

2011 NRCS Annual Report

A Pilot Initiative in
Arkansas,
Georgia and
Mississippi



Message from the Chief

Dave White, NRCS

Dear Conservation Partners:

Today, one in six Americans lives in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau—and 90 percent of counties with the highest poverty rates are in rural America. These are also communities with high numbers of Historically Underserved groups, like African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans.

Last year, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack launched the StrikeForce Initiative, a cross-agency effort to accelerate assistance to Historically Underserved groups. Through this initiative, USDA is working to ensure all producers have access to programs that can help them thrive, including proven conservation programs.

In partnership with local community-based organizations, three USDA agencies—Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency and Rural Development—are working to improve USDA's outreach to these communities in order to increase their access to—and participation in—our valuable programs. We're currently piloting the StrikeForce Initiative in 137 counties in Arkansas, Georgia and Mississippi.

NRCS is working in **three key areas** to propel this initiative:

1. **We're expediting our service**, placing a high priority on enrolling producers in StrikeForce counties quickly, so they can start implementing conservation and seeing the benefits. We have also placed a premium on providing fast service to these communities in the wake of recent natural disasters.
2. **We're expanding outreach and participation**, devoting staff resources to outreach and local education seminars in the pilot states to let producers know that assistance is available and help them understand what's needed to take advantage of these programs.
3. **We're removing barriers**, identifying regulatory roadblocks to getting service to the StrikeForce counties and getting assistance to Historically Underserved and Limited Resource producers.

In fulfilling its commitment to the StrikeForce Initiative, NRCS augmented its allocations in these three states by providing \$6 million in additional financial and technical assistance to Historically Underserved and Limited Resource producers.

Since we began this initiative a year ago, we've helped hundreds of producers make conservation work on their lands—increasing productivity while also improving their bottom lines. The following pages highlight just a few of our successes.

We're committed to ensuring all producers across the nation have access to conservation programs. By working together, we can support a productive agricultural industry while also preserving the health of our environment and the sustainability of our natural resources.

Yours in Conservation,

Dave White, NRCS Chief

Arkansas

StrikeForce Counties: Arkansas, Bradley, Chicot, Clark, Columbia, Dallas, Desha, Drew, Hempstead, Howard, Jackson, Lafayette, Lawrence, Lee, Mississippi, Monroe, Nevada, Newton, Ouachita, Phillips, Randolph, Searcy, Sevier, St. Francis and Woodruff

Newton County

Although raging waters had subsided at Deanna Young’s home in Ponca, Ark., a flood of emotions hit her when she found out USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) would pay 100 percent of the cost of protecting her home from falling into Adds Creek.

After the creek flooded her property, washing away the stream bank next to the house where she lives with her three children, Young qualified for NRCS assistance. But Young couldn’t afford the required cost-share, and the bank turned down her loan request.

The cost-share waiver was approved, and work began on the Youngs’ property. It was completed within two months.

Sevier County

Lee Pauley, an 84-year-old farmer from Mineral Springs, Ark., plants and harvests a variety of produce to sell at county farmer’s markets. Pauley was introduced to NRCS by the Silas Hunt Community Development Corporation and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, one of NRCS’ conservation partners.

And now, thanks to financial and technical assistance from NRCS, Pauley was able to install an irrigation project on his property. He no longer uses a bucket to irrigate his peas, watermelon, potatoes, cabbage and other crops.

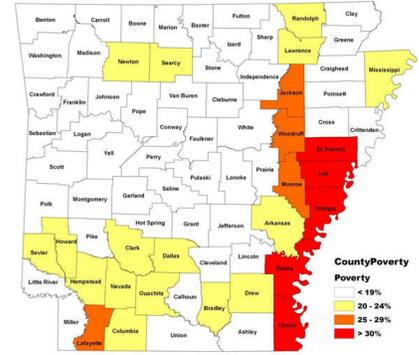
Pauley was also able to install an irrigation well. The well is equipped with a submersible pump that pumps 40 gallons of water a minute, allowing Pauley to use drip lines for irrigation. In addition, NRCS helped fund the installation of 4,620 feet of PVC irrigation pipeline underground. This pipeline connects to 86 sprinklers that water about 10 acres from the well.

Lawrence County

Heavy rains severely eroded the streambank adjacent to a sewer pumping station, water main and city street in Lynn, Ark. But thanks to a 90 percent cost-share from NRCS, the town of just over 300 inhabitants was able to get the damage repaired.

