

Drought can create conservation plan compliance issues

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As one of the worst droughts in over 30 years continues to grip Nebraska, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) reminds producers to work with the local NRCS office to remain in compliance with their current conservation plan on highly erodible land.

Drought conditions affect yield, which can in turn, affect the amount of cover left on a field following harvest. Producers who have a conservation plan on their highly erodible cropland need to maintain a certain level of crop residue to remain in compliance with their conservation plan. The drought could make meeting that requirement difficult for some producers.

According to State Conservationist Craig Derickson, NRCS is providing some flexibility in its program requirements to assist producers affected by drought. Producers unable to meet residue requirements due to drought conditions may be eligible for what NRCS calls a “conservation compliance variance.”

“NRCS understands that yields are down all across the state. For this reason, no-till producers who continue to do no tillage prior to planting a row crop next spring on highly erodible fields will not be found out of compliance due to a lack of crop residue. Producers who use conventional tillage operations will also be eligible for this variance if they agree to plant a cover crop following the fall or spring tillage operation,” Derickson said.

According to Derickson, highly erodible fields that have been grazed or baled in 2012 would also be eligible for this variance, however the variance would not apply to irrigated fields that had sufficient water available to produce near normal yields.

Producers who have conservation contracts may not be able to implement contracted practices or conservation enhancements in accordance with their current conservation contract schedule. Producers are urged to visit with their local NRCS staff as soon as possible if they find themselves in this situation.

Also as a result of the drought, landowners, tenants, and contractors should check with NRCS prior to constructing any soil conservation practices such as terraces or dams. Extremely dry soil conditions are making it nearly impossible to properly compact the soil using conventional

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methods of construction. NRCS will need to make a site-specific evaluation of these projects to see if construction should continue or be postponed until conditions are more favorable.

Additionally, the drought has provided an opportunity for producers to access land that has historically been too saturated with water to reach with a truck, tractor, four wheeler, etc. Producers should check with their local NRCS office before starting any drainage activities in historically wet areas to avoid wetland compliance issues.

Derickson said, "Producers should visit with their local NRCS office before deviating from their current conservation plan or proceeding with any drainage or construction of conservation practices. The drought has created a lot of unique situations that NRCS can help producers navigate through to stay in compliance with their current conservation plan."

For more information about drought resources, as well as other NRCS programs and services, visit www.ne.nrcs.usda.gov or your local USDA Service Center.