

Oklahoma's NRCS-Assisted Flood Control Program

Protecting Our People - Protecting Our Natural Resources

Local, state and federal government agencies work together to utilize the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed Program to address natural resource needs and improve the quality of life for thousands of Oklahomans.

Flooding was a common occurrence in Oklahoma in the early part of the 20th century. Floods washed out roads and bridges, flooded towns, destroyed crops, killed livestock, eroded the land and sometimes resulted in the loss of lives. The floods were costing millions of dollars in damages each year and preventing farmers from utilizing some of the most productive lands that were in the floodplain of streams and rivers.

There were two lines of thoughts on how to control the flooding: construct large dams on rivers or use an approach developed by the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS), now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which consisted of developing a series of smaller flood control dams on tributaries to large streams. These smaller flood control dams would impound water during heavy rainstorms and slowly release it through pipes in the dam over a period of days or weeks. This slow release would reduce the amount of water that reached the larger streams immediately after heavy rains and reduce the flooding downstream.

Oklahoma's conservation districts took the lead in the flood control effort choosing the SCS approach and requested the agency's assistance in developing watershed projects. SCS's help with the first projects was authorized by the 1944 Flood Control Act (PL 78-534). This act authorized the development of 11 flood control projects in the nation with the Oklahoma Washita River Watershed being one of those selected.

The first flood control dam in the nation to be built with assistance of this program was in the Cloud Creek Watershed (a sub-watershed of the Washita River) in Washita County, Oklahoma in 1948. Since that time 1,107 dams in 55 projects have been constructed in the Washita River watershed.

As the dams were constructed the frequency and severity of the flood were reduced. Congress, seeing the benefits of the program, passed Public Law 83-566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act that authorized the formation and funding for other eligible watershed projects across the nation.

Oklahoma was quick to take advantage of this program and began forming new projects in watersheds outside the Washita River watershed. Today there are 74 watershed projects in the state authorized by the PL 566 Program and 1,000 flood control dams have been constructed.

2,107 flood control dams have been constructed by local communities utilizing these two NRCS programs. Conservation districts are usually the primary sponsor of the projects, with cities sometimes being co-sponsors where municipal water or recreation are part of the project. Technical and financial assistance for the projects is provided by the NRCS and the Oklahoma Conservation Commission.

Benefits of the 2,107 Flood Control Dams in 61 Counties

- Over \$81 million in average annual benefits from reduced flood damages
- Flood protection for 1,400 bridges and thousands of miles of county roads and bridges and state highways
- Flood protection for 21,000 farms and ranches
- Dams have created over 50,000 surface acres of water for fish and wildlife habitat, waterfowl nesting areas and livestock water
- Sedimentation is reduced by nine million tons of soil annually
- 45,000 acres of wetlands have been created or enhanced
- Forty-two dams provide municipal and/or recreational benefits

For additional information about watershed projects in the state visit the Oklahoma Conservation Commission website at: <http://conservation.ok.gov> or visit your local conservation district and NRCS office.

