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A Message from the: **State Conservationist**

**Holiday greetings NRCS staff and conservation partners!** My wife, Linda, and I have now been in Iowa for a little over a month and you are making us feel right at home.

After initial meetings with several Iowa conservation partners, I recently began my quest to visit all Iowa NRCS field offices. I have attended a number of National and State conferences as well as a number of partnership meetings. One might say I have been through a pretty intense crash course on the Iowa landscape, culture, partnership structures, and natural resource needs of this great state.

I have met personally with farm program participants who can’t say enough about the conservation assistance you are providing them. I could not be prouder to be a representative of our agency. I admire your dedication to bringing sound natural resource planning and technical assistance to Iowa producers, and by promoting and delivering the Farm Bill programs with such efficiency and effectiveness.

I appreciate your dedication and work ethic, but also the passion, energy, and commitment of our conservation partners to build a strong stewardship partnership that showcases the State of Iowa as a model for collaborative stewardship.

In the future I will be busy working with the Iowa Leadership Team to ensure that we:

- deliver Farm Bill programs efficiently and effectively;
- are accountable and transparent in our delivery;
- position ourselves technically to provide leadership in a changing conservation landscape and clientele;
- and that we work both internally and externally to build strong statewide partnerships that focus on collaborative efforts and strategies that result in more conservation applied on the land.

This Holiday season I want you to feel proud of all you have accomplished. The public truly does appreciate your efforts and assistance. Know that you make a positive impact on the Iowa landscape, and that state leadership appreciates your hard work and dedication. I am really looking forward to 2013 and the many accomplishments we are going to make together.

Wishing you and you families a joyous Holiday Season! Jay and Linda Mar

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**Current Developments** is a product of the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service in Des Moines, Iowa, published bimonthly by the Iowa NRCS Public Affairs Staff in cooperation with NRCS and partner agency employees from across the state.

**Current Developments Stories and Photos**

Please submit your Current Developments story ideas and photos to State Public Affairs Specialist Laura Crowell at laura.crowell@ia.usda.gov.

Past issues can be found at [www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/currentdevelopments.html](http://www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/currentdevelopments.html).

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Soil Health: **Check It Out!**

**Solving E Horizon Compaction**

On a cool, wet, blustery day in early November NRCS Soil Scientist Jason Steele (left) – along with Soil Conservationist Sarah Ham and State Soil Scientist Rick Bednarek – met with longtime continuous no-till farmer Steve Berger (right) of Wellman to exchange ideas for restoring soil health.

Berger has planted cover crops on at least a portion of his 2,200 cropland acres for the past decade. This fall every one of Berger’s cropland acres is planted to cover crops.

Through Berger’s soil health management system, his soils were much more drought-resistant this year compared to conventionally tilled cropland. “Cover crops, in particular, seem to hold moisture in the soil very well,” he said. “Healthy soils are much more resistant to drought than overused, overburdened soils.”

Steele visited with Berger in one particular field where Tuskeego soils are prevalent. “Tuskeego soils have an ‘E’ horizon that is very difficult for roots to grow through,” said Steele. “We are looking into natural ways to break through that compaction.”

Berger says he plans to continue no-tilling the field, but he plans to add some drainage tile and a cover crops mix of oats and radishes next year to see how it responds.

**Testing Moisture Levels**

Following a long summer drought, Area 2 Resource Soil Scientist Patrick Chase spent an early November day in Jasper County examining soil moisture from four fields with different tillage management systems.

Chase, with State Agronomist Barb Stewart and State Soil Scientist Rick Bednarek, took samples from a conventionally tilled field, a conventionally tilled field with cover crops, a field that alternates between tillage and cover crops, and a no-till field with annual cover crops. Samples will also be taken from these fields in the spring.

“We hope to show that continuous no-till fields with annual cover crop plantings will produce healthier soils that hold more moisture in the soil,” said Stewart.
She carved her pumpkin this year to say “I Love Soil,” and that pretty much sums up why one of Iowa’s newest soil conservationists took her position with NRCS.

After serving as a summer intern in Corydon and Spencer in the summers of 2010 and 2011, Wisconsin-native Helen Leavenworth is now a full-time soil conservationist in the Jefferson field office.

Iowa NRCS prides itself on its successful summer internship program. Each edition of Current Developments we will try to highlight one of our own interns who is now working full-time for NRCS.

Leavenworth is the first in this series, and for good reason. She has NRCS in the blood. Learn more about Leavenworth in her profile below.

