

October-December 2011

Message From *R. Phou Vongkhamdy, State Conservationist*

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Greetings from the Rhode Island Natural Resources Conservation Service State Office. During the October to December 2011 period, NRCS staff diligently began work to implement Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 conservation practices throughout Rhode Island.

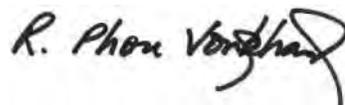
Regarding outreach events, workshops were held in the three Conservation Districts to promote NRCS conservation programs. In addition, NRCS staff attended two recruiting events at local universities. Several educational outreach events occurred including a general information session at the Jamestown Hay Day, a wildlife and pollinator habitat information session for the Conanicut Island Land Trust, and an educational soil session was held for Envirothon students.

The field staff concentrated on obtaining new applications for FY 2012. So far, Rhode Island has received 141 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) applications, 13 Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) applications, 2 Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) applications, and 6 Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) applications. The first round application ranking deadline is February 3, 2012 with two additional ranking periods currently scheduled for FY 2012.

The resource staff continues to provide assistance through technology transfer and program delivery. This includes developing GIS methods to use Rhode Island's new LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) elevation data to produce contour and slope maps for use in planning and soil surveying. Regarding economics, the staff is working on an initiative to develop regional practice payments to promote consistency which may be available for use in FY 2012. Staff is also promoting the New England/New York Forestry Initiative to promote forest stewardship opportunities for private forest landowners.

Lastly, the soils staff completed an update to the RI soils data for over 80 farm plans currently being developed by field staff resulting in better imagery, elevation data, and other remote sensing data.

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R. PHOU VONGKHAMDY
State Conservationist

Administrative - Happenings

by Jackie Pashnik, Assistant State Conservationist for Operations and Walter Marshall, Public Affairs Specialist

Darvis Jordan, Procurement Specialist Trainee, is serving a three-month detail in Rhode Island under the Business Management Leaders Program (BLMP). The Business Management Leaders Program (BMLP) provides a framework for building world class administrative professionals within USDA. It is a two-year intensive training program which provides a combination of formal training with rotational work assignments in financial management, human resources, and acquisitions. The participants may have job rotations with other USDA agencies and the last rotation will be in the assigned specialty. Individuals in this program will travel extensively. The program seeks to fill positions in various job series including Human Resources, Accounting, Acquisitions, and Administrative Specialists. Darvis will be working with the financial team from late December through March 30, 2012.



On December 1-2, 2011, NRCS staff attended a two-day training conference titled "Building the Bridge to Better Work Relations". In addition, staff participated in the annual awards day celebration where employees were recognized for their dedication and hard work addressing conservation issues throughout FY 2011.

Conservation District Happenings:

Conservation District - Eastern District (Bristol and Newport Counties)

by Melissa Hayden, Eastern District Conservationist

The Eastern District has been busy developing conservation plans and processing applications for FY 2012 programs. We have received 38 applications for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, 3 applications for the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, and 1 application for

the Conservation Stewardship Program. Outreach efforts have been very successful at bringing new customers in the door. Nearly half of our current program applications are from landowners who have not participated in NRCS programs in the past.

The Eastern District organized a tour of farms that have been working with us and have demonstrated a high level of environmental stewardship. The Eastern RI Conservation District board of directors attended the tour and selected two farms to receive the 2011 Conservationist of the Year Award, which was presented at the Eastern RI Conservation District Annual Dinner. Windfall Shellfish of Bristol and Treaty Rock Farm of Little Compton were the recipients of this award. We are working with a Technical Service Provider to develop the first Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management Conservation Activity Plan in RI for Long Pond in Little Compton. This plan should serve to provide a strategy for managing the large stand of invasive *Phragmites australis* that is found around the pond. The first Agricultural Energy Management Conservation Activity Plan in RI was completed for Mello's Farm and Flower Center in Portsmouth.

Conservation District - Northern District (Providence County)

by Justin Tuthill, Northern District Conservationist

The Northern District has been working hard since the beginning of FY 2012 to promote and develop applications for FY 2012 Conservation Programs. In total we have received 62 applications for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, 3 applications for the Agricultural Management Assistance Program, 9 applications for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, and 1 application for the Conservation Stewardship Program. We have benefited from our partnership with the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District, who has been feverishly coordinating outreach events and developing outreach materials on behalf of NRCS. Training was provided to the district staff in the use of NRCS business tools to aid in the development and processing of NRCS program applications.

