



Texas Irrigation Expo | 2010

Texas Irrigation Expo Focuses Attention on Water Conservation

State Conservationist Donald W. Gohmert to Give Keynote Address

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 13, 2010

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Mercedes – Next week's **Texas Irrigation Expo** will put a spotlight on what the Rio Grande Valley has learned in recent years about how to grow crops with more efficient irrigation techniques. The free event will be held Thursday, Oct. 21 and Friday, Oct. 22 at the Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show Grounds in Mercedes. It will feature nearly 60 exhibitors, presentations on agricultural water conservation, and tours of local sites that have installed water-saving irrigation measures.

Thanks to a 10-year grant from the **Texas Water Development Board (TWDB)**, the **Harlingen Irrigation District-Cameron County #1 (HID-CC1)** has been working with local growers, irrigation districts, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, and Texas A&M University-Kingsville to test how certain crops grow while using irrigation techniques that use less water. For example, instead of flooding fields with water as in decades past, certain farmers are testing how those same crops will grow when drip irrigation is used.

During the five years since the program began, smaller workshops have been held to educate farmers on new and improved irrigation methods, but this year the state decided to target a wider audience with the first Texas Irrigation Expo.

"Water is the most important resource we have in Texas, not just the Rio Grande Valley," said Wayne Halbert, the general manager of HID-CC1. "Farm land is quickly being urbanized, which means there will be less land and water for farmers in the future. We have to start thinking now about how we're going to meet the needs for food and clothing if we have less water and land to work with."

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) **State Conservationist, Donald W. Gohmert**, will make the keynote address during lunch on Thursday, Oct. 21. His presentation, *How Conservation Technical and Financial Assistance Can Make Every Drop Count*, will review what the NRCS is, how technical and financial assistance can help growers meet their land management goals through

conservation planning, and the benefits of installing improved and efficient irrigation systems. Mr. Gohmert will show examples of how NRCS helps growers with their conservation planning and irrigation needs, and he'll also talk about recent funding from the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program that provided more than \$2.3 million for repairs to four Rio Grande Valley irrigation districts after Hurricane Dolly.

NRCS celebrates 75 years of "*Helping People Help The Land*" this year. Each state has a State Conservationist who oversees the regional and local offices that work directly with farmers and ranchers. Almost every county in Texas has an NRCS office that offers free conservation assistance.

Mr. Gohmert previously served as the state conservationist for Arizona and for Louisiana. A native of Cuero, Texas, Mr. Gohmert now leads conservation efforts in Texas. He said, "We help people help the land every day by working with farmers and ranchers to conserve, protect and enhance their natural resources. Those resources include the soil, water, plants, air and animals. We do this by providing technical assistance, without a fee, to farmers and ranchers to evaluate and see what land management practices can be recommended and implemented to retain, conserve and enhance water quality and quantity, which will in turn improve on-farm water use."

Another key presenter is the Executive Administrator of the TWDB, **J. Kevin Ward**, who will talk about the importance of water conservation to the future of Texas. The regional director of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, **Michael J. Ryan**, will also talk about what the Bureau of Reclamation is doing to help conserve water for irrigation and agriculture.

For a complete schedule, see www.texasirrigationexpo.org. It's free to attend the Expo, but registration on the website will ensure you receive a lunch ticket and a place on the tour bus of your choice. The event begins at 8:30 a.m. on Thursday, Oct. 21 and ends at noon on Friday, Oct. 22. Continuing education credits will be available to farmers who attend Friday's presentations on pesticide regulations and new EPA rules on water quality.

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Please see the attached Q&A with State Conservationist Donald W. Gohmert for more information on what farmers, irrigation districts, and the general public should know about on-farm water conservation.

Questions and Answers from State Conservationist Donald W. Gohmert

US Department of Agriculture – Natural Resource Conservation Service

Q) In layman's terms, what does the State Conservationist do?

