

For Tree Tips column on September 23, 2005
by Steve Rasmussen, Nebraska Forest Service District Forester

Forestry and Trees “Down Under”

Earlier this year, from the end of May to the beginning of August, I had the opportunity to participate in a “change in duty station” with a work assignment to Victoria , Australia. This was a cooperating venture between the Victoria Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and the Nebraska Forest Service of the University of Nebraska. Two years ago, Charles Hajek who is the farm forestry coordinator with DPI for western Victoria visited Nebraska and learned what we were doing here for conservation. This summer I was offered the chance to visit with him and see what was happening on the other side of the world.

The area of Victoria that I was stationed at is somewhat arid with an average annual 16 to 20 inches of precipitation. Winters are mild with snow being rare. Summers are hot and dry similar to central Nebraska. Most of the land use was either pasturing for sheep grazing or the cultivated ground was small grains, rape seed production, chickpea and some olive tree plantations. From what I saw and learned while located in the central part of Victoria was that conservation tree promotion and planting could fall into three broad categories:

First was planting native and indigenous trees and shrubs for bio-diversity. In the area I was at, the past history of the landscape was mostly dense “bush”, which is the Australian title for woodlands and brushy vegetation. In this particular location, over 50% of the native bush was cleared in the late 1800's and converted to pasture or cultivated lands. Now there is a strong effort to re-establish trees and shrubs back on the landscape. There are over 700 species of eucalyptus trees so they have many to choose from for re-establishment.

A second primary use for tree planting is for water quality. Here in Nebraska we promote trees in our agricultural settings to help against nitrate, pesticides or other contaminants getting into the surface or groundwater. In central Victoria, they are planting trees to help curb an increasing salinity (salt buildup) in the water that has occurred due to the clearing of the trees off the landscape.

A third use for trees is for large (100+ acres) plantings of pine and blue gum tree plantations for paper pulp and bio-mass. The goal in Victoria is to triple the acres of plantations in less than 10 years. And they will do it! I found Australians as a group to be very environmentally oriented and they see the importance of utilizing a renewable crop like trees.

The majority of the tree plantings (even the 100+ acre jobs) are hand planted with small containerized seedlings. Many times the farmer collects the tree seeds from trees on the property or neighbors. The farmer then contracts with the nursery to grow the seedlings to a 8 to 14 inch height for the project. Plant out weekends may entail a local neighborhood of farmers and friends planting a big project. Much like the Amish and a barn raising or when we have local farmers pull together to harvest a corn crop or put a hay crop when a neighbor and friend is not able to.

This is the final Tree Tips column for 2005. For landscape / tree care information I encourage you to contact your local nursery, tree care business, UNL Cooperative Extension office or my Norfolk office at 370-4024. For rural conservation tree plantings or forestry assistance with woodlands you can contact your county USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service or local Natural Resource District offices or again, my office. Have a fabulous fall with a wonderful winter season and look for Tree Tips again in 2006.