

CONNECTION

The voice of the Earth Team volunteer.

The Earth Team Partnership Initiative

By Thomas W. Christensen, Regional Conservationist - Central



Congress established the Soil Conservation Service, the forerunner of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, based on the premise that to solve the natural resource problems of America's working lands required local participation and local leadership in partnership with the States and federal government. That was true in the 1930s during the Dust Bowl days, and it is still true today. States, districts, tribes and our local partners must be involved for private lands conservation to be effective.

Local participation also includes inviting Earth Team volunteers to become engaged in solving the natural resource problems in their own communities, helping us accomplish our mission, and spreading the word about the importance of voluntary private lands conservation.

In the Central Region, all states are involved with one or more landscape conservation initiatives, such as the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI). This high priority partnership endeavor is designed to improve the environmental health of small watersheds in the Mississippi River Basin, from Minnesota to Louisiana. We are working with our partners in priority 12-digit hydrologic units to help producers plan and implement systems of conservation practices that avoid, control, and trap nutrient runoff; protect and restore wetlands; and improve wildlife habitat, while maintaining agricultural productivity.

The MRBI work is critically important to producers and to the millions of residents throughout the region. We are dealing with important issues of nutrient management, nonpoint source pollution, and ag water quality improvement

throughout key watersheds in 13 states within the Mississippi River Basin. This initiative focuses on assisting producers and landowners who voluntarily use a system of conservation practices and management techniques designed to improve water quality and enhance the natural resource base throughout the Mississippi River Basin. We are leveraging NRCS funding with partner contributions, and collaborating with these partners to monitor water quality and assess environmental improvement and outcomes.

In this time of tight budgets and increased workloads, Earth Team volunteers can be a workforce multiplier. Volunteers can play an important role in our region's conservation work by conducting information and outreach activities, carrying out natural resource inventories and assessments, and assisting with conservation implementation follow-up.

State and local NRCS leaders should conduct a needs assessment and make a list of jobs that volunteers can perform. Explore how Earth Team volunteers can help your office better serve NRCS' customers and accomplish our mission. If you have a successful Earth Team effort, congratulations! You know the benefits of volunteers. If you need help with your effort, please ask for it. Do not hesitate to call your state's volunteer coordinator. Ask how you can improve your Earth Team effort and recruit new Earth Team volunteers. Getting local volunteers engaged in helping NRCS to address local natural resource problems will not only help yourselves, you will also develop advocates for voluntary conservation, NRCS, and the critically important work we do.

State Volunteer Coordinators—Key to Earth Team’s Success

by Michele Eginore, National Volunteer Coordinator

National Volunteer Week is April 10-16. It’s a time to recognize, thank and honor our Earth Team volunteers for their service. NRCS offices across the U.S. will host office celebrations and volunteer recognition ceremonies and simply say, “Thank you!” to our many volunteers. Our volunteers help with our conservation efforts, educational outreach and resource projects. They choose to work with us to make our land and environment better for all. In short, “*Earth Team Volunteers are the Key Foundation of Conservation.*”



Michele Eginore

If Earth Team volunteers are the key foundation of conservation, I

believe *volunteer coordinators are the key to the continued success and growth of the Earth Team program.* National Volunteer Week is a perfect time for me to say “Thank you!” to all of our coordinators. I appreciate each member of our team and I applaud you for your service to NRCS, conservation and the Earth Team program.

Our volunteer coordinators are the best!

Earth Team is becoming a more frequent topic of discussion at national headquarters and in state offices. Chief White and the regional conservationists are all encouraging state conservationists to stretch budgets and workloads by using

Earth Team volunteers to help with conservation initiatives and projects. I believe this means the work of our volunteer coordinators is going to take on increased importance and visibility within NRCS.

As we enter National Volunteer Week, know that the work of our Earth Team volunteers is appreciated. I thank you for all you do for our communities, the environment and our agency. I also want our state and area volunteer coordinators to know their service is valued and critically important to the success of our program and agency. The national Earth Team staff salutes your work and is here to help each state volunteer coordinator promote and expand your Earth Team program to best serve your state conservationist and your state.



