

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
REPORT TO THE
LOWER PLATTE SOUTH NATURAL RESOURCES DISTRICT
November 18, 2020**

PERSONNEL:

- USDA Service Center Operations – The Lancaster and Cass County Service Centers continue to be closed to walk-in customers. Producers may contact their local office to make arrangements for an appointment, or to conduct business by alternate means, such as over the phone, electronically, or by mail. Staff will continue to complete field work while following social distancing guidelines.

LAND TREATMENT:

- The Conservation/Resources Technicians are currently working on design and layout of conservation practices. There are currently 32 jobs (Cass-18, Lancaster-13) actively under construction. The long-term forecast is showing mostly dry conditions which should help with construction progress and layout of additional projects.
- Planning staff is working on processing EQIP and CSP applications. The next several weeks will be spent ranking applications in the Conservation Ranking Assessment Tool (CART). CART was deployed in FY20 and is designed to help NRCS planners assess site vulnerability, existing conditions, and identify potential resource concerns which are used to support conservation planning activities for producers.

PROGRAMS:

- The FY21 signup deadline for the Environment Qualities Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is November 20th. The LPS currently has the following number of applications:
 - Lancaster County
 - EQIP – 27 applications
 - CSP – 22 applications
 - Cass County
 - EQIP – 16 applications
 - CSP – 5 applications
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) – The Farm Service Agency is opening signup for CRP. Signup for general CRP will run from January 4th to February 12th, and signup for CRP Grasslands will be open from March 15th to April 23rd. The continuous sign-up is currently ongoing. See attached news release.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

**FY21 EQIP & CSP Signup Deadline – November 20th
Thanksgiving Day – November 26th**

Cory Schmidt - District Conservationist

Conservation Accomplishments

Fiscal Year 2020



Conservation Programs

NRCS field staff completed 100% of the annual program work for Farm Bill programs in spite of extremely challenging circumstances. Accomplishments for fiscal year 2020 for our main conservation programs are as follows:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):

- Obligated over 880 contracts on over 335,000 acres providing over \$24 million in assistance.
- 179 of these contracts served Beginning Farmers and Ranchers. This is a 5% increase in the amount of beginning producers served in 2019. These contracts provided nearly \$7 million in assistance.
- 26 of these contracts served Limited Resource, Socially Disadvantaged or Veteran Farmer/Ranchers providing over \$680,000 in assistance.

Top 10 Conservation Practices implemented through EQIP:

1. Cover Crop
2. Brush Management
3. Watering Facility
4. Irrigation Water Management
5. Fence
6. Pumping Plant
7. Conservation Crop Rotation
8. Livestock Pipeline
9. Water Well
10. Terrace

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Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

- Obligated over 220 contracts on nearly 500,000 acres providing \$20 million in assistance.

Top Practices/Enhancements implemented through CSP:

1. Prescribed Grazing
2. Cover Crops
3. Pest Management
4. Irrigation Water Management
5. Tree/Shrub Plantings
6. Nutrient Management
7. Conservation Cover
8. Brush Management
9. Herbaceous Weed Treatment

CSP-Grassland Conservation Initiative

- Obligated nearly 200 contracts on over 10,000 acres providing over \$900,000 in assistance.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

- Received 9 new agreements on over 1,100 acres providing over \$4 million in assistance.
- Closed 11 ACEP-WRE Easements on over 1,000 acres.
- Easement Acquisition Dollars: Over \$3 million.

Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)

- Received 1 new agreement on 8,900 acres providing nearly \$3 million in assistance.
- Received 2 closed ACEP-ALE easements on over 4,000 acres.
- Federal Easement Acquisition Dollars: Over \$675,000.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Wetland Reserve Easements (RCPP-WRE)

- Received 1 new agreement on 47 acres providing over \$133,000 in assistance.

