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An aide from Rep. Tim Huelskamp's Dodge City office, left, learns about the difference in soil types in a no-till environment. L&T photo/Chris Linenbroker

By CHRIS LINENBROKER • Leader & Times The Natural Resources Conservation Service, a part of the United States Department Agriculture, conducted a tour Saturday informing participants about some of the programs it is utilizing to help conserve water and other resources. The tour went to different parts of Seward County for a demonstration of just some of the programs the NRCS has to offer. NRCS is a voluntary program established to help farmers and ranchers with understanding programs which can aid in everything from water conservation to wildlife habitat incentives programs. The tour showed how NCRS was helping one farmer to properly rework his old and failing wind break tree rows through some of the programs currently offered.

The next stop showed how some farmers are changing to green houses and raising specialty crops, like tomatoes and other produce. Following the tour, the next farmer, Travis Fieser, has been using help, from the NRCS using resources like the Conservation Stewardship Program and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Fieser has been using these programs to help map soil types, topography and soil moisture.

During the tour, Fieser explained how his irrigation system has been programmed to adjust its speed to water more effectively, thus getting higher yields with less water. These pivot type sprinklers are now equipped with cellular communication and GPS.

Fieser said it's odd when the sprinkler calls you to say it's stuck, but it only seems to happen between midnight and 6 in the morning.

He is also trying a new type of cover crop on a separate field to help with wind erosion. This crop is planted to hold the field and then is replanted with a cash crop.

The tour continued on to show how ranchers and owners of range lands can benefit from services. The biggest issue that faces the ranchers is with over grazing, especially considering the last few years of drought conditions. Over grazing can happen rather quickly.

At this location, they showed what a well cared for pasture should look like, explaining that some of the grasses seen in a pasture are the first to be over grazed by cattle.

With some of the programs, they can help with planning and show how installing cross fences, livestock pipelines, wells and watering facilities help.

The tour ended at the farm of Theron Walker. He has been working his farm land with a method called no-till for the last 11 years. He explained how not working the soil has improved his profit in farming from not only better yields, but now with not working the fields he has more time off and his production bills have also been lowered.

No-till farming has been around for years, it is described as "less is more" farming. The no-till method of farming based on the method used back before machinery, when farming by hand, farmers could not turn large area of soil by hand.

This type of farming uses more of a planning method of rotating crops and keeping the good bugs and bacteria in soils in check. Some farmers try this and revert back to conventional farming before the process is in full effect.

Becoming a no-till farmer is no easy way out. It is a change in all sorts of practices and, depending on the soil type on the farm, it could take anywhere from two to five years for the soil to be a fully active no-till state.

District conservationist for NRCS Leslie Spikes said the lack of water and the abundance of wind are the two largest problems that Seward County and Southwest Kansas faces. Her office has been helping farmers and ranchers on voluntary basis. They are there for help in planning, and there are programs out there to help farmers in the county.

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