



Conservation Conversation

Eastern Redcedar Trees Add to Fire Danger

Dry weather, low humidity, and high winds continue to spark wildfires in the state, burning thousands of acres and destroying homes and other property. Another key factor adding to the wildfire danger is the state's high population of eastern redcedar trees, according to Mike Thralls, executive director of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.

"Almost every TV report of the recent wildfires has mentioned redcedar trees and how they explode with flames," Thralls said. "Redcedar limbs grow next to the ground and ignite easily in grass fires. The volatile oils in the limbs make them burn readily and then they can serve as a ladder to spread the fire to taller trees and buildings."

Almost every county in the state has high populations of eastern redcedar, added Thralls. The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) estimates there are eight million acres in the state infested with at least 50 redcedar trees per acre. That is a 400 percent increase in infested acres in the past 50 years. The NRCS also estimates that redcedar trees are now increasing in numbers at a rate of 762 acres a day or 300,000 acres each year."

More people are moving into rural areas with large populations of redcedars, and many don't realize the fire danger the cedars pose," said Thralls. People like the privacy and the year long green color that the trees provide, but Firewise, an education program sponsored by the National Wildlife/Urban Interface Fire Program, recommends at a minimum removing highly flammable trees and tall growing shrubs within 30-40 feet of homes or other buildings. Then from 30-100 feet from buildings, thin out cedars and other trees and trim tree limbs up to 6-8 feet from the ground.

The increasing population of redcedars poses other major problems to the state, according to Thralls, including reduced productivity of grasslands, increased allergens, and loss of wildlife habitat. Conservation districts across the state are working with landowners on ways to control the growing population of trees.

Don't Lose Focus on the Wildfires

Instead let's think about reducing their fuel by cutting down cedar trees

By Clay Pope, Executive Director, Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

(Excerpted from an editorial written in early January)

Recently we've gotten accustomed to images of wildfires racing across our state. With the snow in parts of Oklahoma that danger's gone, right?

Wrong.

Oklahoma is still facing a terrible drought. Unless we have additional precipitation, we will be right back where we were. At least the snow gave parts of Oklahoma breathing space. So with this short reprieve, I think it's time we look at ways to reduce the danger from future wildfires. There's no better place to start than by reducing the fuel that feed these fires and first on the list should be the eastern redcedar.

Cedar trees are taking over Oklahoma. According to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). These trees crowd out other species of plants, costing agriculture producers millions of dollars in lost grazing land each year. An evergreen, the redcedar grows year round, denying other trees water and nutrients, creating a canopy that eventually eliminates sunlight from other trees

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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.

"Droughts in 1974-1976 and 2000-2003 made the soil drift. But overall, the earth held much better. Why no second Dust Bowl? In 2004, an extensive study of how farmers treated the land before and after the great dusters of the 1930s concluded that soil conservation districts kept the earth from blowing."

Timothy Egan
from *The Worst Hard Time*.

Conservation Calendar

For more events and information, click on "Calendar" at www.okcc.state.ok.us

- Feb. 9 — Women in Agriculture Conference, St. Francis Catholic Church, Newkirk.
- Feb. 10-12 — Oklahoma Farmers Union 101st State Convention, Biltmore Hotel Oklahoma, Oklahoma City.
- February 16 — Environmental Education Expo, OKC Zoo, Oklahoma City.
- Feb. 26-28 — 68th OACD State Meeting, Biltmore Hotel Oklahoma, Oklahoma City.
- March 6 — Oklahoma Conservation Commission Meeting. Agriculture Building Conference Room, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.
- March 9-11 — Blue Thumb Volunteer Training, Ft. Cobb.
- March 11 — Women in Agriculture and Small Business Conference, Payne County Expo Center, Stillwater.
- March 13 — Conservation Day at the Capitol, Fourth Floor Rotunda, State Capitol.
- March 13-14 — Blue Thumb Groundwater Screening, Woodward.
- March 15 — GIS Day at the Capitol, Fourth Floor Rotunda, State Capitol.
- March 21 — Women in Agriculture & Small Business Conference & Trade Show, Southeast Expo Center, McAlester.
- March 23 — Forestry Workshop, Colcord.
- March 29 — Cedar Eradication & Utilization Conference, Hughes County Fairgrounds Expo Center.