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**HR Corner: Federal Benefits Open Season**

The Federal Benefits Open Season closes on December 10, 2012. For detailed information visit HR’s SharePoint. Here are a few items to consider during Open Season:

- **FSAFeds** – The maximum contribution for a Health Care Flexible Spending Account (HCFSA) has changed from $5,000 to $2,500 for 2013. The maximum contribution for a Dependent Care Flexible Spending Account (DCFSA) remains $5,000 for 2013.
- **UnitedHealthcare Plan of the River Valley** expanded their service area to include the counties of Emmet, Dickinson, Clay, Buena Vista, Pocahontas, and Webster.
- **Iowa Aetna HealthFund** added two new plans for 2013, a Consumer Driven Health Plan (CDHP) and a Value Plan.
- All health insurance changes must be processed through NFC’s personal page by 5 p.m. on Dec. 10, 2012.

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**Feds Feed Families Food Drive: Algona & Tipton Earn Pizza**

USDA Service Centers in Algona and Tipton won this year’s award in the Feds Feed Families Food Drive.

The Algona office donated the most food with 8,656 pounds. Tipton donated the highest average per person at 412 pounds per person.

The three state leaders for Farm Service Agency, Rural Development and NRCS promised pizza parties for this year’s winners.

According to Jay Mar, state conservationist for NRCS in Iowa, these two offices collected more than 40 percent of the state’s grand total. “Every donation made a difference to an Iowan in need,” he said, “so thank you for your participation.”
Iowa NRCS Represents: **Regional Student Ocean Conference**

*Courtesy of Theresa Weiss*

Iowa NRCS took part in the seventh annual student environmental conference at the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, Sept. 20-21.

Dubuque District Conservationist Theresa Weiss, along with Soil Conservationist Lance Porter and Dubuque Soil and Water Conservation District Urban Conservationist Eric Schmechel, guided a tour about Best Management Practices for cropland and urban sites in the upper reaches of a watershed. “The students then visited the mouth of the stream where it flows into the Mississippi River,” said Weiss. “We talk about endangered species, invasive species, and other conservation-related topics.”

About 80 students and teachers attend the annual conference, along with presenters and facilitators. Fifteen schools attended - 14 from Iowa and one from Illinois.

**CRP Acres SAFE: Secretary Vilsack Makes Announcement in Iowa**

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the allocation of 400,000 national acres to support conservation and restoration of wildlife and their habitats as part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) at an event on Oct. 8 at the Gary Matters Farm in Lewis.

The increase acres means about 6,000 additional state acres for wildlife enhancement, or SAFE, to provide habitat in Iowa for high priority species like quail and pheasants.

Each year, CRP keeps more than 600 million pounds of nitrogen and more than 100 million pounds of phosphorus from flowing into our nation’s streams, rivers and lakes. CRP is the largest private lands carbon sequestration program in the country. In 2010, CRP resulted in carbon sequestration equal to taking about 10 million cars off the road.
Seasonal High Tunnels: Great Opportunity for Women Landowners

Submitted by Lori Schnoor, District Conservationist (Maquoketa) and Federal Women’s Program Manager

Kris Doll of Ambleside Farm in Jones County is continuing the tradition of a small, three generation family-run vegetable and grape farm with assistance from USDA’s Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative.

Ambleside Farm grows many different types of vegetables using heirloom seeds whenever possible. “We sell to local farmers markets and have been providing customers CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] boxes for the last four years,” explains Doll. “We specialize in heirloom tomatoes and winter greens. Growing winter greens are possible through use of the high tunnel funded by NRCS in 2010.”

Doll says the funding has made it possible to expand their production of winter greens and participate in the Winter Farmer’s Market in Dubuque.

Joe Wagner, Jones County District Conservationist, is pleased with the recent interest in high tunnels, especially among women. “Kris Doll’s operation is a great example of what can be done with a high tunnel to promote local food systems,” he said. “Her success and willingness to share ideas with others has opened the door for NRCS to outreach to other women or small acreage owners.

“The Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative provides NRCS an opportunity to serve some “non-traditional” customers.

Women across Iowa are benefiting from this Initiative. Iowa has funded more than 200 high tunnels. Approximately 25 percent of these projects are with women. This is a great opportunity for field offices to outreach to women landowners. Hosting a field day of a constructed high tunnel that NRCS has funded is one example of how offices can outreach to women and small specialty producers.