Agricultural Land Easements (RCPP-ALE)

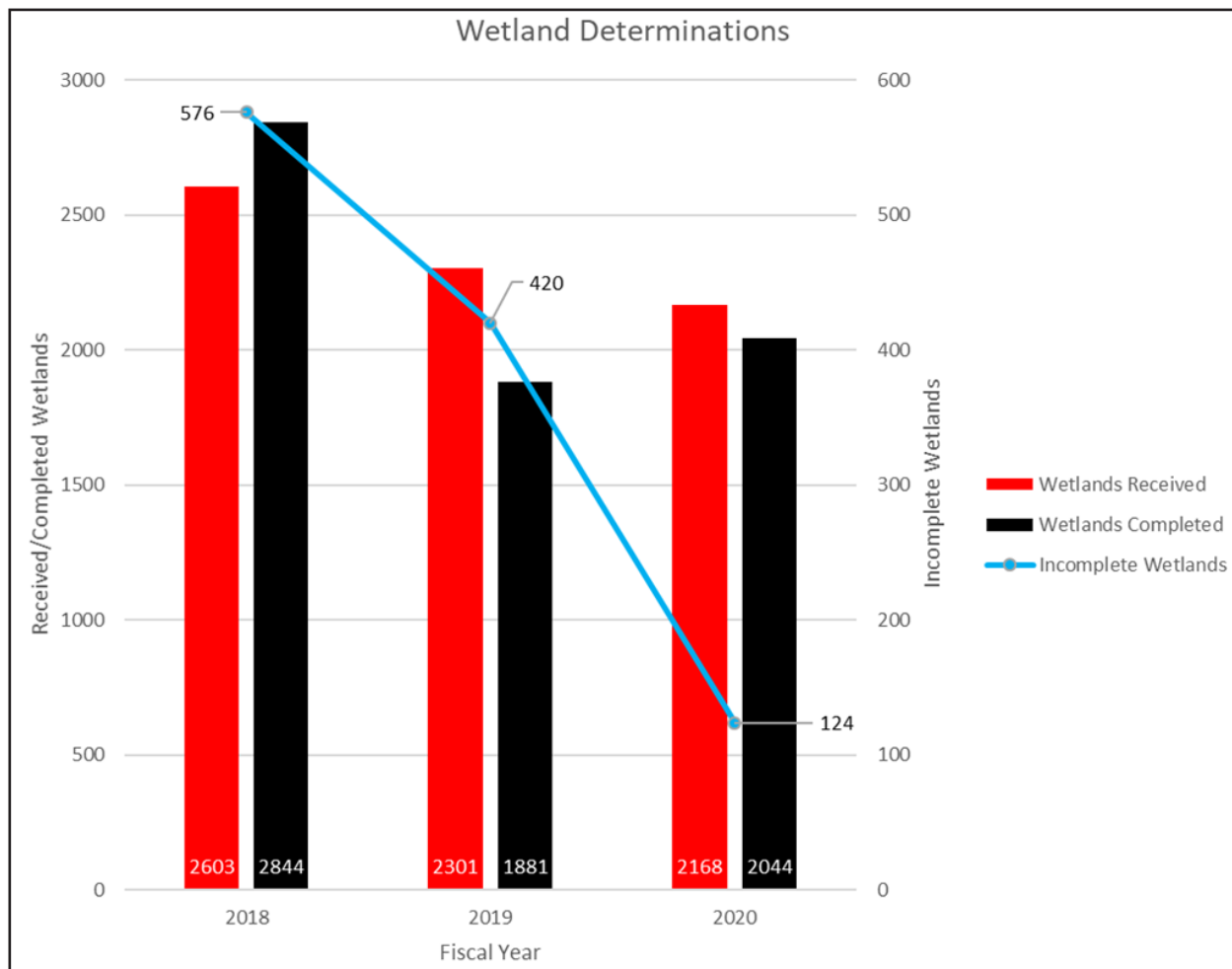
- Received 5 closed RCPP-ALE Easements on 655 acres requiring over \$650,000 to acquire the easement.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE)

- Received 21 eligible applications on 5,590 acres providing over \$20 million in assistance.
- Received 7 applications for possible agreements on over 4,500 acres. The funding needed for these agreements is over \$16.5 million.

