



SEEING IS BELIEVING

BY: DEE ANN LITTLEFIELD, USDA-NRCS

When Cody Gillispie and his wife, Trish, purchased their ranch in Wise County in 1999, they had one big problem. Their ranch had a hole in it. Actually, lots of them. Long, deep gullies. Some of them were 40 feet deep.

“We loved the hills the property had, but the gullies and erosion problems were just terrible,” Gillispie says. “It was beyond repair. Or, So I thought.”

After purchasing the long neglected, scarred property, Gillispie was talking one day with another landowner who suggested he contact the local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office. The NRCS works hand-in-hand with the Wise SWCD to help people develop resource conservation plans for their land.

Gillispie immediately made an appointment. NRCS District Conservationist Darnell Willis met Gillispie at his property to see what his concerns were and offer some possible solutions.

According to Willis, Wise County is dominated by a highly-erodible fine sandy loam soil, making it one of the most erosion-prone counties in the state.

“My main goal was to stop the erosion,” Gillispie says. “My land was going down the creek and that was upsetting to me.”

What Gillispie viewed as a problem beyond repair, Willis’ saw as an opportunity to heal the land.

“It was devastating looking to me,” Gillispie says. “But Darnell took one look at it and said, “Oh yea. We can fix this.”

“At that point I sure didn’t see how, but I figured he had a degree in conservation and did this every day, so I wasn’t going to argue with him,” Gillispie says.

Gillispie soon began to recognize that Willis could help him with more than just erosion problems. Willis could help him increase the ranch’s forage and grass cover, manage brush infestation, and to help design fences and install watering facilities. After many site visits, and listening to Gillispie’s long-term goals with his land, Willis developed a conservation plan. Willis assessed the entire property and got everything mapped out based on soils. The plan included maintenance items to help reach the milestones. To help Gillispie meet his goals and address some of the resource concerns on his land, Gillispie applied and qualified for

financial assistance through the NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Willis recommended building a dam that would act as a grade stabilization structure to stop the erosion on a steep slope where the most erosion had occurred. Gillispie was excited about the prospect of a lake on his property, but still wasn’t sure how it was all going to work.

Willis surveyed the gullies to determine the exact size and location for the dam. He also planned for planting grass on the slope to stop the erosion.

“Darnell showed up with survey equipment and then when the contractors came in with bulldozers things really started to take shape,” Gillispie says. “It was then I realized, ‘Hey, these guys know what they are doing.’” With extreme makeover taking shape on his land, Gillispie leased additional grazing land for his commercial Beefmaster herd to take pressure off the



grasses, while the land was being restored. He also built cross fences and installed watering sites so he could implement a rotational grazing plan to rest pastures between uses.

“You learn as you go in process like this,” Gillispie says. “It doesn’t just happen. But once you get started, then it all kind of falls in place. This took place over the course of about three years.”

After almost three years of working with the NRCS, Gillispie says visitors now comment on the beauty of the ranch.



“I tell them NRCS did it. They can’t believe it. They really can’t believe it when I tell them the professional help I got from the NRCS was free. I tell people their tax dollars are what makes NRCS available – use them,” says Gillispie. He adds that he wishes more people would take advantage of the expertise and technical assistance offered by the NRCS.

“Darnell is just really good about helping me meet the goals I have told him about,” Gillispie says. “He will come out and look around and just mention some things I might want to consider doing. I usually do them because I know what he is telling me will help me meet my goals faster.”

“People don’t understand the knowledge that guys like Darnell have and how they can help,” Gillispie says. “He told me the land would be healed, but I would have to maintain it.”

Gillispie says that if his cattle start walking too much in one area, then he will change the trail up. He says the soil is so erodible, that if cattle get too much of a trail started, then with one big rain that trail turns into a creek and by the next rain it’s a flowing river taking soil with it.

Willis has been working as a professional resource conservationist for the NRCS for 30 years. He has spent 17 of those years in Wise County. Erosion problems such as those he encountered on Gillispie’s ranch are a common site in his profession.

“Cody’s place was definitely a challenge, but I’ve seen worse and we have repaired them too,” Willis says.

Willis has a staff of four conservation professionals that work the entire county, developing conservation plans and helping hundreds of landowners like Gillispie. Recently, the Wise SWCD, the NRCS, the Wise County Water Control and Improvement District No. 1, Tarrant Regional Water District and the Wise County Commissioners established a partnership in Wise County to encourage landowners to adopt land management practices. This partnership has made a special team of four additional Conservation Technicians available to landowners in Wise County. Anyone interested in receiving technical assistance from one of these experienced planners should contact the Wise SWCD or NRCS office. Their information can be found at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov.