

Another Conservation Success Story...

Elbert County, Georgia

July 2008

Conversion of Cotton Fields to pastures using Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

In 1994 Rick and Gina Thomas bought 190 acres of land located at 1965 Ed Mills Road, in Elbert County. The land was planted in cotton, layered with terraces and had an erosion problem. It took them eight years to put in a driveway, build a workshop/tractor barn, build a hay barn, turn the cotton fields into pastures, put up fences, and build a home. Today this ex-cotton field is the Granite City Donkey and Cattle Ranch.

The Thomas's had many conservation concerns with the land itself, their woods – which has a creek running through it, and their ponds. "This was a cotton field when we bought it. We had erosion problems, there was the runoff; the land was in terraces – that's why the pond would stay full because of the runoff from the cotton fields. There is another pond on the other side that caught the runoff from that cotton field; we said we needed to do something with all the erosion, to have good pastures and fencing to keep animals out of the woods," said Gina.

To help solve their problems using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service recommended the Thomas's "plant permanent cover – crop to grassland – Laredo Bermuda grass in the front pastures and Max Q fescue grass in the back pastures, install fencing to better utilize the pastures, fence the animals out of the pond and creek, put in water lines, tanks and water ramps," said Katrina White, soil conservationist for the NRCS in Elberton.

"It has been a work in progress," said Gina Thomas, "but when we bought it, we knew we were going to live here."

Many of the forage and grazing practices



Two of the miniature donkeys that the Thomas's raise on their farm

used on the farm are due to Gina's past work. She worked for 30-years in the agriculture department at the University of Georgia. "I would read



Gina Thomas shows off their newly born mule. Lace the mother is standing behind Gina.

about the research projects when the reports would come across my desk and when we bought the land I put what I learned to use," said Gina. "I retired from UGA and came to the country to be a country farmer."

"EQIP gives you the opportunity to keep the land up once you've got it in shape and the NRCS does a good job getting these programs out to the farmers."—Rick Thomas

Rick is not new to farming nor is he new to the NRCS. His grandfather, father and five uncles farmed. His father was a supervisor with the Oconee River Soil and Water Conservation District. Rick grew up not only with farming, he regularly attended field days at the UGA Watkinsville Experiment Station and caught bumble bees for them at 5 cents a bee. "They used them to study pollination," said Rick.

They also discovered that their ponds were being polluted by their livestock. "We did have animals going around the ponds to drink when it would get hot and dry like this. We discovered that it was ruining the water so NRCS helped us put the water ramps in so the animals could have a better water way to get to the pond without messing up the water, then we put drinkers in all the pastures so all the

animals would have good clean water to drink," said Gina.

They took the time and effort to fence off their woods creating wildlife areas — restoring the riparian buffers. "That wooded area there, we have completely fenced off - it's a wildlife area. It's a place so the wildlife will have a place to live and flourish. The woods over here are fenced off also for wildlife," said Gina.

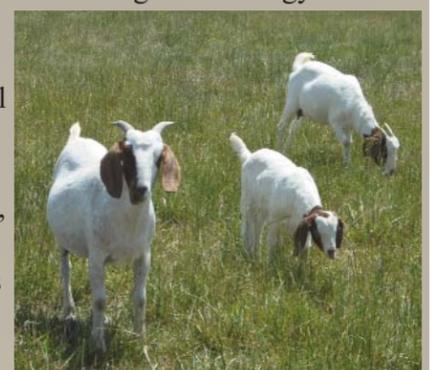
Rick stated he likes EQIP because it helps him keep his land up. "EQIP gives you the opportunity to keep the land up once you've got it in shape and the NRCS does a good job getting these programs out to the farmers."

The Granite City Donkey and Cattle Ranch has benefited from the services provided by the NRCS. "By the fact that you have better grasses, your animals are healthier, cleaner water helps keep the animals healthier with fewer diseases and less problems," said Gina. "I think the NRCS does a good job of helping people as long as you have somebody like Katrina White to come out and tell you about conservation practices."

Gina's conservation philosophy is more about the world we live in than just Elberton. "People take our natural resources for granted. They think that we are always going to have clean water and they think that we are going to have plenty of good soil to farm in so we have lots of food. I don't think they take it seriously. People throw trash in the rivers, they throw trash in the lakes, and we want to dump our sewage in all that. If we don't take care of our natural resources we are not going to have any. The water will be contaminated, the land will be contaminated."

"The Thomas's have done and are willing to do anything to improve the operation – if its economically sound," said White.

The Thomas's have plans for the future. Under the Conservation Security Program (CSP) they plan on doing some energy management, grazing management level 2 with some grazing support software, manage their riparian areas and do some wildlife friendly hay management.



The Thomas's have learned to put goats in the pastures before the horses to allow the goats to eat the weeds.

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