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Water Conservation is the Responsibility of all Oklahomans

The value of water as a limited but renewable resource has urban and rural Oklahomans concerned about their future. Opportunities exist for various conservation measures, however I believe the use and management of watersheds is the most logical and economical option. Currently, state and federal agencies provide cost-share for conservation practices to agriculture producers. These programs have provided financial incentives for land managers to implement these conservation practices. In addition, several states have looked at another alternative for encouraging water conservation.

Oklahoma is a good candidate for implementing a system for rewarding land managers through "Water Credits" for their better management of all resources impacting Oklahoma's water. The primary water managers of Oklahoma are rural people – the farmers, ranchers, foresters and horticulturalists. However, their impact on the return of water into the cycle has been secondary to their daily routines of land management and conservation that often goes unnoticed. The water credit system is designed to target rural land users with incentives for their water management activities. Depending on the management of the land, positive results such as the amount of water that returns to the soil may be increased two or three times through increased groundwater recharging and stream base flows, especially during dry seasons. There is also an equal decrease in the effects of erosion, drought, and flooding.

Water credits are incentives that could transfer cash rewards through direct payments. These incentives would encourage better land management practices within the watershed. Better management means less runoff, reduced flooding and silting of ponds and reservoirs. These conservation practices have traditionally gone unrecognized and unrewarded. Water credits support watershed stewardship through payments from downstream users to upstream land managers for the water conservation services they could provide. The payments provide financial incentives for the upstream land managers or now valued water producers.

Historically, where there has not been an incentive for sustainable management at the watershed level, with water credits there could be support of water resource management and added financial incentives. In order for the water credit program to encourage sustainability, all Oklahoman's must focus on three categories of common goals. 1. Asset-building: restoring natural habitats, ex. funds from municipal water revenues could be used to assist farmers to re-establish native plant communities or plant riparian areas. 2. Land use planning: maintaining existing natural habitats and protecting critical watersheds from conversion to non-agricultural lands, ex. managers could be paid to install conservation cropping systems and restore/conservate sustainable plant communities. 3. Improving existing land uses: ex. by reducing pesticide use, adjusting production & harvest rates to sustainable levels and implementing conservation practices.

While enhancing water resources, water credits will diversify rural incomes and help communities to adapt to economic and related environmental changes. The long-term goals of the water credit's will also encourage rural Oklahoman's to better manage their natural resources to improve the overall security of food, water and public health. Water Conservation, it's the responsibility of all Oklahomans.