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## Nebraska's Shell Creek Watershed Makes History for Successful Water Clean-Up Efforts

### *Grassroots Efforts Significantly Remove Atrazine from Watershed*

(Schuyler, NE) A major Nebraska watershed is making history today for the cleanup and reduction of Atrazine which has greatly reduced negative impacts on aquatic life and overall health of the area. Shell Creek's water, fish, frogs and other aquatic life are the healthiest they've been in decades. This appears to be the first example of a stream being removed from the 'Impaired Waters' list that resulted from implementation of a comprehensive watershed management plan. Shell Creek includes more than 304,000 acres, stretching from Newman Grove to Schuyler. Atrazine is a common herbicide used to kill weeds. It's linked to cancer in humans and can give aquatic life deformities.

This historic accomplishment took more than 12 years to complete. The Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group (SCWIG) is a group of landowners and farmers who led the grassroots efforts in conservation. They worked collaboratively with a variety of partners on the local, state and federal level including the Lower Platte North Natural Resources District (LPNDRD), the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other project partners. More than 240 landowners have participated in the program so far, putting more than 340 conservation practices on the land. Examples of these conservation management practices are no-till farming, filter and buffer strips, and cover crops. These efforts improve the quality of water draining into Shell Creek. As a result of these practices, the Atrazine level has significantly declined and is now supporting aquatic life in the creek.

"I grew up a quarter mile away from Shell Creek and my siblings and I spent a lot of time there," said Matt Bailey, Co-chairman of the Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group (SCWIG). "It's a great feeling to think that my kids will be able to see the shells I didn't see in the creek. The stewardship of this water is the responsibility of all of us as producers and landowners. Getting it delisted is a testimony to all our efforts within SCWIG and especially those who put management practices on their own farms. They're the reason this is becoming a reality."

“This is the perfect example of how Nebraskans pull together to solve our common challenges,” said Governor Pete Ricketts. “Working together, local community leaders collaborated with state and federal agencies, and together they are accomplishing their goals of cleaning up the watershed and being good stewards of our natural resources.”

Shell Creek was first added to the Clean Water Act List of Impaired Waters by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2006 due to impairment of aquatic life caused by Atrazine. Out of 48 water samples collected from Shell Creek between 2007 and 2016, only seven samples exceeded the water quality standard of 12 micrograms per liter of Atrazine, allowing the stream to be delisted for Atrazine impairment in 2018.

“It was the grassroots initiative of the Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group to promote and grow interest in the restoration plan and the producers who stepped up to adopt conservation practices that led to this achievement.” said Jim Macy, Director of the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality. “NDEQ helped develop the restoration plan for Shell Creek and helped secure funding for its implementation. This was great teamwork by all people and partners involved.”

Educating Nebraska’s youth about the importance of water quality has also been a large part to this project. Newman Grove High School and Schuyler Central High School have developed summer volunteer programs to take samples of Shell Creek’s water, sediment and bugs to help monitor the creek’s water quality throughout the years. These samples provide valuable information on the creek’s health and the students get a rare hands-on opportunity to learn more about Nebraska’s natural resources.

“This is a major milestone,” said Eric Gottschalk, Lower Platte North Natural Resources District’s general manager. “We know SCWIG will continue to work hard in keeping Shell Creek healthy. We also know there are other creeks and rivers that could benefit from developing groups like SCWIG. We believe we have a program model that works well in Nebraska and we’re ready to share it with anyone interested.”

To learn more about the watershed plan and Shell Creek, please contact Melissa Foreman, NRCS Program Assistant, [Melissa.Foreman@ne.usda.gov](mailto:Melissa.Foreman@ne.usda.gov) or (402) 564-0506.

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Shell Creek covers almost 110 miles, running through five different counties in Nebraska, and drains approximately 304,873 acres of surrounding farmland. The Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group (SCWIG) was initiated in 1999. The Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group works with landowners and producers in the watershed to identify and promote priority conservation practices, they looked to the Lower Platte North NRD, Department of Environmental Quality and USDA NRCS to engage various agencies on the local, state, and federal level to provide additional assistance. The Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group is a demonstration to the effectiveness of grassroots efforts and local management in natural resource conservation. To find out more about SCWIG, please contact Melissa Foreman, NRCS Program Assistant, [Melissa.Foreman@ne.usda.gov](mailto:Melissa.Foreman@ne.usda.gov) or (402) 564-0506.