

Investing in conservation yields more dividends

By Jon Starns

As state and local budgets become tighter and elected officials are faced with tough decisions about what to fund and where cuts can potentially be taken without severely compromising the public welfare, the question of funding county conservation districts must necessarily be on the table. Do county dollars invested in conservation yield a return on investment?

The answer is yes. For every dollar a county appropriates for its conservation district, the typical fiscal return on investment is anywhere from one hundred to several hundred percent. Last fiscal year in Finney County, for example, the amount budgeted for the conservation district was \$27,300, which generated federal and state cost-share dollars that equaled a 177-percent return on that investment.

A reduction in funding for conservation programs would not only result in reducing or eliminating dollars coming into county coffers, it could also return the state to some of its darkest days. On April 14, 1935, known in this part of the country as "Black Sunday," the Great Plains lost an estimated 300 million tons of topsoil due to the lack of conservation practices. How much dirt is that? Picture dirt piled three feet deep, wide enough to cover the width of an average two-lane highway, running all the way from Los Angeles to New York City, multiplied seven times. That's a lot of dirt. Enough, in fact, to convince President Franklin D. Roosevelt to write a letter to state governors encouraging them to create soil conservation districts to work with the Soil Conservation Service, which had just been established as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

For more than 74 years, Kansas conservation districts and producers have been working with each other and with our partners, the State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), to better preserve the land on which we depend so much. As we've added programs and become more sophisticated with technology, Kansas counties have received millions of dollars through cost-share initiatives on the local, state, and federal levels. Not only have producers benefited through better yields, but the cost savings to our roads, bridges, rivers and streams have been significant. Wildlife habitats, too, derive major benefit from these programs. Whether you are a farmer, rancher, hunter, or just a nature enthusiast, we have all benefited enormously.

When budget hearings occur, attend and speak up. Make sure your county commissioners are aware how much money conservation districts generate in your county. In tight budget times, that revenue is more important than ever.

Kansas is viewed as a model state in conservation, and that's because for more than seven decades we have understood the value of strong conservation. We have considered it a priority. Let's all work to keep it that way.

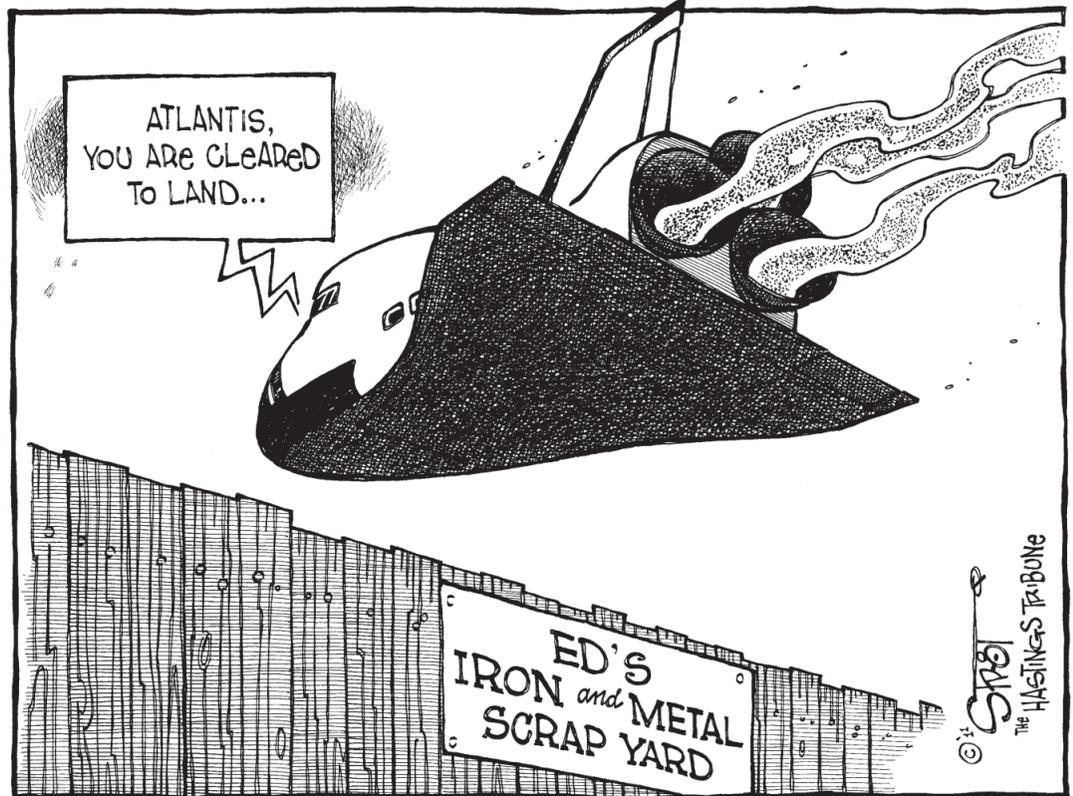
Jon Starns is a member of the Board of Directors of the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts and is the Northern Plains representative on the executive board of the National Association of Conservation Districts. He is a longtime farmer/rancher from Winona, Kansas. For more information, contact Jon Starns at (785) 846-7692.



