



Conservation Conversation

Information for and about Oklahoma's Conservation Districts

Volume 52 No. 9, September 2006



New Area I Conservation Commissioner

Matt Gard, a Major County Conservation District board member, has joined the Conservation Commission as Area I Commissioner representing 18 conservation districts in northwest Oklahoma. Mr. Gard became a cooperater with the Major County Conservation District in 1989 and first joined the board of directors in 1993. He has served on the executive board of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts as Area I director and vice president. (More about Matt in next month's newsletter.)

From M. Darrel Dominick, NRCS State Conservationist (Ret.)

Dear Conservation Friends

Dear Conservation Friends:

My family and I want to thank you for your support, prayers, and friendship over the past two tough months. Through adversity we have found hope because of you folks and our faith that a brighter day is ahead.

One of Gwyn's favorite movies is "It's a Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart. I know you know how the movie goes and you know it concerns the adversity a man and his family goes through that brought agony and uncertainty. But through this tough time, an angel named Clarence, who's looking for his opportunity to earn his wings, is sent to guide the man through his life to a point where he realizes that what's important are all the people in his life. Clarence continues to say that whenever you hear a bell an angel earns wings.

We had a friend give us a bell shaped like an angel. The inscription on the bell reads "No man is a failure who has friends." You have given us a great gift by being our friends and insuring that we know we have not failed. We thank you for this special gift.

I want to assure you that I did my best with every opportunity and challenge presented over the past six years. I am proud of our work together because we did make the Oklahoma landscape better. I thank you again for the opportunity to be a part of this special time and your partner, who will support locally-led conservation to the end of my days.

I want to also assure you that I did my best to not have this reassignment occur. I was told to basically make Congressman Lucas "happy" by quieting the questions at the national level being asked about appropriations and allocations. I could not answer all of those questions because I did not have the information necessary to answer them. I answered questions and provided information concerning the Oklahoma NRCS budget and what I did know about the national scenario.

I did not ask Congressman Lucas or anyone else to place amendments on appropriation legislation that would do anything to anyone's budget. I asked no one to lobby for any such action.

I did not have anything to do with Chief Knight's departure from the agency and subsequent promotion. Those are decisions made in Washington, D.C., and I live in Stillwater, Okla.

I did continue to take up for what I know was needed in Oklahoma for operations and keeping conservation work on track. If I had it to do over again, I would stand up again for the conservation efforts here along with doing the right thing. I will continue to do business this way.

I encourage all of you to focus on providing leadership to get conservation on the land for our customers. I encourage you to not forget that you can set the conservation agenda for the United States! Oklahoma leaders did this from the Dust Bowl to today and it should be expected to continue in the future.

I will close by thanking all of you again for what you do here in Oklahoma. I ask you to support the next state conservationist and achieve bigger and better conservation on the land than what we have accomplished since 2000. My family, over the past three generations, thanks you for the opportunity to be a part of the Oklahoma conservation family. It was a great 66 years!

Take care. It's a wonderful life!

M. Darrel Dominick, NRCS State Conservationist (Retired)



NRCS State Conservationist
M. Darrel Dominick

In This Issue

New Area I Conservation Commissioner Matt Gard

Dear Conservation Friends by M. Darrel Dominick

Oklahoma Conservationists Outraged at USDA Decision

Support for NRCS State Conservationist an Important Topic at Cooperative Conservation Listening Session in Enid.

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 and other partners, on behalf of the citizens of Oklahoma.

The power of choosing good and evil is within the reach of all.

- Origen,
De Principiis, Proem. 2.

Conservation Calendar

For more events and information, click on
"Calendar" at www.conservation.ok.gov

Oct. 2 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Conference Center, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.

Oct. 11-13 — Managing Agricultural Landscapes for Environmental Quality - Strengthening the Science Base, Westin Crown Center Hotel, Kansas City, Mo. Soil & Water Conservation Society.

Oct. 13-14 — Greater Oklahoma Farm Show, Grady County Fairgrounds, Chickasha. Chisholm Trail Promotions, LLC.

