

CONNECTION

The voice of the Earth Team volunteer.

Celebrating Earth Team Volunteers in Action

Celebrate Earth Team Volunteers and Meet the Challenge Ahead

By Thomas Christensen, Regional Conservationist – Central



Tom Christensen

National Volunteer Week is April 15-21. This is a time we set aside each year to honor our Earth Team volunteers and thank them for their service to NRCS and the environment. The theme this year is “Celebrating Earth Team Volunteers in Action.” Please let each volunteer know we appreciate them and the actions they take to advance conservation.

This is also a good time to acknowledge NRCS staff members who work with Earth Team volunteers. These coworkers demonstrate leadership skills and show a special passion for conservation by finding ways to involve Earth Team volunteers in land-improving projects.

For example, the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) is a landscape conservation initiative focused on improving the world’s second largest watershed, including the enhancement of habitat for the millions of birds that use it as a migratory flyway. NRCS works with conservation partners and agricultural producers in the 13-state Mississippi River Basin. We use Farm Bill conservation programs and a suite of conservation practices to promote water quality, wetland restoration and wildlife habitat while maintaining agricultural productivity. There are many tasks Earth Team volunteers can do to support MRBI projects and expand our capabilities and capacity. Invite Earth Team volunteers to help us.

The EQIP Organic Initiative helps organic producers and those transitioning to organic production to employ sound conservation measures. Our efforts with organic producers are known to improve the land, maintain production, produce nutritious food and help the economies of rural communities. Earth Team volunteers can do many tasks to support this initiative. Invite more of them to help us.

In FY 2011, the Central Region led the nation in the number of Earth Team

volunteers, number of volunteer hours and in the percentage of offices participating in the program. I’m very proud of this accomplishment, but the number of volunteer hours in the Central Region dropped from FY 2010 to FY 2011. We need to reverse this trend – and we will with your leadership.

NRCS is an innovative technical agency. We like to say “yes” to challenges and then meet those challenges. Budget constraints will test us, but also provide impetus for innovation and greater efficiency. Earth Team can help us meet that test and succeed, but only if it is used. Make a list of jobs Earth Team volunteers can do and then invite them into your office. Let them assist you. Let them do their part to help us with the challenges we face and expand our conservation reach and effectiveness.

To do that, I challenge you to place at least one Earth Team volunteer in every Central Region office to assist us in serving customer needs. Invite those volunteers to conduct outreach and communications activities, assist with technical and information technology needs and conduct conservation education classes. Update your volunteer task list by conducting an office needs assessment. Find jobs Earth Team volunteers can do in your office.

If you need help with any Earth Team activity, get it. Talk to your area or state Earth Team volunteer coordinator or contact the National Earth Team office at 515-270-4864.

National Volunteer Week is a perfect time to say “thank you” to our many Earth Team volunteers for assisting us in our conservation work. It is also a good time for each office to assess their Earth Team volunteer program. Look at your workload and then look at your need for volunteer help. Look at the challenges you face, innovate and say “yes”. Meet those challenges with the help of Earth Team volunteers.

Celebrating **Earth Team** *Volunteers in Action*



National Volunteer Week *April 15-21, 2012*

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Embrace Your Earth Team Role

By Jan Klaus, Kansas State Volunteer Coordinator and 2012 National Volunteer Coordinator Award Winner

As the state volunteer coordinator for Kansas I can honestly say that the Earth Team Volunteer Program has become near and dear to my heart. Whether that is working with my wonderful and highly motivated area coordinators (who by the way have become like family to me), working with Bonnie and Michele on special projects or attending a regional training conference, everything associated with this program has made me proud to say that I am part of it.

With “volunteer” as my middle name, some would say I was destined to become the Kansas state volunteer coordinator. In 2006 I took over the role and had some big

shoes to fill. I was replacing a 10-year state volunteer coordinator by the name of Lonnie Miller. Kansas had just won the Chief’s Cup in 2005 and now I had to somehow keep the program at the top where Lonnie had taken it. Well, I guess you can say “the rest is history” with Kansas winning the Chief’s Cup again in 2009 and 2011.

