

# Another Conservation Success Story...

## Gilmer County, Georgia

March 2009

### Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Improves Family Farm

Located just northwest of Ellijay in the valley of Mountaintown Creek is a 400-acre family run farm called Cohutta Farms. Bill James, a second generation farmer, runs the farm with his son, Gene, and son-in-law, Kenny McClure. Currently the farm has two combined animal feeding operations (CAFO) chicken farms and 175 beef cattle. They rent an additional 300 acres.

In the early years, the 75-acre farm consisted of crop production, but today it consists of both a chicken and cattle farm with pastures for hay. "My father had a row crop business that consisted of the production of beans, potatoes, cabbage, corn, peppers, etc. I got my start with him in the 60's. As the local economy changed, the truck cropping converted over to strictly corn and pastureland," said James.

James went on to say, "Eight years ago, my son, Gene, and my son-in-law, Kenny, left the timber business and built chicken houses. With the added responsibility associated with those operations, our cropland was converted to hayland and pastureland for our beef cattle operation."

"The resource concern initially found on Cohutta Farms was water quality degradation, both surface and subsurface, associated with their beef cattle and chicken operations. Due to unlimited access to stream banks by the live-

stock, and Mountaintown Creek being a trout stream, there were additional concerns about trout and wildlife habitat depletion, and the quality of water leaving the farm and eventually flowing into Carter's Lake," said Robyn Ledford, soil conservation technician for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Blairsville.

Today, with two CAFO chicken farms and a beef cattle operation, water quality issues are at the top of the natural resource concern list for Cohutta Farms.

With the use of Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) (Conservation Planning), the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Partners for Fish & Wildlife, all streams that ran through the pastures have been fenced improving both the water quality and stream bank health and providing a habitat area for the wildlife. Heavy use area stream crossings were installed to provide a stable surface for the cattle to cross and watering ramps provided a way the cattle could drink without standing in the water.

With the fencing of the pastures, a rotational grazing system was implemented and ball drinkers (a "frost free" watering trough where livestock push down on a ball to drink) were installed to allow better distribution of the grazing.

A Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan was devised to safely handle poultry waste. Two waste storage/dead bird composters were installed to handle the chicken litter eliminating the need for open pits. All land applications of litter now meet forage needs, and a buffer of untreated area is left along any open waters.

"All of the improvements were possible through funding assistance from the NRCS and the US Fish & Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program. Through the



Billy James (left) supervising the building of one of the waste storage/dead bird composter combo facilities in 2005

utilization and success of these best management practices on their farms, Gene and Kenny have encouraged other landowners to apply the same practices," said Ledford.

Ledford went on to say, "farmers like Billy and Gene James, and Kenny McClure, rely on

**Through an open relationship and line of communication with NRCS staff, the resource concerns have been addressed, while production levels have remained the same, if not improved," — Billy James.**

the land to make their living, and they do a great job with what they have to work with. By NRCS providing technical and engineering assistance and funding, they were able to make those improvements within their limited budget, to a level that will last them for many years," said Ledford.

James said the NRCS helped him correct his conservation concerns with the possibility of improvement. "Application of chicken litter on pastures, and the open access of streams to cattle provided several opportunities for nutrient and sediment loading of streams. Through an open relationship and line of communication with NRCS staff, the resource concerns have been addressed, while production levels have remained the same, if not improved," said James.

"Some of the rented properties were improved through funding from the Upper Coosawattee 319 Project, administered through the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission," said Ledford.



One of the heavy use area stream crossings that was installed to provide a stable surface for the cattle to cross

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