

CONSERVATION CALENDAR

APRIL 2018

- 4/4** Feral Hog Management and Soil Health Workshop in Altus
- 4/5** Ottawa & Craig County CD Feral Hog Outreach Meeting in Afton
- 4/12** Conservation Awards Ceremony in the Agriculture Lab Atrium at the Department of Agriculture Buidling in Oklahoma City
- 4/12** Seminol CCD Soil Health Field Day at Blackjack Ranch in Wewoka
- 4/23** Greer CCD Soil Health Field Day
- 4/25** Comanche, Cotton, & South Caddo CD Feral Hog Outreach Meeting in Lawton
- 4/26** Dewey & Major County CD Feral Hog Outreach Meeting in Chester
- 4/26** Natural Resource Day in Kay County
- 4/26** Deer Creek CD Annual Outdoor Classroom in Weatherford

**For details on specific events, visit the calendar on the Conservation Commision website or check with the local conservation districts*



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Conservation Chronicle

Monthly Newsletter of the Oklahoma Conservation Commission
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GIS Specialist Shellie Willoughby, her son Andrew, and Lt. Gov. Todd Lamb at GIS Day at the Capitol

GIS Day at the Capitol A Success

The 24th GIS Day at the Capitol took place on March 6th and was seen as a success by the Office of Geographic Information and Technical Services.

“GIS Day at the Capitol 2018 was a great success with over 50 exhibitors from various municipal, county, regional, state, tribal and federal agencies displaying their use of geographic information technology to support day-to-day decision-making. I appreciate the interest shown by Lt. Governor Lamb who visited several exhibit displays as he made his way around the 4th floor Capitol Rotunda,” said Director Mike Sharp. Sharp also thanked GIS Specialist Shellie Willoughby who planned and coordinated the event.

Pictures of the event can be found online at the Oklahoma Conservation Commission’s Flickr page (see back page).

Welcome Letter

Welcome to the first edition of the Conservation Chronicle, your monthly source of conservation news and notes. As I grow further into my role as Public Information Officer at the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, I hope to build relationships with the districts and the people we serve. The goal of this newsletter is to do just that, enhance communication. The more collaboration we have, the better we can serve. I have always felt that sharing ideas and stories leads to growth and enrichment.

This newsletter is designed to highlight some of the great work being done at the Commission and at the district level. My hope is to highlight at least two Commission divisions or programs, one event from each of the five Commission Areas, and a conservation partner each month. Hopefully, these stories will not only showcase the work being done, but also spark ideas for other ways to reach out to those we serve in the various districts.

I hope this newsletter proves to be a valuable source of information and a way that the conservation story can be spread across the state. Please print as many copies as you would like for distribution at your local district offices. The plan is to release this newsletter at the end of every month so, from here on out, be looking for it to hit your inbox in the final week of each month. Also, please contact me, Chris Cox, with any story ideas at christopher.cox@conservation.ok.gov or by calling 405-522-5954. Thank you and I hope you enjoy the first edition of the Conservation Chronicle.

MONTH IN REVIEW

The month of March was a busy month for the Oklahoma Conservation Commission. Coming off the heels of the successful OACD State Meeting, Commission employees were at the State Capitol for not one but two recognition days. The first was GIS Day on March 6th. Shellie Willoughby and Mike Sharp hosted the event that featured over 50 exhibitors that showcased Geographic Information Systems technology and how it is used on a daily basis. GIS Day also featured an appearance by Lt. Gov. Todd Lamb. Just two weeks after GIS Day on March 20th was Water Appreciation Day at the Capitol. The Blue Thumb team had a booth at Water Appreciation Day and showed off the wonderful work they are doing.

The warmer weather, and the arrival of Spring, meant the beginning of field days across the state. The Kiamichi CD hosted the first field day on March 16th. Over 50 farmers and ranchers attended that field day down in Frogville, OK. The field day was held as a part of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts “Oklahoma Healthy Soils” project. The North Caddo CD also hosted a field day in Eakly, OK on March 29th. Soil Health Educator Blane Stacy attended and spoke about assessing soil health, cover crops, and grazing management plans. Be sure to check the Conservation Commission website, www.conservation.ok.gov, for a full list of upcoming field days across the state.