Oct. 26-27 — Blue Thumb and Oklahoma Water Watch Volunteer Training, Grand Lake Association Visitor Center, north of Grove on Hwy 59. Oklahoma Conservation Commission Blue Thumb Program and Oklahoma Water Resources Board CLEAR Grand Project.

Nov. 6 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Conference Center, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.

Nov. 10 — Veterans Day Holiday

Nov. 2 — OACD Area I Meeting, Rock of Restoration Church, I-40 at Cherokee Trading Post Exit, South of Geary.

Nov. 6 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Conference Center, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.

Nov. 8 — OACD Area IV Meeting, Western Oklahoma State College, Altus. Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts.

In Our Thoughts

Nicole Morehead, Kiowa CCD secretary, lost her husband Jesse, due to a tractor accident.

Cheryl Cheadle, OCC/WQ Blue Thumb state coordinator, lost her father to a battle with cancer.

Marilyn Newman, Beaver CCD secretary, lost her 20-month-old great niece due to an accident.

Keith Wilson, Dewey CCD director since 1985, passed away Aug. 10 at the age of 80.

Former state Rep. Randall Erwin and his wife and daughter, were seriously burned due to an accident.

Linda Bone, Valliant CD secretary, lost her nephew Aug. 15.

George Ensminger, retired SCS Area engineer, passed away at the age of 72 Aug. 17. Mr. Ensminger also served as engineer for OCC designing many CAFO and AML projects..

Congratulations!

Sheryl Easton, OCC/FM/HR grants accountant, married Paul Gibson Aug. 26.

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

Oklahoma Conservationists Outraged at USDA Decision

Oklahoma conservationists expressed outrage at the decision by Mark Rey, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment. On Aug. 10 Rey made the decision to reassign Darrel Dominick, state conservationist in Oklahoma for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), to a position in Fort Worth, Texas. The reason given for Dominick's reassignment was that he was not effective in working with conservation partners in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's conservation organizations have taken strong exception to Rey's reasons for the reassignment. According to George Stunkard, chairman of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, "Mr. Dominick has been an outstanding leader in natural resource conservation in the state. He has worked closely with our state agency to ensure that Oklahoma's land managers receive the best possible conservation services. For the Under Secretary to say that Mr. Dominick has not worked effectively with his principal state partner is outrageous."

Earlier this year the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts enlisted the help of Congressman Frank Lucas to find out why NRCS was reducing funding in Oklahoma for the technical assistance needed to carry out the conservation programs of the 2002 federal Farm Bill. Congressman Lucas also was frustrated in his efforts to get an explanation from the NRCS about how they allocated federal appropriations for technical assistance. His frustration resulted in an amendment he authored to the 2007 USDA appropriations bill that eliminated funding for the office of the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Mark Rey. The amendment passed the House of Representatives.

"We find it to be more than a coincidence that Mr. Rey chose to reassign Mr. Dominick to a position outside Oklahoma. It appears to us that it was a political act of retribution by Mr. Rey for Oklahomans to dare to ask the question of where needed technical assistance money was going within the USDA" said Dan Lowrance, OACD president. Lowrance went on to say "Darrel Dominick is committed to working closely with Oklahoma's 88 conservation districts. He believes in locally-led conservation where our local board members set the conservation priorities in their communities. There is not a more committed conservationist in the state than Darrel Dominick."

Clay Pope, OACD executive director, pointed out that Dominick was raised on a small cow/calf operation near Hartshorne, Okla., and is the third generation of his family to work for the conservation service in Oklahoma. His grandfather and father both spent their careers in the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, which changed its name to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in 1994. Dominick also served on numerous civil rights and Native American committees within USDA and received numerous honors for his conservation accomplishments.

Numerous other Oklahoma conservation and agriculture leaders and organizations joined in expressing support for Dominick.

Support for NRCS State Conservationist Darrel Dominick an Important Topic at Cooperative Conservation Listening Session, Aug. 30, Enid.