The work consisted of grading and shaping the existing channel and placing rip rap on each side for 150 feet to stabilize the banks.

“We could not have done the repair without NRCS funds and technical expertise,” says Mayor Van Doyle. “The whole project went off without a hitch. Myself and the citizens of our small city are very grateful.”



Margaret Lonadier (right), Newton County district conservationist, meets with Deanna Young to discuss how NRCS can protect her home.



Lee Pauley (right) discusses his farming operation with NRCS employees Abe Hester and Burthel Thomas.



A contractor completes work on a streambank stabilization project in Lynn, Ark.



Adam Eades, district conservationist in Pocahontas, Ark. (left), and Stuart Davis, farmer in Warm Springs, Ark., meet to follow up on progress made in his operation.

Randolph County

Stuart Davis, a farmer from Warm Springs, Ark., has a diverse five-acre operation. Not only does he produce squash, okra, beans, tomatoes, peppers and pumpkins, but also truffles and ginseng.

But the well on his property, which irrigated the vegetables he sells locally and supplied water to his house, had almost dried up.

Davis went to the bank for a loan to install a new water system, but was turned down. Luckily, 90 percent cost-share assistance from NRCS helped him dig a new well and install an irrigation pipeline. The new system has increased water efficiency and production, and has improved his family's quality of life.

"This is my livelihood," Davis says. "I used to go to the back door of restaurants and other local vendors to sell my produce. Now, I'm establishing an expanded local produce stand where I can more effectively market my produce."



Left to right: Burthel Thomas, assistant state conservationist for South, Ark.; Todd Sewell, district conservationist for Hope, Ark.; and Sandra Martin discuss Martin's organic farm.

Hempstead County

Sandra (Sandy) Martin has a passion to help people in need—and a 108-acre farm in Patmos, Ark., which has been in her family for more than 150 years. Martin wants to use her farm to train at-risk youths and adults how to farm, package and market produce.

She received a 90 percent cost-share from NRCS to build a high tunnel, which will extend her growing season by at least two months a year. This will enable Martin to get her produce to market before most of her competitors and also increase her profits by producing more than one crop per year.

Martin plans to plant a wide variety of vegetables such as tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, peppers, earlier okra and greens. She is also working with NRCS to implement a number of other conservation practices on her farm.



Brian Gawf (right), NRCS construction inspector, looks at a trench created to hold rocks on the levee around a sewage treatment facility lagoon.

St. Francis County

This spring, when water from excessive rains damaged the sewage treatment facility in Hughes, Ark., and the lagoon ponds began to breach, Mayor Larry Owens contacted NRCS to help prevent total failure of the surrounding embankment.

"Raw sewage was flowing into a creek," says NRCS state engineer Walt Delp. "Without quick action, the contamination would have spread downstream, impacting the entire community."

The sewage leak and potential wastewater contamination of groundwater resources could have caused serious health threats to the community, in addition to environmental problems in the area's lakes and streams.

Mayor Owens says that he and Hughes as a community appreciate NRCS and its assistance. "[NRCS'] speedy reaction led to successfully averting what could have been a huge problem for our community," he says. "It's good to have programs like this to help take care of us in these types of emergency situations."

Georgia

StrikeForce Counties: *Appling, Atkinson, Baker, Baldwin, Ben Hill, Berrien, Bulloch, Calhoun, Candler, Charlton, Clay, Clinch, Coffee, Colquitt, Cook, Crisp, Decatur, Dodge, Dooley, Early, Emanuel, Evans, Grady, Hancock, Irwin, Jefferson, Jenkins, Johnson, Laurens, Macon, Miller, Mitchell, Montgomery, Peach, Pulaski, Quitman, Randolph, Screven, Seminole, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Taliaferro, Tattnall, Taylor, Telfair, Terrell, Thomas, Tift, Toombs, Treutlen, Turner, Ware, Warren, Washington, Wayne, Webster, Wheeler, Wilcox and Wilkes*

Baldwin County

Jere Leverett always made it a priority to take care of the land on his picturesque, 110-acre Oconee Sands Farm, just outside Milledgeville, Ga. But operating a cattle breeding operation on the Oconee River made Leverett's attempts at conservation difficult.

To help protect the Oconee River, Leverett was awarded cost-share funds, which he used to install 2,622 feet of fence to prevent his 25 cattle from getting into the water. The fence protects the river from bacteria and helps prevent soil erosion along its banks.

