Another Conservation Success Story...

Clay County, Georgia

March 2009

147-Year-Old Farm Depends on Environmental Quality Incentives Program

(EQIP)

Cattle farming is not new to Will Harris – a fourth generation cattleman. He grew up on the same farm he owns and operates today, White Oak Pastures, a farm that has been around since 1866. Today he is the only one in his family that farms but his middle daughter does help with the marketing and the farm's website.

Today the farm has 650 head of beef cattle and 150 head of Hair Sheep and it is the largest certified organic farm in Georgia. "Our family has lived on, and made our living on, this same farm for 147 years. The stewardship of this farm is a core value that has been passed down through five generations of the Harris family. Our farm is the largest certified organic farm in Georgia. Our certification is through the Georgia Crop Improvement Association's Organic certification Program," said Harris

Harris learned about the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service as a child growing up on the farm and he is very aware of the programs that are available.

Harris' conservation concern was an erosion problem on the farm. He needed to begin an intensive prescribed grazing system to add additional forage for the cattle.

"He converted over 400 acres of conventionally tilled cropland to permanent pasture and hayland, planting clover and three different types of Bahia and Bermuda grass. This resulted in a significant reduction in soil loss

and helped facilitate an effective rotational grazing system, improving forage quantity and quality, livestock health and productivity, the water quality, reduced soil erosion, and it helped build organic matter. Will utilized the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance from NRCS to plant the grasses. He also received an incentive payment for installing a management intensive prescribed grazing system through the EQIP program," said Karen Reese, program analyst for the NRCS in Cuthbert.

Harris believes EQIP has helped with his conservation concerns. "With the assistance of the NRCS and the use of EQIP I have been able to bring erosion down to zero, build organic matter in the soil and improve water quality," said Harris

Other practices used on the farm throughout the years are heavy use area protection, conservation buffer strips, irrigation water management, nutrient management, pest management, and riparian buffer.

Gerald Isler, Clay County conservation district supervisor, said, "Will has a very innovative project going. He is developing a niche in the market that no one in Georgia has attempted to do."

White Oak Pastures is a business that not only employs 18 local employees but processes its own beef and turns waste into fertilizer. "We raise grass fed beef cattle on our farm. We

process our cattle in our certified humane, USDA-inspected zero waste processing plant that we recently built on our farm. We capture the wash down water in a 30,000 gallon underground system to use for pasture irrigation. We have an anaerobic/aerobic digester that turns all of waste into organic fertilizer that we use on our land. We catch rain water for use in our organic garden. Our beef is sold primarily in the Atlanta market at whole foods mar-



Karen Reese, program analyt for the NRCS in Cuthbert stands with Will Harris, District IV winner, outside of the White Oaks Pastures store out side of Bluffton.

kets. We offer other local cattlemen a market for their cattle that are raised on our production protocol. Our plant and farm employs 18 local employees over and above the involved family members," said Harris.

Waste is not in the vocabulary of White Oak Pastures. "George Washington Carver said, 'In nature there is no waste.' This is how we try to manage our farm," said Harris.

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Harris likes EQIP because "It enables me to engage in practices that makes farming more environmental sustainable that otherwise may not have been affordable. I do not like that there is not enough money available in the program," said Harris.

Future generations should learn about Harris' conservation philosophy. "I learned from daddy and granddaddy: You take care of the land and the herd and they will take care of you. These are core values that have been passed down through generations of my family. Environmental sustainability and animal welfare are not new concerns for us."

"His innovative ideas and proven leadership qualities enable him to be an effective ambassador for environmentally sound conservation practices and long-term sustainability of our precious natural resources," said Steven Cleland, district conservationist for the NRCS in Blakely.



Natural Resources
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Lower Chttahoochee River Soil And Water Conservation District

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