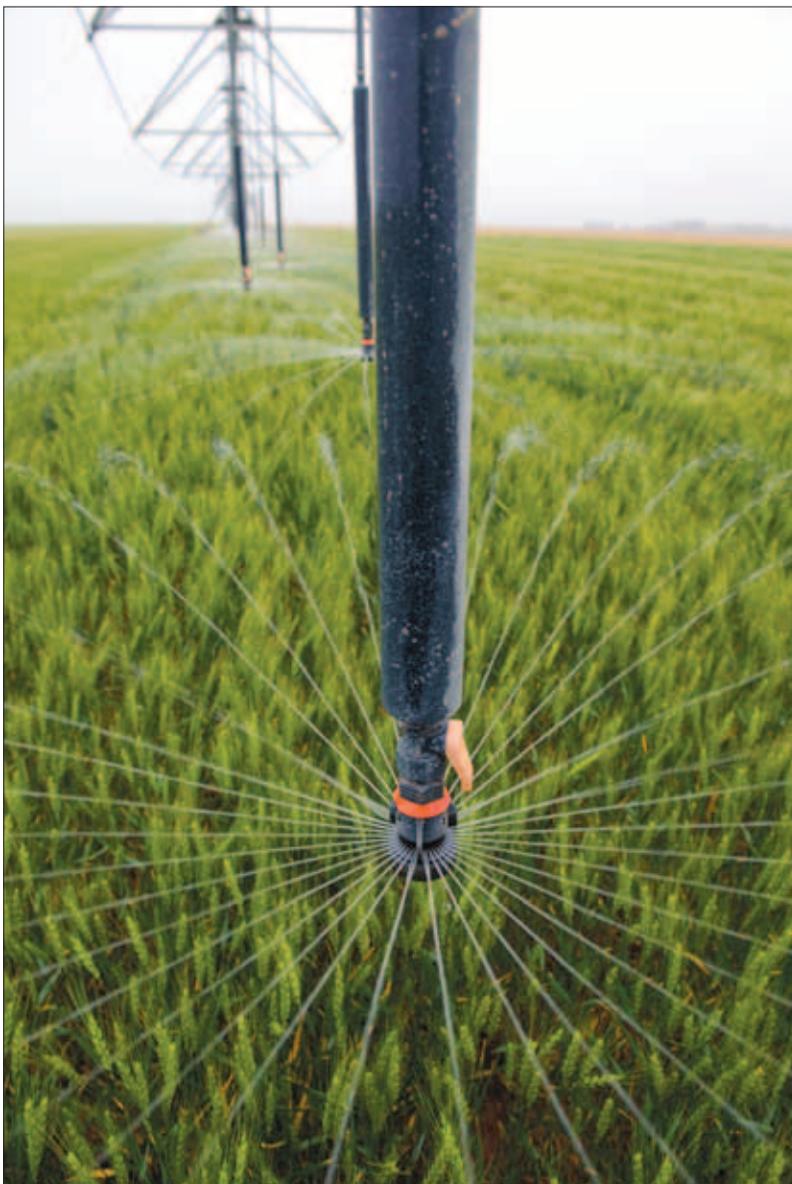


Don't Lose Your Land

Waterways outside of Ballinger, Texas, provide a filtration system that amplifies conservation-minded producer's means of producing cleaner water for surrounding residents.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF USDA-NRCS



Irrigation system updates allow for an effective and efficient means of water delivery to this Texas wheat crop.

by **Katrina Huffstutler**, The Cattleman

Erosion isn't just a rainy season problem. It can strike amidst the most exceptional drought and become a major problem once the rains return. That's why we went to Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Phillip Wright, Edwards Region Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative coordinator for the lower Edwards Plateau/Hill Country area.

Wright, who covers a 15-county area in Texas, works with private landowners to provide technical assistance on grazing management issues.

He says over the last two years, much of his time has been spent helping landowners figure out how to best cope with the drought without sacrificing their rangeland resources, whether that means continuing to hold livestock but feeding or decreasing their herd numbers and trying to maintain their rotational grazing system as is.

He says producers will likely see an increase in erosion problems during a drought, due to both plant loss and overgrazing. And if those areas aren't addressed in a timely manner, they could get much worse when a more normal weather pattern returns and rain is present to further wash those areas away. So

what can you do once you notice the early signs of erosion on your place? Here are the basic steps according to Wright.