Leverett was also able to build a heavy-use area on the farm with an alternative water source in the form of water troughs. As a result, Leverett says, not only is the river protected, but in addition, "animal health has improved and the survival rate of calves has increased."

Terrell County

John and Julia Canty moved to Dawson, Ga. less than five years ago, but in that short time the couple has grown a small garden into a half-acre operation in their backyard. They produce a variety of fruits and vegetables, including collards, okra, peas, tomatoes, squash, watermelon and zucchini.

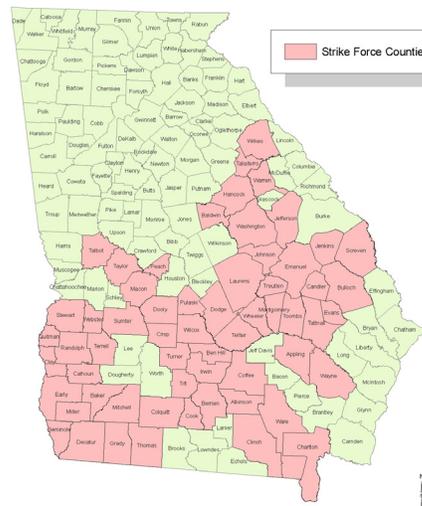
At times, it has been a tough job, especially for the years they used a hose to water their plots. But with technical and financial assistance from NRCS, the Cantys have been able to dig a well and install a solid-set irrigation system. Now the couple, married 42 years, has a steady supply of water to help them grow their farm.

Hancock County

When they retired, Bedell and Geneva Finley bought a 23-acre farm outside of Sparta, Ga. The farm had 131 pecan trees and a large pasture. To keep from having to bush-hog the pasture twice a year, the Finleys acquired cows. But that caused wear on the land, especially through overgrazing.

To minimize the impact of the livestock, the Finleys implemented rotational grazing and installed watering facilities in their newly divided pastures. With funding from NRCS, they put in cross fencing for grazing, installed heavy use areas for feeding and watering, drilled a well that delivers water to different areas, planted longleaf pines for wildlife habitat and planted clover in their pastures to help control soil erosion.

Bedell Finley says that this way of farming is more efficient and less labor-intensive. Both the land and the cows have benefited.



NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Corey New (left) and Jere Leverett (right) stand in front of a heavy-use area on Oconee Sands Farm.



NRCS helped John and Julia Canty develop a water source on their fruit and vegetable farm.



Bedell and Geneva Finley own several cows so they don't have to bush-hog their pasture.



John Lowe no longer relies on a five-gallon bucket to water his pecan orchard.

Macon County

In 2005, John Lowe planted 95 pecan trees on a small piece of land near Montezuma, Ga. He filled up a 300-gallon water tank and drove to the field, where he used an old five-gallon bucket to hand-water the trees. He spent four to five hours watering the trees every day, three days each week.

NRCS was able to offer a 90 percent cost-share for Lowe to install an irrigation system. Thanks to his new whole-farm irrigation plan, he now spends just five minutes a day watering the trees.

Lowe has a system better than he ever dreamed of. And now other local farmers, inspired by his example, are seeking out NRCS.

Screven County

Relinda Walker convinced her father to let her transition the family farm in Sylvania, Ga. to an organic operation growing peanuts, peas and onion seedlings.

Through NRCS, she was able to install a six-acre sprinkler system on her farm.

“It’s expanded my ability to do intensive management of my vegetable crops and to grow things with less water,” she says.

Walker Farms is among the first to successfully grow an organic onion seedbed and now sells organic onion seedlings to other farmers. The farm also harvested the first Georgia crop of certified organic peanuts to go to market.

Since then, Walker has installed a high tunnel to extend the growing season and a five-acre sprinkler system.



NRCS Engineer David Drewry and Relinda Walker with her organic vegetables.

Irwin County

Jerome Powell, a third-generation fruit and vegetable farmer outside Fitzgerald, Ga., believes in conserving water wherever possible. After he learned about NRCS from reading newsletters and seeing a presentation by a soil conservationist, he applied for assistance.

He completed his first irrigation project on 14 acres of watermelon and other crops. He is now installing, with the help of NRCS irrigation engineer Andrew Swain, an irrigation well, a micro-irrigation system and irrigation water management on an additional 28.7 acres.