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Volunteer Synergy - Massachusetts Volunteers Share Thoughts

Submitted by William Breed, Earth Team Volunteer, Amherst, Massachusetts

In February, Earth Team members across Massachusetts were asked to write a few sentences about how they are helping the agency in their different roles. They were also asked what they are getting out of their contributions.

Here are some responses:

Jennifer Kujawski

Earth Team member Jennifer Kujawski has had a chance to see both sides of the volunteer process. A former NRCS employee, Kujawski supervised a small Earth Team group at the National Plant Materials Center in Beltsville, Md. After taking several years out of the workforce to start a family, she recently approached NRCS about becoming an Earth Team member. She has been volunteering with District Conservationist Kate Parsons at the Pittsfield, Mass., Field Office since November 2010. Kujawski says she is glad to be able to offer her conservation plant knowledge to the field office and feels the Earth Team experience is preparing her to reenter the natural resources workforce.



Jennifer Kujawski

Richard Starkey

Earth Team member Dick Starkey spent five years on the board of the Franklin Conservation District, four years as chair of the State Commission for the Conservation of Soil, Water and Related Resources and on the executive committee of the Berkshire-Pioneer Resource, Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council. "After having worked with NRCS staff it seemed to me appropriate to join the Earth Team. My primary interest is outreach and I am prepared to talk to clubs, schools and other organizations on such topics as backyard conservation, the wonders of wetlands, and now the year of the tree," said Starkey.

He will also use opportunities to talk about NRCS programs and technical assistance.

William Breed

Earth Team member Bill Breed began volunteering at the Berkshire-Pioneer RC&D in January 2011. Breed is working part time for NRCS at the Massachusetts state office. Breed needed a volunteer opportunity to fulfill a requirement for a college course in the Renewable Energy



William Breed

Program at Greenfield Community College, in Greenfield, Mass. He works with Darlene Monds, Berkshire-Pioneer RC&D coordinator, on the Massachusetts Farm Energy Program. This will help fulfill his college volunteer requirement and also help Berkshire-Pioneer RC&D meet its goals. Breed feels there is a real synergy between the work going on at the BP RC&D and a renewable energy student's educational needs and objectives.

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Award Winner Talks About Earth Team

By Tracey Martin, Kansas Earth Team Coordinator and 2011 Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator National Award Winner

I started as an Earth Team volunteer coordinator in 2008. In the beginning, I thought I would do this for a while and see what happens. I wasn't overly excited, but the more I was around the other coordinators, the more excited I got. These people weren't going through the motions – they really cared about this program! The more I got involved, the more excited I became.

I have fun encouraging NRCS employees to utilize volunteers, but the best part is the volunteers themselves. I am fortunate that I get to interact with individuals from high school students who have never had a job before, to retired people who have "been there and done that." I love the wisdom that older folks provide – we can learn a lot from them. I also enjoy working with the youth; they are eager to learn and ask a lot of questions. It's fun to find out their interests, and I always get a kick out of asking them to use the typewriter. It amazes me that they have never even seen one.

Over the past few years, the Earth Team Program has become near and dear to my heart. I am excited about the opportunities that it gives me to interact with others, both in teaching and in learning.



Tracey Martin

Earth Team Skills on Exhibit

Photo and story by Jayme Gordon, Stream Team Coordinator, Pierce Conservation District, Puyallup, Washington

Submitted by Bob Jarrett, West Area Volunteer Coordinator, Olympia, Washington

Over the past 11 years, Earth Team Volunteers Mike Viafore and his wife, Jill Viafore, have built a number of educational exhibit items for the Pierce, Wash., Conservation District Stream Team, including an easy-to-transport event sign and rolling shovel rack.



Jill Viafore

This past summer, the Viafores built a demonstration house designed to educate the public about the benefits of rain barrels and rain gardens at exhibits and fairs.

With the easily transported house, Stream Team volunteers can now show fairgoers ways they can minimize the impact of stormwater on local streams using rain barrels and rain gardens.

Rain barrels take rainwater from roofs and divert it into a barrel. The

captured water can then be used to water gardens and landscapes during dryer periods. Rain gardens are attractive landscape features which take stormwater from roofs and other impervious surfaces and filters pollutants out as the water percolates down through the soil into the groundwater to help recharge aquifers.