The Oklahoma Conservation Commission also saw the first feral hog outreach meeting take place in McAlester. Hosted by the LeFlore and Haskell County conservation districts, and in conjunction with the Eastern Oklahoma Beef Cattle Summit, producers learned about the damage caused by feral hogs and ways to not only address the damage but also ways to prevent the feral hog damage. These outreach meetings will take place across the state in April and May make sure to look at the OCC calendar for dates and contact information regarding the various feral hog outreach meetings.

Perhaps the biggest event in conservation across the state in March didn't actually take place in Oklahoma. The NACD's annual Washington D.C. Fly-In took place on March 20th. OCC Executive Director Trey Lam, NRCS State Conservationist Gary O'Neill, OACD President Jimmy Emmons, and OCC Commissioners Scotty Herriman and Bill Clark took the conservation message right to lawmakers in Washington. The fly-in came at the perfect time as federal budget issues and Farm Bill negotiations threaten some conservation programs.

While one busy month ends, another is on the horizon as April brings several more events across the state. The big highlight in April will likely be Conservation Awards Ceremony on April 12th where the Conservation Partnership will honor districts, employees, and celebrate Jimmy Emmons on becoming the first Leopold Conservation Award winner in Oklahoma.



From R-L: NRCS State Conservationist Gary O'Neill, Area III Commissioner Scotty Herriman, Rep. Markwayne Mullin, OCC Ex. Dir. Trey Lam, & Area V Commissioner Bill Clark

PRODUCER/PROGRAM SPOTLIGHTS

In Oklahoma, conservation plays a key role in just about every farming and ranching operation. Soil health and water conservation practices help Oklahomans maximize their land while also regenerating the land's natural resources.

Several people in Oklahoma have been at the forefront of conservation in the state. However, only one has been recognized as a Leopold Conservation Award winner and that is Jimmy Emmons from Leedy. Emmons and his wife Ginger farm and run cattle on land that has been in his family since 1926. In Western Oklahoma where rain is scarce and water is a precious commodity, Emmons realized he needed to make changes to his operation to maximize his natural resources. Emmons started incorporating no-till farming practices as early as 1995 and now has a complete no-till operation. It's that kind of thinking and long-term commitment to conservation that landed Emmons the prestigious Leopold Conservation Award.



Jimmy and Ginger Emmons

Since 2003, the Leopold Conservation Award is given out annually by the Sand County Foundation to “agricultural landowners actively committed to a land ethic.” According to the Sand County Foundation website, the award recognizes people who show “extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation, inspire other landowners through their example, and help the general public understand the vital role private landowners can and do play in conservation success.” Emmons exemplifies those qualifications.

Through his role on the Dewey County Conservation District Board and as the president of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts, Emmons finds himself on the frontlines of the conservation conversation. “My grandfather did the best he could with the tools and knowledge he had to manage our family's land. I am trying to continue that legacy by using what we now know are the best practices for improving the health of our soils. My goal is that my grandson, Owen, and his children will be able to farm this land for another 100 years, if they choose. That is only possible if Ginger and I do our part to take care of the natural resources,” said Emmons.

To go along with the prestige of being named a Leopold Conservation award winner, the Sand County Foundation also presents award winners with a crystal award and \$10,000 in a setting that showcases the landowners achievements among their peers. Emmons will receive his award at Conservation Day at the Capitol on April 12th. For more information on the Leopold Conservation Award visit www.sandcountyfoundation.org.

Congratulations Jimmy & Ginger Emmons!

AREA 5 SPOTLIGHT

Great speakers, great topics and wonderful weather set the mood for the Kiamichi Conservation District’s Soil Health Workshop. The Kiamichi Conservation District, OACD, the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service successfully sponsored and hosted the first soil health and cover crops Workshop in Choctaw County. The educational event was held on March 16 at the Charlie Seimer Farm located in Frogville, OK, SE of Hugo, OK. The event, part of OACD’s “Oklahoma Healthy Soils” project, was attended by 50 farmers and ranchers interested in improving their soils and extending their grazing season.

