Canadian County CD to examine conservation practices. J.D. Strong, chief of staff for Secretary of Environment Miles Tolbert, gave a visual presentation commending conservation districts for their activities in a variety of environmental issues and encouraged them to continue seeking new ways and new partners to carry out natural resource conservation.

Sen. Richard Lerblance, and Reps. Jerry Ellis, Terry Harrison and Mike Mass, as well as Shawn Wiebers, field representative for Congressman Brad Carson, each spoke at Area V. The meeting for southeast Oklahoma's conservation district directors and employees was held in McAlester on Nov. 20. Craig Marquardt from the Forestry Services Division of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry presented information on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forestry Incentives Program.

The OACD Area Meetings include contests for youth in categories of speeches, essays and posters. First place winners in the essay and poster contests, as well as first and second place winners in the speech contest, are eligible to compete at the state level during OACD's Annual State Meeting to be held Feb. 22-24, 2004, in Oklahoma City.



Sen. Kathleen Wilcoxson



Rep. Jerry Ellis



Rep. Mike Mass



J.D. Strong, chief of staff for Sec. of Environment Miles Tolbert

A Summary of the Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission met Nov. 3, 2003, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

District Director Resignations

Delmar Helmick - Ottawa County

District Director Appointments

Comanche County - Damon Doye

Jackson County - Herbert L. Turner

Jefferson County - Royse Reagan

LeFlore County - Jasper Rabourn

* Marshall County - Walter Bruce Bigger

* Ottawa County - Gerald Grimes

Payne County - Lee Ray Stiles

*New Director

Claims/Financial Statement

Commissioners approved the claims and financial statement as presented by Steve Coffman, Financial Management and Human Resources director, who reported that 266 claims were paid for a total of \$762,929.84.

Agreements

Commissioners approved the following agreements as presented by Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director.

1. Office of Secretary of Environment, wetlands projects.

2. Oklahoma County CD, wetlands learning center at Deer Creek School.

3. Oklahoma State University, to generate a document of specific guidelines for appropriate use of the Soil Watershed Assessment Tool (SWAT) model as it pertains to non-point source issues in the development of site-specific total maximum daily loads.

4. Central North Canadian River CD, amendment, for emergency watershed protection (EWP) debris removal.

5. West Caddo CD, amendment, for EWP debris removal.

Commissioners approved an agreement presented by Larry Edmison, OCC Water Quality Program director, between OCC and the Office of the Secretary of Environment for the FY2003 319(h) workplan in the amount of \$3.5 million, naming Spavinaw Creek as the new priority watershed project.

Out-of-State Meetings And Travel

Commissioners approved a travel request as presented by Mike Thralls, OCC executive director, for Mike Sharp, OCC Information Technology director, to attend training in Las Vegas, Nev., Dec. 1-5.

Regularly Scheduled Meetings for Calendar Year 2004

Commissioners approved a schedule for Commission meetings for calendar year 2004.

FY2004 Joint Annual Plans Of Operations

Commissioners approved Joint Annual Plans of Operations for Alfalfa County, Atoka County, Custer County, Mayes County, North Fork of Red River, Pawnee County, Pontotoc County, and Rogers County CDs as presented by Lisa Knauf, District Services director, who stated this completes the review for all districts.

Conservation Cost-Share Program - Program Year 7

Eldon Merklin, Conservation Cost-Share Program coordinator, presented for approval the state guidelines for the Conservation Cost-Share Program Year 7. He presented several options for allocations to the districts for the new program year. Commissioners approved the guidelines and an allocation of \$7,500 to each conservation district for the Program Year 7.

FY2004 Allocations to Districts for Operating Expenses

Mike Thralls stated that the Oklahoma Association of

Conservation Districts requested OCC to revisit the issue of additional allocations to conservation districts during the November meeting. However, Thralls stated that the Oklahoma Farm Bureau had raised questions regarding the use of cost-share reserve funds for budget shortfalls. Susan Krug, assistant Attorney General, is reviewing the statutes and rules pertaining to the cost-share reserve funds and will need additional time to perform this review. For that reason, Thralls recommended that the item be tabled until the December meeting pending a thorough review of the cost-share reserve fund and expenditures. Commissioners approved a motion to table the item until the December meeting.

FY2004 Supplemental Budget Request

Thralls stated that Sen. Robert Kerr is supporting a request by Deer Creek CD for an additional \$15,000 to fully fund an environmental education position. Commissioners approved OCC's FY2004 supplemental budget request in the amount of \$15,000 for the Deer Creek CD.

Staff Reports

Administration: Mike Thralls, OCC executive director, stated he has appointed Tammy Sawatzky to fill the position of Conservation Programs Director on an interim basis. Details are being worked out with the Office of Personnel Management to open the position for applications in the near future. Thralls attended a meeting at the Environmental Protection Agency Region 6 office in Dallas to discuss the Stamper Project. Arkansas and Oklahoma have submitted a joint work plan for the project to EPA for approval. Others attending were Michael Jackson from Senator James Inhofe's office; Gary Bradley, owner of a clean-out service in Delaware County; Gary Bledsoe of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry; and OCC staff members Larry Edmison, Shanon Phillips and Dan Butler. Staff met with Secretary of Agriculture Terry Peach and Secretary of Environment Miles Tolbert to discuss the 319 nonpoint source program. Thralls attended the Pittsburg County CD annual awards banquet.

Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director, stated the Senate authorized an interim study on district consolidation, and OCC staff has prepared background information for Senate staff. OCC staff has been providing information to state retirement system staff regarding buying back retirement service years for employees hired prior to 1989. Rep. Randall Erwin is holding subcommittee meetings to discuss zero-based budgeting for agencies and Pollard anticipates OCC appearing before the committee within the next six weeks.

