Washita River Watershed Project

Protecting Our People - Protecting Our Natural Resources

This watershed project is an example of how local, state and federal government agencies have worked together to utilize the Natural Resources Conservation Service Watershed Program to address natural resource needs and improve the quality of life for thousands of Oklahomans.

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Severe flooding occurred along the Washita River in the early 20th Century. Towns along the river were frequently flooded, as well as productive Washita River bottomlands. Not only were crops and livestock lost to flooding, but homes were flooded and lives were lost. Seventeen people lost their lives in Hammon, Oklahoma in April 1934 when the Washita River flowed out of its banks and flooded the small community in the middle of the night.

Oklahoma conservation leaders worked with others across the nation to get Congress to pass the Flood Control Act of 1944. This Act authorized eleven flood control projects across the country that would introduce a new approach of controlling the flooding. The concept was simple, a series of small flood control dams would be built in a watershed on tributaries to a large stream or river. These dams would impound the water from heavy rain storms and release it slowly through a pipe in the dam over a period of days or weeks. This would prevent all the rain water from the storms from reaching the river at one time reducing flooding.

The Washita River was one of the eleven projects selected for authorization. The Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service) administers the Program and provides technical and financial assistance to local units of government (mainly conservation districts) in planning and implementing the projects. These projects consist of construction of flood control dams and the installation of conservation practices in the watershed to reduce erosion and sedimentation.

The first flood control dam constructed in the nation under this program was in the Cloud Creek Watershed in Washita County, Oklahoma in 1948. Today there are 1,107 flood control dams in 55 watershed projects in the Washita River Watershed.

As the dams were constructed the state began to see the results by the reduction in flooding.

Washita River Watershed Project Benefits

- $32 million in average annual benefits from reduced flood damages
- Flood protection for 286,000 acres of floodplain
- Flood protection for 650 bridges and hundreds of state highways and county roads and bridges
- Flood protection for 8,100 farms and ranches
- 20,000 acres of wetlands have been created or enhanced by the project
- Sedimentation is reduced by 4.8 million tons of soil annually
- Impounded water has created fish and wildlife habitat, waterfowl nesting areas and livestock water

With the success of the eleven watershed projects authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944, Congress passed the 1954 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566). This Act expanded the watershed program concept to other eligible watersheds across the nation. Oklahoma has developed 74 projects with assistance of this program and constructed 1,000 dams.

2,107 NRCS-assisted flood control dams have been constructed in 61 Oklahoma counties with assistance of these two programs. These dams provide over $81 million in average annual 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.

OKLAHOMA CONSERVATION COMMISSION

This publication is issued by the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, in cooperation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, as authorized by Mike Thralls, executive director. Copies have not been printed but are available through the agency website, http://conservation.ok.gov.
October 2011

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service