Wetlands Team

The wetlands team concept in Nebraska began in 2018 when NRCS transitioned from servicing wetland requests at field offices to servicing requests with a dedicated wetlands team. NRCS made the wetland determination process more efficient by utilizing off-site techniques to complete determinations in a timelier manner. Nebraska NRCS has averaged 2,350 wetland determination requests over the last three years. Wetlands team staff increased from seven employees in 2018 to 13 dedicated employees in 2020. The increase in staff correlates directly with the increase in the number of determinations completed, as shown in the graph below. Wetlands team members are responsible for completing preliminary wetland determinations as well as reconsiderations and restorations/mitigations requests. NRCS will continue to improve the wetland determination process to assist agriculture producers in Nebraska as effectively as possible.



As members of the Nebraska NRCS Wetlands Team increased so did the number of wetland determinations completed.



Engineering

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP,) Watershed Flood Protection Operations (WFPO) Programs

- Worked with 20 sponsors on EWP projects totaling nearly \$10 million.
- Total amount of EWP, WFPO, Rehabilitation and Remediation Payments made in FY20 = over \$2 million.
- FY2020 watershed acres enrolled as part of a Watershed Agreement = nearly 2 million acres.
- Total number of new EWP and WFPO agreements built and implemented in FY20 = 32.
- Total number of agreement and contract amendments processed and implemented in FY20 (i.e.: time extensions, additional funds, etc.) = 12.
- Total number of new Indefinite Delivery and Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) - Engineering Contracts built and implemented in FY20 = 2.
- Total number of current/active EWP, WFPO, Rehabilitation and Remediation Agreements managed by NRCS in Nebraska = 47.
- Total number of current/active IDIQ Engineering Contracts managed by NRCS in Nebraska = 4.

Soil Health Impact

In 2020, the Nebraska NRCS Soil Health Team has prioritized outreach and partnerships, while adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Team used innovative approaches to provide soil health trainings and hosting soil health workshops for NRCS conservation planners, partners, and Nebraska’s agricultural producers across the state.

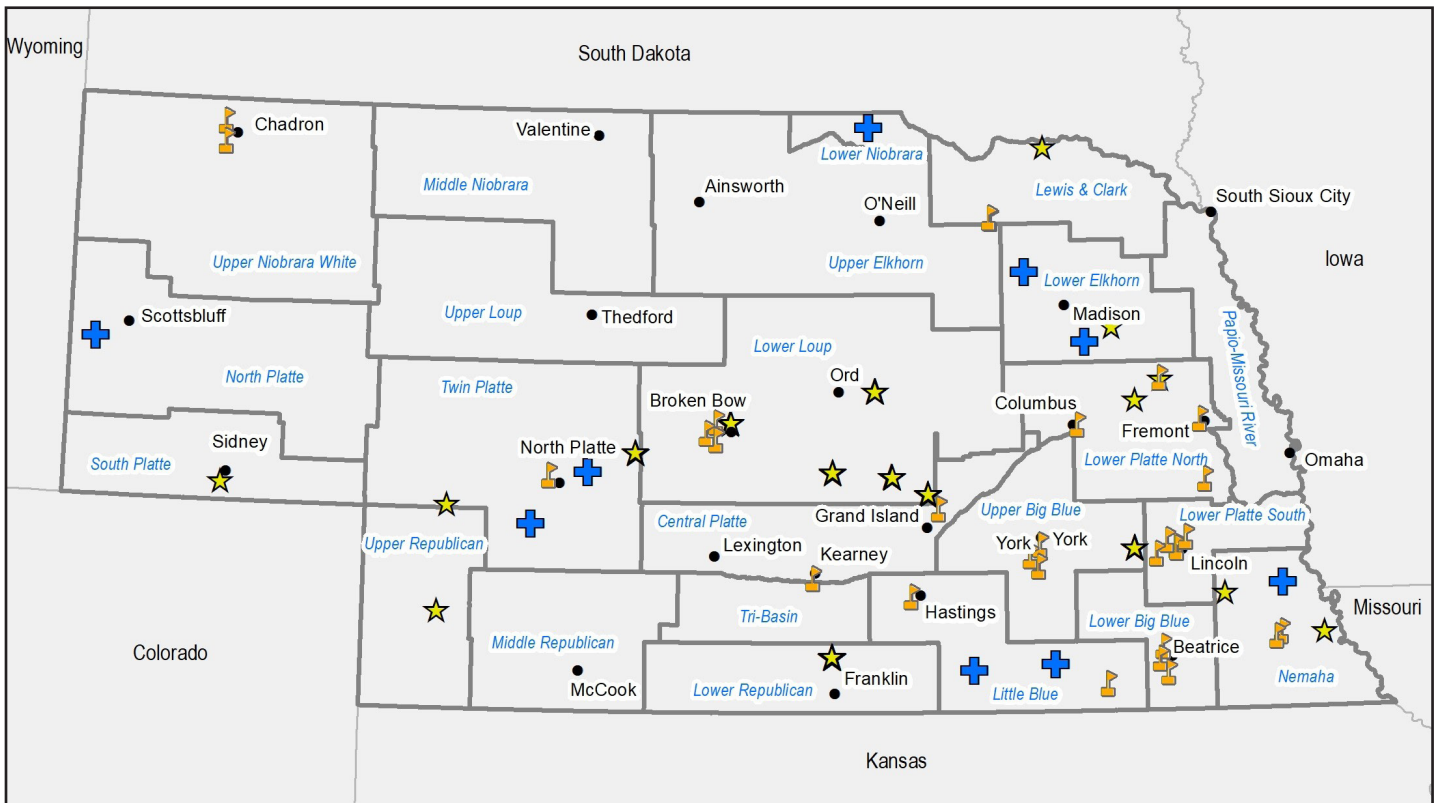
Additionally, the Team inventoried soil physical, chemical, and biological properties from over 25 study sites, representing Nebraska’s croplands and rangelands.

