

Another StrikeForce Conservation Success Story...

Screven County, Georgia

October 2011

EQIP Continues to Help Small Farmer Transition into Organic Farming

Relinda Walker is a woman on a mission. Not only is she determined to grow high quality organic produce, Walker is also very conscious about conserving invaluable resources.

Over the last nine years, Walker has worked around the clock to convert several acres of her family's farm into certified organic fields.

"I think what the NRCS is doing is just wonderful. It's a big organization that helps a lot of farmers in a really specific way."—Relinda Walker

Simultaneously, she has had a water management challenge on the Sylvania property.

Through her involvement in her community and the local USDA Service Center, Walker was able to acquaint herself with programs offered by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). District Conservationist, Austin Blackburn, has worked with Walker over the last few years.

Although the process of getting assistance took a lot of patience, Walker said, "I knew there was a natural fit, but I didn't know what. In spite of goodwill, the programs didn't really fit this type of



EQIP funds helped Walker build a hoop house.

operation. To be honest, I was very frustrated in the beginning; there was just barrier after barrier. In the end, Austin made it happen!"

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provided the financial assistance that Walker needed to build a solid-set irrigation system on six acres. This was a 2009 contract.

"It's a low pressure system that puts out about 1/4 inch an hour one section at a time," Walker explained. "The solid set system is absolutely key. It's probably the single most important thing I've done as an organic farmer," she added.

A new 2011 EQIP agreement will also help Walker install an additional solid-set irrigation system on five more acres on the farm.

Walker has also been able to construct a hoop house on her farm through



Walker is currently converting 17 acres of cropland into organic land.

EQIP. Hoop houses extend the growing season of certain crops. In Walker's case, she is able to extend the season for the more expensive greens, lettuces and winter salad mixes.

"I think we made a really good choice and did a pretty good job of building it. Having a hoop house will have an enormous impact on business," Walker said.

In addition to the water management plans underway on the farm, Walker is in the process of converting 17 acres of the property to become certified organic land. 50 acres of the farm are already considered certified organic.

The Organic Initiative program, which is funded under EQIP, is assisting Walker with this conservation project. As part of the process, Walker uses cover crops and monitors weeds.



Relinda Walker has been farming for nine years.

"It's work. It's really hard. It's no picnic. Weeds are the biggest problem for an organic farmer. Pigweed is giving everyone problems," Walker said.

Even though organic farming has been tough, Walker said that NRCS's involvement through technical and financial assistance has been a big help.

"I think what the NRCS is doing is just wonderful. It's a big organization that helps a lot of farmers in a really specific way," Walker said.

She hopes to share her experience with the agency with other farmers so that they know about the assistance available to help them meet their production and conservation goals.

Screven County is a designated StrikeForce county in Georgia. The USDA StrikeForce Initiative is designed to help relieve persistent poverty in high-poverty counties.



Relinda Walker grows a variety of squash.

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