

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP); a nearly \$200 million investment for water quality in Kansas from 1997-2008

Years ago I wrote an article for *The Kansas Lifeline* to inform our water system community of the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). In the time leading up to the writing of that article, I saw many

municipal water wells in areas that weren't cultivated. I began to think that there should be a program like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to protect wells in pastures or other non-cultivated lands. When I first heard of "GRP", I thought it was that program! I jumped in with both feet. That article caught readers' attention; National Rural Water

Association's magazine picked up the story too. What I learned was that the Grassland Reserve Program was designed to keep the inventions of man out of native prairies – no power lines, no oil, gas or water pipelines, no oil wells, no water wells, no chlorination buildings, no nothing! From a watershed standpoint, GRP is probably a good water quality program. From a site-specific wellhead protection view, it wasn't the answer.

Now that the 2008 Farm Bill (or officially known as the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008) has been approved by Congress, we have programs that are designed to make agriculture more environmentally friendly. Some familiar programs have been retained but like everything else, there are changes.

Landowners still have the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP) that allows historically cultivated fields within 2,000 feet of public water supply wells to be enrolled to protect water quality. There are another 19 specific practices like buffers and windbreaks that fall under CCRP that aren't dependent on the presence of a public water supply well. Another CCRP activity, which may be of interest to Kansas landowners, is the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP). It targets bobwhite quail habitat improvement with added incentives. Public water systems that identify the proper conservation programs and other partners such as wildlife groups may be able to make CCRP work near their wells and intakes.

The Farm Bill program I want to introduce in this article is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). If the CCRP is designed to return cultivated fields, or parts thereof, to a more original condition like native prairie, then EQIP is the program that takes wide-ranging conditions and

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operations on the farm or ranch to a more environmentally friendly and hopefully more profitable condition. These conditions include the effects of livestock on streambanks, pastures, ponds, surface water quality, etc. It can include irrigation practices and weed control. EQIP doesn't attempt to stop agricultural production, but

attempts to identify ways to do it better. The Natural Resource and Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners who voluntarily participate. Depending on the location of these projects, site-specific wellhead protection can be realized. With enough participation, watershed-wide water quality improvement can also be realized.



This hardened stream crossing through Big Creek in Russell County was constructed to give livestock access to water and to grass on the other side of the creek, without damaging the streambanks. It is also designed to encourage livestock to leave the stream after drinking.

The following is a long list of concerns that have been identified as priorities for Kansas in Fiscal Year 2009.

- Air Quality – Objectionable Odors
- Domestic Animals – Inadequate Stock Water
- Fish and Wildlife – Threatened and Endangered Species: Declining Species, Species of Concern
- Plant Condition – Noxious, Invasive Weeds
- Plant Condition – Productivity, Health, Vigor (Forestland/Agroforest)
- Plant Condition – Productivity, Health, Vigor (Rangeland/Pastureland/Hayland)
- Soil Condition – Organic Matter Depletion
- Soil Erosion – Streambank
- Water Quality – Excessive Nutrients and Organics in Ground and/or Surface Water
- Water Quality – Excessive Suspended Sediment and Turbidity in Surface Water
- Water Quality – Harmful Levels of Pesticides in Ground and/or Surface Water
- Water Quantity – Aquifer Overdraft
- Water Quantity – Insufficient Flows in Water Courses
- Water Quantity – Inefficient Water Use on Irrigated Land

Because it is unlikely that any of these priorities will be fully addressed in one year, look for a similar list in future years.

Applications to participate in EQIP for FY2009 were to be submitted by the extended deadline of January 30, 2009. At the time this article was written, the ranking categories had not been developed. Funding decisions will be completed in the Spring for FY2009. Applications can be filed at any time for the next evaluation and funding cycle. Applications are available on the Kansas NRCS website <www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/2009/self_assessment.html>.

In the period of 1997 to 2008, approximately \$172 million of USDA funds were used to implement EQIP projects in Kansas. This is an average of over \$14 million per year. EQIP projects are no longer funded on a cost-share basis. The NRCS determines what they will pay for a project per “unit”, and if the landowner likes the quote he or she receives, the project will move forward. Although theoretically possible, the USDA funds will not cover 100% of the project cost. Landowners with the expertise to install their own projects will see less cash outlay than those that rely on contractors. In recent years, the State Conservation Commission (SCC) has had \$3.4 million per year available in their Water



These sturdy concrete livestock waterers have a small reservoir at ground level. The reservoir extends behind the concrete back to help keep the water from freezing in the winter months. Removing two screws easily accesses a float valve and a shut-off valve behind the metal plate.