This work has helped Powell make significant changes to his operation. "Where I was using three gallons of water, I now use one, for example," he says.

The irrigation system has helped him get his crops to market faster and save on his expenses.

Quitman County

For several years, George Cathrall watched helplessly as he lost irreplaceable top soil on his property, Sunnyview Farms. Gullies carried the precious resource away during heavy rains.

He tried every possible solution he could think of to correct the problem. But it persisted until Cathrall partnered with NRCS.

NRCS assisted Cathrall in installing terraces to control soil erosion and a grassed waterway to provide a safe outlet for water. Livestock were fenced out of a stream, an alternative water supply was put in place and heavy use areas with water troughs were created.

In addition, Cathrall improved forest stands by using pest management and prescribed burning in order to control the undergrowth and participates in a multi-state effort to restore the native longleaf pine ecosystem.

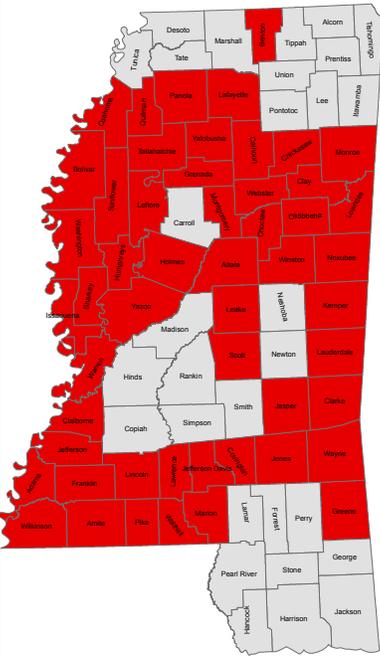


Jerome Powell forms a planting bed and lays down the irrigation system under the plastic cover.



George Cathrall worked with NRCS to install conservation practices that greatly reduced soil erosion on his farm.

Mississippi's 52 Strike Force Counties



Mississippi

StrikeForce Counties: Adams, Amite, Attala, Benton, Bolivar, Calhoun, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Claiborne, Clarke, Clay, Coahoma, Covington, Franklin, Greene, Grenada, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Jasper, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Kemper, Lafayette, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Leake, Leflore, Lincoln, Lowndes, Marion, Monroe, Montgomery, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Panola, Pike, Quitman, Scott, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Walthall, Warren, Washington, Wayne, Webster, Wilkinson, Winston, Yalobusha and Yazoo

Mississippi StrikeForce Outreach

As in the other two StrikeForce pilot states, NRCS Mississippi contracted with local community-based organizations to hold dozens of outreach meetings. These meetings, held between April 2010 and September 2011, were targeted to Historically Underserved and Limited Resource producers in the 52 StrikeForce counties across the state.

Total meetings:	77
Total attendees:	3,039
Total program applications resulting from these meetings (to date):	117

Clarke County

Barbara Robinson, a lifelong resident of Clarke County, is known as one of the local “blueberry ladies.” The small farmer owns and operates B&W Orchards near Clarkedale, Miss.

Her 20 acres of farmland is mostly gardens, fruit trees and blueberry orchards. Five acres are dedicated to blueberries and muscadine grapes, which she grades and packages on the farm and then sells to local markets.

After learning about high tunnel houses, Robinson contacted NRCS and applied for assistance. She received funding last fall to install a high tunnel, which is already producing okra, tomatoes, carrots, broccoli, radishes and spinach. The high tunnel extended her normal growing season by eight weeks, adding that much more to her harvest—and income. She liked the first high tunnel so much, she built another one!

Robinson is now receiving NRCS assistance to install a well and an irrigation system.



Barbara Robinson looks at tomato plants, which will be planted in her new high tunnel.

Warren County

Robert Short has used organic practices on his farm in Flowers, Miss., for years, long before he knew what “organic” meant.

“Organic—we never heard of it,” he says. “This is what my grandfather did 60 years ago. We couldn’t afford to buy fertilizer, so we cleaned out the chicken houses and spread it across the fields each year.”

Now Short uses horse manure and crop rotation to keep his four acres of okra, beans, watermelon, squash and other crops productive. He also uses many other environmentally friendly practices recommended by NRCS, and is now transitioning his operation to organic production under USDA’s National Organic Program.

NRCS has also provided Short with assistance in building a well and a game fence.



