

CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

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Barber County Conservation District



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USDA Accepting Applications for the Conservation Stewardship Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will make available \$100 million this year through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and although applications are accepted all year, farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners should submit applications by February 27, 2015, to ensure they are considered for this year's funding.

"CSP is a way of encouraging farmers, ranchers, and private forest managers who maintain a high level of conservation on their land and agree to adopt higher levels of stewardship," said Eric B. Banks, NRCS State Conservationist in Kansas. "By focusing on multiple resource concerns, landowners are able to achieve a sustainable landscape and maintain or increase the productivity of their operations."

Through CSP, participants take additional conservation steps to improve the resource conditions on their land, including soil, air and habitat quality, water quality and quantity, and energy conservation.

The 2014 Farm Bill brought changes to CSP including an expanded conservation activity list that will offer participants greater options to meet their conservation needs and protect the natural resources on their land. These conservation activities, called enhancements, include cover crops, intensive rotational grazing, and wildlife-friendly fencing.

CSP will also help broaden the impacts of NRCS Landscape Conservation Initiatives through a new pilot effort, which accelerates private lands conservation activities to address particular goals, such as creating habitat for at-risk species and conserving water. In Kansas, they include the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative and the Ogallala Aquifer Initiative

Applications should be submitted to local NRCS offices. As part of the CSP application process, applicants will work with NRCS field personnel to complete a resource inventory of their land, which will help determine the conservation performance for existing and new conservation activities. To be eligible for this year's enrollment, eligible landowners and operators in Kansas must have their applications submitted to NRCS by the February 27, 2015, closing date.

A CSP self-screening checklist is available to help producers determine if the program is suitable for their operation. The checklist highlights basic information about CSP eligibility requirements, stewardship threshold requirements, stewardship threshold requirements, and payment types.

For the checklist and additional information, visit the CSP Web site <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/csp/> or visit your local USDA NRCS office. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Helping Pheasants Recover from Drought

By Daryl Fisher, KDWPT Biologist
Garden City, Kansas

Pheasant populations appear to be starting to recover from the drought in western Kansas in recent years. If landowners or farmers want to return to the days of good bird hunting success, what can they do to help speed the recovery of pheasants? Ensuring good habitat, is the only way to increase pheasant numbers and population recovery. The habitat components that are most important to upland game birds are winter cover, nesting cover, and brood cover. Water is also a necessity for upland birds, but pheasants (and quail) usually get their water requirement from dew and from the foods they eat, so don't require an available supply of open water.

Winter cover is generally a heavy cover that can provide some insulation necessary to help pheasants survive severe cold temperatures and snow. It should also be near a source of winter food, which is generally waste grain from harvested crop fields or possibly a dense stand of forbs (broadleaf plants, often called weeds) and its associated supply of seeds. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) stands and larger farmstead windbreaks with vegetation between the rows provide good winter cover.

Nesting cover enables the hen to make and hide a nest for her eggs. The vegetation types that serve this purpose are generally grassy with enough standing residual vegetation from the previous year's growth (such as CRP), or have enough new growth, as found in a good stand of green wheat.

Brood cover is generally the required habitat component that is in shortest supply. Brood cover is vegetative habitat that provides a good population of insects (required food for chicks) that is fairly sparse at ground level, small chicks can easily move through it, but it also provides overhead cover, so hawks and owls cannot easily see the hen and chicks moving around. Examples of brood cover include harvested wheat fields that are not tilled or sprayed for weeds right away, somewhat thinner CRP stands that have been inter-seeded with forbs or have been lightly disked, and fields that have been planted to cover crops that contain a variety of forbs. Cover crops are not only a good way to improve soil health (which helps crop production), but can also be excellent brood habitat for pheasants and quail.

Please contact your Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or conservation district office located at your local county U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the internet at offices.usda.gov) for assistance. More information is also available on the Kansas Web site at www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov. Follow us on Twitter @NRCS_Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

"Neighbor to Neighbor" the Future of Prescribed Burning

by Jess Crockford, Southwest Regional Fire Coordinator

Fire has proven to be the most effective and economical way to suppress and control most invasive woody plant species encroaching on native grasslands in Kansas. Heavy infestations of woody species can have significant negative impacts on space for valuable grass species as well as reduce the amount of water available for grass and ground water recharge. More and more landowners are learning to develop prescribed burn plans, and considering ways that they might conduct and carry out prescribed burns on their grassland acres.

Yes, the future of prescribed burning may very well lie in neighbors helping neighbors to implement prescription burn plans. The benefits of using fire as a resource management tool are many, while the excuses for not using fire are generally limited to four. First, "liability": it should be a concern but not to the point of inaction. There is little evidence in case law that properly conducted prescribed fires have resulted in significant settlements. Much of the perception of risk is the result of media coverage of wildfires, which have nothing to do with prescribed fire.

Other excuses include "I don't have enough training or experience; I don't know how to burn; I don't have enough people to help; and perhaps I don't have enough equipment." All too often people use these excuses to justify not burning and not taking care of the land. Eventually they will be out of business regardless of their interests because their grasslands will slowly convert to brush and forest in the absence of fire.

These excuses and concerns should not lessen your enthusiasm for prescribed fire as a rangeland management tool. Now is the time to become bold and innovative while always remaining prudent in the use of prescribed fire. For example, rural neighborhoods are banding together to address these concerns by forming prescribed burn associations (PBAs). You still have liability concerns as an organized PBA, but you can manage your risk by arranging for the proper training, finding experienced help, and acquiring the proper equipment provided by the association. Your involvement with the PBA adds to your experience and confidence while working with your neighbors. You do not have to hire labor, because you now have neighbors helping neighbors.

Association members pool their equipment so that no one has to buy all of the equipment. One person may have a drip touch, another person a slip-in cattle sprayer, while another member has a four-wheeler, and yet another has a tractor and mower for preparing firebreaks. All of this equipment and manpower allows you to safely conduct prescribed burns.

The value of having adequate numbers of helpers, the right equipment and people with training and experience cannot be over emphasized. By reducing the equipment and labor costs as well as risk and legal liability concerns of applying prescribed fire on private land, PBAs have proven to be a valuable tool for encouraging landowners to apply fire across the landscape to reduce woody plants such as Eastern red cedar. At the end of the day, in rangelands it is generally not a question of will the grasslands burn, but when will they burn and how much (or little) control over the fire land managers can exert when fire occurs.

If you and your neighbors would be interested in hearing more about Prescribed Burning Associations or are interested in forming your own association please contact your local conservation district at 620-886-5311 or Jess Crockford, SW Regional Coordinator, Kansas Prescribed Fire Council at 620-664-4882, email - jess.crockford@ks.usda.gov or Roger Tacha, NW Regional Coordinator at 785-672-0401, email - plansman1@outlook.com.

There currently are nine active PBAs in Kansas that help to make up the state wide organization, the Kansas Prescribed Burn Association (KPBA). The KPBA is a nonprofit organization that works with the Kansas Prescribe Fire Council to promote and support the formation of local burn associations. The current president of the KPBA is Eva Yearout, a member of the Gyp Hills Burn Association and a resident of Barber County.

This effort is just one example of the work being completed by the KS PFC. The Council organized in 2008 and is an educational non-profit that promotes the safe and effective use of prescribed fire. If you are interested in learning more about prescribe fire or burn associations, contact your local Conservation District or Natural Resources Conservation Service, or the Kansas Prescribed Fire Council at 785-532-3316.