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Middle Republican Natural Resources District

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For Immediate Release

Area Producers Attend Water Conservation Workshop

McCook – Nearly 100 Republican River basin producers, residents, and associations participated in the first in a series of four Water Conservation Workshops last Wednesday in McCook.

The workshops are being organized by The Republican River Water Conservation and Education Coalition. Coalition members include the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation, The Groundwater Foundation, Upper, Middle, and Lower Republican NRDs, Tri-Basin NRD, Nebraska Bostwick Irrigation District, AgriAffiliates, Inc. and the Nebraska Republican River Management Districts Association. The mission of the Republican River Water Conservation and Education Coalition is to collaborate and address the need of water conservation and education in the Republican Basin to provide producers, landowners and communities the information and resources to make decision and adopt strategies to conserve water and maintain the economic viability of the region.

Presentations focused on the particular management tools and strategies producers might use during seasons of drought and restricted water usage. David Tarkalson, from the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension told producers, “We can’t control how much precipitation we get in a given year, but we can control our agronomic practices. Through crop management we can control some of these factors to buffer against dry years.”

What are those management practices?

Dr. Derrel Martin, a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, outlined a number of steps that producers can take, including: improving irrigation efficiency by managing runoff and improving uniformity, changing to automated systems, reducing the amount of land irrigated, changing irrigated crops, and improving irrigation efficiency through deficit irrigation. “You are more likely to reach optimum production by irrigating the whole field (with allocation given), than reducing your irrigated area to produce the maximum yield.”

What about incentives?

Two presenters targeted potential incentive programs for producers to temporarily or permanently retire irrigated acres. Ben Hardin, of the McCook Natural Resources and Conservation Services (NRCS) Office, outlined eligibility requirements for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Eligible practices include irrigation pipelines, surge valve systems, drip irrigation systems, center pivot systems, sprinkler drop nozzle packages and water conservation cropping incentives, which include converting irrigated cropland to non-irrigated cropland, pasture or wildlife land. The program offers up to \$100/acre for eligible land that is retired for four years. Payments are made for the first three years. NRCS is working with the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (NDNR) to create a Ground and Surface Water Conservation Special Initiative, which will offer an additional \$100/acre for those contracts in the Republican River Basin Quick Response Area. The Ground and Surface Water Conservation Special Initiative is set up to work as a combination contract with EQIP. EQIP signup is ongoing. The Ground and Surface Water Conservation Special Initiative has yet to be approved.

Another potential incentive program is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The proposal, which Congressman Tom Osborne has been instrumental in developing, seeks to take 100,000 acres of irrigated land out of production and into conservation acres. The area includes 23 counties and seven NRD's. Half of the proposed acres are located in the Republican Basin, in Quick Response Areas, with the other half situated in the North Platte/Platte Basin Quick Response Areas. The application for the proposal was forwarded to the USDA in late August and is currently in negotiation. Bobbie Kriz-Wickham, from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, reported, “The reviewers have stated our proposal is a priority, but the timeline is uncertain.”

All of the presenters emphasized that there is no magic formula that can be applied across the board to mitigate reduced water allocations; rather, producers must take into account the location of their acres, the crops they produce, and yield goals. Bruce Dodson, of AgriAffiliates, has created the W.A.T.E.R. Model, a spreadsheet tool developed in the spirit of helping agriculturalists adapt to irrigation water allocations by budgeting their water resource and developing strategies that maximize profitability. Users, who enter their data and assumptions to calculate the most profitable utilization of their water resource, can save their individual scenarios for later review and revision. This management tool is available for download at <http://www.agwaterbudget.com>. Dodson stressed that, “the benefit of all these tools comes from making multiple runs and looking at the risk sensitivity of the decisions you are making.”

There are three workshops remaining in this series. The remaining workshops take place Tuesday, December 21 at the Ag Building in Holdrege; Tuesday, January 11 at the Community Center in Alma; and Wednesday, January 12 at the Community Center in Imperial.

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