



Equipped with EQIP

By Joe Snyder

Curt Rincker is a true conservationist at heart and doesn't mind putting forth the time and effort to improve his cattle operation. At his purebred Simmental-Angus farm near the east-central Illinois town of Shelbyville, he has found a way to pursue both passions through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Cattlemen like to think of themselves as good stewards of the land, Curt says, and EQIP funds better enable them to do that. "You have to think beyond your own lifetime and make sure the land you depend on today will be in as good a shape or better later on," he says.

Rincker Simmentals has been involved with ongoing EQIP projects since 2004.

Water

"We first fenced away the creek areas to keep livestock out of running water," says Curt. "At same time, we have to provide the water for them, so we followed up with three different types of watering systems."

A permanent energy-free waterer uses a ball-float system to keep out contaminants and winter temperatures. It waters cattle grazing on corn stover or soybean stubble fields during fall, winter and early spring. Curt's EQIP specifications require that cattle do not travel more than 800 feet from any point in the paddock to reach the watering point. Any further travel may decrease the cows' efficiency and require increased energy for the water uptake. Curt says the system works well but producers must have a minimum of 30 mature cows drinking the water to keep the system from freezing if the temperature is below zero.

A spring-fed water system runs

year-round, continually capturing artesian spring water and moving it downhill in a PVC pipeline that feeds two 500-gallon tanks. The water ends up in two paddocks for watering, with the overflow going into a creek. Water in the tanks has avoided freezing during the past three Illinois winters due to the continual replacement of the ground temperature spring water.

Growing season watering tanks use 6,000 feet of water lines to carry water pumped from a farm well to 100-gallon tanks used in most of the remaining paddocks. A quick coupler disconnect used for the on-off prevents cattle from damaging standing hydrants.

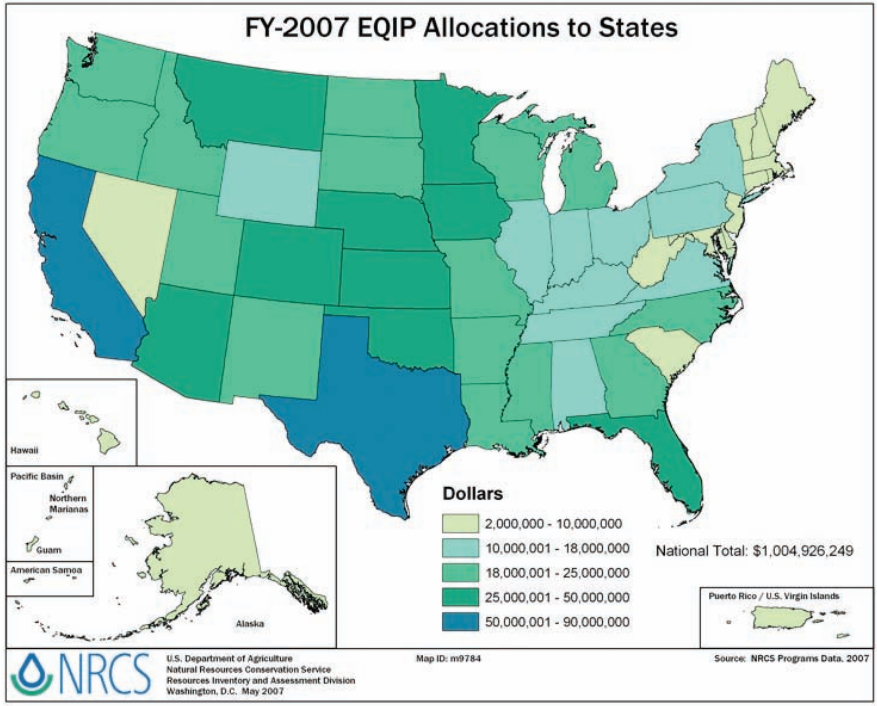


perimeter fencing and, importantly, interior fencing that has changed Curt's operation from one that used two grazing pastures to 12 unique grazing locations. This has given him the benefits of rotational grazing and extended his grazing season a full two months. The only time now that his cattle aren't grazing is from January through mid-March when they are fed hay harvested during the summer.

"The grass is in its vegetative stage
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Fencing and Paddocks

The EQIP project includes





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right now, so every day I'm moving the cows to a different paddock, 12 paddocks in 12 days," he says. "When it starts to slow down with more growth, cattle will spend two days in each paddock, so we will move through all the paddocks every 24 days.

"This allows us to maximize the efficiency of the soil and our forage selections. I'm using some residue grazing on cornstalks and soybean stubble in the fall and spring where I have interseeded annual rye grasses. Cattle feed in those fields first, then move into the permanent pastures. The intent is to come as close as you can to year-round grazing."

Use Areas

Some locations of the Rincker operation were classified as Heavy Use Areas and some became Use Exclusion Areas. Both were treated with an initial layer of Geotextile fabric, followed by a kind of rock used for road pack, topped with a layer of limestone.

"Stream crossings were a challenge because we have to keep cattle out of the stream but they have to cross at logical points," says Curt. The problem was solved using the same materials described above plus sand and rock from the stream bed to create a natural base for livestock and equipment to cross.

Cattle currently do not drink from the creek. They pass over the stream at one location, the crossing, to get to the next paddock, allowing stream banks to heal.

"We could go into the creek and do some flash grazing (for one day at a time)," Curt says, "but I've chosen not to because we want to allow the stream banks to mend and revegetate as much as possible."

Curt says directives from NRCS

during these projects were not burdensome but coincided with goals of the farm. The Rinckers are considering other EQIP projects to improve their operation, which supplies black and polled genetics for purebred and commercial cattlemen, among other things, and holds a major farm sale each September. Curt also chairs the Agriculture Department at Lake Land College in Mattoon.

But these potential EQIP projects have another purpose as well. "We want the land to be healthy when it's turned over to our children and the generations to come," he says.

What is EQIP?

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is a federal program managed at the state and local level. It shares the cost with farmers and ranchers for installing conservation practices that improve animal waste management, irrigation water management, grazing land, soil erosion and sediment control, reduced emissions, at-risk species habitat and other resource concerns. The voluntary program helps producers meet federal, state, tribal and local environmental requirements.

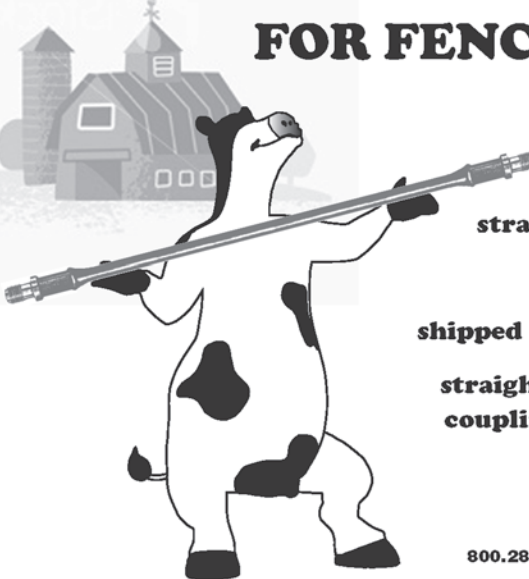
EQIP may pay up to 75% of the costs of certain conservation practices, and cost-share rates for those who qualify as "limited resource producers" or beginning farmers and ranchers may be as high as 90%.

EQIP applications are scored and ranked according to standards that vary from state to state; your local NRCS office will clarify the conservation priorities in your area.

About one out of every six applications is accepted. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service works with you to develop the EQIP plan and follows up to ensure you've adhered to it before they pay you.

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