

## Mellette County Conservation District (No. 64)

Mellette County is located in the vast ranching section of the south central part of the state. The county was created in 1909 and organized in 1911. It was named in honor of the first governor of South Dakota, Arthur C. Mellette. The northern boundary is formed by the White River, separating it from Jackson, Jones and Lyman Counties. Tripp County is on the east and (former Washabaugh County) Jackson on the west

The dry year in 1911 and several following, scared out most of the homesteaders and left the area to those who were primarily interested in cattle ranching. Some large cattle ranches are in the county, at the present time this county produces a lot of wheat, mostly winter wheat.

The topography of the county is mostly rolling to undulating, but there is considerable steep sloping land along the major streams and badlands.

The county is drained along the northern boundary by the White River. Flowing into this river from the south to the north are many smaller tributaries, chief of which is the Little White River which bisects the county from South to North. The waters from the Little White River make up the most desirable source for irrigation water. The White Thunder Creek and Oak Creek are the two main drainage-ways in the eastern part. Black Pipe Creek, Cottonwood Creek, and Pine Creek are the main drainage-ways in the western part.

The soils in the eastern part of the county are predominately a mixture of heavy soils developed from the Pierre shale formation, and medium to somewhat sandy textured soils derived from the Ogallala Formation. Also included here are a few small acreages of soils which have been reworked and transported by wind. The northwest and central parts of the county have predominantly clayey soils developed from the Pierre formation. Along the western edge there is some badlands soil. In the southwestern part of the county there are heavy to medium textured soils derived from the Chadron-Brule formations.

The County lies in an area of climatic extremes subject to high winds, heavy dashing rains, and long dry spells. During drought periods, wind erosion is a serious problem on overgrazed pastures, bare fallow or cropland without sufficient stubble mulch cover. Hard rains may come during either wet or dry seasons, resulting in sheet erosion and gullying. Heavy rains are especially destructive in fields where up and down hill cultivation is practiced.

Wind erosion has taken place in all areas of the county but is least destructive to grass and pasture land. Water erosion appears in the more rolling areas and is a serious problem in overgrazed pastures along the steep slopes adjacent to the creeks and rivers.

Cattle numbers have increased beyond carrying capacity in some areas in the county. To maintain herd numbers requires range improvement; seeding of heavier yielding grass varieties, growing more legumes for protein feed and soil fertility and raising forage crops to provide fodder, supplemental pasture and silage for winter feed. Considerable opportunities exist for water spreading on lower lying lands to increase feed. Stock water dams of sufficient capacity to bridge long dry spells are needed. Shelterbelts for livestock and farmstead protection are desirable. Due to the heavy texture and dense structure of some of the soils, careful selection of species and tillage methods will be needed to prolong the life of the trees.

After studying their problems, some of the ranchers and farmers decided that a soil conservation district could help to overcome their difficulties. Some of the ranchers and farmers

had seen the work being done in the surrounding areas through conservation districts and became interested in the matter.

In 1953, they petitioned for a hearing. The first hearing held was held April 22, 1953, to organize a Soil Conservation District in Mellette County. As a result of this hearing, the State Soil Conservation Committee decided that there was sufficient interest and a need for creating a SCD in the county. The State Soil Conservation Committee appointed a sponsoring committee composed of Keith L. Harner, White River; Everett Green, White River; Rueben Buxell, Stamford and D.C. Vollmer, Stamford. This committee conducted a mail ballot in May 1953. The proposition was rejected. More informational work was done during the winter of 1954.

The results of the referendum held on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1954, on the proposition of the creation of the Mellette Soil Conservation District showed 273 of a possible 450 ballots marked and 221 for (80.98%). A majority of at least 66% was needed to organize. Only land owners were eligible to vote.

On July 17, 1954, the official charter was issued organizing the Mellette County Soil Conservation District. The State Soil Conservation Committee appointed John Dolezal and Eugene Strain as members of the Board of Supervisors – Dolezal for a two year term and Strain for a 1 year term. An election was held on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October for the remaining three members of the board. The candidates and the number of years are as follows: Stanton Galbraith, Wood, (3 years), Orlo L. Schaeffer, Wood, (2 years), and Erwin Ring, Norris, (1 year).

During the fall of 1954, the newly elected board entered into a Supplemental Memorandum of Understanding with USDA. The Board signed the document on January 12, 1955. The first Program of Work was developed in 1954 when the Conservation District came into being and was up-dated in 1963.

From this beginning the Soil Conservation District had its start. In February 1955, Jens P. Jensen was detailed to White River as Action Work Unit Conservationist to assist the Mellette County Soil Conservation District. Alvin Tucker stopped at the office to see Mr. Jensen and he offered Alvin a part-time job. With the many conservation practices being implemented Mr. Tucker immediately became a full-time technician. Alvin Tucker worked with SCS for 33 years as the technician. Alvin also served as the acting secretary for the Conservation District in the early years and when they did not have a clerk. Much of his work included staking dams and designing pipelines. Alvin also promoted planting trees. In the first 18-20 years of his career the main source of water for livestock in the area was dams. Alvin staked and designed 80 dams per year. Then a number of dry years went by and many of the dams went dry. Many of the producers went to deep wells (artesian) or shallow if water source was adequate for their water needs. Pipelines would be designed and staked from the wells to supply water to pastures for livestock.