In these challenging times, the Team will continue their efforts to promote natural resource conservation in Nebraska in partnership with Nebraska’s farmers and ranchers.

Soil health outreach efforts are shown in the map below.

-  = FY20 Soil Health Outreach Events
-  = Rangeland Soil Health Study Areas
-  = Cropland Soil Health Study Areas

Soil Health Outreach Efforts Across Nebraska During FY2020



Helping People Help the Land.

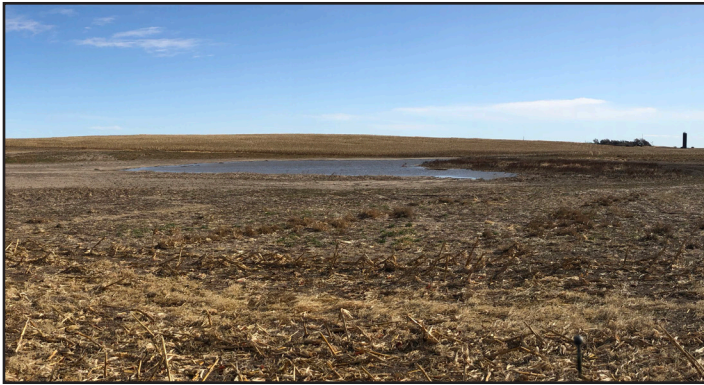
Success Stories

Perkins County Wetlands

When people think of the high plains of southwest Nebraska, most may not think about wetlands. But, this area is home to several wetlands that are critical to waterfowl and other wildlife. The NRCS in Grant, Neb., has been working with landowners to restore some of these wetlands.

Through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), landowners are provided funds to restore wetland acres on their farms. NRCS Resource Conservationist Claudia Stevenson said, "These acres are enrolled in a component of CRP into a practice called the Migratory Bird, Butterfly, and Pollinator Habitat State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (Migratory Bird SAFE). This practice focuses on conserving wetlands and gives landowners the opportunity to set the payment rate they wish to receive to offset the removal of the restored wetland acres from production. This helps make this sort of conservation work not only good for wildlife but isn't detrimental to the farmer's bottom line."

This program proved to be very popular with producers in the Perkins County area with 25 applications approved for wetland restorations through this CRP practice. A total of 48 wetlands were restored, including the one shown below, which totaled nearly 190 acres and included over 570 acres of upland habitat.