There have been challenges along the way, but I will tell anyone that asks that this has been one of the most rewarding opportunities I have had in my entire career. If you get the chance to be part of this great program, give it your all and it will give back to you in so many ways.



Kansas NRCS State Conservationist Eric Banks presents the 2012 National Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator Award certificate and trophy to State Volunteer Coordinator Jan Klaus.

Wounded Warrior Volunteers in Kansas Field Office

By Kevin Religa, District Conservationist and Kansas NRCS Military Liaison

Kansas NRCS and the Earth Team Program are helping injured soldiers from Fort Riley recover from war wounds and prepare for a civilian career in agriculture. Wounded Warrior Alex Barrans is Kansas’ latest Earth Team volunteer. The Iowa native suffered a severe back injury in Iraq which now limits his daily routine.

Barrans says he isn’t sure what he is going to do after being discharged from the Army, but he knows he wants a career in agriculture. A call to Tom Roth, soil conservationist and comprehensive nutrient management planner in the Manhattan Field Service Center, convinced him to become a member of the Kansas NRCS Earth Team and learn more about NRCS.



Earth Team Volunteer Alex Barrans, right, tours the Kansas State Agronomy Department with Dr. Michel Ransom.

“I am thinking about going to college to study soils and agronomy,” said Barrans. “I have always been interested in crop consulting and soil testing. I really appreciated Tom taking me to the field and demonstrating the soil probe and soil testing.”

Along with training on soils, nutrient management, livestock waste systems, ArcMap and aerial photography, Alex was also trained on pond site evaluation and design by Soil Conservation Technician Nick Strawn.

Alex had an opportunity to tour the Kansas State University (KSU) Agronomy Department where Dr. Michel Ransom showed him the soils testing lab, computer lab and greenhouses.

Barrans is the second Fort Riley soldier to join Earth Team in Manhattan this fiscal year. Staff say they hope soldiers will continue to join Earth Team and work with them in order to become more aware of the NRCS mission.

Earth Team Volunteer Speeds Soil Testing

Submitted by Carol Donzella, Connecticut State Volunteer Coordinator

The Connecticut NRCS State Office Soils Lab is eliminating a testing backlog thanks to Earth Team volunteer Diane Lambert. She is helping the lab process soil samples for Rapid Carbon Assessment which is part of a national effort to assess soil carbon levels across the country.

NRCS Soil Scientist Donald Parizek praises her volunteer efforts. "Diane is a hardworking, conscientious person willing to help out in the field and in the lab. Her assistance has increased the efficiency of the soils staff

and I consider this a true success story within the Earth Team Volunteer Program," he said. "The agency benefits and the Earth Team volunteer gains additional knowledge and new skills as we work to meet our Rapid Carbon Assessment deadline."

Lambert holds a bachelor's degree in geography and received on-the-job training from NRCS staff. She started volunteering with the agency in November 2010 by helping staff with field soils testing. She now volunteers two days per week in the state soils lab.



Earth Team volunteer Diane Lambert prepares samples for soil testing in the Connecticut NRCS State Office Soils Lab.

Volunteer Enjoys 'Earth Work'

By Mary Anne Gonter, Biological Science Technician (Plants), Brooksville Plant Materials Center, Florida

What does Earth Team volunteer Pat Leach enjoy doing? Weeding? Yes, weeding! In a match some say is inspired, Leach volunteers one day a week at the NRCS Plant Material Center (PMC) in Brooksville, Fla., where she



Earth Team volunteer Pat Leach cleans seeds at the Brooksville Plant Materials Center in Florida. A master gardener, Leach enjoys helping the PMC with many activities including weeding.

routinely spends four or five hours going through the PMC's native plants getting rid of weeds.

There is a lot of weeding to do at the PMC and staff are very happy to have her help. They say it is an ongoing struggle to get rid of the unwanted vegetation. Plants they do not want enjoy the PMC's good growing conditions as much as the plant varieties they are developing for conservation work.

Why weed? Leach says she enjoys it. She does not want to do office work, but she wants to volunteer outside with her hands in the soil.

Leach, a retired hospital administrator, is a master gardener. She is very active in gardening circles and she coordinates the county demonstration garden. She maintains a large home garden and still has time to volunteer at the PMC.

