

## Volunteers Provide Valuable Irrigation Season Assistance

By: Curtis Scheele, NRCS Water Quality Specialist & Joanna Pope, Nebraska Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator

Three students from the University of Nebraska-Kearney – Josh Johnson, Jason Garris and Dave Zorn - were recruited by the Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (NRD) to assist with irrigation projects. These projects were used to educate farmers about crop water use and water conservation in an area with water restrictions due to water shortages.

The NRD shared the interns with NRCS. NRCS signed the students up as hosted Earth Team volunteers.

NRCS had the volunteers complete survey data used to design conservation projects. The volunteers also did field checks for compliance with conservation programs, ensuring the use of no-till farming or conversion from irrigated acres to dryland. All irrigation-related Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts signed in 2003 through 2007 with dryland and no-till obligations were field checked. This would have been nearly impossible without the volunteers' assistance.

The volunteers' help allowed NRCS to provide better technical assistance to the producers. The work they performed was extremely time-sensitive since it could only be conducted during irrigation season. Without the help of the volunteers there simply would not have been enough "hands" to complete the work.

The Holdrege NRCS field office has increased their trust in allowing volunteers to do the work rather than thinking NRCS employees have to. This volunteer opportunity also created a win-win situation for all partners involved. The summer volunteers gained valuable experience in what they are currently studying in college. The agencies gained valuable assistance in meeting the challenging workload during the summer's short irrigation season.

The assistance provided by the interns has helped provide critical information to landowners during the recent drought years in south-central Nebraska, and remains vital, especially in the Republican and Platte river basins where irrigation water supplies are limited, and water use lawsuits are pending in neighboring states. The intern program is hoping to be continued during this year's irrigation season. ♦



Photo courtesy of Kearney Hub NRCS Water Quality Specialist Curtis Scheele (left) trains Earth Team Volunteer Josh Hohanson on how to install and operate an ultrasonic flow meter on an irrigation pipe. Josh was one of three university students who assisted NRCS during the busy irrigation season.