Expanding the Use of Cover Crops

Zach and Cory Masat farm in Antelope County. They enrolled part of their farm in an EQIP cover crop contract, which provided funds to plant covers. Their 30 acre field was seeded into a terminated cereal rye cover crop. The Masats also have cattle. Zach and Cory grew their own rye cover crop seed and will follow that with a 12-way grazing mix. They utilize the cover crops as not only a soil health measure, but a grazing source. The Masat brothers liked how covers worked so well they are expanding the cover crops into non-EQIP contract acres.



Zach Masat and his son Hank in the rye field where they grew their own cover crop seed.

Mill Pond Bank Restoration

Mill Pond in Cherry County had its plunge pool rock riprap compromised during the 2019 Bomb Cyclone. NRCS worked with the Middle Niobrara NRD through the Emergency Watershed Protection program to help repair the damage. The project brought stability to the downstream side of the structure by replacing riprap and seeding native grass on both sides of the channel. Chandler Schmidt, watershed coordinator with the MNNRD said, "If we endure another storm as such, that should withstand the amount and volume of water the dam endured during that bomb cyclone. All in all, the project turned out to be great, so far. We will see how it does handle the next big storm episode."



Mill Pond before EWP repairs (top) and after.



American Water Resources Association annual conference summary

November 8-11, 2020 (virtual)

--Tracy Zayac, Stormwater/Watershed Specialist

I attended the first virtual version of the annual American Water Resources Association conference during the week of November 8, 2020. The conference featured a mix of live panel and discussion/Q&A sessions, pre-recorded technical and poster presentations, virtual field trips, and live virtual mixers.

On Sunday, November 8, I participated in a pre-conference short course on “Water Resources Conflict Transformation”. I hoped, in signing up for it, that this class would build on my previous training and experience in working with stakeholders and facilitating difficult natural-resources conversations. The morning presenter, Dr. Aaron Wolf of Oregon State University, is widely recognized in the world of water resources conflict resolution, particularly at the international trans-boundary level. He began demonstrating how we come into conversations—and how we can shift our perspectives—from the very beginning of the class, taking something as simple as our individual introductions to the group as examples of how we in this society’s water resources sphere tend to approach other people we don’t know, and guiding us toward seeing how that might fit into a tense group context by shifting our perspectives to what we might share with the folks we’re interacting with in a group, rather than setting ourselves off in our own acronym-identified groups. He went on to steer us toward broadening our thinking of messaging and approach to collaboration and facilitation, suggesting that we move from focusing narrowly on the technical and emotional aspects in play in a stakeholder meeting, but also considering even the spiritual/belief systems that may also be in the room. Two facilitation practitioners led the afternoon portion of the class, which included role-playing exercises and the exploration of digital platforms for gathering stakeholder input and connecting participants to information.

I found the morning portion of the class more valuable, though the afternoon portion was also helpful for showcasing tools and methods that I had not seen from previous classes.

Monday, November 9

The conference led off with a keynote by the Attaché for Infrastructure and Water Management at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The speaker highlighted example projects that the Dutch have implemented to combat rising sea level and increased inland flooding, projects that do not rely solely on gray or built infrastructure, but that give rivers room to move and preserve or enhance ecological resources. In addition, the speaker showed examples of Dutch-U.S. collaborative efforts in New York, Charleston (SC), and New Orleans that share Dutch experience in building coastal resilience to aid U.S. communities in storm recovery and long-term sustainability. The Dutch have done some really neat things, and I was glad to see that cities on this side of the pond are taking advantage of their expertise.

Of the three panel sessions, I joined one on optimizing stormwater infrastructure and environmental resiliency, based on the City of Ft. Lauderdale’s experiences in implementing its

2018 management plan. One interesting point: Ft. Lauderdale ranks its infrastructure assets based on the consequences and likelihood of failure, when scheduling both inspections and maintenance. Assets with higher scores in those categories get more attention and dollars than lower-scored assets, which allows them to budget more effectively and prioritize where their maintenance dollars will go in the system. This makes a lot of sense, and seems obvious once articulated, and may be worth a look.

