



# Conservation Conversation

Information for and about Oklahoma's Conservation Districts

Volume 51 No. 6 June 2006

## Conservation Commission announces Water Quality Improvements in Two Projects in Northeast Oklahoma

On May 22 the Oklahoma Conservation Commission announced significant water quality improvements in the Beaty Creek watershed that drains into Lake Eucha in Delaware County and in the Peacheater Creek watershed in Adair County that drains into the Illinois River. The phosphorus reduction follows implementation of Oklahoma Conservation Commission/U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Watershed Projects, funded through the federal Clean Water Act, state Priority Watershed funds, and match from local landowners. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service also assisted in the Beaty Creek and Peacheater Creek projects through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Recent analysis of six years of water quality monitoring data completed by the Oklahoma State University Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering Department confirms a 31 percent reduction in expected phosphorus loading to Beaty Creek, a tributary of Lake Eucha. The Beaty Creek watershed is approximately 38,000 acres in size, of which about 25,670 (69 percent) are in Oklahoma.

The results indicate an additional 17 percent decrease in expected phosphorus loading compared to the reduction reported last April after five years of water quality monitoring. Also, water quality data collected during the project indicates that concentrations of E. coli bacteria have been reduced to safe levels in the stream.

Analysis of six years of water quality monitoring data from the Peacheater Creek watershed confirms a 27 percent reduction in phosphorus compared to a nearby untreated "control" watershed. Preliminary results for the seventh year indicate a higher reduction of possibly over 50 percent. Nitrogen loading was reduced by 29 percent in the sixth year results.

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### Reclaiming Seventy Acres of Abandoned Mine Land

## Club Lake West Project Completed

Representative Ray Miller and state conservation leaders attended a tour of a reclamation project in Haskell County on Thursday, June 8. Oklahoma Conservation Commissioner Virginia Kidd and Assistant Director Ben Pollard, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationist Darrel Dominick and Haskell County Commissioner Kenny Short toured the Club Lake West Reclamation Project. Deward Martin and Chester English, representing the Kiamichi Economic Development District of Oklahoma also attended as well as Hubert Thomas, the project contractor.

Thirty-three acres of abandoned coal mine land, less than a mile from the town of McCurtain in Haskell County, had not only been an eyesore, but also a dangerous area. Concerns about the hazard to public safety put this site as a high priority for reclamation.

"The area consisted of old spoil piles, highwalls, and deep water pits. It was not only dangerous, but had also become a dumping ground for household waste and rubbish of all kinds," said Commissioner Kidd. "State Highway 26 is adjacent to the site and a county road runs through the property; there was a concern that a vehicle could run off one of those highwalls."

Reclamation on the area began in October 2005 and was completed in May 2006. The project included filling strip pits to eliminate 3,400 feet of dangerous high walls and two hazardous water bodies and reclaiming 10 acres of residential waste. The project was funded through the Abandoned Mine Land (AML) Program, administered by the Conservation Commission, and cost over \$730,000. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service contributed \$58,000 to that amount to help with the design of the project.

"The pits were backfilled against the highwalls using the old spoil materials," said Mike Kastl, AML program director. "The disturbed areas were graded and shaped to conform with adjacent topography and planted to grass." Because the county road had to be relocated, 1.7 acres of wetlands were affected by the project and 5.7 acres of new wetlands were created to mitigate that loss. The McCurtain FFA and 4-H Chapters, in coordination with Haskell County CD, helped plant 2,000 trees and five acres of grass for the newly created wetland, along with the introduction of 300 water plants (button bush, marsh hibiscus, soft stem rush, and soft stem bulrush).

OCC worked closely with the landowners Bob Byrum and Wayne Warren and the Haskell County CD in planning and carrying out the project.

*Club Lake West, continued on page 2*



## In This Issue

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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.