Robert Short and his granddaughter, Camiren, pick okra on Short's four-acre farm.

Claiborne County

Arthur Phelps is a small cattle farmer who lives on the same farm he was born and raised on 76 years ago. Before coming back home to farm, Phelps worked 19 years with Letourneau Technologies, in Vicksburg, Miss., helping to build oil rigs and spending a lot of time offshore. He was part of the maintenance crew responsible for painting and sandblasting.

After word-of-mouth led him to seek assistance from NRCS, Phelps has been successful in completing at least 20 different conservation projects on his farm, including two ponds, fencing, nutrient management, critical area stabilization, streambank stabilization and, most recently, grade stabilization and diversion. Phelps has completed just about every conservation practice you can think of except for tree planting.



Arthur Phelps (left) and Patrick Smith, NRCS soil conservation technician in Port Gibson, Miss., monitor a grade stabilization that was installed to stop two severe erosion sites and also serves as a watering source for the cattle.



Carl Brown on his 22-acre beef farm.

Lincoln County

Carl Brown has been raising cattle since he was 15, when he bought his first cow for \$400. Today, Brown owns a 22-acre beef farm south of Brookhaven, Miss., where he has 23 cows.

The retired Mississippi State Police officer has worked in the cattle business for more than 30 years. NRCS has played a crucial role in Brown's success, helping him implement pasture best management practices like prescribed grazing, cross fencing and a grade stabilization structure.

Quitman County

Conservation has run through Frank Wilbourn's veins since he was a youngster working alongside his father. Now he has bought his family's place in Lambert, Miss., where he earns a living growing herbs, fruits and vegetables.

NRCS helped the 71-year-old construct a high tunnel and irrigation system. Wilbourn grows potatoes, greens, tomatoes, eggplant, squash, okra, watermelons and herbs, among other Delta favorites. He sells his goods at a farmer's market and out of his pickup truck.

The high tunnel has allowed him to lengthen his growing season, and the irrigation system has equipped him with a well, a pump and an efficient underground delivery system.



Frank Wilbourn (left) shows cabbage growing in his new high tunnel to Soil Conservation Technician Larry Pride.

StrikeForce Outreach Meetings

Each StrikeForce state has held numerous public outreach meetings to reach Historically Underserved and Limited Resource producers. These meetings reflect NRCS' commitment to both increasing funding and addressing disparities in knowledge about and access to conservation assistance in persistent poverty counties. NRCS contracted with local community-based organizations to hold these meetings.

State	Attendees
Mississippi	3,039
Arkansas	932
Georgia	1,922

Targeted Financial Assistance in StrikeForce Counties

This table reflects NRCS conservation investment in Limited Resource and Historically Underserved farmers and ranchers in 137 StrikeForce counties. 2010 funding figures are shown for comparison. This table shows only financial assistance dollars; many of the StrikeForce funds were allocated to conservation technical assistance.

Historically Underserved*	2010			2011			Percent Change between 2010 & 2011 (due to StrikeForce)		
	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled
Arkansas	13	189,448	365	62	796,916	57,840	377%	321%	15734%
Georgia	29	450,621	1,807	52	1,151,130	35,628	79%	155%	1872%
Mississippi	129	1,196,225	3,951	392	3,235,375	160,643	204%	170%	3966%
Total	171	1,836,294	6,123	506	5,183,421	254,111	196%	182%	4050%

Limited Resource**	2010			2011			Percent Change between 2010 & 2011 (due to StrikeForce)		
	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled	Number of Contracts	Dollars Obligated	Acres Enrolled
Arkansas	9	41,888	277	32	518,015	2,973	256%	1137%	974%
Georgia	8	190,023	712	11	248,724	446	38%	31%	-37% ***
Mississippi	31	211,571	872	71	588,990	2,065	129%	178%	137%
Total	48	443,482	1,861	114	1,355,729	5,484	138%	206%	195%

*Historically Underserved producers include Asians, African Americans, Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans.

**A Limited Resource producer is defined as:

1. A person with direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than \$163,200 (adjusted for 2012) in each of the previous two years, and
2. A person with a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four or less than 50 percent of county median household income in each of the previous two years.

***The negative change is because, while the number of enrollees increased between 2010 and 2011, the average acreage per producer shrank, which is consistent with the Limited Resource producer population. NRCS Georgia also provided \$141,748 to small farmers in 2011, resulting in 9 contracts on more than 315 acres.