Mike Viafore

Stream Team personnel say now, with the Viafore built house, they can better demonstrate to the community the benefits of rain barrels and rain gardens while discussing the importance of using conservation practices to protect local streams, lakes, and the Pacific Ocean.



The bright yellow demonstration house built by Pierce Stream Team Volunteers Mike and Jill Viafore was used at the Western Washington Fair to show how to install a home rain barrel and

miniature rain garden. Using these practices, homeowners can save water and protect nearby lakes and streams from pollution. Photos courtesy of the Pierce Stream Team.

Earth Team Planning

By Mary Giles, Public Information & Outreach Coordinator with NRCS South Missouri Water Quality Project

Editor's Note: Mary Giles is a past NRCS Employee Earth Team Award winner. This article explains how Earth Team planning can help form partnerships which can help conservation projects succeed.

Seven years ago, I accepted a position in a newly formed NRCS project office. The staff was challenged with a large service area and no discretionary funding for marketing technical services. We realized we needed to increase our presence within the watershed to effectively provide conservation technical assistance through a voluntary, cooperative approach.

This was accomplished by drawing on the time, talent, and energy of the very people we wanted to serve—the residents of the watershed. They became the main component of an outreach/education strategy that incorporated the Earth

Team as a tool to market technical services and provide conservation education programming.

Projects requiring specialized skills were developed. Community partners were engaged and targeted recruitment was directed at specific audiences.

We found collaboration with volunteers and community partners supported creativity and increased our presence within the watershed. It also raised awareness about natural resource concerns and promoted our staff's ability to provide technical assistance through NRCS Farm Bill programs.

Over the years, I have found

effective, innovative Earth Team planning involves six simple steps. I've also found the first word in each step spells the words: **Be Kind**

Brainstorm project ideas
Evaluate staff needs

Know your audience's motivators
Invest in developing partnerships
Network constantly
Diversify to enhance service

I live by this code: **Be Kind**. At the end of the day, it is not as much about how I have managed a project as it is about the kindness I have shown our volunteers during the process.

It also helps me get a good night's sleep.



Mary Giles

Earth Team Volunteer Has a Line on Conservation

By Jackie Bailey, Office Manager, Highlands County, Florida, Parks and Natural Resources Department

Submitted by Darryl Williams, Florida State Volunteer Coordinator

Dan Wilson, Sebring, Fla., Field Office's newest Earth Team Volunteer, has been collecting fishing line from the twenty bins in Highlands County. The Monofilament Recovery and Recycling Program (MRRP) encourages recycling fishing line through a network of bins and drop off locations. Monofilament fishing line lasts up to 600 years in the environment where it entangles and poisons wildlife, reduces the health of fisheries, and is a hazard to boaters, divers and swimmers. Berkley Manufacturing accepts the recycled fishing line to make fish attractors and tackle boxes.

Wilson, who also volunteers with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, is credited with making monofilament bin collection easier and efficient for anglers.



Earth Team Volunteer Dan Wilson collects fishing line for recycling to keep it from harming Florida waterways and habitat.

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Fieldwork as a Classroom

By Susan Looper, NRCS Soil Conservationist and 2011 NRCS Employee Earth Team Award Winner

Our Rupert, Idaho, NRCS Field Office staff decided to foster interest in natural resource management by giving students real-life agricultural production experience. I believe the most effective way to do this with any student is hands-on field work, so I coordinated an Earth Team volunteer project that began in March 2010. The project was developed for high school and college students interested in the agriculture industries, and aimed at increasing student knowledge about soil, plant and water relationships.

The project took more than a year of planning, but had the support of local educators, landowners, local agriculture industry field specialists, and interagency partners and technical specialists.



Susan Looper

The project was structured to meet one day a week for three hours for 33 weeks. Weekly sessions began in the Rupert Field Office with scheduled technical specialists. After each lesson, the students went to the project's host farm to apply the technical knowledge and skill they had just learned. The lesson content was planned to simulate actual field operations required for sugar beet production from planting to harvest, and engage the students in the decision making process of crop production.