Resources Cost-Share Program. The objective of this SCC program is to provide additional funding to EQIP projects that reduce sedimentation, nutrient and pesticide runoff, and fecal coliform bacteria loading in targeted public water supply reservoirs, and to reduce soil erosion on cultivated fields and pastures.

Public water systems that rely on surface water reservoirs should be supportive of the priority to reduce streambank soil erosion and the three water quality priorities. Water systems in western Kansas that utilize the Ogallala Aquifer will benefit from efforts to affect water quantity, to reduce aquifer overdraft and to improve irrigation efficiency. Some rural water districts might benefit from efforts to improve

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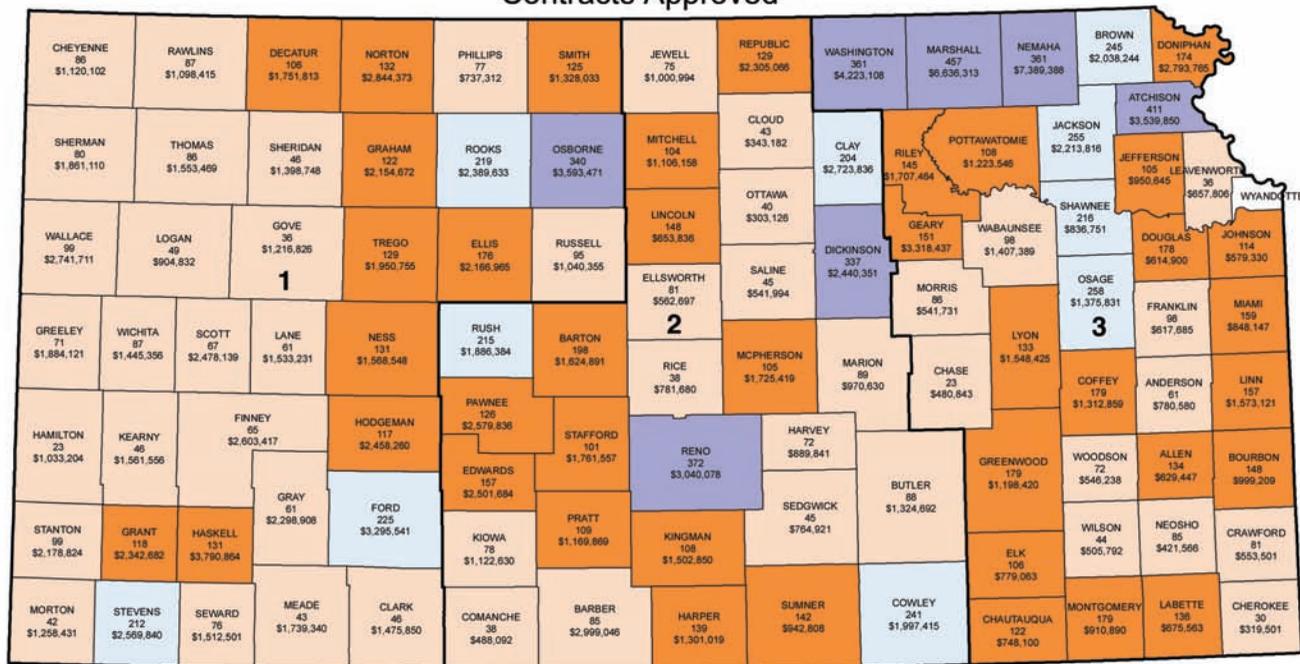
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Fiscal Years 1997-2008 - Kansas Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Contracts Approved*

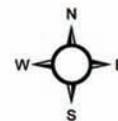


NRCS Administrative Areas

1st No. = Number of Contracts
2nd No. = Number of Dollars

* Includes Regular and Ground and Surface Water Conservation EQIP

Area	No. of Contracts	Dollars Approved
1	3,811	\$ 70,881,208
2	3,752	\$ 43,356,582
3	5,885	\$ 57,497,264
Total	13,448	\$171,735,054



October 1, 2008 - Resource Conservation Staff - Salina, KS

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water availability for livestock, to reduce high summertime water demand by ranchers and cattlemen forced to rely on pasture taps.

A hardened cattle crossing is one kind of project that has been funded in the past to control streambank erosion and improve water quality. These crossings are designed to allow cattle to easily access a stream and cross that stream if they are inclined to, without creating a muddy wallowing hole. The size of the gravel used will allow easy access to drink or cross, but at the same time make the cattle a little uncomfortable so they won't loiter in the stream. The placement of the various sized rock is also designed to stand up to most storm events upstream.