Thumbs up to the American Legion Baseball Team on their zone championship and their coaches. Good luck in Ottawa.

Gene Wiltfong

Letters to the Editor and Thumbs Up:
e-mail dpaxton@nwkansas.com
or to write 215 S. Kansas Ave. 67654
785-877-3361



Granddaughter's visit motivates grandma

We're out of the goat business. And, I can't say as how I'm unhappy about it, either. Actually, we didn't even know it until the man we bought the goats from called and said, "Your goats are back over here at my place."

Jim's reply was, "Well, they can just stay."

Unknown to us, the roof off one of Jim's storage sheds in the goat's pen was completely lifted off and dropped in the compound across the alley during that microburst we had a couple of weeks ago. That was the escape route Nanny and Billy had been waiting for. They were up and over and on their way "home" in a flash. Truth of it was, Nanny and Billy just wanted to be with the herd they knew.

We tried goats this summer mainly because we weren't able to get any baby calves to bottle feed. Goats couldn't be much different we thought. They should be able to keep the weeds down as good as calves.

What we discovered was goats prefer the tasty leaves of cherry trees and even have a liking for the needles on Austrian pine trees. They about destroyed my dwarf cherry tree and two Austrian pines in their lot. The little stinkers evidently stood on the lower branches and ate leaves/needles as high as they could reach. The trees will recover. As soon as the goats were taken from the pen, all three trees began to put on new growth.

The man we bought them from was very kind and offered to pay us back what we paid for them. We took part of it but, gave him the sack of goat feed we had left and chalked it all up to good experience. We learned we're not cut out to be goat herders.

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



Granddaughter, Taylor, is with us for one more week. We had big plans to do so many things while she's here. So far, we have a good start on a very complicated puzzle; she's read a lot; she painted a screen door; and she's working hard on decorating a cake to enter in the county fair.

Nothing too exciting but I don't necessarily think kids have to be entertained 24/7. A little quiet time is not a bad thing for them. She does know enough, however, to not say she's bored. Perhaps, her mother warned her. My girls may have tried it once but soon learned if they said they were bored, mother had plenty of jobs to keep them busy.

This "cake" Taylor is making will be covered with fondant. Something I have no experience with, so Taylor is on her own. The fair rule book said decorated cakes have to be on a form. Evidently, it's only the decorations that are judged. That's good because the cake she's making is in the shape of a large "bone" with a little black and white puppy on top of it. Jim made the basic shape out of expanding foam and Taylor has "whittled" it down to the perfect size. She's busy mixing the colors and will begin rolling out the fondant. Sure hope three pounds is enough because it's 45 miles to the closest store that carries fondant.

Photography is also one of Taylor's interests. She's been taking lots of pictures and if we got something worthy, we'll print it off to enter in the fair, too. Otherwise, it will just be a lot of snapshots.

I made arrangements to take Taylor and two of the girls she has known from past visits out for pizza. I picked the girls up and headed to the local pizza parlor. Conversation was at a standstill as all three girls acted very shy and no one was talking. I felt like a police investigator grilling a suspect. I kept asking questions about school and sports; but, nothing seemed to spark any interest. After ordering our meal I realized I was the problem and needed to vacate if they were ever going to talk to each other.

Thank goodness for small towns. You always see someone you know and can butt in for a visit anytime. Sure 'nuff, I spotted two old friends; excused myself from the girls and moved to the friend's table. In no time at all, the girls were talking like magpies. Grandma just needed to get out of the way.

