

Awards honor landowners' work

By Christina Beringer

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With a commitment to conserve water, soil and other natural resources vital to our farms, the Thomas County Conservation District has selected this year's Kansas Bankers Award winners, landowners who have demonstrated a commitment to safeguarding the environment.

The annual soil conservation and windbreak awards are given to recognize landowners and operators who implement conservation projects throughout the year.

"Criteria for these two awards are set by the Kansas Bankers Association and dictate eligible nominees who are selected by the community," said Debbie Potter, director of the Thomas County Conservation District. "Nominees are asked to submit a write-up telling about their operation or windbreak, and the winners are selected by our supervisors."

Potter said each of the 105 Kansas counties has a conservation district which give awards to nominees selected by the community.

Potter said the winners are given a certificate provided by the bankers and a sign for display on their farm.

"The award recipients will be recognized at our annual meeting on Monday (Jan. 23) at



Combines and a service truck move from fields to field during harvest.

the United Methodist Church in Colby," Potter said. "During the meeting, awards will also be given to the poster and coloring contest winners; a dinner will be provided courtesy of

banking institutions in Thomas County; and a business meeting will take place."

Potter said the district office also provides many services and opportunities that support its mission.

"We can help provide technical and financial assistance for conservation activities such as terraces, livestock wells, grass seedings and septic systems, just to name a few," she said. "We are a service-based office and we are here to help with whatever is needed. We offer a grass drill for rent. We sell grass seed, drip irrigation supplies, trees, marking flags, moisture meters and gypsum blocks."

Not only does the office provide services to farmers, she said, but it helps city people, too. "We have available funds to assist homeowners with replacement of septic systems, which many people are unaware of," Potter said. "These funds are made possible through the Kansas Non-Point Source Pollution Program. If your system is failing or you have cesspools, you are eligible for cost-share."

Another opportunity is available for water resource projects. Potter said that landowners with natural-resource concerns can stop by to discuss solutions and possible state financial help. Projects that could be eligible include those that protect land from erosion, preserve water quality or help conserve water.

"Applications are taken beginning May 15 through June 15 each year," Potter said. "The

docket of projects that will receive cost sharing also helps tailor a list of needs for the area and the projects provide work for county and area contractors."

In 2011, \$17,916 was distributed to landowners and farm or ranch operators for water projects. Since 2006, Potter said, more than \$205,000 has been paid out in Thomas County through the office's cost-sharing programs.

Since 1944, the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts have been forging federal, state and local partnerships to protect the state's natural resources and demonstrate wise and efficient conservation practices. The commitment stemmed from the devastations of the 1930s when more than 100 million acres of farmland were destroyed due to improper farming practices and soil erosion, says the association.

The precipice of the "Dirty '30s" was "Black Sunday," April, 14, 1935, when an estimated 300 million tons of soil blew away. That persuaded President Franklin Roosevelt to urge governors to start conservation districts.

The Kansas association was established in March 1937 to measure and conduct surveys and investigations, research soil erosion and its prevention and other efforts. The focus has expanded from protecting soil to encompassing all natural resources. Many terraces built during those first efforts are still used to protect the land today, the group says.

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