In Our Thoughts

- Max Barth, Longtime Harper County CD director, passed away Dec. 22.
- George Moore, OCC/CP watershed technician, lost his father Jan. 8.
- Cimarron County CD director Hal Clark's wife Pat had surgery for a ruptured disk in December and is recovering at home.
- Edna McNally, wife of the late Vernon McNally, longtime East Woods County CD director, passed away Jan. 23.

Congratulations!

- Mike Thralls, OCC executive director, has a new granddaughter, born Jan. 23.
- Debi Carnott, Central North Canadian River CD manager, has a new grandson, Ethan Joseph Carnott, born Dec. 20.
- Please inform Mark Harrison at OCC of district directors or employees who have been ill, passed away or had babies. Please include dates!!!!!!!

Tour of West Commerce Reclamation Project

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission provided a tour on Dec. 21 of its next reclamation project in the Tar Creek Superfund Area. The tour of the West Commerce Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Project was held for legislators and their representatives and state and federal agency representatives. The City of Commerce Public Works Department provided facilities at the Commerce City Hall for pre-tour and post-tour discussions as well as a luncheon provided by the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts and hosted by the Ottawa County Conservation District.

State Senator Charles Wyrick and Representative Larry Glenn attended the tour as did two representatives of U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe — Blu Hulsey from the senator's Washington, D.C., office and Ken McConkey from Sen. Inhofe's Tulsa Office. Congressmen Dan Boren and Tom Coburn also sent representatives. Agencies represented included the state Office of the Secretary of Environment and Department of Environmental Quality and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Local landowners Lena and Chester Enochs also attended the tour. The Conservation Commission completed a reclamation project earlier this year on property that the Enochs own.

"We couldn't be more pleased with the way it turned out," Lena Enochs told the tour participants.

There were approximately 19 different lead and zinc mining leases on the 210-acre site where the West Commerce Reclamation Project will take place. Most of the mining took place early in the 20th century, but some lasted as late as the 1940s. In addition to approximately 330,000 cubic yards of "chat" — the residue of lead and zinc mining that is high in lead, cadmium and zinc content — the area has turned into a site for illegal trash dumping.

Bids by contractors seeking to perform the reclamation were opened on Jan. 10, 2006, and Beachner Construction Company, Inc., of St. Paul, Kan., was the low bidder. At \$2,276,837.25, it will be the largest abandoned mine land reclamation project managed by the Conservation Commission to date. Work could begin as soon as early March, according to Mike Sharp of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.



On Dec. 21, about 30 people toured OCC's next abandoned mine land reclamation project in the Tar Creek Superfund Area.

Senator Robert M. Kerr, Conservation Friend

State Senator Robert M. Kerr lost a long and difficult battle with cancer. Sen. Kerr passed away Jan. 25 at the OU Medical Center in Oklahoma City. Often cited for his commitment to conservation and conservation districts, Sen. Kerr was a former district director on the Jackson County CD board and was inducted into the Oklahoma Conservation Hall of Fame in 1990.

During his career, Sen. Kerr was a farmer, stockman and real estate developer. He chaired the Agriculture Committee from 1988 to 1994, the Rules Committee from 1995 to 2000, and the Subcommittee for Human Services from 2001 through 2003. In 2004, he was appointed Assistant Majority Leader of the Senate, a position he held until his death. He was the current Vice-Chairman of Appropriations.



Commission Employees Receive Service Recognition

Gayle Bartholomew, OCC/WQ environmental project coordinator, was honored for 10 years service to the state. She has been with the OCC since 2000. Previously she worked for the Oklahoma State University's Plant and Soil Sciences Department in the Cooperative Extension Office for five years.

A Summary of the Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission met Dec. 5, 2005, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

District Director Appointments

Lester Gagan - Caney Valley
Jimmy Dorsey - North Caddo
Mike Rooker - Shawnee
Ronald Walzer - South Caddo
Wesley Nixon - Woods County

Claims/Financial Statement

Commissioners approved the claims and financial statement presented by Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, who reported \$1,304,755.06 in claims Nov. 18 - Dec. 18.

Agreements

Commissioners ratified the following agreement, previously approved by Commissioner Rick Jeans, chairman, due to time constraints, as submitted by Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director:

1. NRCS No. 68-7335-3-93, Amendment No. 6, Technical Assistance Contribution.

Commissioners approved the following new agreements, as submitted by Pollard:

2. Delaware County CD (Okla.) and Washington County CD (Ark.), for a memo of understanding for coordination of education efforts with agencies in Arkansas for the Spavinaw Creek Watershed Implementation Project.

3. Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, to establish as a demonstration project, a stable stream crossing that will protect water quality.

4. NRCS, to provide engineering and emergency action plan assistance on flood control watersheds.

Commissioners approved the following amended agreements, as submitted by Pollard.

5. Oklahoma State University, to extend Turkey Creek Targeting.

6. Oklahoma Corporation Commission, to locate sources within oil and gas fields in the Wister Lake watershed that are contributing to threats and/or impairments of stream and lake water quality and farmland productivity.

7. LeFlore County CD, to provide technical and planning assistance.

FY2006 AML Grant

Commissioners approved the FY2006 Abandoned Mine Land Reclamation Grant as requested by Mike Kastl, Abandoned Mine Land Program director. Kastl reported the grant contains \$1.5 million for reclamation and \$180,000 for emergencies.

Travel Request

Commissioners approved a motion for Commissioner J.T. Winters Jr. to attend the U.S. Composting Council's 14th Annual Conference and Trade Show, Jan. 22-25, 2006, Albuquerque, N.M.

OACD State Meeting

Commissioners approved a motion to cosponsor the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts Annual State Meeting, Feb. 26-28, 2006, in Oklahoma City.

Cost-Share Program Year 8

Commissioners approved a request from Alfalfa County CD to offer Brush Management (314) for willow, saltcedar, Osage orange, elm, plum, and cottonwood as a practice for Conservation Cost-Share Program Year 8, as presented by Robert Toole, Conservation Programs director.

Upper Red Rock Creek Site 44

Commissioners approved financial assistance from the 400 fund (interest from funds set aside for watershed rehabilitation) for legal assistance for Garfield County CD

in defending its easement at the Upper Red Rock Creek Site 44, as requested by Richard Wuerflein, district director, and Jason Skaggs, district manager.

Members Reports

Commissioners Virginia Kidd, George Stunkard, J.T. Winters and Rick Jeans reported on attending their respective Area Meetings and stated that the meeting agendas were very helpful. Commissioner Jeans also reported on attending the House Appropriations Natural Resources subcommittee meeting to discuss conservation needs.

Commissioner Winter attended a small farms meeting and tour where composting and its uses were discussed at length. He also on attended the Farm Bureau convention and commended OCC staff on the recently-held watershed operation and maintenance seminars.

Commissioner Dan Lowrance reported attending the National Association of Conservation Districts Water Resources Committee meeting in Nebraska City, Neb. This was his first meeting as chairman of the committee and provided him the opportunity to discuss the watershed program. Commissioner Lowrance attended the Area I meeting and thanked OACD vice presidents for attending other area meetings in his absence.

Staff Reports

Administration: Mike Thralls, OCC executive director, stated that a photo and news media opportunity for the Club Lake project was scheduled for Dec. 14 with NACD President Bill Wilson, OCC Commissioner Kidd and state legislators. He also reported that a tour of the Tar Creek area was scheduled for Dec. 21. There, OCC will be contracting its largest reclamation project, the West Commerce AML Reclamation Project, exceeding \$2 million and over 200 acres in size. Thralls stated that work continues on the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. Staff met with the Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission (OSRC) who have received a commitment of over \$1 million from the poultry industry for riparian and streambank restoration. A meeting with OSRC, Farm Service Agency, NRCS and the Nature Conservancy was held to discuss a project in the Euchu/Spavinaw area. The City of Tulsa is considering assisting with permanent easements in the area. Thralls stated that the Stamper project is being moved to the Euchu/Spavinaw area to ease the permitting process. Thralls stated that OCC will provide written testimony to the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research of the Committee of Agriculture of the United States House of Representatives in support of USDA's Watershed Programs managed by NRCS.

Financial Management/Human Resources: Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director, gave the FM/HR division report, stating that the FM/HR division is hosting the full staff meeting and luncheon at the Harn Homestead. Pollard reported staff had begun work on the OACD State Meeting. OCC and NRCS will have a booth at the Tulsa Farm Show, Dec. 8-10.

District Services: Lisa Knauf, DS director, reported on attending the OACD area meetings. She also worked with NRCS to expand the technical service agreement to include Latimer County and LeFlore County CDs and attended the LeFlore County board meeting to discuss this agreement. Knauf continued review of the Commission's strategic plan and provided comments.