Technical training was provided by soil scientists, soil laboratory technicians, nutrient management specialists, agronomists, wildlife biologists, water quality specialists and agriculture economists. The training also included special field tours with agriculture industry service providers.

The students participated in field activities that included soil pit profiling, soil sampling and soil laboratory analysis; pest

identification and monitoring techniques; and irrigation water management instrument installations and readings. They received about 15 weeks of field training before they began monitoring the host farm field operations for pests and nutrient and irrigation water needs as well as recording data using a GPS instrument.

When students were asked what they enjoyed most about their project experience, they each reflected different aspects of the project: For Tiffany, a senior at the University of Idaho, the local sugar beet factory tour topped her list. Ben, a sophomore at Minico High School, was glad he learned about the Farm Service Agency Youth Loan Program, and is considering growing sugar beets for a 4-H project. Casey, also a sophomore at Minico High School, was impressed with how much work is done in a soils lab to get soil test results, stating, "Without the results, farmers wouldn't know how much fertilizer to put on."

The Earth Team student participants earned 1 to 3 academic credits and contributed nearly 250 hours of volunteer service.

Editor's note: In December 2010, Susan Looper moved from Idaho to Nevada to become the state resource conservationist for programs at NRCS in Reno. The former Rupert Field Office soil conservationist hopes the "fieldwork as a classroom" program will continue in Idaho and begin in Nevada.



Students conduct soil pit profiling at a farm near Minico, Idaho. The soils work was part of natural resources training conducted by the Rupert, Idaho, NRCS Field Office for young Earth Team volunteers interested in agriculture careers.

The NRCS Earth Team Connection is looking for articles for our next issue.

The deadline for submission is May 13, 2011. Please send your stories, tidbits, photos and photo captions to: dick.tremain@ia.usda.gov.

Tanzanian Engineer Assists Michigan Farmers as an Earth Team Volunteer

Submitted by Juanita McCann, Field Engineer, NRCS, St. Johns Field Office, Michigan and Teresa Moore, Michigan State Volunteer Coordinator

Back home in Tanzania, Earth Team volunteer Tulakemelwa Ngasala collects rain water for household use, boils all her drinking water, and stays away from well water because of its excessive salt content. Two thirds of rural Tanzanians have no safe water to drink, and indoor plumbing is rare. Cholera, typhoid, dysentery and other diseases are common and kill thousands.

Tula, as her friends call her, is now living in Michigan. She's a 30 year old civil and water resources engineer raising three young girls while her husband works toward his Ph.D. in geology at Michigan State University.

Juanita McCann, a field engineer in the St. Johns field office, works with Ngasala. McCann said, "It's incredible Tula spends the gas money and makes arrangements to work with us. The exchange in cultures is really neat and it is inspiring

that she is so dedicated. Her background broadens our horizons and brings us a different perspective."

McCann says Ngasala has been a very effective Earth Team volunteer.

McCann admits getting Ngasala, a non-US citizen, approved as an Earth Team volunteer was a bit challenging. She said there were forms to fill out and their office had to invest some time to train Ngasala, but now that she is trained, they are reaping many rewards. "Tula can tackle a roof runoff project or a cattle crossing on her own. Tula knows what to do and that's a huge help to us," said McCann.

Sometime in the next three years, Ngasala and her family expect to go back home. She wants to help her country's rural areas. "There is a lack of educated people



District Conservationist Edwin Martinez conducts a wetland determination assisted by Earth Team Volunteer Tula Ngasala near St. Johns, Mich. Ngasala, a Tanzanian engineer, assists the St. Johns Field Office one day a week.

to tell Tanzanian farmers about conservation practices and how to protect the environment and their own health," she said. "I want to go back and help them."

Teacher Honored for Recruiting 112 Earth Team Volunteers

Photo submitted by Mary E. Giles, Public Information & Outreach, NRCS South Missouri Water Quality Project



Missouri State Conservationist J. R. Flores presents Kat Allie, professional artist and fine arts instructor at Ozarks Technical Community College and Missouri State University, with an NRCS Partnership Award at the MO NRCS Area 4 Awards Banquet in January 2011. Allie collaborated with the South Missouri Water Quality Project as a community partner and assisted with recruitment and oversight of the artistic contributions of 112 Earth Team volunteer artists.

