

Another Conservation Success Story...

Long County, Georgia

October 2009

Naturalist Farmer Helped by EQIP

Don't be fooled by Cecil Stafford's overall jeans and laid back farmer appearance. This self-proclaimed naturalist is an encyclopedia of information on the natural resources on his farm and in Long County itself. In fact, he is so well known and admired that he is the naturalist for the Belfair Plantation in Bluffton, SC Island and is a consultant with the Sea Island Golf Course.

He has labeled hundreds of trees and plants on his farm and can tell you fascinating tales about the origins of the plants names, how they were used by native Americans as medicines and ceremonial plants and much more. He hosts tours from the Nature Conservancy and other groups—sharing his knowledge of nature and conservation with all who will listen.

“There's so much talk about debt; the only thing we can leave behind is a good conservation program. We need to preserve something for future generations,” he said.

Stafford has farmed in Long County all his life. He was raised on a dairy farm and went out on his own when he graduated from high school.

“We (he and his wife Hazel) ran a dairy for six years and never had a day off; we decided to take a day off,” he said with a chuckle.

In 1974, he purchased 20 blueberry plants, dug holes with a post hole digger and began an endeavor that 35 years later has resulted in 20,000 blueberry plants—all grafted from the

original 20 blueberry plants and planted by hand with a post hole digger.

And, by the way, he did all this while working full-time at the Interstate Paper Corporation. “I've always had other jobs to support my farming. That's my aptitude—what I enjoy doing. That's my calling,” he said.

Stafford's love for the land is evident in the way he talks about the plants and animals on his farm. A casual visitor enters the farm knowing nothing about what he is seeing and leaves the farm with an appreciation for native plants, wildlife, conservation and farming in general.

He contacted NRCS for some help to improve the natural resources on his land. “I think mainly we had some really poor soil; with their (NRCS personnel) education and technical expertise, they showed me how to put the right plants on the right soil.”

Years ago, NRCS personnel helped Stafford install drain tile and provided techni-

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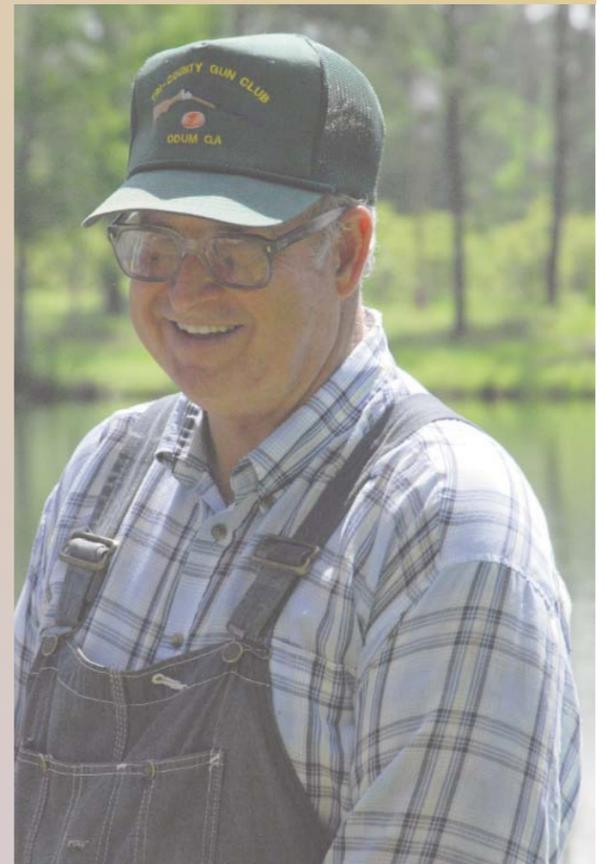
cal assistance on the installation of a farm pond. He did not receive financial assistance, but rather the technical assistance that helped him decide the best spot for the pond. Then, he learned about silvopasture, rotational grazing and prescribed burning from NRCS.

He applied and was accepted into the

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). 3,044 ft. of fencing was installed to exclude livestock (goats) from sensitive/wetland areas and to establish a rotational grazing system that will make more efficient use of grazing resources.

Rotational grazing is an essential management practice for reducing parasite loads in the goat herd.

He established 68 acres of silvopasture to increase the amount of forage available for grazing and to facilitate a rotational grazing system. Silvopasture allows Stafford to produce two agricultural crops (livestock, timber) on the same acreage increasing the over-



Cecil Stafford, naturalist farmer.

all productivity of his operation. About 31 acres were burned to control unwanted species and increase forage productivity within existing silvopasture.

On his own, Stafford has planted thousands of plants and trees for wildlife. His farm is home to the gopher tortoise and Eastern indigo snake—both threatened species. A bateman warbler—one of the rarest birds in North America—was seen on his land. He has five Georgia State Champion trees on his property. A champion tree is the biggest know tree of that species in the state.

He is a recipient of the Georgia Forestry Stewardship Award. When asked about the assistance he received from NRCS, Stafford had this to say, “Gracious, I couldn't do it without it (the EQIP program and technical assistance from NRCS staff).



Stafford has 20,000 blueberry plants.



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