Another Conservation Success Story...

Rabun County, Georgia

September 2003

In Step with Conservation **Farmer Robert Mitcham**

Robert Mitcham isn't a shy man by any means and when he speaks about American farming, his passion speaks for itself. "The family farm will be the salvation in feeding this country as you see the corporate farms fade away due to the cost of the business," he predicts as we drive along his Rabun County farm. And he has plenty to say about the assistance he receives from NRCS and the other USDA agencies. What he likes best about us is



that "NRCS provides me knowledge and skills on a professional level that I can't get anywhere else."

"Doug Towery and Tony Galloway

have worked with me from the beginning. They know what they're doing—not their first time." He worries about the future of assistance from USDA and the future of conservation programs.

"We have cut so many programs back -things have gotten out of hand—done in the name of cost-cutting. Our land and our farms' ability to feed us should be considered very precious. We're not looking at the value—just the economics.

"All USDA agencies have a strong place in the farm community. I'm afraid we'll do away with our seasoned people with all this downsizing. We need seasoned people to stay where they're at; these are the people who are going to provide stability in our farming," Mitcham

emphasizes. "If we don't spend dollars for a quality program, don't have a program.

Every



dollar we spend today will save \$10 down the

provide good pollination.

road," he stated. Mitcham has been working with NRCS for close to 50 years.

"The agency helped us on some ponds back when I was a kid—you can get some first-class services for free—conservationists come out with the purpose of helping you and taking care of the environment.

People in natural resources are looking at both sides of the picture—not just the side that makes money. Money helps you carry on the project to a higher level of completion—

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from just getting by to a more complete job," he said.

"Longrange planning helps you

It all started with apples. prepare for a catastrophic event. You can fix it

Conservation Practices

Recent flooding has taken its toll on the curvy mountain stream on Mitcham's farm. With the help of NRCS, he is establishing

rather than put a band-aid on it," he adds.

trout habitat structures along with armor, to protect the streambank. In addition to stream improvements, he will install a 20-ft. wide filter strip adjacent to all

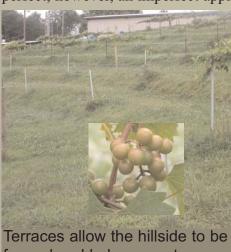
of the environmentally sensitive areas. Conservation tillage and cover crops are planned for Mitcham's row crops. "Farming is a worse gamble than a poker game," Mitcham laughs as we check over his fields-

An eroded streambank jeopardizes the nearby vegetable fields.

fields that he will check over 4 more times that day. "There's very little profit in farm commodity. If you do anything wrong, real quickly goes into loss." I learned real quick to take this type of product into value-added. he said.

He learned the hard way when he took a bumper crop of apples to the Atlanta markets to sell. Despite assurances to the contrary, they didn't sell and he was faced with a loss. "I decided right then—value-added was the way to go—not perishable."

To sell an apple fresh market, it must be perfect; however, an imperfect apple makes



farmed and help prevent erosion.

applesauce," he said. So he started making apple butter, apple jelly, apple cider. Now, 20 years later

he has

perfect

more than 600 products and 6,000 customers.

Mitcham gets the most out of his 150-acre operation. He maintains his own bees—first for pollination—second for honey. "I try to use every foot of ground," he says.

> He raises a wide variety of cropssquash, zucchini, pumpkins, beans, etc. "Diversity prevents you from getting caught in a

year where you don't have something to sell."

He has wood-working and metal-working shops. "If you don't take care of it now, won't be anything in the future for you to take care



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Blue Ridge Mountain Soil and Water **Conservation District**

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