The following are some of the practices that would help toward meeting the existing problems: grassed waterways in cropland and some in pastures; water spreading on pasture and grassland; water diversion in some gullies; terracing and contouring where conditions warrant these practices; stubble mulch and return of all crop residues to prevent loss of organic matter and improve soil structure; use of crop rotations including grass and legumes; and improvement of range and pasture by: proper stocking (based on range condition and amount of forage produced), proper season of use (including deferred grazing or resting), uniform distribution of grazing by careful distribution of watering facilities, skillful use of salt, and location of fencing; seeding of tame grass pastures to provide early spring grazing; reseed marginal cropland to native grasses to stop erosion and for greater returns; reseeding run-down native pastures to

the better native grasses where the pastures are in such low condition that natural resources would be slow; mechanical treatment- furrowing, pitting of certain range sites (soil) of pasture in need of such measures; farmstead and feedlot tree plantings and field shelterbelts.

This table shows the kind and amount of work done by the close of 1968:

Cooperators (district)	195	Irrigation Systems	15
Basic farm/ranch plans	81	Pasture/Hayland Plting.	20,545 acres
Cons. Cropping Sys.	115,000 acres	Range Proper use	500,000 acres
Contour Farming	6,925 acres	Range seeding	5,613 acres
Farm Ponds	1,113	Springs	78
Farmstead Windbreaks	926 acres	Terraces	156 mile
Field Windbreaks	151,820 lf	Wells	1,465
Grassed Waterways	276 acres		

The tree planting program in the Conservation District continued to grow into the 1970's. The Conservation District planted nearly a thousand acres of trees in this decade. They continued to provide a grass drill for producers. Great Plains contracts were reviewed by the Conservation District. The Mellette County Conservation District celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary November 15, 1979. Conservation District activities for the year included: distributing Mellette County Soil surveys, adopting Sediment Control Standards, sponsoring a soil & moisture contest, energy conservation demonstration was hosted by the Conservation District. The Conservation District also sponsored Poster Contests.

The Rancher's Workshop began with a select group of ranchers being invited to listen to Tex Lewis, who was a Range Specialist at South Dakota State University, present information on the importance of improving range conditions and developing plans to do this. Word spread about this meeting and soon other rancher's inquired about having another such workshop. The Rancher's workshop is held annually alternating between Todd and Mellette County. Both Conservation Districts continue to support the workshop. SDSU, NRCS, FSA, and RC&D have all been involved in making the workshop successful.

The 1980's Annual Plans of Work included promoting conservation tillage such as strip cropping and minimum till farming to reduce wind and water erosion. A large part of the Conservation District consists of rangeland. The Mellette County Conservation District set goals to promote native seedings on non-arable lands, promote methods of improving production while protecting natural resources and promote the use of planned grazing systems in the ranch operations.

With the decline of commodity and land prices and record high interest rates in the 80's many operations struggled financially. With these difficult financial times and many people struggling to make ends meet, the Conservation District tree planting program declined.

The Bootstraps Program "Ranching for the 90's" was developed during 1989-90 in response to requests for assistance in dealing with farm crisis related issues. Ranchers in Todd and Mellette Counties were concerned about the future of their operations and community. To address the concerns, local conservation and extension staff developed the series of programs that became known as Bootstraps. The program was built around the premise that a sustainable operation results when good resource conservation practices are followed. Families who participate in the program make a two-year commitment. The first year they learn about farm/ranch management from four prospectives – family, livestock and crop production, finances and natural resources.

During the second, they use the knowledge gained to develop a holistic, sustainable management plan for their operation.

The Bootstraps pilot group, Group I, consisting of Todd/Mellette County farm/ranch families was formed during 1990. Based on the experiences of the group the program was refined and conducted for a second group of 18 Todd/Mellette County families before taking in a wider audience. Since its inception, approximately 350 farm/ranch families who manage over 1.5 million acres have participated in the program. Initial funding for the Bootstraps program came from the SD Conservation Commission's Conservation Grants Fund. Several other agencies signed on to help, including: South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service, Todd & Mellette County Conservation Districts, SD Department of Agriculture, and the USDA NRCS (then the SCS). Some of the people instrumental in the development and implementation of the Bootstraps program include: Dave Steffen, Jeff Adrian, Dale Mallory, Milton Klein, Barry Dunn, Delvin Meyer, Clifford Klein, Harlan Schemm, Bill Cumbow, Bonnie Metcalf, Sena Lauritson, Mike Carson, Darrell Glenn, Maurice Hiatt, Andy Harris, Lawrence Peacock, Robert Fronck, and Ski Rasmussen.

The turn on the century motivated people to plant more trees. The new fabric mulch would minimize maintenance on newly planted trees. The fabric mulch would hold moisture and minimize competition from weeds and grasses. 2001 and 2002 reached near record numbers with nearly 300 acres of trees being planted in these two years. The following years brought extremely dry conditions and decline in numbers for the tree planting program. The Conservation District purchased a lot, and built a new storage shed with a tree cooler. There was a great need as the old cooler would not keep trees cool enough on warm days and it needed repaired weekly. The Community pulled together for this project, it was built almost entirely with volunteer labor.

In 2005 the Conservation District celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Mellette, Todd, Shannon, and Bennett Counties have a joint grant with the Conservation Commission, Ducks Unlimited, SD GF&P and US Fish and Wildlife to build dams within the counties. This is the second phase of this project. We have been working with Joe Nichols, currently there are 6 completed projects for phase one.

Over the years the Conservation District has provided many things to cooperators such as, culverts, grass seed, chemical, fabric, and fertilizer for trees. Seeding of both tame and native grasses have been encouraged by having the appropriate planting equipment available. The tree planting program has progressed from 'heeling in' trees, to a mobile cooling unit to the present storage facility. A tree planter and crew are available to plant shelterbelts, windbreaks, and wildlife habitats.

Farming practices changed in the Conservation District, the amount of land under plow continually decreases. Minimum and no till farming preserve the soil by reduced erosion. Cover crops such as radishes and turnips help reduce compaction and increase water infiltration. Range condition improvement will continue to be a priority for the Conservation District.

Todd, Mellette, Bennett and Jones Counties worked together to submit a grant to the State Conservation Commission to fund the Prairie Area Technician. Tyrell Tucker filled this position for the duration of the grant and is currently working as the Mellette and Todd County technician. This allows the Conservation District the ability to be involved in many conservation practices. The Conservation District technician helps plan pipelines and other conservation practices in the counties. These practices are fostered through Conservation Commission

Grants administered through the Conservation District to assist in Water Quality issues - Renewable Resources such as solar wells, Ponds for Waterfowl Habitat, pipelines for livestock water to enhance grazing distribution and protect riparian areas. The Conservation District also administers a pre-approved practice grant which can provide cost share for producers wanting to install conservation practices. Conservation education is being fostered through range camp, Rangeland Days, Ranchers' workshops, Environmental Fairs, speech and poster contests.

Over the years many producers in the Conservation District have set an example for others, some of their hard work has been recognized. Izaak Walton League of America Habitat Award Winners include: Lawrence and Betty Jo Peacock, 1994; Milo, Rob, and John Koskan, 1995; Harold and Ben Krogman, 1996; Robert and Mary Fronek, 1998; Melvin (Jr) and Karen Schmidt, 1999; and Kenny and Bonnie Krogman, 2000.

Producers nominated by the Conservation District as Goodyear Cooperator of the Year for Mellette County include:

Roger Glynn	1989	Richard Jans	1996
Barry Jensen	1991	William Huber	1997
Rod Lookabill	1993	Levi Newbold	1998
Wayne Shouldis	1994	George England	1999
Richard Kingsbury	1995		

"Excellence in Range Management" award winners include: Robert T. England, 1984; Kenny Kingsbury, 1987; Darrell, Rosie, Roger & Joyce Glynn, 1995; Dennis and Sena Lauritsen, 1997; Dominic and Trista Harmon, 2007.

District Conservationists and NRCS Staff that have served the Conservation District have been: Keith Harner, Wayne Noble-DC, George Leibel-DC, Dave Steffen-DC, Dave George-DC, Alvin Tucker-Technician, Melvin (Jr) Schmidt -Technician, Derek Oliver, and Seanna Rugenstein-Tribal Liaison. 2011 NRCS staff includes: Lealand Schoon-DC, Mary Scott- Tribal Liaison, and Nell Heying- Technician

Those who have served as supervisors have been:

John Dolezal	1954-1964	Robert Fronek	1968-2000
Eugene Strain	1954-1963	Maurice Hiatt	1972-1992
Orlo Schaeffer	1954-1959	Lawrence Peacock	1969-1998
Stanton Galbraith	1954-1964	Fred Egleston	1972-1985
Ervin Ring	1954-1958	Ted England	1992-2004
Jake Ring	1957-1964	Dennis Lauritsen	1992-1996
Dwight L. Schaeffer	1958-1966	Sena Lauritsen	1997-1998
Larry Hutchinson	1962-1965	Charles Chamberlain	1971-1998
John Carr Jr. (Jack)	1964-1970	Al Korb	2000-2010
Andy Harris	1963-1978	Ronald Bouman	2004-2008
Lawrence Kingsbury	1964-1969	Robert Koskan	1999-Present
Wesley Egleston	1964-1965	Bret Strain	1999-Present
Derrill Glynn	1965-1998	Dan Rasmussen	1999-Present
Harold Diess	1965	Jerry Krogman	2008-Present
Bert Ryno	1965-1970	Levi Newbold	2010-Present