Approximately 160 people attended a Cooperative Conservation "Listening Session" in Enid on Aug. 30. The listeners were David Tenny, Deputy Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dept. of Interior; and Richard Green, Regional Administrator, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado were represented among the speakers. About 50 people spoke on a variety of issues including the Endangered Species and Clean Water Acts. Many spoke of their dismay with the USDA reassignment of Darrel Dominick, NRCS state conservationist (Oklahoma) to a lesser position in Fort Worth, Texas. (Dominick has since announced his retirement from the service, see page one) A number of speakers stated that Cooperative Conservation was nothing new; local conservation districts and NRCS have been practicing exactly that since the Dust Bowl.

Mike Thralls, Oklahoma Conservation Commission executive director, used a quote from Will Rogers to draw an analogy to the reassignment of Darrel Dominick. Rogers once spoke of a politician who "would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump to make a speech on conservation." He said Dominick had not only strengthened Oklahoma's traditional conservation partnership, but had torn down walls to build partnerships with other agencies, organizations and Tribes.

Thralls said "You tear it down and are guilty of preaching from the redwood stump when actions such as this are allowed to stand. If you wish to encourage cooperative conservation, federal agencies must act with integrity. And when injustices such as this one are made known, I would ask that you have the courage to correct the wrong. Because in so doing, damaged relationships can be restored and we can move on to the important conservation task that is before us." Thralls offered the suggestion that any government agency could build successful cooperative conservation by emulating the example set by Dominick.

Two Commissioners of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission spoke at the listening session. OCC

Cooperative Conservation, continued on page 4

A Summary of the Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission met August 7, 2006, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

District Director Appointments

Scott Cormack - Alfalfa County
Benjamin Clayborn - Latimer County
Ryan Clark - Mountain View
Richard Godfrey Jr. - Oklahoma County
Mead Ferguson - Woodward County

State Auditor and Inspector

Virginia Gurney and Mike Starchman, Office of the State Auditor and Inspector, presented the Commissioners with a report on Agreed Upon Procedures for the time period of July 1, 2004, to Dec. 31, 2005. Gurney presented an overview of their findings and concluded by praising OCC staff for their efficiency and professionalism in responding to each request made by the auditors.

Claims/Financial Statement

Commissioners accepted the claims and financial statement presented by Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, who reported \$1,449,410.83 in claims June 19 - July 24.

Agreements

Commissioners approved three amended agreements and ratified one agreement previously approved by the OCC chairman due to time constraints, as presented by Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director. (For details, contact Mark Harrison, OCC office.)

Travel Requests

Commissioners approved four out-of-state travel requests for six staff members as submitted by Mike Thralls, OCC executive director.

Joint Plans of Operation

Commissioners approved Joint Plans of Operation for 82 districts, submitted by Lisa Knauf, District Services director.

REAP Fund

Commissioners approved the distribution of Rural Economic Action Plan (REAP) funds among watershed rehabilitation, priority watershed cost-share and field services administration as submitted by Mike Thralls. Commissioners approved a motion to table consideration of locally-led cost-share funds until the September Commission meeting.

Commissioner Reports

Commissioner Virginia Kidd reported Channel 5 News in Ft. Smith, Ark., was coming to the Club Lake West AML site to conduct interviews of landowners and shoot footage of the reclamation project on Aug. 17. Commissioner Dan Lowrance reported attending the buffer initiative at Fort Sill in Comanche County as well as a meeting in Canadian, Texas, hosted by the National Wild Turkey Federation, to discuss invasive species control in New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. Commissioner Lowrance also reported attending the NACD South Central Region meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas, stating that Oklahoma will host the meeting next year. Commissioner Rick Jeans commended Robert Toole, Conservation Program director, and Dan Seibert, National Watershed Coalition executive director, on their watershed presentation at the NACD South Central Region meeting. He also reported that he had participated in the Funding Issue Team session for OACD Strategic Planning.

Staff Reports

Administration: OCC Executive Director Mike Thralls reported that staff is beginning discussions on the FY08 budget priorities. On Aug. 17 division directors will review accomplishments within the strategic plan and begin budget proposal work. Thralls also reported attending the Governor's Executive Development Program, indicating that it was

an excellent program and he enjoyed participating.