“Improving the health of our soils and putting more dollars back in the pockets of our farmers and ranchers, was the main topic of the workshop,” said Scott Pace, District Conservationist with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in Hugo, OK. Field day topics included cover crops for southeast Oklahoma, looking at some 2017 cover crop plantings, adaptive grazing management and year-round grazing plus much more. Speakers included OACD President Jimmy Emmons, Steve Alspach with NRCS, OACD Executive Director Sarah Blaney and Brett Peshek with Green Cover Seeds. More information on the “Oklahoma Healthy Soils” project can be found at www.okconservation.org/healthysoils.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT



For the first Partner Spotlight, let’s focus on the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts. The Oklahoma Association of Conservation District, or OACD, is a nonprofit organization that represents Oklahoma’s 84 conservation districts and one tribal district. The goal of OACD is to provide leadership, resources, and partnership opportunities for

conservation districts and those who manage the land to enhance our natural resources for a better Oklahoma.

OACD is led by President Jimmy Emmons and Executive Director Sarah Blaney. Emmons, a farmer from Leedey, was first elected to lead OACD in 2017 and was re-elected in 2018 to his second term. Blaney began working at OACD in 2011 as the Director of Development and was named Executive Director in December of 2017. “Conservation in Oklahoma is successful because of the strong partnerships. The commissioners and staff are always willing to help OACD and the districts in our combined efforts to preserve the natural resources of Oklahoma. What I personally love about the partnership between OACD and OCC is it really does feel like a team,” said Blaney

Oklahoma Conservation Commission Executive Director Trey Lam said, “OACD is an essential part of the Conservation Partnership. Their work promoting conservation practices on the local level is what makes the idea of locally-led conservation a reality.”

For more information on the OACD, visit their website www.okconservation.org.

OCC DIVISION SPOTLIGHTS

OFFICE OF GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND TECHNICAL SERVICES

The Conservation Commission has several divisions that all play an important role at the OCC and in spreading the conservation message. But one division that can, at times, seem out of place at the Conservation Commission is the Office of Geographic Information and Technical Services, or GIS.

GIS houses the State Office of Geographic Information, the State GIS Coordinator, and is tasked with maintaining the OCC’s geographic information systems operations and database. The OCC and the Office of Geographic Information and Technical Services also chairs the State GIS Council. Created by law in 1994, GIS has seen its mission change from simply creating a statewide GIS strategy to now solving eight primary issues.

While not often thought about in the conservation conversation, GIS plays a critical role in the work that OCC and its partners do. GIS allows OCC to map out data that is critical in helping farmers and ranchers meet their conservation needs. Without GIS, farmers and ranchers would potentially be left to their own devices to figure out critical issues on and around their land.

To learn more about the Office of Geographic Information and Technical Services visit, www.okmap.onenet.net.

WATER QUALITY DIVISION

While GIS might not be the first division thought of when you think Oklahoma Conservation Commission, the Water Quality Division might be. Water Quality works to assess stream health across the state. Many streams are already in good shape due to wise management practices. However, when problems are identified the Water Quality Division partners with landowners and others through voluntary programs that reduce pollution.

To achieve that pollution reduction goal, Water Quality identifies waters impaired by nonpoint source pollution (NPS), prioritizes projects to reduce pollutants, and implements those various projects. OCC’s Water Quality Division has been one of the most successful organizations in the country in cleaning up NPS sites. To date, Oklahoma has 60 bodies of water delisted from the EPA’s 303(d) list. That is second most in the entire country. In 2017 alone, Oklahoma had 6 bodies of water delisted from the 303(d) list.

But Water Quality does more than just monitor bodies of water. Water Quality also educates through the Blue Thumb, WET, and Soil Health Education programs (which will all be highlighted in later editions). Water Quality also is in charge of monitoring the state’s wetland areas, managing the state’s Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and is in charge of the carbon sequestration certifications.

AREA 1 SPOTLIGHT

It was a fairly quiet month in Area 1. But one thing that is still of concern to many conservationists in Area 1 is the burn ban that remains in effect for many counties in northwest Oklahoma. High winds and dry weather led to the burn ban from Governor Fallin, which was initially enacted in February. Barring unforeseen rain, the burn ban will likely stay in effect for a while as the majority of NW Oklahoma is in D3 (Extreme Drought) or D4 (Exceptional Drought) according to the US Drought Monitor.