NRCS and the Northern RI Conservation District participated in several tours of agricultural operations in the first quarter. Governor Chafee made a last minute visit to Confreda and Urban Edge Farms, both NRCS program participants, to talk with farmers and listen to their thoughts and concerns. A second tour was organized for students at Scituate High School by the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District, Providence Water, and NRCS to Pine View Farm, an NRCS program participant and Baldwin Farm, a property saved from development by Providence Water to aid in watershed protection. The purpose of the tour was to discuss natural resource concerns and how an agricultural producer in cooperation with NRCS could address them to minimize the farm's environmental impact.

The first quarter was also a busy time for construction and installation of conservation practices in the Northern District. Three Heavy Use Area/Waste Storage Facilities were completed, many producers submitted records for nutrient, pest and grazing management, and several access roads, grassed waterways and lined outlets were installed.

Conservation District - Southern District (Kent and Washington Counties)

by John Richard, Southern District Conservationist

The Southern District currently is working on conservation planning on 41 applications for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and 4 applications for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) for FY 2012 programs. The Southern District will be working with landowners on New England cottontail habitat development in the WHIP program for FY 2012 – we have developed a strong partnership with local land owners and organizations such as Audubon Society of Rhode Island, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Rhode Island DEM to develop concentrations areas and conservation plans for habitat restoration.

The Southern District held an outreach event on December 8th at the East Farm campus of the University of Rhode Island. The Southern Rhode Island Conservation District Executive Director gave a presentation that discussed the different types of services that they offer to the public. NRCS also presented the different conservation programs that are offered. More outreach events will be scheduled for this winter.

NRCS is continuing to move forward on the Shady Lea Dam Anadromous Fish Passage project – we have conducted the topographic ground survey that will be used in the development of the design alternatives and have met with the State SHPO Office (Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission) to discuss potential alternatives relative to the cultural resources onsite.

Outreach, Communications, and Recruitment

by Walter Marshall, Public Affairs Specialist

During the October to December period, NRCS sponsored an exhibit booth at the Jamestown Hay Day on October 1, 2011 with over 200 attendees. General NRCS materials were distributed along with information related to the creation of pollinator habitat.

State Biologist Gary Casabona conducted an educational presentation on wildlife including pollinators, nest boxes, and the New England cottontail to private landowners in Jamestown at the December 21, 2011 meeting of the Conanicut Island Land Trust. There were approximately 20 attendees at the event.

Regarding recruiting events, NRCS also exhibited at the 2011 Government Career Fair held at Johnson and Wales University on November 3, 2011 where over 400 students from seven area colleges and universities attended the event to learn about careers in various government agencies and the Federal, State, and local levels. NRCS staffed an exhibit booth at the University of Rhode Island 2011 Fall and Internship Job Fair on November 8, 2011 to discuss career opportunities with engineering, environmental, and life science majors. Names and contact information for attendees interested in NRCS careers were collected for any upcoming vacancy announcements including internships.

Regarding the Rhode Island NRCS Web site, starting in December 2011, all program related Web pages were in the process of being updated and streamlined for the FY 2012 application period. Web

site visitors will begin to notice a more streamlined and concise approach to the Web presentation of program application information.

Conservation Success Story: Blackbird Farm-Setting a Higher Standard With Quality, Black Angus Beef Leads to a Thriving Business; NRCS Assistance Contributes to the Farm's Success



Blackbird Farm in Smithfield, RI raises 100 percent certified Black Angus cattle. The various cuts of quality beef are sold at its farm stand and also served in many local restaurants in Southern New England.

