

Can irrigation history waiver pave the path for more conservation in the state?

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On May 12, 2016, the USDA published a modification to an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) requirement. The change proposed includes an irrigation history waiver for limited resource and/or socially disadvantaged farmers including Indian Tribal producers, whereas other producers not in the above-mentioned categories are still required to meet irrigation history and continued production requirements in order to qualify for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) assistance.

Those who are not aware of the EQIP, it is a program under which the NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to farmers to adopt on-farm conservation practices. One assistance category includes financial assistance to allow farmers to adopt irrigation practices on their farm. In order to qualify for such assistance, the field/farm is required to have irrigation history, i.e., that particular field/farm should have been irrigated in two of the last five years (2/5 criteria) and should be in active production in four of the last six years (4/6 criteria).

Although such a requirement might have its benefits of limiting the use of funds for big ticket items such as land leveling (also an irrigation related practice), the irrigation history requirement has its share of drawbacks. For example, farmers not meeting the 2/5 criteria have to spend out of pocket expenses to irrigate their crops to attain the irrigation history requirement to qualify for irrigation-related NRCS assistance. In other words, farmers who have no irrigation history (vis-à-vis no expertise in irrigation practices) are obligated to irrigate inefficiently for the first two years to qualify for financial and/or technical assistance from NRCS to make changes/improvements in practices to improve irrigation efficiency. Such a requirement only intensifies already existing resource concerns (poor irrigation can lead to excess runoff, sediment loss, soil compaction, and off-farm water quality deterioration, among others) as well as poor return on investment in irrigation efficiency technology.

Pathway for Conservation

An irrigation history waiver if available for all farmers (including limited resource and/or socially disadvantaged farmers including Indian Tribal producers) can be a pathway to promote more conservation of resources. For example, if a farmer who does not meet the 2/5 criteria should be allowed to qualify for financial and technical assistance for irrigation practices if he/she is willing to adopt other conservation measures identified to mitigate resource concerns prominent in his/her parish. Such a holistic approach can enhance conservation through more acres under scientifically proven conservation methods, mitigate on-farm and off-farm resource concerns, improve any associated ecosystem services, and provide most “Bang for the Buck” invested in conservation and efficiency improvement. Moreover, involvement in improving efficiency in irrigation practices can only make the learning curve less steep for first-time irrigators and can increase the expectation of such farmers to adopt more advanced efficiency practices such as surge valves and moisture sensors. In addition, limiting the type of efficiency practices qualified for assistance when the 2/5 criterion is not met can limit the use of conservation dollars on big-ticket items like land leveling. We should not pass on such an opportunity that can provide more conservation in the state.