Earth Team Helps RC&D Implement Award Winning Project

Submitted by Laura L. Coover, New Jersey State Volunteer Coordinator

Earth Team volunteers helped North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development (NJRC&D) restore a wetland, stabilize a stream bank and plant a riparian buffer. Their work helped win environmental awards and get the project featured in a conservation magazine.

The winning project rehabilitated a portion of Walnut Brook in west central New Jersey. NJRC&D and several partners constructed three acres of forested wetlands, installed bioengineering practices and restored a riparian buffer. The stream and buffer work was designed to improve water quality in Walnut Brook and the wetland to provide wildlife habitat and a functioning floodplain to provide storm water storage and reduce the potential of downstream flooding.

The \$690,000 project was awarded a New Jersey Section American Water Resources Association "Excellence in Water Resources Protection and Planning Award" and the 2010 New Jersey Governor's Environmental Excellence Award for Healthy Ecosystems. The restoration was also



Earth Team volunteers plant trees in a riparian buffer

along a stream in western New Jersey.

highlighted in the January/February Land and Water Magazine.

Over 80 Earth Team volunteers planted 1,500 native trees and shrubs in 2009 and 2010.

During the summer of 2010, when drought and heat threatened to kill their plantings, Earth Team volunteers went back and watered and mulched the plantings to protect them.



Desktop Conservationist Helps Fix Priority Watersheds

Written by Patrick Natale, North Jersey RC&D Agricultural Outreach Specialist, New Jersey
Submitted by Laura L. Coover, New Jersey State Volunteer Coordinator

Earth Team Volunteer Steve Eckstein's computer work is helping North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development Council (NJRC&D) improve his area's water quality in a big way. He's also helping farmers get conservation funding they need to improve their land.

It was 2009 and the NJRC&D had a problem. They were approved by NRCS to participate in the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP), but they needed help pinpointing program eligible farms and farmers.

AWEP is a five-year program which provides cost-share for farmers to implement best management practices to improve water quality in a selected high priority area. NJRC&D needed to identify sub-watershed areas impaired with phosphorus, sediment, and bacteria and

contact individual farmers owning properties needing help. The NJRC&D had a model showing hotspots of environmental concern, but the challenge was to link the model's hotspots with actual farms on the ground. That required tedious computer mapping work.

The NJRC&D advertised for an Earth Team volunteer to help them, but felt they had little hope of finding one. They thought Earth Team volunteers love planting trees and doing hands-on conservation activities; not spending hours doing tedious computer work. Fortunately, they got a response from Steve Eckstein, who said he was willing to help in any way he could.

Eckstein explained he was available because he had been placed on long-term disability from his physically demanding job. Eckstein has severe asthma and said data entry was a perfect place

for him to help. Eckstein said he was determined to be active and helpful in spite of his asthma so he embarked on becoming a volunteer "desktop conservationist".

Eckstein took almost a thousand publicly available tax data sheets on area farms and manually entered that information into a database that was compatible with GIS computer mapping software. Data could then be used in the AWEP work to contact farmers and improve water quality.



"Desktop Conservationist"
Steve Eckstein

Earth Team Turns an Ugly Area Into a Beautiful Attraction

Submitted by Pamela Hertzler, California State Volunteer Coordinator

Earth Team volunteers have helped transform an ugly fairground area into an attraction experts say will help boost tourism and the local economy in Mariposa, Calif.

The formerly eroded, weed-infested site on the Mariposa County Fairgrounds has been turned into the Sierra Nevada Foothills Native Plant Demonstration Garden thanks to Mariposa County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) teamwork, community donations and Earth Team volunteers. Funded by a grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, the garden now showcases a diversity of indigenous trees, shrubs and wildflowers that stabilize the soil, protect water quality and attract native pollinators.

The 2,000-square-foot site will have pathways which will be handicapped accessible when complete.

Earth Team volunteers' contributions include site planning, design and preparation; weeding and additions of soil and mulches; identification and selection of plants; installation of the irrigation system; grading and edging to comply with ADA standards; and placement of 250 plants enveloped in hand-cut wire gopher baskets.

