

BUFFER NOTES

Buffer Notes was written by NACD in cooperation with the USDA Farm Services Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

October 2002

CCRP, INGENUITY CREATE A NICHE

Fabric-laying machines selling on the plains

The owners of McIlravy Mesh Machines in South Dakota credit CCRP for their success.

While the program may have opened the door, it took farm boy ingenuity and willingness to tinker to create sales of dozens of fabric-laying machines. The machines lay down a fabric weed barrier that protects seedlings.

It all started when Arthur McIlravy began to lay fabric for the Haakon County Conservation District. His wife, Tanya, is district manager there. "They had a machine that didn't work very well. I tinkered with it, tore it apart a couple of times and got it to work pretty well, other than the fact that it broke down a lot," he says. "The next winter, I decided to build one, so I did, and it worked."

Word spread. "Other districts heard about it, saw it work, and the next thing you know, I was building them," McIlravy says. His machines have made their way to conservation districts in South Dakota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Montana. He also sells to private landowners and to private businesses specializing in fabric laying. In addition to building machines, McIlravy operates a tree-planting and fabric-laying business, and he and his father, Kenneth, run a cow/calf ranch.

McIlravy credits his inventive streak to his grandfather, Morris Sorenson. "He'd cut trees for firewood and use the branches to build rocking chairs," McIlravy says.

Weed barriers protect plantings

Tree planting in many regions of the country has come to rely on weed barriers, which allow seedlings to get their footing and also help hold moisture on the ground. The latter is important in western South Dakota, where the McIlravy's live. "Out here, it's hard to get trees to grow. There's a lack of water, and the soil is the poorest in the state," he says.

Conservation districts and entrepreneurs have jerry-rigged various implements, looking for the right machine. What makes his distinctive? "The machine has a floating fabric unroller. It floats on the ground," he says. "It's also a fairly light machine, and you can put it on almost any tractor. My advantage is I have to work with the machine. I use it all

the time. I didn't just build it and hope it works. As soon as I got done building it, I was out using it the next day."

Fabric-laying can be labor-intensive. McIlravy's operation involves six people. He drives the tractor. Another person sits on the fabric machine. Four people follow the machine. Two cut holes in the fabric for the trees. Two others fasten staples through the plastic to keep it in place.

Trees returning to the plains

McIlravy benefits personally from CCRP, but he also sees benefits for the people and land.

"It's a good program. People need to take advantage of it here," he says. "If there were trees, they were cut down in the 1800s and early 1900s for heat. With CCRP, you get a chance to put in some trees, and you're not paying much to do it. There are environmental benefits, and it's definitely going to help wildlife in our county," he says.

An inventor is usually looking for another challenge. How about McIlravy? "I'm trying to build a machine that plants trees and lays fabric at same time," he says.