EQIP can also be instrumental in identifying ways to control cattle waste. Depending on the site and situation, uncontrolled runoff through a cattle pen could cause water quality impairments downstream. The EQIP program can provide expertise and funding to control the runoff above a pen and provide methods to catch waste for application on nearby fields later.

Another popular activity is the installation of what are currently called alternative watering devices. These waterers for livestock are often installed below the dams of

ponds, to be close to the former supply of livestock water and to provide protection of the waterer from freezing winds. These devices have a small reservoir that is just large enough for cattle to drink. A float valve controls the water level. A pipe to deliver the water to the waterer runs from the pond either through or around the dam. A pad of gravel – usually large gravel placed on top of a synthetic fabric, topped with small limestone screenings – surrounds the watering area available to the cattle. The dam can be fenced to preserve its integrity. The cattle will generally avoid the muddy sides of the pond if other water for drinking is available nearby. With rotational grazing, cattle can be placed in other pastures when the weather turns hot to prevent the temptation to take a swim. If rotational grazing is not an option, the pond can be fenced. Hopefully there will be a lot more of these waterers installed in the future so they become the norm, not an alternative.

Speaking of rotational grazing, EQIP can be used to establish rotational grazing programs. The project can include the cost-share to do cross-fencing to keep livestock in specific areas of the pasture and exclude the immediate area of public water supply wells, somewhat like the CCRP keeps cultivated land away from wells.

On the water quantity side, EQIP can help producers develop a procedure and purchase new equipment to convert from irrigated to dryland farming. One technique that may be employed in the procedure is no-till cultivation. A number of areas in western Kansas have been identified where the reduction of water use from the Ogallala Aquifer will likely achieve benefits such as a stabilized water table. If the farmer finds the conversion to be successful, and is located within one of the specific target areas, it is possible that a State Conservation Commission program called the Water Transition Assistance Program (WTAP) could be applied. WTAP can purchase and permanently retire the formerly used irrigation water right. It should be noted that EQIP cannot be used for an irrigation-to-dryland project if the water right is already sold or abandoned. EQIP must come first. The Kansas Water Office published an excellent report on WTAP in October of last year. It can be found at: www.kwo.org/KWO%20HYDRORAM/Article_Oct2008_WTAP.pdf

While the stated goal of WTAP is to restore aquifers and improve streamflows, it is obvious that water systems

relying on these same water sources will indirectly reap the benefits of this program.

I don't know who said it first, but a wise man once said that most things in life worth having don't come easy. If you want to see your neighbors take advantage of this federal program, find out how you can help make it happen. Maybe you can hang some USDA posters where water bills are paid. Maybe your water system can host a meeting where an expert from the local NRCS office can explain how these programs can be utilized. Maybe you can give door prizes or even pay for part of a landowner's water quality improvement project. If it helps your water supply, won't you help?

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Kansas Capacity Development Achievement Awards go to 10 water systems

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) will award ten public water supply systems with the second annual Capacity Development Achievement Awards. The award program is the first of its kind in the country, and is designed to encourage public water systems to go beyond mere compliance with the Safe Water Drinking Act (SWDA).

"This unique awards program serves as a positive means for encouraging systems to not just meet the standards, but to exceed them," stated John Mitchell, Director of the KDHE Division of Environment. "We're extremely pleased with the results that we're seeing from communities, and look forward to presenting many more of these awards in coming years."

The 2008 Capacity Development Achievement Awards were presented to the following recipients:

City of Assaria
City of Walton
City of Linn

City of Olpe
Harvey County RWD 1
City of Deerfield
Cowley County RWD 4
City of Fowler
City of Larned
City of Hutchinson

Up to five Capacity Development Awards per year are given for systems serving 500 residents or less. Up to five additional awards are given for systems serving populations of between 501 and 3,300 residents. No more than one award each is granted every year for systems serving between 3,301 and 10,000 people; and for 10,001 or more people. In addition, no more than one wholesale water district receives an award each year.

The awards are made possible using EPA funds that are allocated to states, and are just one of many activities that KDHE performs for the purpose of ensuring compliance with the SDWA. The majority of SDWA compliance

activities performed by KDHE include monitoring public water supplies for health and safety, administering low-interest loans to communities that enable them to upgrade and maintain their public water supply treatment systems and providing training and technical assistance to public water supply operators.

The federal SDWA was passed by Congress in 1974 and amended in 1996. The amendments required states to put strategies in place that help public water systems maintain technical, financial and managerial capacity. Originally, the SDWA focused primarily on treatment as the means of providing safe drinking water at the tap. The 1996 amendments greatly enhanced the existing law by recognizing source water protection, operator training, funding for water system improvements and public information as important activities for ensuring safe drinking water from source to tap.