

Another Conservation Success Story...

Pike County, Georgia

March 2011

Hoop House for Organics

In January 2010, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), launched the high tunnel pilot study. If the use of high tunnels is effective in reducing pesticide use, keeping vital nutrients in the soil, extending the growing season, increasing yields, and providing other benefits to growers.

Dave Bentoski of D & A Farm in Zebulon is a firm believer in High Tunnels – also known as hoop houses. D & A Farm, a small organic operation, has been in operation since 2001. “There’s no doubt it’s a good production technique. For professional growers, they’re (High Tunnel) incredible,” Bentoski said.

The Farm has two full-time and two part-time employees managing some 80 different crop varieties. Different crops extend the production season throughout the year.



Right to left - Carmen Westerfield tours the new high tunnel with Dave and Alan Bentoski.

High Tunnels at a glance appear to be similar to common greenhouses. They produce a micro-climate like a common green house, but that’s where the similarity ends. Crops are planted in the ground of the high tunnel. The high tunnel is built over the crop. Irrigation is necessary and is applied through drip tape. The tunnel ends are opened and closed as needed to maintain proper air exchange and temperatures for optimum growing conditions.

While not a practice specific to organic farming, the practice has added to the operation by extending the growing season. Another benefit is crops that are not usually grown in our clay soils such as, carrots can be grown. Bentoski has discovered carrots need friable soils to germinate. Any crusting of the soil due to rain causes poor germination.

Bentoski first learn about the conservation technical assistance provided by the NRCS from talking with other producers and NRCS personnel.

District Conservationist for Pike County Carmen Westerfield had this to say. “When I first visited D & A Farm, I noticed how great the crops looked, but then I noticed erosion problems around edges of the fields and green-house and they had drainage issues that contributed to the erosion. Dave had not worked with the NRCS before and had no knowledge

“I like the partnership feel of EQIP,” said Dave Bentoski

of the available technical assistance or of programs. It was a learning curve for me as I knew the specifications for critical area, but I had to make sure the recommendations fit within the organic program since Dave is certified organic. I didn’t want to recommend something that contradicted his certification. We were able to use organic fertilizer to meet the fertilizer needs and use standard grass seed since it wasn’t in the crop areas. He applied an erosion control blanket on the larger areas and used organic mulch on some smaller areas.”

“Dave is a beginning farmer and participates in other NRCS programs. He was approved for Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) in 2009 under the organic funding unit. With this contract, a conservation plan was developed. Cover crops and rotations were planned as well as critical area treatment. One of the most visible improvements was the critical areas. Drainage and erosion around fields and buildings were becoming problematic,” said Westerfield.

Westerfield worked with Bentoski and developed a grading plan to alleviate the problem areas. She also looked at old aerial photography, scheduled a field visit with Jim Lathem, soil scientist and assisted Bentoski in locating additional acreage to bring into production.

“Dave has been very active promoting organic farming as well as locally grown produce. He serves on local Pike County Farm Bureau, Board of Directors; Georgia Organics, Board of Directors; Pike Agribusiness Authority, Vice Chairman Board



Vegetables growing in a high tunnel.

of Directors; Morningside Farmers Market, President Board of Directors; as well as in the organic mentoring program. He gave a presentation at Georgia Association of Conservation District Supervisors in 2010, hosted a district tour with the Towaliga Soil and Water Conservation District as well as a number of other groups such as local farm groups, garden clubs and Leadership Pike,” said Westerfield.

He likes EQIP. “I like the partnership feel of EQIP; it is good to have folks who recognize problems not to judge but to awaken ones inner conservationist,” said Bentoski.

“Through the use of EQIP, my operation has benefited both physically and practically, by minimizing soil loss at every opportunity, many of them overlooked or misunderstood by myself. Aesthetically we have made things look a lot better with the help of the NRCS.”

Bentoski’s philosophy for future generations is simple. “Building and maintaining healthy soil is the key to crop productivity at this farm; my hope is that by virtue of my success in that regard they will know my philosophy as they will still be able to farm this land.”



Bentoski installed critical area treatment. The road was graded and shaped and the ditch around the high tunnel was shaped to have a flat bottom to establish vegetation. This not only controls erosion but makes maintenance easier allowing the ditch to be mowed. This is a certified organic farm so weed control is mechanical.

**Two Rivers Resource
Conservation Development
706-885-0103**

 **NRCS Natural Resources
Conservation Service**
Carmen Westerfield 770-358-0787

**Towaliga Soil And Water
Conservation District**