

Finding the Silver Lining in Midst of Drought

As I drive across Kansas watching cattle graze contently, I cannot help but notice piles of freshly turned soil next to ponds. This sight is a prime example of the strong Kansas agriculture community that came together during a time of emergency to provide economical solutions to meet a dire need.

Last summer, livestock farmers and ranchers were hurting. At the climax of a harsh drought with no relief in sight, many Kansans were facing the difficult reality of not having enough water for their livestock. Governor Brownback witnessed first-hand the harsh effects the drought was having on livestock farmers and ranchers and charged the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA) to provide relief, support and assistance to Kansans.

During the drought, livestock farmers and ranchers called upon KDA's Division of Conservation, Division of Water Resources and the Kansas Water Office daily to provide relief. Identifying the need to restore water holding capacity for livestock water sources and remove sediment storage in existing ponds, especially in the Flint Hills region, KDA's Division of Conservation, under Greg Foley's leadership, went to work. The result was an innovative cost-share initiative to renovate existing livestock water supplies. The response was overwhelming. During the short 45-day sign-up period from Aug. 1 through Sept. 15, 2012, the Division of Conservation received more than 3,200 applications requesting more than \$8 million in funding.

With the flexibility to shift budgets and financial assistance from KDA's Division of Conservation, Division of Water Resources and local conservation and watershed districts, more than \$2 million was allocated for drought initiative contracts and more than 600 ponds will be renovated by the end of fiscal year 2014.

The real success story, however, is the will and fortitude of Kansas cattlemen and women who took the initiative to act and use their own resources to clean out ponds and restore other livestock water supply structures. A recent report showed that for every one pond KDA helped clean out, at least another 10 ponds were cleaned by livestock farmers and ranchers at their own expense. Kansas farmers and ranchers are resilient, especially in disaster situations, but they are also resourceful and responsible managers of the land and its resources. In this disaster situation, they saw an opportunity to take action and improve their water supply capacity and prepare for the future.

Timing was essential to this project. KDA's Division of Conservation needed to contact and inform farmers and ranchers and identify ponds to restore across the state quickly in order to get the work done. This initiative would not have been possible without many boots on the ground during this state-wide emergency. Local USDA officials, the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) and conservation districts worked with KDA and offered immediate and flexible partnerships that reached beyond their typical job descriptions.

Kansas set the bar for emergency drought livestock water supply initiatives. Upon seeing the overwhelming response of KDA's Division of Conservation's emergency drought initiative, the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) was provided the data to solidify the empirical demand for a federal program and utilized the Emergency Conservation Program to provide relief in November 2012. Additionally, USDA NRCS launched a similar emergency drought livestock water supply initiative in April 2013.

I am proud to be a Kansan, and I am proud to be a part of Kansas agriculture. While many parts of our state are still challenged by this severe drought, the Kansas livestock sector has weathered the storm and is prepared for the future with more water storage capacity. Kansas agriculture thanks all those who continue rising to the challenge to ensure agriculture remains the state's largest industry.