Lower St. Francis River Watershed Cost Share Project

FINAL REPORT

2020

St. Francis County Conservation District

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BACKGROUND

The Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality's 2012 303(d) list cataloged Reach 008 Segment 5A of the Lower St. Francis River impaired by turbidity and chlorides with both pollutants' cause listed as agricultural activity. The stream listed as a Category 5d. The 2008 Integrated Water Quality Monitoring and Assessment Report stated that 74% of the tributary waters in the watershed were assessed and the assessment concluded that all of the streams in the segment had high turbidity and silt loads carried into the stream from row crop agriculture. This condition was encouraged by the drainage of lowland areas and by ditching and channeling stream to facilitate runoff. The river was immediately impacted by erosion from agricultural and other daily operations on land within the watershed. Traditional tillage methods on row crops resulted in a tremendous amount of sediment leaving agricultural fields and being deposited into tributaries of and ultimately into the St. Francis River. This project educated land users in the area of the need to use best management practices to reduce the amount of sediment leaving the field and entering the streams by providing the needed cost share to install and use these practices. There were no special projects in this area addressing water quality. There were a number of producers in the watershed that need and want to apply practices on the ground. When producers came into our office requesting assistance with soil erosion problems, we looked at their overall needs and guided them toward programs that offer cost assistance with installing BMPs. Farmers in this area, small farmers and farmers installing single practices have a hard time qualifying for EQIP dollars as these applications do not rank as high as those who are located in high priority areas and installing more complex practices and systems. This project provided an incentive for land users to install the best management practices and to incorporate the practices into their daily operations and accomplish our goal of placing erosion practices on the ground to improve water quality in the St. Francis River Watershed and help build relationships with the producers in the area.

The Plan

The Project was publicized through news media, newsletters, and public meetings and provided education to producers and land owners

Identified potential applicant's needs

Accepted applications for cost share assistance

Designed Best Management Practices to address resource concerns for each applicant

Certified Installation of Practices

Submitted for payment of cost share

Practices used in the Project:

Core Practices

- 340 – Cover Crop – Avoiding
- 345 – Mulch Till – Controlling
- 430 – Irrigation Water Conveyance - Avoiding
- 393 – Filter Strips – Trapping
- 590 - Nutrient Management – Controlling
- 449 - Irrigation Water Management - Controlling
- 386 – Field Border – Controlling
- 410 – Grade Stabilization Structure - Controlling
- 587 – Structure for Water Control – Controlling
- 646 – Shallow Water Management & Development – Trapping

Our most popular practices were cover crop, mulch till, irrigation water conveyance and drop pipes.

The river is immediately impacted by erosion from agricultural and other daily operations on land within the watershed. Traditional tillage methods on row crops have resulted in a tremendous amount of sediment leaving agricultural fields and being deposited into tributaries of and ultimately into the St. Francis River.

Year One Highlights

The first year of the project started off with producers being notified of the availability of cost share for practices in their watershed. Producers were notified by newsletter, phone, one on one, and email. Producers were invited to the District Annual Meeting to learn more about the project.

The District received 7 applications during the first year. All seven were completed and paid within the first year. Practices implemented during the first year include:

- Cover Crop – 615 Acres planted
- Mulch Till – 3516 Acres planted
- Drop Pipes – 2 installed treating 166 Acres

Of the $55,000.00 in cost share available, $44,096.66 was obligated and paid during the first year.

Year Two Highlights

During the second year of the project the District continued notifying producers about the opportunities available through newsletter, phone, one on one conversations, radio news spots, and newspaper articles. The District also provided information at the District's Annual Meeting for producers.

The District received 4 applications during the second year and obligated 100% of the available cost share funds with these applications. Practices to be implemented with these producers include:

- 389 Acres of Cover Crop
- 1400 feet of Irrigation Water Conveyance
- 1 Drop Pipe

Year Three Highlights

The District entered year three with all funds obligated but not paid so it was difficult to advertise the project as there were most likely no funds available. The District focused on communicating the importance of completing approved practices and BMPs with the approved producers. Once again producers were faced with adverse weather conditions during the planting season. As this was the third season for adverse weather, producers were reluctant to move forward with new projects for fear of cash flow. The District accepted one additional application as one other producer stated he would probably not be able to complete his practice. The new application was completed and submitted for cost share. This completion zeroed out all the project funding.
The final practice implemented in this project was 1169 feet of Irrigation Water Conveyance. There were four practices left unfunded due to exhaustion of funding.

Practices implemented during the three year period include:

- 1004 Acres of Cover Crop
- 3516 Acres of Mulch Till
- 1169 Feet of Irrigation Water Conveyance
- 1 Drop Pipe protecting approximately 100 acres

These practices kept more than 4800 tons of soil on agricultural fields and out of adjacent waterways during the project period.

Looking Ahead

The District continues to promote best management practices in this watershed and will visit with producers in the project area to educate them on the water quality issues in their watershed and offer solutions to problems. There were several applicants that did not get practices installed before the funding ran out so we will pursue additional funding for another project in the future.

The St. Francis County Conservation District Board of Directors is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this program and offer cost share solutions to area producers that will greatly improve the water quality within the Lower St. Francis River Watershed.