Financial Management and Human Resources:

Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, reported that Russ Halstied, OCC benefits coordinator, conducted employee benefits option period meetings in Enid, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Lawton, Clinton, Ardmore, McAlester and Idabel. Coffman continued preparation of OCC's FY2005 budget request. Staff attended CORE training for the conversion of the state's accounting and purchasing system. OCC is scheduled to go on line with the new system at 12 noon Nov. 3.

Conservation Programs: A written report was submitted, but no oral report was given.

Water Quality: Larry Edmison, WQ director, stated the division completed its move to the Will Rogers Building.

Abandoned Mine Land: Mike Kastl, AML director, reported that the city of Perry will be the location of the next EWP project to open. He has met with the Black Bear and Red Rock Conservancy Districts to discuss watershed clean-up under the program. Three contracts will be let for engi-

neering and design for the Club Lake (Haskell County), Reeves (acid mine drainage, Pittsburg County), and Whitlock/Jones (Clean Streams Initiative, Pittsburg County) Projects. The 61st Street (Wagoner County) and Bates (Rogers County) projects are being let together under one additional contract. He reported that no word has been received regarding federal reauthorization of the AML program.

Information Technology: Mike Sharp, IT director, reported that computer system support was provided to several districts during the month including upgrading computers with the latest anti-virus software and operating system updates. Sharp stated that final inspection for the McNeely AML project in Tar Creek was scheduled for Nov. 12 and that landowners are very pleased with the completed project. Sharp and Thralls met with Ryan Jackson from Senator Inhofe's office to discuss Tar Creek and additional funding for the area. An additional \$40 million may be available for Tar Creek, with \$2.5 million appropriated to the NRCS budget.

District Services: Lisa Knauf, DS director, reported that the first billing for the NRCS operational agreement was prepared in the amount of \$72,000. Knauf conducted nine training sessions around the state for district employees on development of Long Range Plans. She compiled data from district annual reports and assisted Blaine County with board meeting preparations.

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

Don Bartolina, OACD executive director, stated that OACD was preparing for Area Meetings. The OACD executive board will meet Dec. 1 at 1:00 p.m. An appreciation luncheon for OCC Commissioners and staff is planned for that day. The OACD State Meeting is scheduled for Feb. 22-24, 2004, at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City. Conservation Day at the Capitol is scheduled for March 10, with an awards ceremony in the Blue Room at 10:30 a.m.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Darrel Dominick, NRCS state conservationist, stated that NRCS is operating under a continuing resolution pending receiving its federal budget. Dominick commended the Earth Team Volunteer Program, reporting that over 93,000 hours were volunteered this year. Dominick reported that the FY2003 allocation for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program was close to \$11 million. More than 950 contracts were approved covering 345,000 acres. Over 5,000 applications for conservation practices remain unfunded, totaling an estimated \$32 million. Oklahoma received an allocation of over \$2.5 million for the acquisition of rental agreements and easements in the Grassland Reserve Program. A total of 324 applications were received for approximately 340,000 acres. NRCS is working with the Farm Service Agency on how tribes access EQIP. Dominick participated in the Zone 4 meeting where a quality assessment was performed. He would like to include the partnership in future quality assessments.

USDA Farm Service Agency

Rod Wanger, Conservation Program chief, stated that \$33.2 million was dispersed in Conservation Reserve Program payments. The livestock assistance program continues through Nov. 21 in 52 counties. Wanger stated that 1,457 farm loans were approved totaling \$173 million and that 609 of those were Loans to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers/Ranchers.

Next Meeting

The next regular meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission will be held on Dec. 1, 2003, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Current Generation Enjoys Conservation Pioneers' Legacy

The History of Oklahoma and Conservation are Intertwined

The history of Oklahoma and the history of soil, water and other natural resources conservation are intertwined. And any discussion of conservation in the United States must include reference to Oklahoma to be complete.

For the past two years the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service have cooperated with the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts to produce a new book chronicling Oklahoma's leadership in natural resource conservation. *Out of the Dust – the History of Conservation in Oklahoma in the 20th Century* is now complete and will soon be available to the public.

We envision this publication not only as a documentation of the state's tremendous accomplishments and reputation as a national leader in conservation but also as an educational tool for students and adults alike. We hope this book will serve for many years to educate and inform citizens about the rich history of conservation efforts in Oklahoma.

The book begins with the most well-known relevant historic event – the Dust Bowl. Overgrazing and misuse of rangeland, along with poor farming practices, set the stage for disaster when the drought that would last ten years hit the plains in 1931. By 1934 parts of Oklahoma began to resemble a desert.

Although rains would come to the state during the drought, they often occurred at the wrong time to help crops and even added to the problem by washing away bare soil. Some of the most devastating floods in Oklahoma happened during the Dust Bowl era when there was little vegetation to help hold back the rain that became a torrent. And particularly disturbing was the frequency with which they occurred. There were 70 floods along the Wildhorse River near Duncan between 1923 and 1942. Logan County suffered through 114 floods from 1933 to 1950, 43 of which covered at least 50 percent of the flood plain.

The Dust Bowl taught us about the importance of being prepared for drought, flood and unexpected challenges. Conservation tillage, contour farming and upstream flood control are but a few of the tools that have helped bring Oklahoma "out of the dust." Though evolving as needs change, the continuing conservation effort helps give us the quality of life that we are privileged to enjoy today. We reap those benefits even through periods of enduring drought, soaring temperatures, powerful and relentless winds that would challenge those of the Dust Bowl era, and torrential rains equal to those that devastated the parched earth in life-taking floods. The pioneers of conservation laid the foundation for the success that is their legacy today.

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