In 2010, Jackson and Jones Counties teamed up to host a Seasonal High Tunnel Workshop in partnership with Buy Fresh Buy Local and Iowa State University Extension.

“The attendance exceeded our expectations, showing us how popular this is becoming,” said Wagner. “We had over 50 people view a recently built high tunnel, learn about EQIP funding and how to use and construct a high tunnel.”

As a result, the two counties have funded a total of 12 high tunnels. The opportunity and customer is present in every county.

Seventy out of 99 counties have funded a Seasonal High Tunnel. This goes a long way for supporting USDA’s “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” Initiative. Iowa NRCS is making it happen and providing an opportunity for, not only women farmers, but other specialty small crop producers as well.
Pink Day: USDA Recognizes Breast Cancer Awareness Month

In recognition of USDA Pink Day, the Cresco and Osage NRCS Management Unit staffs, Cresco FSA staff, Area staff, and State Conservationist Jay Mar (front center) wore pink to work on Oct. 24. The Pink Day event was organized by Resource Conservationist Beth Rachut.

Iowa NRCS: Always Evolving

If you haven’t been keeping up, you may have lost track of Iowa NRCS organization. Over the past six months 10 offices combined to form five Management Units, and the Soils Office in Fairfield closed. Here is a list of the newest Management Units:

» Logan/Council Bluffs
» Harlan/Oakland
» Red Oak/Clarinda
» Creston/Mount Ayr
» Storm Lake/Pocahontas
2012 Drought Impact: Hits White Fox Creek

Submitted by Bruce Voigts, MRBI Coordinator

White Fox Creek near Clarion, often used for water monitoring for students in the area, was different than landowner Mike Mechem ever remembered in 60 years. The dry creek is taking its toll on the wildlife that rely on flowing water.

Clockwise below: (1) a juvenile snapping turtle barely stays alive (2) a large carp succumbed to the drought (3) There was about one mussel for every step taken in the stream (4) a leopard frog barely stays alive without water.
Must Read: Conquest of the Land Through Seven Thousand Years

Submitted by Ted Oswald, Civil Engineering Technician

In light of the 2012 Drought, it might be appropriate for Iowa NRCS employees to read a little-known article, “Conquest of the Land Through Seven Thousand Years.” It was written in the 1930s by Dr. W.C. Lowdermilk, former Assistant Chief for the Soil Conservation Service.

“It is a fantastic piece with a direct correlation to what we could be going through now were it not for our conservation efforts,” said Oswald. “It provides a unique perspective on the formative years of soil conservation in the U.S., and the consequences for lack of conservation.”

Study Shows Many Benefits of Longer Rotations

Analysis of data collected since 2003 at Iowa State University research plots comparing two-year corn-soybean rotations with longer-term rotations reveals many advantages, including higher yields, lower energy use and effective weed and pest management with far fewer chemicals, while providing comparable economic returns.

Project findings were published Oct. 10 in the peer-reviewed online journal PLOS ONE. The article, “Increasing cropping system diversity balances productivity, profitability and environmental health,” was written by Adam Davis, USDA-ARS weed ecologist in Urbana, Illinois; Iowa State University agronomist Matt Liebman, who leads the research project; Jason Hill, an environmental scientist at the University of Minnesota; Craig Chase, economist and interim program leader at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture; and ISU Extension economist Ann Johanns.

The authors write, “Substantial improvements in the environmental sustainability of agriculture are achievable now, without sacrificing food production or farmer livelihoods.” The key to the success can be summed in one word: diversity.

“More diverse cropping systems can use small amounts of synthetic agrichemical inputs as powerful tools with which to tune, rather than drive, agroecosystem performance, while meeting or exceeding the performance of less diverse systems,” the authors note in the journal. They call it “synergizing effects of cropping system diversification.”

The paper is available on the PLOS ONE website.

Women Landowners Share Stories in New Videos

A new series of videos gives voice to Iowa women who face daunting challenges as landowners with strong ties to the land, but perhaps little experience as decision-makers on the farm.

The videos were developed by the Sustainable Agriculture Land Tenure (SALT) Initiative in partnership with Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN).

Women currently own more than half of the rented farmland in the United States. Many of them come from a generation and a culture where they did not hold positions of authority, and lack the confidence and knowledge to make informed choices. Edward Cox, principal investigator of the SALT Initiative, teamed up with Leigh Adcock, executive director of WFAN, to tell their stories.
# Changes In: NRCS Personnel

*In order of Effective Date*

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Happy Thanksgiving!