*"We have found there is no blanket, short-cut method for getting the conservation job done. There is no quick and easy way out."*

*Hugh Hammond Bennett. The Hugh Hammond Bennett Lectures, Raleigh, North Carolina: The Agricultural Foundation, Inc., North Carolina State College, June 1959.*

## Conservation Calendar

For more events and information, click on "Calendar" at [www.okcc.state.ok.us](http://www.okcc.state.ok.us)

- June 20-21 — Inter-Tribal Environmental Council 11th Annual Conference, Sheraton Hotel, Oklahoma City. Inter-Tribal Environmental Council.
- June 25-30 — Black Mesa Ecological Academy, Kenton. Panhandle State University and Cimarron County Conservation District. June 26-27 — Pulling Together: A Stewardship Conference for Environmental Volunteers, Wichita Wildlife Refuge.
- July 3 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.
- July 4 — Independence Day Holiday
- July 22-26 — Soil and Water Conservation Society 2006 Annual Conference, Keystone Conference Center, Keystone, Colo. Soil and Water Conservation Society.
- July 30 - August 1 — Resource Conservation & Development State Summit, Clarion Meridian Hotel and Convention Center, Oklahoma City. Oklahoma Association of RC&D Councils.
- August 7 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.
- August 11-12 — Developing Grassfed Livestock Production Systems, 5th Annual Grazing Lands Dollar\$ and Sense, Biltmore Hotel, Oklahoma City. Oklahoma Grazing Lands Conservation Association.
- September 4 — Labor Day Holiday
- September 5 — Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, 9:30 a.m., Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln, Oklahoma City.
- September 8-9 — Blue Thumb Volunteer Training, Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge, Tishomingo. Program.

### *In Our Thoughts*

Paul Thompson, former Murray County CD director, lost his wife Reba May 11.

Paul Nelson, former NRCS district conservationist at Kingfisher, passed away.

Otho Lamar, former NRCS district conservationist at Duncan, lost his wife.

Please inform Mark Harrison at OCC of district directors or employees who have been ill, passed away or had babies. Please include dates!!!!!!!

### Water Quality continued from page 1

The Peacheater Creek watershed was selected for the project because it is typical of watersheds in the larger Illinois River watershed with respect to human and livestock conditions. Its human and livestock populations are contributing to excess phosphorus loading into the Illinois River and Lake Tenkiller. The watershed covers an area of approximately 16,000 acres.

In a related development, Clay Pope, executive director of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts, said his organization has been promoting the establishment of a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for the Oklahoma portion of the Lake Eucha watershed and the Illinois River watershed to build on the success in Beaty and Peacheater Creek watersheds. The proposed CREP projects would protect up to 65 percent of the riparian area in the Oklahoma portion of the Lake Eucha and Illinois River watersheds and is projected to reduce phosphorus loading by at least 30 percent.

CREP is administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) with a 15 year program life. Landowners enter into a contract with FSA to protect riparian areas and install practices to improve water quality. The program requires state participation. Pope said that funds are being sought this legislative session for the Conservation Commission to use to match the available federal funds. According to Pope, the City of Tulsa has already pledged \$1.25 million to the project for permanent easements as part of the CREP project and the Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission has committed to contribute \$197,000. The Nature Conservancy of Oklahoma has also committed to contribute to the project, but has not yet completed calculations to determine the extent of its contribution.

"Voluntary incentive programs providing landowners with technical and financial assistance have proven to be an effective way to address nonpoint source nutrient issues in the Lake Eucha and Illinois River watersheds. We believe the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program will continue the positive trend of improving the water quality in Lake Eucha and the Illinois River," said Pope.

### Club Lake West continued from page 1

"I am pleased with the efforts of the Haskell County Conservation District working on projects like this to restore and conserve our natural resources," said Rep. Miller. "This project also made safer an area that was hazardous to public safety," he added.

This AML project is one of 140 completed in the past 24 years. Congress authorized the reclamation program in August 1977, when they passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. The act established a reclamation tax of \$.35 per ton on active surface-mined coal, and \$.15 per ton on underground coal mining. The money collected is used for reclamation of abandoned coal mining areas. Oklahoma has over 32,000 acres of abandoned surface coal mines and another 40,000 acres of underground coal mines in a 16-county area of eastern Oklahoma. Hazards from these areas range from dangerous high walls and water bodies to open mine shafts, acid mine drainage, and dilapidated mine structures. Numerous deaths and injuries have been and continue to be associated with these areas.

