

Success in 2006—Partnerships will be the key

By State Conservationist Richard Van Klaveren, Iowa NRCS

Each year brings new challenges and opportunities for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and our customers. Through our partnerships with farmers, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, other conservation groups and government agencies, we worked together in 2005 to exceed expectations. Last year was a great example of what cooperation can accomplish. In fact, the conservation partnership helped Iowa NRCS exceed our goals—from applied comprehensive nutrient management plans to restored wetlands.

Here are a few examples of our 2005 accomplishments:

- 2 million tons of reduced soil erosion
- 176 comprehensive nutrient management plans written
- 1.2 million acres of cropland conservation plans written

These successes were realized while leading in the nation in CSP contracts and awarding more than \$20 million in EQIP contracts—for the second year in a row. Last year Iowa NRCS awarded 1,467 EQIP contracts worth \$21.6 million. We also wrote nearly 2,000 CSP contracts for 2005. Nationally, one in every six CSP contracts in 2005 was awarded to an Iowa landowner or producer.

This year will bring additional challenges, largely due to the budget pressures created by Hurricane Katrina. Even before Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, our Chief, Bruce Knight, indicated the NRCS budget would be very tight.

What does that mean to Iowa NRCS and our partners? Will we have money to do the cooperative and contribution agreements we did this past year? Will we add staff? Will we take on additional commitments?

Chances are we will not. But we will continue to help people help the land.

No matter how the budget resolves itself, NRCS and our partners will still help landowners solve their resource and program related issues. These are issues we won't resolve today, next week or even perhaps next year. Rather, they are long term conservation challenges and opportunities.

The first of these is expiring CRP contracts and land use planning. Nearly 1.5 million acres of Iowa CRP contracts will expire by 2009, one-half of them in 2007 alone. Despite USDA plans to offer extensions and renewals for many of those acres, we believe much of that land will revert to crop production. The bottom line is many landowners will make more money renting their ground to farmers than to the government.

So our goal is to help these producers and landowners make the best land use decisions—show them ways to leave the most critical areas in permanent grass cover to maximize environmental benefits while balancing the need for profits. Hopefully this will also preserve their chances for qualifying for future Conservation Security Program signups.

And what is the future of CSP? In the immediate future, the CSP workload and challenges appear overwhelming. The tools used to implement CSP continue to change, making the process seem even more challenging. Despite the financial challenges, I believe CSP will continue to grow and evolve into our top conservation program, supported by the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

None of this will be accomplished without cooperation at every level—local, state and national. As the NRCS workload grows and evolves, partnerships become an even stronger cornerstone of our daily work. It would be impossible to reach our goals each year without the help of our partners and the conservation commitment of our customers. So here's to another successful year as Iowa NRCS works to help people help the land.