WARWICK, RI Ann Marie Bouthillette grew up in a farm family where she always had a keen interest in animals. When she married her husband Kevin in the 1980s, they started a small farm of their own with just a few acres of land and some feeder animals. Such projects were limited to 15-18 months due to the animals they bred. Then one day, Ann Marie and Kevin decided to buy better quality cattle that would last several breeding generations for their children to develop. That decision dramatically changed the

farm where the operation now consists of over 80 head of 100 percent registered Black Angus cattle which roam on a 106 acres property in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

Much of the farm's success is the result of the Bouthillettes' dedication to the proper care of the animals and a successful quest for top Black Angus cows which yield superior quality meat. The Natural Resources Conservation (NRCS) also assisted in the farm's success. NRCS provided both technical and financial assistance to implement numerous conservation practices under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Since 2002, NRCS staff has worked with Kevin and Ann Marie to address several natural resource concerns including water quality, animal health, pasture condition, and erosion. As the farm expanded, resource concerns changed where NRCS was able to use its expertise in conservation to address evolving resource concerns.

Initially, the Bouthillettes worked with NRCS in 2003 to implement several conservation practices to optimize their pasture quality and quantity, improve conditions around the barnyard, and safely store manure. NRCS staff devised a conservation plan which includes rotational grazing of the cattle on various parcels of the farm. Such a plan provides many benefits where it improves the quality and quantity of feed for the animals, reduces soil erosion, and reduces soil compaction. As part of the plan, NRCS provided cost-share assistance for fencing and the design of a water pipeline and watering facilities, i.e., automatic water feeders, to various pasture site locations.

NRCS also designed and provided cost-share assistance for a roofed heavy use area and manure storage facility which both include roof runoff management (i.e., gutters and downspouts). The roofed heavy use area also improves animal health by protecting the cattle from harsh weather conditions such as extreme heat, cold, and wet



To improve pasture quality, NRCS designed animal trails and provided cost share assistance to install fencing.

conditions. While the cattle are at pasture, a natural fertilization process occurs. As the cows graze rotationally, the manure is spread out relatively uniform. While the cattle spend time in the heavy use area, manure needs to be managed and stored. The manure storage facility is vital to protect the soil and water from excessive nutrients being leached out of the manure as it accumulates in the heavy use area.

As part of the farm's nutrient management plan, NRCS reviewed soil samples taken from the pasture lands and advised the Bouthillettes on the proper fertilization and seeding based on those results and the various soil types. Other conservation practices implemented include the design and cost-share of an access road and animal trails and walkways which reduce soil erosion and enhance overall animal health.

Currently NRCS continues to work with the Bouthillettes to develop a grazing management plan on 60 acres of newly acquired land. They already cleared over 20 acres of pasture in an area previously used as a pig farm. NRCS looks forward to seeing this expansion be as successful as the previous plan where conscientious grazing practices will benefit the Bouthillettes, their cattle, and the environment.

Blackbird Farm exemplifies another successful partnership with NRCS where conservation of our natural resources such as water and soil quality combined with a passion for quality yields high quality meat products which can be enjoyed by local consumers at home and at a diverse group of restaurants throughout Southern New England.

Resources

by Eric, Boettger, Resource Conservationist; Gary Casabona, State Biologist; Chris Modisette, State Forester; and Reena Shaw, Agriculture Economist

The Resource Team continues to provide assistance through:

Technology Transfer – Providing training, technical tools, standards, and jobsheets required for technical assistance.

Program Delivery – Assisting in the management process for effective program delivery during the fiscal year includes: setting priorities and goals; and addressing resource needs in the State.

The Resource staff has been working with the Soils and Engineering staffs to develop GIS methods to use Rhode Island's new LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) elevation data to produce contour and slope maps for use in planning and soil survey.

A workshop on pollinator conservation with Xerces Society staff was held at URI for partners, producers, and NRCS staff. Another pollinator training will be held in either MA or CT in the coming months. Partners, producers, and NRCS staff who missed the RI training last year are encouraged to attend this training. There will be an NRCS Food Security Act Wetland Training to be held in conjunction with MA and CT NRCS staff this spring.

Economics

In July 2011, NRCS initiated a national effort to develop and maintain the practice payment schedules, their associated scenarios, and estimated incurred costs on a regional basis. The objective of this initiative is to provide greater consistency in program payment rates nationally. Rhode Island is included in the New England Region with additional States of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. Representatives from each of the New England States including Rhode Island developed regional payment schedules for the fifteen national priority conservation practices that are supported through Farm Bill programs and are available for use in FY 2012 contracts. Representatives from each State are now in the preliminary stages of regionalizing all the remaining practice payment schedules to support the FY 2013 program year.

