

O K L A H O M A C O N S E R V A T I O N C O N V E R S A T I O N

Information for and about Oklahoma's Conservation Districts

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Four Oklahoma Streams Removed from EPA 303(d) List

EPA declares water quality work done by Oklahoma agricultural producers and the Oklahoma Conservation Partnership successful; several state streams no longer impaired.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has removed four Oklahoma streams from its impaired water, or 303(d) list, state conservation leaders announced at a press conference at the Capitol on Feb 2. Efforts by farmers, ranchers and other landowners, in cooperation with the Oklahoma Conservation Partnership, to address nonpoint source pollution through voluntary, locally-led means have resulted in the streams being removed from a federal list of impaired water bodies and another 170 streams not going on the list, they said. The Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) held the news conference with speakers from state and federal agencies and one farm organization.



EPA administers a list of impaired streams *Four Streams, continued on page 2*

OCC and OWRB complete study on keeping dams safe Recommendations for funding and changes to Dam Safety Rules

Nearly 200 dams in the state have been designated as more hazardous to public safety than when they were built because of development downstream in the intervening years. And the number of dams that could have the same fate continues to grow. A group selected to study the situation has completed a report, making recommendations intended to save the state millions of dollars spent to modify a growing number of dams that could possibly receive that high hazard classification.

With over 2,100 flood control dams (watershed dams) in the state, Oklahoma is a national leader in the USDA Small Watershed Upstream Flood Control Program. In the 50-plus years since the watershed dams were built, residential and business development in the dams' breach inundation areas has resulted in 199 of them to be reclassified as high hazard. The breach inundation area is the area downstream from the dam that would likely be inundated if the dam were to fail. A dam is classified as high hazard if a loss of life may be likely if the dam should fail. With homes and businesses being built downstream from these dams, the number of watershed dams be- *Dams Study, continued on page 3*

Oklahoma Carbon Program Accepting Applications

The Oklahoma Carbon Program is now accepting applications from aggregators and verifiers of Oklahoma agricultural and forestry carbon offsets. Oil and gas companies who want verification of downhole injection of carbon dioxide are also invited to apply. Applications and details are available on the Oklahoma Conservation Commission website, www.conservation.ok.gov.

"There are definitely benefits from participating in this voluntary program," said Stacy Hansen, Carbon Program director for the Conservation Commission. "For example, oil and gas companies can now get formal recognition with a certificate if they are capturing greenhouse *Carbon Program, continued on page 3*

In this Issue

Four Oklahoma Streams Removed from EPA 303(d) List

OCC and OWRB Complete Study on Keeping Dams Safe

Oklahoma Carbon Program Accepting Applications



Going Green?

Want to receive the electronic newsletter instead of the paper one? Just email Mark.Harrison@conservation.ok.gov asking to be moved to the email subscription list!

Our vision:
Responsible care for Oklahoma's natural resources.

Our mission:
To conserve, protect and restore Oklahoma's natural resources, working in collaboration with the conservation districts and other partners, on behalf of the citizens of Oklahoma.

www.conservation.ok.gov

Conservation Calendar

For more events and information, click on "Calendar of Events" at www.conservation.ok.gov

USDA Agricultural Research Service Showcase, March 2, St. Louis, Mo.

Blue Thumb Training
March 5-6, Ponca City

Conservation Commission Meeting,
March 8, Oklahoma City

Conservation Day at the Capitol,
March 8, Oklahoma City

GIS Day at the Capitol, March 10,
Oklahoma City

Dewey County CD Open House and Locally-Led Meeting,
March 10, Taloga

Southwestern States RC&D Meeting,
March 14-17, Fort Worth, Texas

Erosion and Sediment Control Workshop, March 24, Oklahoma City

Conservation Commission Meeting,
April 5, Oklahoma City

Oklahoma Envirothon,
April 6, Lake Arcadia, Edmond

Conservation Commission Meeting,
May 3, Oklahoma City

National Land & Range Judging Contest, May. 4-6, Oklahoma City

Prescribed Fire Day at the Capitol,
May 10, Oklahoma City

Memorial Day Holiday, May 31

Conservation Commission Meeting,
June 7, Oklahoma City

In our thoughts...

Danielle Whaley, NRCS district conservationist at South Caddo CD, lost her mother on Jan. 27.

Freddy Trujillo, NRCS soil conservation technician, lost his father Orlando Trujillo, on Jan. 22.

Todd Goodall, Upper Washita CD engineering aide, and his wife Mindy lost their one-year-old daughter Mykenzie on Jan. 29 after a brief illness. There is a fund in Mykenzie's name at the First National Bank in Elk City to help with expenses.

Rita Niece, West Caddo CD secretary, is having a difficult recovery from knee surgery.

Wandine Russell, wife of Hughes County CD director Leon Russell, was hospitalized after suffering a major stroke.

Michelle Williams, Tulsa County CD secretary, lost her mother in January.

Congratulations!

Iris Imler, Cimarron County CD program coordinator, and husband Joel have a brand new grandson, Jackson Bradley Imler, born Jan. 8.

