Watershed structures save southwest Nebraska over half a million in flood damages.

Southwest Nebraska continues cleaning up and drying out from powerful storms, which dumped over five inches of water in some areas earlier this week. Although there are many people personally affected by flood damages, flooding could have been much worse if not for the watershed control structures in Hayes and Hitchcock counties, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

NRCS, with assistance from the Middle Republican Natural Resources District, constructed flood control structures throughout Lincoln, Hayes, Hitchcock, Frontier and Red Willow counties through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act.

These funds authorized NRCS to provide assistance with the planning and installation of flood control structures like small dams and grade stabilization structures, and in applying conservation practices like no-till, terraces and waterways.

The Middle Republican NRD sponsored the project and purchased the land rights in order to build the dams. NRCS provided nearly $3.4 million to construct the 11 dams in the Blackwood Creek watershed.

These structures have had a big impact on preventing flood damages. The flood control structures and conservation practices work together throughout the watershed to catch and slow runoff from heavy rains.

Flood control structures may easily go unnoticed across the landscape. Several of these structures do not look like a typical dam, and many do not even hold water. But after a heavy rain event, like what was recently experienced in southwest Nebraska, these structures spring into action. They capture rushing flood water and hold the water back allowing it to be slowly released downstream. Slowing the water down and allowing it to be gradually released reduces damage to roads, cropland, fences and other property.

According to NRCS Hydraulic Engineer Arlis Plummer the existing flood control structures in Hayes County helped prevent $576,500 in flood damages from the recent storm.

“With big rain events like this we really see the benefit of flood control structures. They work together with conservation practices to prevent damage to infrastructure. When things like roads and bridges are spared from damages, then we’re talking about a lot of dollars saved,” Plummer said.

Ron Thompson, NRCS Resource Conservationist in the Hayes Center field office spent the day surveying the affects of the heavy rainfall. He saw first-hand how the flood control structures and conservation practices have worked together to lessen the damage from the heavy rainfall.

“Even though several county roads are washed out across the county, and there is a lot of hail damage, it could have been much worse if these flood control structures had not been here,” Thompson said.

With nearly 900 watershed dams constructed statewide the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act has benefited over 1.6 million acres. Benefits include significant savings in soil erosion, water conservation, road and bridge damage reduction, wetland/upland wildlife habitat creation and most importantly, saved lives and property.

The total benefits to Nebraska exceed $27 million each year according to NRCS.