



# THE SPIGOT

from the NORTH DAKOTA RURAL WATER SYSTEMS ASSOCIATION



## The National Conservation Buffer Initiative:

## Can it work for you?

A conservation buffer protects a small stream.

Anyone responsible for delivering clean, healthy water to consumers in rural areas can now add the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the list of agencies providing assistance for watershed and wellhead protection.

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative is designed to protect and enhance ground and surface water quality and other environmental resources by encouraging landowners across the country to install two

million miles of conservation buffers by the year 2002. These filter strips, wellhead protection areas, riparian forest buffers, grassed waterways, and other small parcels of land are planted to permanent vegetation that will reduce the flow of water and sediment—and any pollutants they may carry—to surface and ground water.

The initiative complements EPA's programs authorized under the 1986 Safe Drinking Water Act amend-

ments to help municipalities and rural communities protect their drinking water sources.

### Why conservation buffers?

Vegetative buffers—strips planted to grasses, shrubs, and trees—have tremendous filtering capability; in some cases, taking up as much as three-fourths or more of the nutrients washing off a farm field. This is

especially true when they are installed in conjunction with other proven conservation practices, such as CRP land. They are a highly effective, inexpensive way to protect source water supplies. Buffers are common sense conservation for the land and cost-effective pollution prevention for water managers.

USDA has noted a significant improvement in national agricultural water quality after 10 years of focus on crop residue management, other conservation programs, and land retirement programs like CRP. The 1996 Farm Bill builds on these programs with an emphasis to inform, encourage, and assist farmers to install conservation buffer practices as an important component of their overall farm conservation plan.

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative also focuses on promotional efforts from both the public and private sectors to help farmers learn about conservation buffers and the technical and financial assistance available to them to install conservation buffer practices on their property.

### Why should an ag program interest water utilities?

Although the percentage of Americans directly involved in agriculture has dropped from 20 percent to 2 percent over the last 70 years, farmers and ranchers still own and manage half of the private land in this country. Agriculture is a dominant land use in most watersheds that provide drinking water supplies for the American public. Major improvements in water quality from agricultural sources are economical pollution prevention investments that reduce the task and cost of treating drinking water.

For water utilities that use reservoirs, the demand for water volume increases over time, while reservoir capacity decreases through sedimentation

## How can you get involved?

■ *Join a local partnership to provide additional support to local efforts promoting opportunities for farmers who want to install conservation buffers to participate in USDA conservation programs.*

■ *If a campaign does not already exist, take leadership and create one. Contact the USDA-NRCS state office and ask for contacts at the USDA Service Centers in your watershed. Local conservation districts, agricultural supplies and dealers, Farm Bureau, commodity groups such as the Corn Growers or Wheat Growers, and wildlife and environmental groups are potential partners.*

■ *To stay involved in this and other critical environmental issues, request membership on the State Technical Committee.*

■ *Consider providing financial incentives within your source watershed to increase the amount of financial assistance available to farmers for buffers. This is a golden opportunity to benefit from a significant improvement in the quality of the water flowing to your treatment facility at a fraction of the total cost.*

### Want to know more about the National Conservation Buffer Initiative?

Contact NRCS' website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>

### USDA-NRCS State Conservationist:

Contact the North Dakota state conservationist for membership on the State Technical Committee - Scott Hoag, Jr. - 701-250-4421.

tion except when sediment levels are reduced through good on-farm and development practices. Sediment from agricultural sources may also carry nutrients and chemicals which,

if allowed to enter reservoirs, further reduce water quality. A successful agricultural program is also a success for drinking water suppliers.

There are some good examples of working partnerships between the source water and agricultural communities:

The city of Rochester, Minnesota, home of the renowned Mayo Clinic and a large IBM facility, plans to carry out an innovative plan to take advantage of the national focus on conservation buffers. In the Land of 10,000 Lakes, Rochester is located in Olmsted County and does not have a single large lake. That will be rectified soon due to a plan approved by the city and a large mining company which is reclaiming the mined area into a large recreational lake and surrounding park area for the benefit of Rochester's citizens.

City leaders are working with the agricultural landowners through the Olmsted Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to provide approximately \$50 per acre in addition to the annual federal payments farmers would receive for 10 years through CRP to encourage them to install riparian buffers along the tributaries to the lake. "The city has a lot to gain by a small contribution," says Steve Connelly, District Manager for the Olmsted SWCD.

The National Conservation Buffer Initiative is led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service in cooperation with other USDA agencies, other federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, state conservation agencies, conservation districts, agri-businesses, and agricultural and environmental organizations—at last count, nearly 100 organizations. It includes members of the source water protection community such as the National Rural Water Association, American Water Works Association and the National Water Resources Association. ■