

CONSERVATION Showcase

Locally-Led WorkGroup Acts to Save Playas

Much has been written about the deterioration of the Ogallala Aquifer in eastern New Mexico and adjacent plains states. Conservationists in the Central Curry Soil & Water Conservation District are not willing to sit idly by and let this huge natural resource issue go unanswered, however. The retort of their local work group has been to make the playa lakes in their area a priority resource concern, and source of action to preserve these valuable environments.

The Clovis area, where the Central Curry SWCD functions, is characterized by semi-arid rangeland interspersed with intense agriculture cropland. The land is under laid by the Ogallala Aquifer that is vital to agriculture, urban development, and the natural environment of the area. The aquifer is currently being depleted faster than it is being recharged, and the playas are prime recharge areas.

Playas are intermittent lakes that appear in swales in prairie country during heavy rains. They will then dry up, only to reappear when the rains come again. They are comprised of heavy clay soils that shrink and swell depending upon soil moisture. As the clay soil swells and seals, the playa begins to act like a saucer that holds water. With enough rain, however, the water spills over the edges of these saucers in what is known as buffer zones. As a consequence, two areas become critical to the playas. The saucer itself can be threatened by sediment, fill in, and cease to be a playa. The buffers are areas where water seeps into the land, and so are the sites of aquifer recharge. It is important to protect these areas from overgrazing as grasses act to filter out sediment and potential pollutants – and contribute to improved water quality.

In addition to functioning as critical areas for the recharge of the Ogallala, playas are completely different



ecosystems with regard to the insects, vegetation, and wildlife they support. They provide beneficial food, cover, and nesting areas.

The locally-led work group that aids the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in the area, by making preservation of the playas a priority concern, has helped direct \$250,000 toward this effort since 2005 using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The funds have been used to provide incentives to ranchers to not graze the bottoms and buffer zones of playas – with some additional funds for adjacent range lands – up to 320 acres per contract. The result has been 15 contracts for such preservation since 2005.

While the funds are an incentive, the whole effort has resulted in valuable education in an area that local ranchers may not have been aware of before. The program is being well received, and demonstrates the initiative of locally-led conservationists.

For more information about the playas, you may contact Rachel Armstrong, NRCS district conservationist at (505)762-4769.