

NRCS helps Washington growers save water, money

By ERICK PETERSON
For the Capital Press

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is helping producers in Yakima County, Wash., improve their water and land use, Corey Bonsen says.

Bonsen is the NRCS district conservationist for the south-central team. His area includes Yakima, Benton and Klickitat counties.

In discussing the ways his office helps producers, he brings up the Environmental Quality Incentive Program, which is the area's most popular program.

"We help private landowners and tribes meet resource concerns that they have on their agricultural or private industrial forestry grounds," he said of EQIP. This includes forestry range, crop land — both



Erick Peterson/For the Capital Press
In their Zillah, Wash., office, Simone Mansfield, Corey Bonsen and Oscar Tobias of the Natural Resources Conservation Service discuss water projects underway in Yakima County, Wash.

irrigated and dryland — and livestock operations.

In areas around the Yakima River, many producers are converting their irrigation to sprinkler systems to save water. Through EQIP, these producers receive fi-

nancial assistance to help fund sprinkler systems, which may include a drip system or pivot.

He said there are many examples of individual producers helped by the NRCS through EQIP, but one re-

cent grower comes to mind. This producer, on the Yakima Reservation, specializes in row crops and had long depended on flood irrigation.

The producer had done some work with the NRCS on irrigation water management to ensure that water reached the root zone of crops and did not push nutrients and pesticides into the groundwater.

Still, flood irrigation left him with limitations. Crops at the top of the field received more water than those at the bottom, and much water was used to push water across the field.

With the installation of a drip system, made possible with financial help through EQIP, the producer was able to conserve water, limit runoff and improve production. He also began planting areas around his

field for wildlife habitat.

This is a typical story of NRCS-producer cooperation, Bonsen said. There are many other stories in which dryland farmers have been able to reduce wind and water erosion. Also, much has been done for local ranges, with water projects that use resources more uniformly. Troughs, fences and off-channel watering have helped improve water quality and animal habitat.

He said that cooperating individuals enjoy water savings. In some cases, producers can achieve 95 percent better efficiency. During the recent drought such savings have been crucial.

"They're saving quite a bit of water," he said. And, as part of their cooperation, they install a flow meter that shows them their savings.

In addition to EQIP, other programs have proven useful. The Conservation Stewardship Program, for example, was designed for people who are already displaying good resource use. These producers can sign up for enhancements to improve even more.

The Air Quality Initiative and Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative have also been popular.

Working in Zillah, Wash., with Bonsen, soil conservationist Simone Mansfield and civil engineering technician Oscar Tobias talked about NRCS' work in the area.

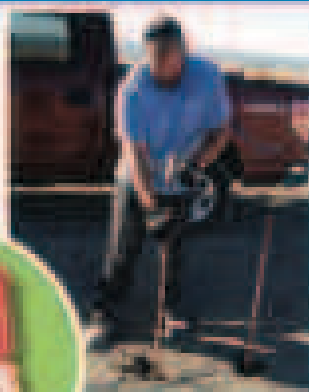
"There is always concern about water. This is a huge ag area, and a large variety of crops is grown. It's good that we are able to help," Mansfield said.

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