Leach is a very enthusiastic Earth Team volunteer and PMC staff are very eager to have her help. They say she is an NRCS team member who seems happiest when she is volunteering with her hands in the earth.

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

The deadline for submission is May 13, 2012. Please send your stories, tidbits, photos and photo captions to: dick.tremain@ia.usda.gov.

Michigan Earth Team Volunteer Enjoys Giving Back

by Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist

She calls it 'giving back.' Twice a week, Susan Anderson volunteers a morning or afternoon at Big Rapids, Michigan's NRCS office. Working as an Earth Team volunteer, Anderson assists clients, files and helps staff inventory and analyze the resource concerns of area farmers and landowners.

Anderson started volunteering with NRCS seven years ago shortly after retiring from the Michigan Department of Education. She was director of School Support Services with state-wide responsibilities and a budget of \$500 million a year. She administered Michigan's non-academic education programs including child nutrition, food distribution, drivers' education and pupil transportation.

Anderson says she enjoyed her work in education, but she is enjoying her retirement, too.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to volunteer with NRCS and help clients improve their land and

the environment. This is a great opportunity for me to give back to the community and work to improve the lives of others," she said.

Jennifer Taylor is the Mecosta County district conservationist. She says Anderson's Earth Team work is making an impact in her county by doing important office tasks and giving her staff the 'gift of time.' "Thanks to Sue, we can do a more thorough job of conservation planning to help producers address resource concerns and install practices that can improve both their bottom line and the environment," Taylor said. "Sue's efforts allow us to better serve our customers and help people help the land."

Anderson's environmental impact extends beyond Mecosta County. Her work is speeding the delivery of NRCS services in other central Michigan counties. She has done this by scanning thousands of aerial slides into digital images that were then incorporated into ArcGIS mapping software.

This Earth Team volunteer veteran is very involved in field office conservation activities. She assists with HEL (highly erodible land) determinations, helps producers identify native plants that will best work on their land and she speeds office work by organizing files. She underwent security training and a background check to qualify for computer access and she is listed on the office personnel directory under the title: "volunteer."

"I love the outdoors and nature and I like the customers and staff. I believe in what NRCS is doing and I enjoy the variety of activities," Anderson said. "And I really like being able to help others and the environment as an Earth Team volunteer."



Susan Anderson

District Conservationist Offers Recruiting Tips

by Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist

Big Rapids, Mich., District Conservationist Jennifer Taylor says Earth Team volunteers like Susan Anderson (see story above) are doing great things. "Their work is measurable and appreciated, but we have a lot more that needs to get done. As a result I am always looking for additional volunteer help," Taylor said.

She routinely updates her volunteer task list and then looks for volunteers to do those tasks. "The bigger issue is getting the word out. There are many active retirees that don't think about volunteering with NRCS' Earth Team," she said.

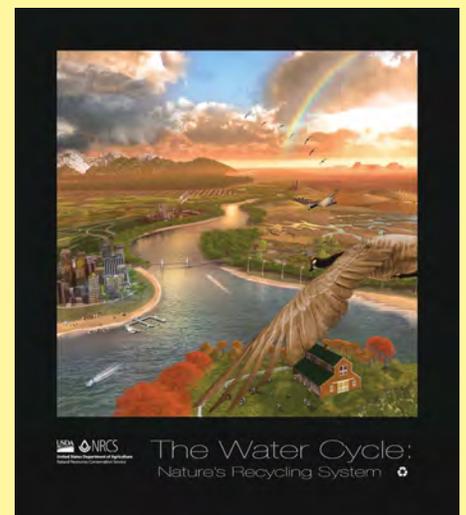
Taylor recruits Earth Team volunteers from the Master Gardener program and local schools and she recommends working with the

Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Taylor looks for anyone interested in natural resources or who is tied to the land. "Not everyone wants to do paperwork," she said. "If I can get a volunteer outside to work on the land then oftentimes I can get them to help with conservation projects. The end result is we get more conservation in place, happier clients and our Earth Team volunteers enjoy the personal pride they get from assisting."