OCC Assistant Director Ben Pollard reported Mark Harrison, OCC information officer, is working with OK.Gov in the process of redesigning the OCC web page. Pollard reported attending a tour hosted by Kay County CD to educate legislative candidates on conservation issues. He also reported on preliminary meetings with the NRCS Information Technology division to begin work on federal computer security issues, stating that the federal requirements for background checks will impact conservation districts.

District Services: Lisa Knauf, DS director, reported staff attended board meetings in Muskogee County, Coal County, Noble County and Kiamichi CDs the past month. She also attended the retirement reception for Sue Armstrong in Caney Valley CD. Knauf continues to work with several districts on personnel issues and training new staff. She facilitated a Culture Issue Team session for OACD Strategic Planning.

Water Quality: Dan Butler, WQ director, reported that the Environmental Protection Agency had made three visits to OCC with one more scheduled in August. He also reported that staff has submitted three success stories to EPA and there might be two more depending on negotiations between the Office of Management and Budget and EPA. If Oklahoma is allowed to count the final two success stories, it will have more documented nonpoint source successes than any other state or territory.

Abandoned Mine Land: Mike Kastl, AML director, introduced Mike Sharp, IT director, to provide a legislative update on AML reauthorization. AML reauthorization language was removed from the Pension Reform bill and moved to the Tax Relief bill. Both bills and the Tax Relief bill (raising the minimum wage and reducing estate taxes) were passed by the U.S. House of Representatives before adjourning for the August recess. The Senate took up both bills and passed the Pension Reform bill but could not gather the 60 votes needed to close debate on the Tax Relief bill. A procedural move kept the bill on the calendar to be considered when the Senators return after Labor Day. Kastl reported that bids would be opened that day on three AML emergency projects, maintenance on one AML emergency project and elimination of the drilling mud on the Kirk AML project in Haskell County. Reclamation work is continuing on the O'Neal Project near Sallisaw. The pre-work conference with the low bidder, United General of Kingfisher, was held at the McPheeters and the Greer Phase I Project sites in Rogers County on Aug. 3.

Information Technology: Mike Sharp, IT director, reported on Tar Creek activities stating that work continues on the West Commerce project. The contractor, Beachner Construction, has had considerable equipment problems but has made recent adjustments resulting in an increase in daily work production. Chat placement on the Southeast Commerce project is virtually complete. The water collection system has been undergoing some redesign to adjust for site conditions. OCC staff are reviewing final design of the Howerton Project. Sharp reported that IT staff has been working with the Office of State Finance on the implementation of HB 2935 that requires all state agencies to conduct a standard security risk assessment of technology-based physical and logical resources by Dec. 1. The first phase of that process was completion of a survey of OCC/IT systems. IT staff is assisting OCC administration and NRCS personnel in addressing security background checks on district and OCC personnel who utilize NRCS information technology resources. The Geographic Information Council has selected a strategic planning consultant, Dr. Mary Jo Major, from

a Department of Central Services-approved list to assist in preparing a strategic and business plan that should be completed prior to the next legislative session.

Financial Management/Human Resources: Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, reported that most of the month had been spent completing and submitting the agency's FY07 Budget Work Program. Coffman stated that all FY06 district claims were in and they were closing out the last fiscal year.

Conservation Programs: Robert Toole, Conservation Programs director, reported on his presentation at the NACD South Central Region Meeting titled Communicating with Decision Makers. He discussed development of Watershed Fact Sheets and using them to communicate with decision makers. Washita County, Custer County and Upper Washita CDs used the fact sheets to communicate the benefits of watershed structures to county commissioners resulting in assistance to acquire equipment for watershed O&M. The annual Wildlife Expo is Aug. 25-27 at the Lazy E Arena. Toole said staff continues to process claims for Program Year 8 of the Locally-Led Cost-Share Program. Staff is preparing recommendations for the FY07 appropriations to be presented at the September Commission Meeting. Watershed operation and maintenance is an ongoing challenge due to lack of dedicated resources. He stated that staffing and funding must be redirected at the district level to catch up and keep up with the required O&M on 2,105 structures. Currently staff is monitoring 48 sites needing corrective action with NRCS requiring significant action on several of them. Staff is about to bid the Sandstone 16A Rehabilitation Project, with an estimated cost of \$1,418,262. He anticipates having six rehabilitation sites under contract by the end of FY07.