A) A State Conservationist is responsible for the overall operations of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in his or her state. State Conservationists oversee the entire operation of the agency. They supervise the Assistant State Conservationists for Field Office Operations (ASCFO). The ASCFOs supervise a number of field offices in their zone. There are five administrative zones for NRCS in the State of Texas. The zone offices are located in Lubbock, San Angelo, Corpus Christi, Bryan and Weatherford. Many of these zones have more counties than some states. The State Conservationist interacts with NRCS national headquarters in Washington, D.C. on a regular basis and it is his or her job to make certain that the states are carrying out the goals of the national office. Each state has its own priorities relative to resource concerns; however, they must be aligned with the overall mission of the agency.

NRCS has offices in almost all Texas counties and staff works one-on-one with producers in their county. NRCS is a non-regulatory agency and all services are provided without a fee. NRCS is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Q) What role does your office play in on-farm water conservation?

Texas NRCS helps people help the land daily by working with farmers and ranchers to conserve, protect and enhance their natural resources of soil, water, plants, air and animals. We do this by providing technical assistance, without a fee, to farmers and ranchers to evaluate and see what land management practices can be recommended and implemented to retain, conserve and enhance water quality and quantity which will in turn improve on-farm water use.

Among the most popular practices are converting high pressure, overhead sprinkler (pivot) irrigation systems to more efficient low pressure bubbler systems with nozzles placed close to the ground. We recommend nozzle packages to take advantage of water saving technology that they provide. These sprinkler systems are referred to as Low Energy Precision Application (LEPA). We also convert thousands of acres each year from flood irrigated fields to drip systems that use buried drip tape placed just below the crop.

In addition to irrigation, NRCS promotes conservation tillage practices such as no-till and reduced tillage. By leaving crop residue on the ground following harvesting the soil is able to retain moisture in greater amounts than if the field were tilled. NRCS does not charge for the technical assistance or financial assistance provided to the producer. NRCS has practice standards for all types of water conservation practices such as irrigation efficiency retrofits and conservation tillage methods.

Q) What's the most important thing for irrigation districts to know about the role they play in water conservation?

Irrigation districts are confronting new challenges, especially as their service areas urbanize and give way to subdivision development. This urbanization is making it critical for irrigation districts to educate the increasing

population of citizens on their role in protecting water quality and quantity and what conservation measures they can take at home to protect this valuable resource. Irrigation districts also play an important role in helping farmers make the best use of the water resources that are available. With the depletion of the Ogallala and heavy demands on the Edwards Aquifer the role of conservation is vital.

Agricultural producers are very aware of water conservation and the public needs to be aware as well.

Q) What's the most important thing for farmers to know about water conservation?

Farmers need to know where to go to get information of water conservation practices. One of the first places to start is the local NRCS office in their county. NRCS provides free technical assistance to all who ask for it. In addition NRCS provides financial assistance to those who qualify. We even have programs for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, beginning and limited resource producers which can provide a higher amount of financial assistance. NRCS staff will work with the landowner to develop a conservation plan based on their goals and objectives to protect and optimize their land and natural resources for crops, livestock and/or wildlife. All services and programs are voluntary and offered to all agricultural producers and land managers.

Conservation plans are not contracts; they are recorded objectives that landowners/managers have in mind for all of the land they own or operate. A conservation plan is tailored to each situation and is a confidential document. It is only when financial assistance is received on practices identified in the conservation plan that a contract is drawn up for implementing those specific practices. Requests for conservation plans and applications for conservation financial assistance are accepted throughout the year.

Most producers are well aware of the depletion of the aquifers under the state. They can tell by the decrease in gallons per minute pumped from wells. Conservation tillage is one way to conserve water and educating them on this practice along with other avenues to protect and enhance their natural resources is a major part of our job.

Q) What's the most important thing for the general public to know about water conservation, especially when it comes to agriculture?

The productivity of irrigated land is approximately three times greater than that of rainfed land. Agriculture is already using less water, thanks to more efficient irrigation practices. The public should be aware that agriculture is a business that provides food, fiber and horticultural products for all of us, and businesses need to be profitable to survive. It takes money to drive pumps to get water out of the ground. Agriculture does not pump water indiscriminately for irrigation. It does so with a measured approach to get the best yields on their crops with profitability in mind.

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