Thank You!

We would like to thank everyone for the continued prayers for Koy and for the help and generosity of donated leave.

From Steven and Cody Suanny.

commonly referred to as the 303(d) list.

Streams are put on this list when they don't meet water quality standards, usually because they have too much soil, nutrients or bacteria in the water. Approximately 500 streams statewide are monitored on a rotating basis by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC). The Oklahoma Conservation Partnership, including the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), local conservation districts and OCC, then works with farmers, ranchers and other landowners to address these water quality challenges through voluntary, locally-led implementation of best management practices.

Recent monitoring in four of these state streams — Wolf Creek in the northwest, California Creek in the northeast, Little Wewoka Creek in central Oklahoma and Little Elk Creek in the southwest — has shown that because of the work done by the landowners in these watersheds, sections of these streams can be removed from the 303(d) list for many of the reasons they were previously listed. In addition, another 170 streams have been shown to meet most of the state's water quality standards and won't be listed for these pollutants, due again largely to work done by the agriculture producers and other landowners.

State Sec. of Agriculture Terry Peach and Sec. of Environment J.D. Strong participated in the press conference, as did Oklahoma Farm Bureau President Mike Spradling and NRCS Assistant State Conservationist Gary O'Neill. OACD Vice President Kim Farber and Executive Director Clay Pope and OCC Executive Director Mike Thralls and Water Quality Division Director Shanon Phillip also spoke.

"In most of the streams monitored, conservation efforts and sound management by agriculture producers in these watersheds have preserved a sustainable living environment for fish and a healthy aquatic community," Phillips said. "The fish and aquatic insects in a stream are an indicator of the health of that stream, and also the landscape that drains to the stream. If the aquatic community is healthy, then the stream is likely to be safe for other uses such as drinking water and agricultural and industrial needs. This happens because agricultural producers have controlled soil erosion, have used pesticides or herbicides wisely and have made sure to not undertake other potentially damaging land use practices. While on some of these streams there may still be individual water quality challenges remaining such as bacteria levels or certain specific nutrient issues, for all intents and purposes the water is clean in these streams and it's clean because the farmers, ranchers and other landowners who live in these watersheds have worked to keep it that way."

"This shows what we can do working together — state, federal, local conservation districts and local landowners and producers — to improve natural resource issues in local areas," Thralls said.

"We are extremely proud of this accomplishment," Farber said. "When given the chance and the technical and financial help from the state and federal governments, Oklahoma's agricultural producers and other landowners have answered the call to protect our water."

"In the past, the Oklahoma experience has shown that it was best to work cooperatively with landowners to address environmental concerns," Pope said. "The agricultural producers of our state have shown time and time again that when they are provided financial and technical assistance to address an environmental problem, they will step up to the plate and do what needs to be done, even though it costs them money out of their own pocket. This is how we addressed the Dust Bowl. This recent delisting of streams shows that this approach, when properly funded, will work to address our nonpoint water quality challenges as well."



OACD Vice President Kim Farber speaking at the press conference.

Awards & Recognition

Lynn Weldon, OCC/FMHR human resources management specialist, was recognized for 15 years of service to the state of Oklahoma and OCC at the February Conservation Commission meeting.

Dams Study, continued from page 1

ing reclassified to high hazard is increasing each year. The average cost estimate for modifying a watershed dam to meet high hazard safety criteria is \$1,000,000.

House Bill 1884, passed by the state Legislature and enacted on April 27, 2009, directed the Oklahoma Water Resources Board (OWRB) and the Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC) to establish a study group composed of members selected by OWRB and OCC for the purpose of how to reduce the increasing number of dams being reclassified as high hazard. The study group completed its work and submitted a final report on Dec. 22, 2009.

The goals of the group were to:

1. Review laws and regulations pertaining to the classification of high hazard dams.
2. Make recommendations to reduce the future number of low or significant hazard dams that are reclassified as high hazard.
3. Form a plan to inform the public and officials on safety risks associated with the construction of residences or businesses downstream of or adjacent to low- or significant-hazard dams.
4. Explore funding sources and options for the upkeep and rehabilitation of dams in the state and for the mapping of breach inundation areas downstream of dams.

The findings and recommendations were grouped into four categories: Legal, Funding, Education and Mapping.

Legal

The report recommends revisions to Oklahoma Dam Safety Act to relieve the urgent demand for costly dam safety modifications for some low priority dams if mechanisms for public safety — such as warning mechanisms and evacuation plans — are in place. The group recommended that OWRB make those revisions and also allow for variances to be granted contingent on public health and safety mechanisms. The group encourages that any revisions to the rules ensure continued public safety and not interfere with the state's ability to qualify for and receive federal dam safety and rehabilitation funding.