MCRCD project manager Kris Randal said Earth Team volunteers'

contributions were pivotal. "This project could not have succeeded without their persevering commitment and sustained support," she said.

The garden will educate visitors of all ages. A retired educator is developing lesson plans and onsite activities for fourth-grade students and the garden will serve as a model for local homeowners. Randal said if residents will copy and build gardens like theirs, homeowners can increase their

property values, save money on maintenance, reduce stormwater runoff and save water.

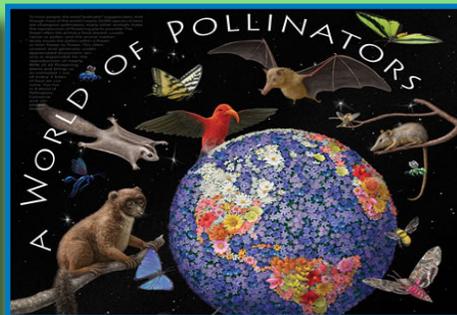
The Mariposa Native Plant Demonstration Garden and its Earth Team volunteers have received local recognition for their work. Newspaper articles have featured the garden and its environmental benefits. It also recently received the California NRCS 2010 Earth Team "Volunteers of the Year" award.



California Earth Team volunteers plant some of the 250 species of native trees and shrubs planned for a 2,000 sq. foot demonstration garden in

Mariposa County. The garden will be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and is expected to host thousands of visitors.

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Tidbits -- National Volunteer Week Ideas

Nebraska--

Our 'tid-bit' for Volunteer Week is that we have the Earth Team exhibit up in the lobby of the federal building. I design a printable thank you card for all offices to print off and sign to give to their volunteers. I email a fillable Earth Team certificate of appreciation for offices to fill out, print off, frame and present to their volunteers. We send every Earth Team volunteer in the state a small "thank you" item. This is something very small – pen, note pad, key chain, etc. That way all volunteers are recognized across the state.

I strongly encourage offices to do something locally for their volunteers. Present the card, certificate, and thank you item during a special pot luck lunch, or bring cookies and have an extended coffee break to celebrate your



Joanna Pope

volunteers during volunteer week. Joanna Pope, Nebraska State Volunteer Coordinator

Tennessee--

In Tennessee we present certificates signed by the state conservationist to volunteers across the state for their "outstanding contributions to the Earth Team Volunteer Program." Each office recognizes volunteers with recognition items, cards or luncheons. The state coordinator sends out special thank-you cards or certificates to area coordinators, area conservationists, public affairs specialists and others that have supported the volunteer program.

Dimple Geesling, Tennessee State Volunteer Coordinator



Dimple Geesling

Kansas--

Plans are underway at the Kansas state office to hold a volunteer appreciation event in the afternoon on April 13, 2011. Mary Shaffer, public information specialist, will do a presentation on the People's Garden as well as "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food." Additionally, Allen Casey, from the plant materials center, will speak about pollinators. "Volunteer Appreciation Certificates" will be presented to all volunteers in attendance and posters will be ordered from the NRCS Distribution Center, along with various brochures, to pass out to the volunteers along with seed packets. Cookies in the shapes of flowers and fruits and vegetables will be served. Jan Klaus, Kansas State Volunteer Coordinator



Jan Klaus

Natalie Freeman Wins Tennessee Traveling Trophy

Submitted by Dimple Geesling, Tennessee State Volunteer Coordinator



Tennessee Area 4 Volunteer Coordinator Natalie Freeman holds her state's traveling Area Earth Team Trophy for having the most Earth Team volunteer hours in a fiscal year. Looking on are (L to R) Chief Dave White, Area Conservationist Terrance Rudolph and State Conservationist Kevin Brown.

Tennessean Honored for Earth Team Work

Submitted by Dimple Geesling, Tennessee State Volunteer Coordinator



Former Public Affairs Specialist Perry Stevens holds a plaque honoring him for providing outstanding service to the Earth Team Volunteer Program in Tennessee. Presenting the award were NRCS Chief Dave White, State Volunteer Coordinator Dimple Geesling and State Conservationist Kevin Brown.