

Another StrikeForce Conservation Success Story...

Early County, Georgia

June 2012

NRCS Helps Farmer Meet Conservation Goals

No matter the challenges she faces, Hazel Welch is a woman committed to conserving natural resources. Raised on her family's farm in Jakin, Welch grew to appreciate agriculture at a young age.

"It's helping me maintain the farm and making sure it has use in the future."—Hazel Welch

"My father farmed. He was into row cropping," Welch explained that she was right there with him every step of the way.

"I drove a tractor before I drove a car. I was my dad's only son," she said jokingly.

Even after going off to college and becoming a teacher, Welch wanted to do what was best for her family's land and spent her free time brainstorming ideas on how to ensure the land wouldn't end up developed.

"I don't want it changed over into a sub-division. I want it close to what it was when my great grandparents had it," Welch said.

Finally, Welch got information she needed. It was during a school day 22 years ago and Welch overheard a fellow teacher talking to someone about conservation programs offered to landowners like her.

"My first enlightenment was when I overheard the high school's Ag teacher talking about CRP."

Welch later learned that CRP is the Conservation Reserve Program which is offered through the USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA).



Wildlife species such as the gopher tortoise (pictured above) benefit from WHIP conservation treatments.

She admits that it was a long process but finally she became the first to receive assistance through CRP in Early County.

"I wanted the farm to pay for itself versus us working to death," Welch said.

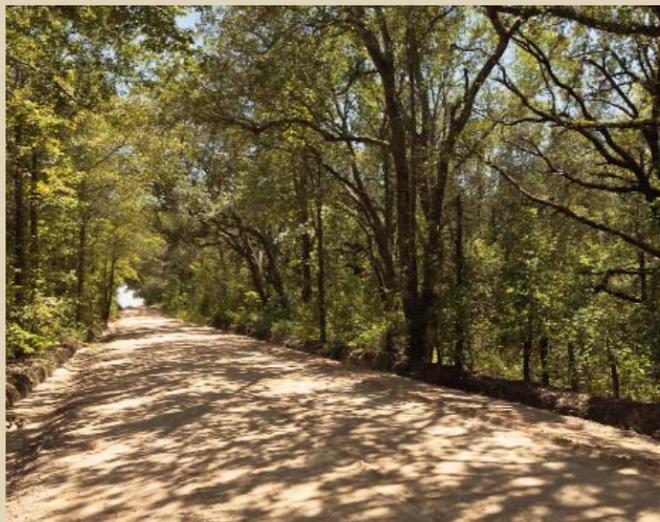
Over the years, CRP has helped Welch establish longleaf pine and native warm season grasses. The program has also helped her establish and manage, through light disking, wildlife buffers around field perimeters to enhance habitat for upland birds such as the Bobwhite quail.

Through her relationship with FSA, Welch learned about the USDA-NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service).

Welch has been able to do even more conservation planning for her property through technical and financial assistance provided through NRCS programs.



Landowner, Hazel Welch and District Conservationist Steve Cleland review a map of the Jakin property.



Hazel Welch manages several acres on Molton Family Lands in Early County.

Two Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) contracts, in 2005 and 2006, have helped Welch address wildlife habitat deficiencies on her land.

WHIP assisted Welch in improving her forest resources through the planting and management of longleaf pine.

In addition to these practices, WHIP has allowed Welch to develop and manage early successional vegetation by spraying recommended herbicides to control undesirable plants. The early successional vegetation will serve as a wildlife buffer.

Prescribed fire was used to also control undesirable vegetation, reduce wildfire hazards, and improve wildlife habitat. NRCS District Conservationist, Steve Cleland said, "She's a conservationist in every sense of the word. And, you can see that through all the practices she's implemented on her land."

Because of her demonstrated dedication to conservation, Welch has been awarded two Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts.

CSP is a voluntary conservation program that encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by undertaking additional conservation activities; and improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

The CSP contracts cover forest and pasturelands and have enabled Welch to continue efforts to address air, soil and water resource concerns on her farm.

"It's helping me maintain the farm and making sure it has use in the future," Welch explained.

In addition to the previous conservation efforts, Welch has converted her father's 30-year Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easement into a permanent easement. She is actively working to restore the hydrology, vegetation and wildlife habitat that existed on these 248 acres before it was cleared and drained for agricultural production.

She said that Georgia's Easement Specialist, Sharon Holbrooks, explained how easements worked.

"I asked Sharon about easements and protecting the farm and making sure that the land wouldn't be plowed over when I'm gone," Welch said.

Welch also explained that every decision she has made to conserve resources on her family's land has been to ensure that it has use in the future.

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

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