Wildlife

With State Biologist assistance, in-State and region-wide partners including the RIDEM- Fish & Wildlife and the US Fish & Wildlife Service worked to identify priority areas and projects for New England cottontail conservation. These priority areas will benefit RI NRCS program assistance.

State Biologist, Gary Casabona and Kat Zuromski of the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) have begun working to leverage the Stream Continuity Database to identify potential projects for aquatic organism passage (e.g., culvert replacement) in landscapes that may also offer opportunities for wetland restoration to benefit amphibians as they disperse from vernal pools after metamorphosis.

Forestry

New England/New York Forestry Initiative

In 2008/2009, the New England Governors' Conference commissioned a Blue Ribbon Task Force to identify the most urgent land conservation issues facing New England. The committee identified five principles to build a lasting conservation legacy for future generations of New Englanders, including "Keeping Forests as Forests". NRCS is supporting the Governor's effort by establishing the New England/New York Forestry Initiative.

The USDA All Lands Policy recognizes the important role that forests play in providing clean drinking water, supporting rural economies, and protecting wildlife habitat. NRCS is working with forest landowners and land managers to *Keep Forests as Forests* and maintain and enhance the public benefits they provide. Through the *New England/New York Forestry Initiative*, NRCS is committed to improving forest stewardship and wildlife habitat, and conserving the value of the region's forest landscape for future generations. The initiative provides a combination of technical and financial assistance to landowners and land managers in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

NRCS is working with State and local partners to promote NRCS forest stewardship opportunities for private forest landowners in this region.

Agronomy

Healthy soil gives us clean air and water, bountiful crops and forests, productive pastures, diverse wildlife, and beautiful landscapes. The Resource staff has been working to promote soil quality. To help maintain, improve, and determine the quality of our soils, the Cornell soil health assessment was added as a practice scenario. The Cornell soil health assessment protocol emphasizes the integration of soil biological measurements with soil physical and chemical measurements. These measurements help determine degraded soils and provide the framework which RI NRCS soil conservationist will work with the landowner towards managing for healthy soils.

Soils Program

by Jim Turenne, Assistant State Soil Scientist

Technical Soil Services: The Soil staff completed 10 on-site soil and geophysical investigations providing technical soils assistance to the staff and partners. The soil staff also completed an office review and update to the RI soils data for over 80 farm plans currently being worked on by the planners. The purpose of the review is to assess the 30+ year old soils data for the farms and adjust the mapping using better imagery, elevation data, and other remote sensing data.

Outreach:

A session on soils was held for the Envirothon students in November, where approximately 50 students and teaches attended the one-day session held at an Audubon facility in West Greenwich. Students learned about soil science and walked the landscape observing the different soil pits. A talk on the RI Soils Program was provided at a workshop hosted by the Society of Soil Scientists of Southern New England.

New Soils Data planned for March:

A new version of the digital RI soils data is scheduled for March, the new update will feature improvements to the spatial data including: a complete re-digitized Block Island to correct a shift on the existing data, Phase II of the Coastal Zone Soil Survey (Point Judith to Greenwich Bay), revisions to correct errors, subaqueous soil mapping for 6 RI fresh water ponds – the first ever example of a fresh water subaqueous soil survey!

Notice to Hispanic and/or Women Farmers or Ranchers

Compensation for Claims of Discrimination

If you believe that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) improperly denied farm loan benefits to you between 1981 and 2000 because you are Hispanic, or because you are female, you may be eligible to apply for compensation.

This means you may be eligible if:

1. you sought a farm loan or farm-loan servicing during that period; and
2. the loan was denied, provided late, approved for a lesser amount than requested, or approved with restrictive conditions, or USDA failed to provide an appropriate loan service; and
3. you believe these actions were based on your being Hispanic, or your being female.

If you want to register your name to receive a claims packet, you can call the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429 or access the following website:
www.farmerclaims.gov

In 2011, a claims administrator will begin mailing claims packages to those who have requested one through the Call Center or website. The claims package will have detailed information about the eligibility and claims process.

For guidance, you may contact a lawyer or other legal services provider in your community.

If you are currently represented by counsel regarding allegations of discrimination or in a lawsuit claiming discrimination, you should contact your counsel regarding this claims process.

USDA Cannot Provide Legal Advice to You.