I still have hopes of finishing the home office while Taylor is here. She even volunteered to help paint. And, I would like her to know Grandma really can complete a project. I have to finish it. Jim brought home the plywood to fix the floor in what will be the library and all the "stuff" that came out of the office ended up in the library and now it all has to find a new home. I'm thinking of pushing it into the dining room 'til he's done making his mess. In home remodeling, it's always something.

The moral of the story is: don't weaken. Someday it will be done.

What goes around always comes around again

Insight

John Schlageck

The word oasis comes to mind when describing northwestern Kansas this summer. Although within a few weeks if the 100-degree plus temperatures continue, it may turn a bit drier.

But for now, in mid-July, the cattle graze in pastures with lush, tall grass. Each field of corn, beans or milo resembles a living green tapestry woven by the Master's hand. Dryland corn looks just like its irrigated cousin. Both have even, uniform stands colored in deep dark green while standing six feet tall. Powerful corn as farmers say in this part of Kansas.

And the wheat crop? You have to see it to believe it. And that's just what I did on July 14/15. I traveled nearly 240 miles west on Highway 36 from Manhattan to visit the Holle family in Rawlins County. Crops and grassland were green the entire distance in the upper tier of Kansas counties.

Once I pulled up to the wheat field, I climbed up the combine ladder and veteran Rawlins County farmer/stockman Kevin Holle opened the cab. Old friends, we both sported broad smiles as we shook hands and I sat down in the buddy seat as we began to talk. I'd known Kevin since we were both kids nearly 35 years ago. Our two schools Atwood and Hoxie, where I grew up, were sports rivals.

Needless to say an hour sped by like the blink of an eye as we caught up and he told me about this year's wheat crop. He was

running a Gleaner with a stripper head on a field approximately 22 miles southwest of Oberlin.

It didn't take me long to ask Kevin how the wheat was rolling into the bin. He pointed to the computer on the right side of the combine cab. The number 66 (bushels per acre) flashed across the screen.

Reports of 50-85 bushel wheat have been common throughout some counties in far northwestern Kansas this harvest. The only problem is showers have come through this region of Kansas nearly every other night since the end of June.

In Rawlins County, Holle says they've received nearly six inches of rain since July 1. Throughout harvest he cut around the bottom of terraces to avoid getting stuck in the wet fields.

"It's one of those unbelievable years," Holle told me. "It's just such a great feeling to watch the crop coming in like this."

Holle believes his wheat crop will average 65 bushels per acre. Yes, the last three years have been kind and bountiful for the Holles and other northwestern Kansas grain producers. Two years ago they harvested 180 bushel dryland corn. Their best crop ever.

"Everything has to come together just right," Holle says. "Timely rains, cooler temperatures when the wheat heads are filling or the corn is tasseling."

Still with the abundant harvest Holle knows what it's like to be on the other end of the stick. During the beginning of the 21st Century, his family suffered through six years of drought, crop failure and heartache. He knows all too well what his fellow farmers across Kansas are feeling.

"I feel bad for the producers who can't get a rain for anything," the Rawlins County producer says. "I'd sure like to share some of this with them right now."

During those tough times beginning in 2002, it was so dry on the Holle pastureland they didn't bother to even turn their cow herd out on the grass. There wasn't any for his herd to eat. They also swathed their corn crop, rather than cut it for grain, to feed their hungry herd for six years.

"It's amazing what this country out here will produce with a little moisture," Holle says. "This year is testimony to that. The good Lord has blessed us."

Yes, so far in 2011 crops and livestock in northwestern Kansas have flourished. Crops roll for miles in green splendor with the promise of an abundant harvest this fall. That means farmer/stockmen like the Holles will prosper this year, set some aside for the lean years and continue to farm land that's been under their family's care for five generations.

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OFFICE HOURS:
8 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon.-Thur.
8 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Friday
Phone: (785) 877-3361
Fax: (785) 877-3732

STAFF

Dana Paxton..... General Manager
Advertising Director/
email: dpaxton@nwkansas.com
Carleen Bell..... Managing Editor
cbell@nwkansas.com
Dick Boyd..... Blue Jay Sports
nortontelegram@nwkansas.com
Brandi Diederich..... Intern/Society Editor
bdiederich@nwkansas.com
Vicki Henderson..... Computer Production
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