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

Dan Lowrance, OACD president, reported that Clay Pope, OACD executive director, was attending a state association executive director's retreat in Colorado. Lowrance reported that OACD is continuing to develop the association's strategic plan and all issue teams had met the previous month. Lowrance stated that he and Commissioner Jeans will attend the NACD executive board meeting in Columbus, Ohio.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Kevin Norton, NRCS assistant state conservationist, stated that Oklahoma leads the nation in Conservation Security Program approved contracts and applicants, and that the CSP work in the Poteau River watershed was an excellent model for partnership and conservation delivery. It is not yet known what funding will be available for CSP in 2007. Norton reported that Oklahoma held the first signing ceremony in the nation for the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program for a compatible use buffer area easement within the Fort Sill Army Base. Norton reported that NRCS continues to detail staff to Louisiana to assist with the Emergency Watershed Protection Program due to Hurricane Katrina.

USDA Farm Service Agency

Rod Wagner, FSA Conservation Programs chief, introduced Jillian Schultz, an intern from Michigan. Wanger indicated that all 77 counties have received drought disaster designation. He reported that approximately 20 counties are still involved with the Emergency Conservation Program, drilling wells and cleaning out ponds.

Next Meeting

The next regular meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission will be held on Sept. 5, 2006, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, Okla., beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Cooperative Conservation, continued from page 2

Chairman George Stunkard said "We've heard the saying 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it,' but I also say 'if you can't improve it, leave it alone!'" He went on to say that the conservation partnership in Oklahoma was working as effectively as at any time in history, until federal intervention from Washington, D.C., set it back.

Commissioner Rick Jeans outlined the chain of events that many believe led to the reassignment of Dominick, from an inquiry about funds appropriated for NRCS technical assistance being withheld from certain states to an amendment by Congressman Frank Lucas to cut funding for the office of USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Mark Rey. Jeans stated that current Gov. Brad Henry and former Gov. Frank Keating, as well as Sec. of Agriculture Terry Peach and numerous farm and diverse other organizations and Tribes had issued letters of wholehearted support for Dominick. That support should not be ignored, Jeans stated.

Clay Pope, Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts executive director, told the listeners that the government didn't need to "reinvent the wheel" and that conservation partnership had ended the Dust Bowl and still works effectively today. He also stated his opinion that the reassignment of Dominick was retaliation for an inquiry by OACD, OCC and Congressman Lucas into why federal dollars that were appropriated to fund NRCS technical assistance were withheld from Oklahoma and a few other states.

George Fraley, Rogers County CD director and former OACD president, outlined the cooperation of conservation districts with abandoned coal mine land reclamation and gave examples of successes in those efforts. Fraley also represents the Agriculture and Conservation sector on the Oklahoma Mining Commission.

"Oklahoma has accomplished significant amounts of reclamation of abandoned coal mines through a cooperative local, state and federal partnership," Fraley said.

"I believe our reclamation program in Oklahoma is successful because a local unit of government, the conservation districts, are actively involved in how the program is implemented at the local level. "

"We have been challenged in northeast Oklahoma with the issue of too many nutrients in our streams and rivers," said Scotty Herriman, Nowata County CD director, OACD vice president and Cherokee Hills RC&D board member. "Part of the nutrient increase is attributed to poultry production and the land application of litter. Application of litter to meet the nitrogen needs of the forage generally results in over-application of phosphorus, which can then run off into streams and lakes. While we have made great strides to implement nutrient management practices that better control the runoff of litter, there remains a need to find better ways to use the litter." Herriman encouraged federal agencies to support projects like one in his area. The project plans to use a recently-patented process to convert excess poultry litter in the region into an economical liquid fertilizer and to generate electricity in the process.

Richard Wuerflein, Garfield County CD director; Wayne Spies, West Caddo CD director and Area IV OACD director; Dean Graumann, Greer County CD director; Joe Caughlin, Kay County CD director and Oklahoma Wheat Growers Association board member; and others also made statements. (See OCC's web site, www.conservation.ok.gov for the complete report.)

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