Fifty-nine AML projects have been completed in counties south of Interstate 40 and east of Interstate 35 (Atoka, Coal, Haskell, Latimer, LeFlore, McIntosh, and Pittsburg). These projects have reclaimed 1, 233 acres of abandoned mine land, eliminated 61,659 feet of dangerous highwalls and 70 hazardous water bodies, and sealed 312 mine openings. The total cost of these projects cost \$6.3 million and another \$670,579 was expended on AML emergency projects where there was a sudden collapse of an underground mine. The emergency projects were in Haskell, Latimer, LeFlore, and Pittsburg counties.

Oklahoma conservation districts were strong supporters of the legislation that authorized the AML program and Oklahoma is one of the few states where conservation districts help with the projects. The AML program was implemented in Oklahoma through state legislation in 1981. Oklahoma receives about \$1.5 million annually for AML projects and \$180,000 for emergency projects. It is estimated that it would take approximately \$90 million to reclaim the remaining high priority sites in the state. Over \$1.6 billion has been collected from active coal mining operations for reclamation and is in the AML Trust Fund in Washington D. C., but Congress has chosen not to allocate it to states.

"It's a shame that there weren't regulations in place before the 1970s that required companies to reclaim coal mined areas like there is today," said Mike Thralls, Conservation Commission executive director. "But because there wasn't, we need to reclaim the most dangerous areas. We are proud to have completed 140 projects that have reclaimed 3,966 acres of abandoned coal mine areas and sealed 319 open mine shafts. The program has greatly reduced safety hazards and restored these areas to a productive state."

## OACDE Annual Essay Scholarship Contest

The Oklahoma Association of Conservation District Employees' Essay Scholarship Contest is open to any college or technical school student who is a family member of an OACDE member (child, grandchild, stepchild). Students who will be freshmen through seniors are eligible. Essays should be submitted to the appropriate OACDE Area Director who will then forward it on to the judging committee. Essays must be submitted to Area Directors by July 1, and the winner will be announced by the third quarter meeting of the OACDE Executive Board. The winner will be awarded \$500 to be used toward his/her continuing education. A check from OACDE will be sent to the winner when he/she is enrolled in their respective college or technical school. A copy of their registration must be mailed to the Area Director. For rules or other info, contact your OACDE Area Director.

## **A Summary of the Monthly Meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission**

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission met May 1, 2006, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

### **District Director Appointments**

Blaine County — Clay Loosen  
Cotton County — Jack Hudman  
Creek County — Terry Kisse  
Delaware County — Dusti Crace  
Garfield County — Mark Thompson  
Garvin — Brent Mynhier  
Grady County — John Paxton  
Haskell County — Bill Wilson  
Jackson County — Sam Vinyard  
Logan County — Talleri Beck  
Pushmataha — Frank Rosenthal  
Texas County — Kerry Duer  
Upper Washita — Wesley Harden Jr.  
Valliant — James Hicks

### **Claims/Financial Statement**

Commissioners approved the claims and financial statement presented by Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, who reported \$981,901.62 in claims March 22 - April 17.

### **Envirothon**

Commissioners approved a motion to provide an additional allocation to the Ottawa County Conservation District for support of the 2006 team from Wyandotte High School to compete in the Canon Envirothon July 23-29, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

### **Agreements**

Commissioners approved three amended agreements and one new agreement, and ratified one amended agreement previously approved by the Commission chairman due to time constraints, as presented by Ben Pollard, OCC assistant director. (For details, contact Mark Harrison in the OCC office.)

### **Travel Requests**

Commissioners approved two out-of-state travel requests for four staff members.

### **Payne County Conservation District 319 Project**

Bob Priess, Payne County CD director, appeared before the Commission to propose a new 319 water quality project for Payne County including grazing management and no-till. He stated that the Stillwater Creek Project will end this fall and the district would like to work on another project. The Commission moved to take the request under advisement and discuss the matter with OCC's Water Quality division.