Jennifer Taylor

Water Cycle Poster Now Available



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Earth Team Volunteers Restore Wetlands

By Jewel McKenzie, New Hampshire State Volunteer Coordinator

Resource Conservationist Brooke Smart had the help of newly trained Earth Team volunteers to remove invasive plants on Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) land in New Hampshire. They hand pulled weeds to complete wetlands restoration plans in two counties.

Conservationists consider removal of invasive vegetation critical to restoring native plant communities, wetland functions and improving the overall health of wetlands.

Smart and the three Earth Team volunteers treated five acres. The four focused on invasive plants growing along the wetlands, stream edge and buffer areas. Smart said the work was not glamorous, but they made a significant impact and definitely improved the landscape.



Earth Team volunteers help New Hampshire Resource Conservationist Brooke Smart (second from the right) pull invasive plants from buffers. Assisting are Earth Team volunteers (left to right) Silas Morency, Bob Lyon, (Smart) and Laura Beard.

Volunteering for NRCS Leads to Career Choice

By Roger Risley, Soil Survey Team Leader, Duluth, Minnesota



Earth Team volunteer Alyssa Alness helps with soils studies in northern Minnesota.

A few years ago an Earth Team volunteer helped our staff with soils work. Not only was her work very welcome, but I am happy to report she found a career in natural resources, too. This is her Earth Team success story.

I am an NRCS soil scientist. In the summer of 2010, I was doing soils survey work out of the Duluth Major Land Resource Area (MLRA) Soil Survey Office and I had the help of an Earth Team volunteer named Alyssa Alness. She used an electronic tablet to record field survey findings and her “extra set of hands” sped my work. During the winter of 2011, she continued to volunteer at our office and compiled the data she had collected in the field. This not only helped us, but it allowed Alyssa see a complete range of what was involved in being a soil scientist on the MLRA Staff.

Alyssa found out about NRCS’ Earth Team Volunteer Program from her father. He made sure his daughter learned about the natural resources field and volunteered with NRCS. This exposure led to a love for the great outdoors and to getting a degree in natural resources management from the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Alyssa tells me her experience at NRCS made her realize that she wanted her life-long career to focus in on natural resources. Today she works full-time as a resource conservation technician at the Scott County Soil and Water Conservation District Office in Jordan, Minn. This proves to me that the Earth Team Volunteer Program is not only improving our lands, but that it is making a difference in the lives of people that volunteer. Alyssa Alness is my proof.

Job Shadow Leads to Hiring Plans

by Charles Leinen, Civil Engineer, Omaha, Nebraska



Earth Team volunteer Carlie Mander, helps Civil Engineering Technician Tim Helman (center) and Soil Conservation Technician Troy Couchman (right) layout terraces in Lancaster County Nebraska. Mander, an Iowa State University civil engineering student, signed up as an Earth

Team volunteer to job shadow field office staff. Mander told staff she is very interested in a career with the NRCS as a civil/environmental engineer and Nebraska NRCS plans to hire her into a Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) position during the summer of 2012.

Volunteer Work Benefits Riparian Buffers

by Jewel McKenzie, State Volunteer Coordinator, with Nels Liljedahl, District Conservationist, New Hampshire

A recent visit to an NRCS contract-holder's project site showed the successful establishment of a 15-acre riparian buffer planting in North Conway, N.H. The entire planting was made over a week in May 2010 by 15 Earth Team volunteers from the Fryeburg Academy's Pequawket Valley Alternative School in Fryeburg, Maine, and a contractor. The plantings consisted of a 1,400-foot long buffer with 450 feet of interior shrub zone and pollinator plantings.

What used to be a 50-acre corn field with corn being harvested right up to the Saco River is now a well-established riparian buffer. The plantings are preventing soil erosion and keep part of the field from being lost each year through streambank sloughing.

Earth Team Volunteers Assist in Wet Meadow Conservation

By Kim Santos and Beth Huntone, ERSL, Greensboro, North Carolina

Earth Team volunteers from the NRCS East Remote Sensing Laboratory (ERSL) in Greensboro, N.C., worked alongside other community volunteers during the T. Gilbert Pearson Audubon Society's Price Park Wet Meadow Clean-Up on Saturday January 28th, 2012.