Funding

In addition to state appropriations there are a few potential federal funding sources to help pay for mapping the breach inundation areas of low and significant hazard dams. One is the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Watershed Rehabilitation Program that is currently being used to map high hazard dams. In the Department of Homeland Security the Flood Mitigation Assistance, Pre-Disaster Mitigation, and Map Modernization Management Support programs are potential funding sources. The group suggested that the issue of seeking more federal funding be communicated to Oklahoma's Congressional Delegation as a priority. State legislative actions were also suggested, such as charging fees for permits to build in breach inundation areas.

Education

The study group found that limited existing educational materials are available regarding the potential hazards for public safety and buildings in dam breach inunda-

tion areas. It concluded that targeted audiences and key organizations could be identified to implement an education plan. The group recommended that existing funding be utilized to the extent possible to create and distribute materials until a long term plan is developed to detail materials, strategies, budgets and schedules.

Mapping

The group recommended that uniform mapping standards and methodology currently in use by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) be adopted. The report concluded that it produces reasonable, conservative breach inundation maps in a timely manner. It would require significant human and financial resources to map breach inundation areas of all low and significant hazard dams in the state, but at best it would be a fraction of the cost of upgrading the dams to meet high hazard dam safety requirements. The group recommended that OWRB, OCC and NRCS together formally adopt a uniform and consistent methodology to map the breach inundation areas of the NRCS-assisted low and significant hazard dams in the state and that the Oklahoma Legislature appropriate the necessary funding to pay for it.

Carbon Program, continued from page 1

gas emissions from a source and are pumping them underground to recover oil," she said. "Even though they may have been injecting underground for years, the program's third party verification of the carbon storage now provides companies the credibility that is necessary to claim the injected carbon dioxide as a carbon offset and trade it as a commodity."

A carbon offset occurs when an activity, such as injecting carbon dioxide underground, planting trees, or converting to no-till farming, reduces the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. One goal of Oklahoma's carbon program is to connect the interested public with screened companies that handle carbon offset contracts. "We will publish on our website the names of approved aggregators and verifiers. We will also refer to them in program publications that are distributed at events where the carbon program exhibits," said Hansen, noting that the program was promoted at 20 Oklahoma events reaching around 700 people in 2009.

Aggregators are companies who sign carbon contracts with multiple customers and sell the carbon offsets created by their customers to one or more buyers. The program requires aggregators to be bonded, have insurance, and make clear to customers who sign contracts what will happen if a contracted carbon offset is reversed intentionally or by an extreme weather event. "All of these things sound pretty basic," said Hansen, but people unfamiliar with carbon contracts could get into trouble if they don't know what questions to ask." This fits with another goal of the program, which is to protect Oklahomans by providing them with information and some oversight of carbon trading in the state.

What the program primarily offers is third party verification and certification. Third party verifiers are persons who assess land management or project documents to confirm that the land or project is being managed to a particular

Carbon Program, continued on page 4

Carbon Program, continued from page 3

standard. To participate in the carbon program, verifiers of agriculture and forestry offsets must have expertise in their area of interest, have insurance, and submit a resume. "Screening applicants allows us to gather key information that the public needs to know before we approve and advertise them to the public," said Hansen.

While the possibility of federal climate legislation waxes and wanes, voluntary carbon markets and programs in the U.S and abroad continue to exist. According to Hansen, in Oklahoma there are two simple reasons why. "The same practices that remove carbon dioxide from the air also protect soil and water quality," said Hansen. "We are a conservation agency — so encouraging Oklahomans to voluntarily improve air and water, something we can all benefit from, just makes sense to us and fits with our mission. The fact that people can make money is simply a co-benefit," she said. "The second reason is this — as long as carbon markets exist out there, people will benefit from a program to protect and assist Oklahomans who are interested in participating." While the Conservation Commission's Carbon Program provides a mechanism for participating Oklahomans to have their carbon offsets verified, what does the program mean for Oklahomans who aren't buying or selling carbon offsets?

"Well, it's not costing them anything and provides the safety net of having a functioning program in place should carbon regulation become law," said Hansen, of the voluntary, fee-based program that is housed within the agency's Water Quality Division. "And as participation in the program grows, we all stand to benefit from good conservation practices.

"We hope the carbon program will continue grow and help promote good conservation practices around the state. All citizens will benefit from healthier soil and cleaner water and air," Hansen said.

Mailing Tab Area

WORKSHOPS & TRUNKS

Project WET Workshops
Karla Beatty, 405.521.2384

Project Learning Tree
Workshops or Trunks
Christina Stallings, 405.521-3864

Project WILD Workshops
Lisa Anderson, 405.521-3857

Oklahoma Conservation Conversation
Oklahoma Conservation Commission
2800 N. Lincoln Blvd., Suite 160
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105-4201
405.521.2384, FAX: 405.521.6686
<http://www.conservation.ok.gov>

Commission Members

- Area I Matt Gard
- Area II Mike Rooker
- Area III George Stunkard
- Area IV Dan Lowrance
- Area V Virginia Kidd

Editing and Layout — Mark Harrison
email: Mark.Harrison@conservation.ok.gov
Proofreading and Reviewing — Charlotte Stieber
and Ben Pollard

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