**Habitat Happenings**

**Nebraska Buffer Strip Program**

The Nebraska Buffer Strip Program pays landowners to establish buffer strips on cropland adjacent to perennial and seasonal streams, ponds and wetlands or existing buffer strips with expiring contracts that were established after January 1, 1996. Buffer strips are designed to filter agrichemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides and prevent them from entering the water body. Two kinds of buffer strips are eligible – filter strips, which are narrow strips of grass and riparian forest buffer strips containing trees and grass. The minimum widths are 20 and 55 feet respectively. The maximum widths are 120 and 180 feet respectively. This program is administered by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) from fees assessed on registered pesticides and the Natural Resource Districts (NRD).

The program is designed to be used in conjunction with the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), or other programs. The Buffer Strip Program can also be used by itself as a standalone program. In addition to offering rental rates for both irrigated and non-irrigated cropland along with incentives for partnering with other government programs, there are incidental haying and grazing allowances in the program.

Rental rates are calculated as follows:

* For irrigated cropland where CRP, CREP, or other government-funded programs are also used, rental rates are $250 per acre minus payments from the other programs.
* For irrigated cropland where CRP, CREP, or other government-funded programs are not used, the rental rate is $225 per acre minus any other program payments.
* For non-irrigated cropland enrolled in CRP, CREP or other government-funded programs, the rental rate is equal to 20% of the average CRP soil rental rate.
* For non-irrigated cropland without CRP, CREP, or other government-funded programs, the rental rate per acre is equal to 120% of the average CRP soil rental rate plus $5 per acre, minus the payment rate from any other programs.
* In no case may payments from all programs exceed $250 per acre.

The process to enroll in the Nebraska Buffer Strip Program begins by working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to tentatively identify buffer strip locations and to complete the application. The completed application is submitted electronically to the NRD the land is located in. Together with the NDA, the application is reviewed. If approved, the landowner enters into a formal agreement with the NRD. The landowner establishes and maintains the buffer strip according to NRCS Field Office Technical Guide practice requirements.

Interested landowners should contact their local NRD office or USDA NRCS office to begin the application process. More information can be found at bit.ly/NDAbuffer or by calling the NDA at (402) 471-2351.

*The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture is a public/private partnership that works with federal and state agencies, local Natural Resources Districts, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners to develop “win-win” opportunities to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands in the Rainwater Basin. For more information, visit www.rwbjv.org and follow us on Facebook and Instagram.*