The Audubon Society manages several acres in Price Park as a wet meadow for bird and wildlife conservation.

Wet meadows feature a variety of hydrophilic plants that grow well in saturated soil. They offer many environmental advantages including collecting storm water runoff to help control seasonal flooding, act as a

natural filter to improve water quality and create a fertile habitat for a multitude of wildlife. The Price Park Wet Meadow attracts many species of birds and insects, including the famous Monarch butterfly, which is known for migrating between Canada and Mexico.

Earth Team volunteers removed encroaching weed trees and improved the habitat for many species. They put in a hard day's work and left feeling rewarded for preserving a wet meadow that will benefit us all.



Earth Team volunteers gathered for the group photo at the Audubon Society's Price Park Wet Meadow Clean-Up. Back row left to right are Brent Vargo, John Bowlin and Robert Dildine. Front row left to right are Kristyn Gill, Amanda Reppel, Anne Pollok, Kim Santos and Beth Huntone.

My Earth Team Success Story—The Start of an NRCS Career

By Adria Smith, Kansas NRCS

Editor's note: Adria Smith joined Earth Team as a high school student. She is now a student trainee soil conservationist looking forward to a career with NRCS. Here is her story:

I heard about the Earth Team program through Mr. Eric Banks, the Kansas state conservationist. We go to the same church and he spoke with my mother about this program. I began an apprenticeship at the state office in Salina the spring semester of my senior year in high school.

I met several employees in the state office and I had an opportunity to job-shadow them. I soon discovered Earth Team was much more than I had expected. I learned over 16,500 people have accumulated nearly a half-million Earth Team volunteer hours in Kansas since 1985. This is an amazing statistic and I soon decided I wanted to share their enthusiasm and dedication to the motto of "Helping People Help the Land."



Adria Smith

I would recommend the Earth Team program to anyone, not just other high school seniors. It is a great and humbling experience. People volunteer for different reasons: some find it satisfying to help others, some do it in hopes of becoming closer to the great agency of NRCS, some do it to just help the environment, but, truly, it does not matter what inspires you – just do it.

Working the past two summers with NRCS I have learned much. I have observed various positions in the different offices within the agency, but I have found myself to be more intrigued with field office personnel who do hands-on work helping farmers and producers.

What I like best about being a student trainee soil conservationist is working outside with farmers on the conservation planning and helping them with crop and erosion problems. I enjoy surveying and staking waterways and terraces and I look forward to the future.

This is a career path I can enjoy and I am grateful for this opportunity to work with NRCS. And to think it all started with a chance conversation at church and signing up as an Earth Team volunteer.

What Do I Want to Be When I Grow Up?

By Jan Klaus, Kansas State Volunteer Coordinator



Range Specialist Toni Flax (standing right) explains grass management to students at a conservation education field day at a youth camp in Kirwin, Kansas. Flax is assisted by Soil Conservation Technician Zach Roth.

It was 1997. High school student Toni Flax was bothered with the "What do I want to be when I grow up?" question. Earth Team helped her find the answer.

As a high school student, Flax found she really enjoyed participating in the Future Farmers of America (FFA) Range Judging Contest. She trained for the competition and was introduced to the local NRCS office staff. She liked what NRCS staff was doing and signed up to assist them as an Earth Team volunteer. She worked with them and learned more about the agency. She assisted staff in the field, learned to make maps and soon she had an answer to her nagging question. Flax knew exactly what she wanted for a career – to be a range specialist with NRCS.

Flax started college and continued to volunteer with NRCS. In the summer of

2000 she was hired by NRCS and placed in the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP). After graduation, the agency hired her to be a range specialist in El Dorado, Kansas. Since then there have been other assignments and a promotion. Flax is now a multi-county range specialist stationed at Hill City.

Flax credits her Earth Team volunteer service for introducing her to a career she loves. She is enthusiastic about sharing her good fortune with others and was recently named an area Earth Team coordinator. Flax is happy with the assignment. She says she can now assist her area with recruiting students to the Earth Team and hopefully help new volunteers answer their own, "What Do I Want to Be When I Grow Up?" question. Who knows, Flax says, the answer might be, "Working for NRCS."