### **Commissioner Reports**

Commissioners Virginia Kidd, J.T. Winters Jr. and Rick Jeans attended the Governor's Conference on Agriculture and Economic Growth and all agreed it was an excellent conference. Commissioner Kidd commended Mike Kastl, AML Division director, for his work with the Club Lake Project stating that the project looks good and is near completion. Commissioner George Stunkard stated that the Wagoner County CD will host the district's 51st Annual Soil Stewardship Breakfast on May 5 with NRCS Chief Bruce Knight as the keynote speaker. Commissioner Winters attended the East Woods County CD Soil Stewardship Breakfast and the Blaine County Ag Expo hosted by the Blaine County, Cimarron Valley, and Central North Canadian River CDs.

### **Staff Reports**

**Administration:** OCC Executive Director Mike Thralls, stated that the Senate had passed a general appropriations bill with an increase of general revenue funds to OCC in the amount of \$570,000; however, there was no provision for REAP funds. The House general appropriation bill has

no new revenue. The legislative impasse is due to teacher pay increases and tax cuts and no action will be taken until these issues have been agreed upon. He stated that OCC continues to provide information to the Attorney General's office concerning the poultry litigation.

OCC Assistant Director Ben Pollard attended the Woodward County CD Annual Bankers Awards Program and commended Commissioner Winters for his district's work with local banks. OCC set up a booth at the Southern Plains Farm Show. Gov. Brad Henry recorded a Public Service Announcement for Soil and Water Stewardship Week and another for conservation in general. Pollard commended Mark Harrison and Clay Pope for their work with the PSAs. Pollard stated that the management team participated in training titled Managing A Multi-Generational Workforce. The average age of OCC staff is 46 with the average age of the management team being 53. Pollard provided copies of the National Land and Range Judging Contest Program and a list of staff activities in conjunction with National Public Service Week.

**District Services:** Lisa Knauf, DS director, reported on attending board meetings at Garvin and Oklahoma County Conservation Districts. She assisted Oklahoma County with personnel and payroll issues. Knauf notified three districts that their April board meetings were invalid due to improper posting of the agendas. Knauf had been assisting with the National Land and Range Judging Contest registration database. She reported that staff will be meeting with NRCS staff to discuss loss of the contributions agreement for the coming year and training activities.

**Water Quality:** Dan Butler, WQ director, updated Commissioners on rain garden contracts approved at the April meeting. He reported on a meeting with EPA in Dallas to discuss significant changes to the FY07 319 Program guidelines. The EPA water program guidelines have changed as well. The direction of the program is to require proof of success in a shorter time period, and 319 money will focus on areas where there is success. Butler stated that under the new guidelines, the Beaty Creek Project will no longer be considered a success until Lake Eucha is removed from the 303(d) list.

**Abandoned Mine Land:** Mike Kastl, AML director, stated that the Club Lake West-191 project in Haskell County should be completed during the month of May. He reported that the Office of Surface Mining has turned down a request for an emergency project. Kastl stated that an AML project in Rogers County was delayed until a determination was made about the presence of an endangered plant species - the prairie orchid.

**Financial Management and Human Resources:** Steve Coffman, FM/HR director, stated that the division has been assisting the State Auditor and Inspector's office with OCC's 18-month audit. An auditor will attend the June Commission meeting to report the findings. He reported that director and district liability insurance is being updated with a new policy beginning on July 1.

**Information Technology:** Mike Sharp, IT director, reported that he and Shellie Willoughby attended the 2006 Mid-America GIS Symposium in Kansas City, Missouri. He reported that work on the West Commerce Project in the Tar Creek area has ramped up considerably and the Southeast Commerce project is 75 percent complete. Sharp reported that on April 18 a sonar unit was lowered into a flooded underground mine on the Howerton project. He reported that OCC's Internet domain name will change from okcc.state.ok.us to conservation.ok.gov.