Call a pro

"The first thing they should do if they feel they have an erosion problem develop on their property is contact us," Wright says. "The faster they get in touch with one of our local NRCS offices, and begin to work with those people and get them out on the grounds to take a look at it, the better chance they have of taking care of it before it gets worse."

He says a small erosion area can become a critical area, if it is not treated.

Work together to find a solution

Wright says, once the producer gets in touch with NRCS, a conservationist will come out to evaluate the sites with the landowner, determine how severe the problems are and start working to find a solution.

He says the conservationists have several options for treating erosion problems and can customize a plan based on the landowner's particular situation. If it's the beginning of a gully — a landform created by running water and resembling a large ditch or small valley, for example, they will likely look at the possibility of

a grassed waterway, a common type of conservation practice.

“That would mean going in and grading and shaping the land so it would be able to withstand the flow that would come through that area and then trying to get it established as quickly as possible with a good grass cover that would protect that site from future erosion,” Wright says.

Another option Wright uses frequently is called critical area treatment. It’s a process similar to putting in a grassed waterway, but they use their standard specifications for critical area planting, which means increasing the seeding or sprigging rate up to double the usual amount.

No matter what type of solution is chosen, Wright says it is imperative to make sure there is an adequate outlet.

“In other words we don’t want to fix an area and cause it to create erosion further downstream,” he explains.

Sometimes that means using a combination of practices, like a grassed waterway in association with filter strips. In these situations, Wright says, you can mix in native legumes or forbs to provide additional grazing, and diversify for wildlife.

“[With] grassed waterways, we tend to want to use grasses that can be managed so the water will flow across them and then go out the outlet in a manner that does not create erosion in the filter strips. Those grasses [also] create wildlife habitat, as well as potential grazing for the future.

“Native grasses and forbs can be planted in this strip around the waterway to filter the sediment out, but allow the water to run through and then go into the grass waterway flow along the waterway

and out the lower end. And when it comes out the lower end, it moves out, but it’s slowed before it spreads out

over the remainder of the pasture or rangeland,” he says.

Protect the area from further damage

Once a method is chosen and implemented, Wright says it’s important to move quickly and take the necessary steps to make sure the buffer can do its job.

“In an ideal situation,” he says, “once you’ve shaped it, you want to go in and seed it or sprig it as quickly as possible, to get the grass established as soon as possible, and then protect that area during that time.”

He says that could mean applying mulch or putting hay bales around the area to protect it from concentrated flow. Filter fences and other types of runoff diversions will prevent the area from getting washed out before the grass has time to establish.

Wright adds, “And that is probably the hardest thing we deal with when we are looking at either a critical area treatment or grass waterway — just trying to get the grass established before the next large rainfall.”

He says when possible, he advises seeding or sprigging the area and then putting some type of irrigation on it to get it established faster — but he understands many, if not most, landowners don’t have that option.

“Most of us just have to rely on Mother Nature to get things established for us,” he says. During and following a drought, protecting those areas also means being extra diligent when it comes to proper grazing management.

“These critical areas, grassed waterways, filter strips and other recommended practices, are really good methods that

work well. But the key is that we have to protect those areas from additional erosion while the grasses

Still looking for more erosion control solutions?

In addition to the methods suggested by Phillip Wright, wetland construction can also solve certain erosion problems.

Winner of Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) and the Texas Section of the Society for Range Management’s joint Outstanding Rangeland Steward Award, Gary Price has 40 acres of man-made wetlands on his 77 Ranch in Blooming Grove, Texas.

“I never thought I’d say I built a wetland,” he told Ellen Brisendine, TSCRA executive director of communication services, “but it works well.”

Working with Ducks Unlimited, Price turned a highly erodible, farmed-out parcel of cropland into an area that stops erosion, holds floodwaters — allowing sediment to settle before the water enters the larger water system — and creates habitat for ducks.

For more information on wetlands, visit nrcs.usda.gov and select “Water,” then “Wetlands.” **HW**

are getting established,” Wright says. “That means protecting those areas with temporary fences or electric fencing, or something like that, so that they aren’t overgrazed — at least the first growing season and, in most cases, the second growing season.

“We want those grasses to get established. We want those root systems to develop. Not overgrazing — that’s a critical thing.”

He adds that once stands are established, proper grazing techniques still apply. “All of these practices should be protected by using a rotational grazing system after they have been well established. That way you can protect your land.” **HW**

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“... a small erosion area can become a critical area, if it is not treated.”

— Phillip Wright



Rangeland has been reseeded with a native grass mix to provide a vegetative cover to prevent soil erosion and increase forage productivity.