

“MIDDLE REPUBLICAN NRD GETS ADDITIONAL FUNDING FOR WATER QUANTITY & QUALITY”

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will invest about \$8 million in the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative Fiscal Year 2016 to help farmers and ranchers conserve billions of gallons of water annually while strengthening agricultural operations.

NRCS launched the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative Project (OAI) in 2011 to reduce aquifer water use, improve water quality and enhance the economic viability of croplands and rangelands in Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, South Dakota and Wyoming.

An additional project area has been added for Fiscal Year 2016. One of the new focus areas for those funds is the Middle Republican Natural Resources District in southwest Nebraska. Nebraska currently has Ogallala Aquifer Initiative project areas in the Central Platte, Little Blue, and Upper Big Blue Natural Resources Districts.

The Ogallala Aquifer is the largest aquifer in the U.S. and includes nearly all of Nebraska and sections of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming. It is the primary water source for the High Plains region. Covering nearly 174,000 square miles, it supports the production of nearly one-fifth of the wheat, corn, cotton, and cattle produced in the U.S. and supplies 30 percent of all water used for irrigation in the U.S.

According to Nebraska State Conservationist Craig Derickson, Nebraska is ahead of the curve when it comes to managing groundwater in the Ogallala Aquifer.

“Thanks to the Natural Resources District’s management of groundwater, the Ogallala Aquifer in Nebraska is in good shape. The work of NRD’s are doing to manage groundwater in a sustainable way is far ahead of other regions within the Aquifer making them the perfect conservation partner for the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative,” Derickson said.

The newly approved Middle Republican Natural Resources District project includes Hayes, Hitchcock, and Red Willow counties, and part of Frontier and Lincoln counties. The project will enable participants to voluntarily implement practices to conserve irrigation water and improve groundwater quality.

Nationwide, the Natural Resources Conservation Service will target nearly \$8 million to support local efforts to conserve the quality and quantity of water in nine focus areas through the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative. The Middle Republican will be looking at things ranging from irrigated to dryland conversions, surface/sprinkler irrigated to subsurface irrigation, and soil moisture monitoring systems.

However, the district proposes OAI priorities that will be focused on areas in the Ogallala Aquifer where groundwater pumping is considered to be contributing to high levels of streamflow depletion. Priorities will be given to areas where groundwater pumping from the Ogallala Aquifer contributes to more than 48% overall depletion rate. The MRNRD is committed to managing irrigation in the OAI that addresses concerns of water quantity in the Ogallala Aquifer, as well as, meeting the Republican River Compact requirements. NRD manager Jack Russell says “We do have areas within our NRD where we’ve seen declines and we look at this as an opportunity to use a voluntary program to work with the producers in the NRD to address some of those declines.”

Increased irrigation efficiencies by MRNRD producers realizes compact compliance and reduces aquifer overdraft. Irrigation efficiencies are critical in addressing the areas in the NRD with declining water tables and those which contribute to high depletions to streams. Conversion of irrigated to dryland cropland will reduce consumptive use and increase water available for recharge and streamflow. Converting flood irrigation as well as sprinkler irrigation to subsurface drip irrigation will greatly reduce water usage and increase application efficiencies. Water Quality benefits will be realized with proper irrigation techniques, improved application methods and timing along with supporting practices.

NRCS is working with farmers and ranchers to help them implement proven conservation solutions on targeted landscapes to improve the quality of water and soil, increase water supplies, increase the infiltration of water into the ground, and make lands more resilient to drought.

The sign up will start November 16th, 2015 and run until December 18th, 2015. Producers interested in this program can go into their local NRCS offices and sign up during these dates. Russell also commented that “We are really fortunate that the OAI funds added two new areas and those being one in Oklahoma, as well as, the Middle Republican NRD here in NE.”