

Another Conservation Success Story...

Haralson County, Georgia

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EQIP Helps Haralson County Landowners Preserve the Land

By Karen Buckley Washington, Lawrenceville

Elbert and Casey Durden, father and son, own 86 acres of private forest land along the Tallapoosa River in Haralson County. The Durdens, native Georgians, who reside in Gwinnett County, have a love for camping and hunting, which led them to purchase a former wooded estate and restore it.

"This (the land) was sort of my pay back and play pen for the family and kids," said Casey. "One of the concerns that brought us to NRCS (USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service) was how to do this right – how do we bring this back into forest land the right way."

The land was left unattended for many years, so the Durdens were faced with

the decision to seed the land in warm native grasses or develop a plan for establishing an area that is attractive to both people and wildlife.

"I said to a forester, 'What's going on? There aren't any deer out here,'" said Elbert. "He told me that sweet gums, maples and poplars don't have enough mask and that there was nothing for the animals to eat."

After searching the Internet for programs to assist them, Casey found the NRCS service center in Carrollton. The Durdens' applied for Environmental Quality Incentives Program

(EQIP) and received financial assistance to conduct a prescribed burn, for nutrient and pest management, forest stand improvement, riparian herbaceous cover and forest buffer, as well as tree establishment for a hardwood ecosystem. Tree tubes were used to accelerate the growth of young trees and provide efficient control of weeds.

"We started out with six different types of oak, because that's what we could get," said Elbert. "We got about five or six apple, pear and plums down the road, to help us and the animals. I like to point out these tree tubes. If you put them on every 10th tree (10 feet apart), they claim a 95 percent success (survival) rate. They're popping out. We wanted a tree at least every 40 feet. We put in 2,200 trees."

Casey credits the helpfulness of the NRCS staff to much of their success. "The person I talked to at NRCS was very helpful and kind and I feel if he had been rude or dismissed me, I wouldn't have pursued it any further," said Casey.

"NRCS has been wonderful. Everybody's been flexible and cooperative," said Elbert. "Everybody's been great to make suggestions. You got a question, you call and they'll at least get you headed in the right direction and that's made it a whole lot easier to do. If I hadn't have gotten good cooperation from the NRCS and the Georgia Forestry Commission, this wouldn't have happened – it just would not."

Soil Conservationist Carolee Osborne



Soil Conservationist Carolee Osborne (L) with Elbert (C) and Casey Durden (R)

notes the enthusiasm and efficient work of the Durdens as keys to their success in EQIP and in realizing their conservation goals.

"The Durdens are not the traditional farmer/landowner," said Osborne. "They persevered and put the time in. It's a success story in that landowners should not be scared to do the work. There is a process, but it's not unattainable. The good thing about our office is that we'll assist you and if it's something we don't do or don't have answer for, we'll get you in touch with the right people."

Both Elbert and Casey are former Boy Scouts and one day hope to create a campsite for scouting and church groups, fully appointed with trails, facilities and even labeled trees, as learning tools for the children.

When asked about advice they would give to landowners in similar situations, the Durden's stressed the importance of allotting enough time to complete conservation practices.

"You have to approach it like a job," said Casey. "If my Dad hadn't been retired where he could drive 100 miles, come and go and meet and talk to people, we'd never been able to do EQIP. You have to make the time."

"However many hours you think it's going to take - triple it," said Elbert. "One thing I'd tell landowners is that you have to understand right up front, it's going to take some time to do. NRCS and the Georgia Forestry Commission can't wave a magic wand and have it happen. We probably had to do some things to qualify for the programs that we wouldn't have ordinarily done, like get a farm number, get a conservation plan or get in the Forest Stewardship Program, but it paid off in the long run."



Father and son, Elbert and Casey Durden burning some down trees in a prescribed burn.

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