The burn ban affects many conservationists who practice prescribed burning to help manage their natural resources and protect their life and property. Prescribed burning is when someone intentionally sets a fire that burns certain area of land. Prescribed burning can help prepare the land for the next round of planting. Prescribed burning also is an effective tool in preventing the outbreak and spread of wildfires.

The drought that led to the burn ban also led USDA to declare 57 Oklahoma counties, including all counties in Area 1, as natural disaster areas due to losses and damages caused by the drought. That designation allows qualified farm operators to apply for emergency loans from the Farm Service Agency. For more information visit <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/disaster-assistance-program/index>.

AREA 2 SPOTLIGHT

March was fairly busy for Area 2 as not one, but two appreciation days were held at the State Capitol. The first was GIS Day at the Capitol (see the spotlight on the front page) on March 6th. The second was Water Appreciation Day at the Capitol on March 20th. Both days are big days on the Conservation Commission calendar because it is one a few times all year that Conservation Commission employees, producers, and conservation partners can interact with lawmakers.

On Tuesday, March 20th, the Blue Thumb team attended Water Appreciation Day, held in the state Capitol building. Blue Thumb Education Coordinator Candice Miller and Blue Thumb Educator Rob Barossi were joined by Nathan Carter, Water Quality Division Monitoring Specialist, and Blue Thumb volunteer Theron Blunck.

One of the highlights of the Blue Thumb informational table was the two creek bug samples, side by side, demonstrating the abundant life at the bottom of two different creeks in two different urban environments.

There were quite a few kids who visited the table and got to view the live creek bugs as well as the preserved bugs Nathan set up with a microscope and tv monitor, so that everyone could get an even closer look at the various species and their differences. This gave the team a chance to talk in depth about the bugs they collect in creeks and streams all over the state, why the team collects them and what the bugs tell us.



Nathan Carter and Candice Miller at Water Appreciation Day

AREA 3 SPOTLIGHT

Area 3 also had a fairly quiet month but that does not mean they weren't busy and preparing for the months ahead. Ottawa County and Craig County Conservation Districts are getting ready to co-host a feral hog meeting in Afton. That meeting will take place in conjunction with the Ottawa Craig Cattlemen's Association Annual Meeting on April 5th.

Another upcoming Area 3 event is a legislative breakfast hosted by the Wagoner County Conservation District. The theme of the breakfast is "Watersheds: Our Water, Our Home." That theme is right in line with the National Association of Conservation Districts theme for Stewardship Week. Stewardship Week is April 30th through May 6th.



For more information on these events and other upcoming events, visit www.conservation.ok.gov. Information and promotional items on Stewardship Week can be found at www.nacdnet.org.

AREA 4 SPOTLIGHT



Clay Salisbury, NRCS Soil Scientist at the Eakly field day

North, South, and West Caddo Conservation Districts, co-hosted an Introductory Soil Health Field Day on March 29th near Eakly. Thirty-six people gathered to learn about the basics of Soil Health, Simple Soil Health assessment and tools, and the basics of incorporating cover crops into no-till systems.

Clay Salisbury, NRCS Soil Scientist, opened the discussion by describing the five principles of soil health, and how each principle related to soil function, quality, and resiliency. Blane Stacy, OCC Soil Health Educator, discussed how a diverse plant mix with many types of root systems can break compaction layers, anchor the sandy soil present at the field, and provide food for the biological community in the soil.

The groups visited two fields where Salisbury dug a series of holes in the soil to show the benefits of soil health practices on fields where different crops were grown and different soil health practices were used. Stacy explained that soil health systems are designed to mimic a native prairie, with continuous cover, a diversity of plants with living roots throughout the year, minimal disturbance, and wise use of livestock, will all work together to rebuild soil organic matter, soil stability, and nutrients.

A lively discussion followed with many producers relating successes and failures with their respective operations using cover crops. Many producers that had tried cover crops mentioned how they can be used as livestock feed, weed suppression, soil armor, and various methods to utilize cover crops for many uses.