Highlighted presentation from the afternoon technical sessions: A researcher from the University of Nebraska Medical Center presented a study of Nebraska watersheds with age-adjusted incidences of certain pediatric cancers (brain & central nervous system cancers, leukemia, and lymphoma) that are higher than the national average. According to the presentation, Nebraska is one of the top 5 states in rates of pediatric cancers. Unfortunately, Lower Platte South NRD watersheds show higher-than-average rates of brain and central nervous system cancers; the Lower Platte Basin shows higher rates for lymphoma and leukemia, as well, but other watersheds in our NRD do not. The study associates these increased rates with agricultural use, which they estimated using the presence of row crops as a proxy (rather than direct field measurements of chemical application, for example). Brain/CNS cancers appear most strongly associated, whereas lymphoma and leukemia rates do not show as strong an association, based on the spatial data presented. The degree to which these findings would hold up with additional study is unclear.

Tuesday, November 10

Of the three morning panel sessions, I joined one on long-term policy strategies for taking water beyond politics. One interesting point: In looking at the governance of water, such as how water utilities make decisions and set policy, working at a distance from the electoral process seems to be a stronger model for success. What does this mean? For example, a utility that can plan and implement its rate structures independently will likely meet its infrastructure-maintenance goals more successfully than a utility where rate structures must receive the approval of elected officials, whose chief concerns are their political image or the election cycle. This is not to argue that utilities should be accountable to no one; instead, their accountability framework should make sense for their function in the community, particularly as that evolves over time.

Highlighted presentation from the afternoon technical sessions: Integrating watershed planning and hazard mitigation planning to achieve co-benefits for water quality and hazard mitigation. The presentation included examples from Colorado and Oregon to show green infrastructure implemented to deliver both hazard mitigation and watershed improvements; the plans that provided for these example projects combined traditional FEMA HMP components with important watershed planning goals. This allows an organization to demonstrate enhanced benefits from a given project and opens the possibility of wider funding opportunities, rather than being limited only to what FEMA will fund under the HMGP umbrella.

Wednesday, November 11

I participated in a two-part panel session on water justice, a key interest for me and an area in which every single water-related organization has room to improve. This session included breakouts, in which we interacted with the invited panelists on ideas to improve water justice and brainstorm solutions to potential objections. I came away with a better understanding of some of

the equity issues that the panelists highlighted, as well as a renewed motivation to find ways to incorporate this focus into my own work.

Highlighted presentation from the afternoon technical sessions: A representative from the Riley-Purgatory-Bluff Creek Watershed District in Minnesota, which works on issues similar to the NRD's responsibilities in a suburban area southwest of Minneapolis, presented on the occurrence and mobilization of phosphorus in stormwater ponds through their watershed areas. That District's concerns included the quality of the water that drains from these detention ponds into the larger water bodies in the District (larger natural lakes, in this case). Their study found that the number of stormwater ponds in a given watershed factors directly into the amount of phosphorus measured in the bottoms of both these ponds and the receiving lakes. Moreover, phosphorus is mobilizing out of pond sediments at a much higher rate than the conceptual models of stormwater ponds would suggest, indicating that the ponds are not providing the nutrient capture function for which they were designed. This study may provide lessons for the Lincoln area, should the City begin to focus more on the water-quality function of stormwater ponds in our area and move toward setting nutrient thresholds for the water draining into our creeks from these ponds.

2020 LOWER PLATTE SOUTH NRD ELECTION
GENERAL ELECTION
(unofficial)

Nov 18,2020

SUBDIST. NUMBER	NAME	BUTLER	CASS	LANCASTER	OTOE	SAUNDERS	SEWARD	TOTAL
1	Don Jacobson	262		10,442		598	862	12,164
2	Ron Nolte		9,424	1,975	151	1,280		12,830
3	Mike DeKalb			6,103		276		6,379
	Kenneth Vogel			6,022		301		6,323
4	Gary Aldridge			9,398				9,398
	LeRoy Sievers			9,375				9,375
5	Greg Osborn			2,711				2,711
	John Yoakum			4,551				4,551
6	Anthony Schutz			10,555				10,555
7	Chelsea Johnson			9,191				9,191
8	Christine Lamberty			7,945				7,945
	Christy Eichorn			4,634				4,634
9	Milt Schmidt			4,798				4,798
	Lisa Lewis			7,703				7,703
10	Ray Stevens			6,688				6,688
	Bastienne Salners			5,372				5,372