**Conservation Programs:** Robert Toole, CP director, pro-

vided copies of the Locally-Led Cost-Share Program Year 7 report. Toole reported that the Wilson-Grey Watershed project has been completed. OCC allocated \$40,000 for the work at the request of the Bryan Conservation District. Toole recognized watershed technicians Johnny Pelley, Dennis Boney, and George Moore for their work with this project. Toole recognized Karla Beatty, OCC education coordinator, for being named the Wonders of Wetlands Facilitator of the Year by Environmental Concern, Inc.

### **Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts**

Clay Pope, Executive Director, reported on events including the National Land and Range Judging Contest, OACD executive board meeting, Directors Day at the Capitol, and District Employees Day at the Capitol. He stated that a special legislative session is likely for the month of June to discuss budget issues. Other issues of importance are controlled burning, bond contingency for cities and towns for conservation work and insurance for district directors. OACD continues to work with partners such as the Nature Conservancy on Tallgrass Prairie issues and with the Farm Bureau, High Plains RC&D and the Nature Conservancy on eastern redcedar control. He also met with the Farmers Union and Secs. of Agriculture and Energy to discuss biodiesel.

### **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service**

Darrel Dominick, NRCS state conservationist, reported working on ways to cut costs over the next year including the possibility of office closures. He is meeting with OCC and OACD to discuss delivery of conservation programs with fewer offices and employees. Dominick stated that Upper Red Rock Site 52 watershed received 6.5 inches of rain and overtopped. He reported that the NRCS state office has been through a five-year review of civil rights complaints. The investigation is complete with no findings of discrimination.

### **Next Meeting**

The next regular meeting of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission will be held on June 5, 2006, in the Agriculture Building Board Room, 2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma beginning at 9:30 a.m.

## **Conservation Commission Employees:**

### **Awards & Recognition**

Dan Butler, OCC Water Quality division director, was recognized for 25 years of service to the State of Oklahoma.

Lisa Knauf, OCC District Services director, was recognized for 15 years of service to the State of Oklahoma.

## **Please Note**

Individuals who would prefer to receive the Oklahoma Conservation Conversation newsletter electronically rather than as a hard copy by mail, please send your email address to markh@okcc.state.ok.us with the message "change newsletter to electronic." Please include your name and mailing address so we can remove you from the hard copy mailing list. The electronic distribution will begin at some future point.

Chesapeake Energy Corporation and the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts honor "Outstanding Conservation Educators" at schools across state.

## OACD/Chesapeake Conservation Education Awards

In May the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts and Chesapeake Energy made presentations across the state at the schools of the five "Outstanding Conservation Educators." One educator in each of Oklahoma's five congressional districts was selected for an award from nominations by local conservation districts. The statewide program was created to honor the Oklahoma school teachers who most effectively incorporate natural resource conservation learning into their class curriculum. Chesapeake Energy presented each of the winning teachers with a check for \$3,000.

The recipients were Linda Brown, Virgil Grissom Elementary, Tulsa; Susan Paslay, Thomas Elementary, Holdenville; Gail Swallow, Longfellow Elementary, Alva; Connie Huseman, Ninnekah High School, Ninnekah; and Patricia Johnson, Deer Creek Elementary, Edmond.

The Chesapeake Outstanding Conservation Educator Award will be presented annually to the Oklahoma school teachers judged as having best incorporated information on the conservation of natural resources into their lesson plans using inventive and imaginative techniques.

Winners of the award were announced at the Governor's Conservation Award Ceremony during Conservation Day at the Capitol on March 13. The winners were also recognized at the OACD annual state meeting in February.



*Congressional District 5  
(From left) OACD Executive Director Clay Pope and Vice President Richard Parker, Chesapeake representative John Cox, teacher Patricia Johnson, school principal and Oklahoma County Conservation District Director Debbie Straughn and District Manager Don Bartolina at Deer Creek Elementary in Edmond on May 19.*

## WORKSHOPS & TRUNKS

Project WET Workshops  
Karla Beatty, (405) 521-2384

Project Learning Tree Workshops or Trunks  
Christina Stallings, (405) 521-3864

Project WILD Workshops or Trunks  
Lisa Anderson, (405) 521-6704

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