Texas Soil & Water Conservation Advocates Have Success in Acquiring Federal Funds to Address 2015 Floods

Texas is home to more than 2,000 flood control dams, many of which many were severely damaged by the extreme rainfall events of May 2015 and October 2015. In November of 2015, four organizations from the state of Texas wrote a letter to the entire Texas congressional delegation expressing the need for assistance in repairing the dams that were damaged. The request was made to acquire federal funds to match state and local dollars to put toward the repairs. The Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, the Texas Conservation Association for Water and Soil, and the Texas Association of Watershed Sponsors all strongly advocated for financial assistance to address these needs.

"The flood control dams are critically important in protecting the lives, property and publically-owned infrastructure during an extreme weather event," stated representatives from ATSWCD, TCAWS, TAWS, and TSSWCB in the letter sent to Congress last November.

As part of the appropriations bill passed by Congress in December 2015, $157 million was made available to the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. The EWP Program was created by Congress to respond to emergencies caused by natural disasters. It is designed to help reduce imminent hazards to life and property threatened by excessive erosion and flooding caused by heavy rains, drought, earthquakes, windstorms and other natural disasters.

Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in Texas are responsible for maintenance and repairs on these structures, and the TSSWCB assists local SWCDs by providing state funds and facilitating the delivery and leveraging of federal funds when available. Recently, the USDA-NRCS announced that it will invest approximately $5.7 million of the $157 million directly in Texas for flood control dams that need vital repairs as a result of the 2015 events.

The TSSWCB is planning to dedicate $1.7 million of its funding from the Texas Legislature to ensure that all of the federal funding is adequately matched and utilized. Through EWP, the NRCS also made an additional $21 million available in Texas to help remove debris and stabilize streambanks after the extreme weather events damaged culverts, bridges, roads and flooded drainage systems.

Rex Isom, who serves as both TSSWCB's Executive Director, as well as the Vice-Chairman of the National Watershed Coalition was a strong advocate for this request. "The fact that the Texas Legislature had the wisdom to fund a flood control dam program in Texas has increased the likelihood of the local governments that sponsor these structures, will have the resources they need to receive the federal funds. The EWP Program requires that 25% of the total cost of a repair project come from non-federal sources." TSSWCB's Chairman, Scott Buckles added, "While we have an important state-funded program that stands on its own for maintenance and repair activities, the presence of the federal dollars make the state appropriations go much further."

The NWC advocates are using total resource management principles in planning. They also believe that the USDA-NRCS assisted watershed program, under which Texas' 2,000 flood control dams were created are among the best planning and implementation vehicles available for wise water and land management. Dan Sebert, Executive Director of NWC said, "Texas' state-funded program provides the necessary connection between the federal programs and the local sponsor entities. Texas is setting an excellent example for the rest of the nation in addressing natural resource needs, including the importance of flood control."

Program Updates

• MAY STATE BOARD MEETING

The Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board held a board meeting on Thursday, May 19, 2016. During the meeting action was taken to elect a chairman and vice-chairman. Scott Buckles of Stratford was re-elected as chairman of the TSSWCB board. José Dodier, Jr. of Zapata will remain vice chairman of the board, serving his second term.

• PUBLIC RELATIONS & INFORMATION

77th Annual Meeting of Texas Soil and Water Conservation District Directors:
The 2016 Annual State Meeting for District Directors will be October 17-19, 2016 in Waco. Please make plans to attend. Updates on the schedule and tours can be found on our website.

• TEXAS NONPOINT SOURCE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed and accepted the Lower Nueces River Watershed Protection Plan as meeting the agency's guidelines for watershed-based plans. The Lower Nueces River Watershed Protection Plan outlines a strategy to implement management measures that will reduce nonpoint source water pollution in the watershed that will also improve and protect water quality and wildlife habitat.

The Lower Nueces River was added to the state's Clean Water Act §303(d) list of impaired waters in 2012 due to elevated levels of total dissolved solids. The development of a watershed protection plan was initiated to address the impairment along the 39 river miles from Lake Corpus Christi to the saltwater barrier dam in Corpus Christi with support and technical guidance from the Nueces River Authority; Nueces, San Patricio, and Jim Wells County Soil and Water Conservation Districts; the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board; and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

• BUDGET AND ACCOUNTING

May 15th was the deadline for claiming two thirds of Fiscal Year 2016 Matching Fund allocation.

The District Biennial Budget Request for Fiscal Years 2018-19 is available for online submission. The deadline for submission is May 31, 2016.

July 1st is the deadline to submit 1st, 2nd, and 3rd quarter director mileage and per diem claims for Fiscal Year 2016.

Landowners in South Texas lend help to ensure the protection of Native Plant

On January 11, 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced removal of Johnston's frankenia from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Plants. The plant was originally listed as endangered on August 7, 1984, when there were thought to be less than 1,000 plants remaining.

Johnston's frankenia is a perennial shrub native to the southern parts of Texas, including Webb, Zapata, and Starr counties, and parts of northeastern Mexico. The species occurs within an estimated 2,031 square mile range in Texas. It grows in a clumped, patchy fashion in very salty soils. Johnston's frankenia is found primarily on privately-owned land, making it difficult to complete thorough surveys across the range of the species. As a result of this, many areas within the species' range in Texas and Mexico were not surveyed prior to the listing of the plant.

In order to collect the necessary data to re-evaluate the status of Johnston's frankenia, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department botanist Gena Janssen undertook an effort to engage private landowners. Janssen attended county and community events and organized landowner meetings in Webb, Zapata, and Starr counties to present information and discuss this endangered species. This grassroots outreach effort was a huge success and brought the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and NRCS on board to help.

Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, Vice Chairman and Zapata County Soil and Water Conservation District member, Jose Dodier, Jr., played a vital role involving landowners and beginning the discussions on Johnston's frankenia. Landowner involvement was necessary for TPWD to complete surveys to determine the abundance and distribution of the Johnston's frankenia. These surveys revealed extensive populations and numbers of individual plants that were undiscovered in the original study.

Landowner cooperation was also essential for Janssen and Dr. Paula Williamson, Texas State University, to carry out biological and ecological studies that showed Johnston's frankenia's capacity to survive and increase in plant numbers. Johnston's frankenia coexists with other native plant species in extreme saline soils, giving it somewhat of a competitive advantage, and Janssen's study also revealed frankenia's ability to regrow after some forms of soil disturbance. Additionally, a number of landowners signed voluntary conservation agreements with TPWD to offer some additional protection to the previously endangered species. "Landowners understand the value of Johnston's frankenia. It has wildlife sustainability and erosion prevention value for fragile soils. Landowners are working to conserve the plant in natural settings. Cooperation from landowners, USFWS, and TPWD were instrumental in removing Johnston's frankenia from the Endangered Species List," Jose Dodier stated.

By working together, local landowners, the community, TPWD, and the Service were able to complete extensive surveys and biological/ecological research to fully understand the distribution and abundance of the species as well as its natural resilience. As a result of these valiant efforts, over the past 30 years there have been 64 Johnston's frankenia populations verified in South Texas. Voluntary efforts and cooperation from landowners helped State and Federal agencies truly understand the status of the species such that it merited removal from Endangered Species Act protections.

This endeavor demonstrates the great benefits that can come from landowner conservation efforts and collaborative work with State and Federal agencies. This cooperative effort resulted in Johnston's frankenia being removed from the Endangered Species List. Anna Strong of TPWD continues conservation efforts through monitoring Johnston's frankenia.