Water Quality: Jim Leach, WQ Cost-Share and Finance director, stated that several water quality staff members are attending a training session in Arkansas. Leach reported on outputs submitted to or approved by the U.S. Environ-

mental Protection Agency. He stated that staff is working on the agenda and speakers for the National Nonpoint Source Pollution Conference, scheduled for June 2006 in Utah. Leach reported targeting in cooperation with OSU in the Turkey Creek Project is almost complete. Staff will be working on the 2007 grant this spring.

Abandoned Mine Land: Mike Kastl, AML director, reported on two active projects. He reported that in the FY2006 grant staff is recommending reclamation on a site in Rogers County where several homes are at the top of the highwall, stating that a landowner is resisting agreement to reclamation occurring on his property.

Information Technology: Shellie Willoughby, GIS coordinator, reported that the prebid conference for the West Commerce Tar Creek AML project is Dec. 12 at the site.

Conservation Programs: Robert Toole, CP director, gave a presentation at the Mid Continent Oil and Gas Association meeting. Staff is working with the Corporation Commission on efforts to locate oil and gas drilling sites related to watershed structures. Toole stated that Karla Beatty, education coordinator, is finalizing the soils curriculum. He stated that Tammy Sawatzky, administrative officer, provided Cost-Share Program training to 25 district employees.

Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

Clay Pope, executive director, thanked OCC for agreeing to cosponsor the Annual State meeting. The meeting theme is "Proud Past - Positive Future." Pope expressed appreciation to OCC staff for assistance with the Area and State Meetings. He stated that Dec. 9 is the deadline for pre-filed bills. A few topics being considered of importance to the OACD are controlled burning, tax credit for conservation, and funding for REAP. Pope stated that a resolution was submitted at the Area Meetings regarding additional requirements for district director training. The NACD annual meeting is scheduled for Jan. 29 - Feb. 2 in Houston. Pope stated that Oklahoma has met its quota goal for paying NACD dues. Pope stated that he is seeking additional sponsors for youth awards and those announcements will be made in the near future. Pope has been working with sub-state planning districts on placing equipment in conservation districts. Particular emphasis has been placed on no-till and cedar eradication equipment.

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service

Kevin Norton, NRCS assistant state conservationist, reported that staff is preparing for the Conservation Security Program for 2006. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program allocations will exceed \$22 million, up more than \$3 million from last year. Norton reported the 12th Oklahoma Engineering for Conservation Planning Course, held Oct. 31-Nov. 4, went well. Norton stated that the soil survey digitizing for the state should be completed by December 2006.

USDA-Farm Service Agency

Ben Pollard stated that Rod Wanger, FSA Conservation Program chief, could not be present but reported FSA is working to obtain disaster assistance for wildfires around the state and is developing a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program application.

Next Meeting

The next regular meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission will be held on Jan. 9, 2006, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Otis Bennett, Longtime Conservationist Retires



In 1997 Otis Bennett received the Environmental Excellence Award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 6 administrator.

Otis Bennett, OCC/Water Quality Special Projects coordinator, who will retire on Jan. 31, received a Conservation Commission Commendation for almost 50 years of service with two conservation agencies. Bennett has worked for OCC for the last 15 years, after retiring from 33 years of service with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

For the past 15 years Otis has worked on water quality issues for the Conservation Commission's Water Quality Division in the Cherokee County Conservation District office in Tahlequah. He was responsible for designing projects to assist landowners with the installation of conservation practices to reduce pollution entering streams and rivers.

In his career with the Conservation Commission, Bennett has overseen projects in the

Eucha Lake watershed in Delaware County, the Illinois River watershed in Cherokee and Adair Counties and the Wister Lake watershed in LeFlore and Latimer Counties.

Last April Bennett was recognized by the Oklahoma House of Representatives as an 'Architect of our Success' in protecting Oklahoma's environment. This recognition was in part for his work on the Beaty Creek Watershed Project in the Lake Eucha Watershed. During that five year project voluntary conservation practices installed by landowners reduced phosphorus entering Beaty Creek by 14 percent.

[Wildfires. continued from page 1](#)

which then wither and die. This destroys wildlife habitat by eliminating more beneficial tree species and by invading native grasslands.

Now that the snow has melted, the dangerous mixture of underbrush, cedars, high winds and dry weather will again be in the news. We can't do anything about the weather, but we can do something to put the explosive growth of cedar trees in check.

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