



July 2013 NRCS - The Caribbean Newsletter

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service sent this bulletin at 08/16/2013 12:40 PM EDT



Director's Corner

As you all know, Jason Weller was recently selected as our NRCS Chief after serving as Acting Chief for 8 months. Jason brings to NRCS a long-standing commitment and understanding of the agency.

We are just rounding the corner to reach our year-end finish line. As runners say, we train for

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The Rapid Carbon Assessment Initiative (RaCA) is Underway in the Caribbean Area



The NRCS Caribbean Area (CB) and its Soil Survey Division staff welcome the opportunity to be part of this second phase effort to inventory soil carbon stocks nationwide. By the late 1800's, more than 90 percent of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands were deforested for agriculture, mostly sugarcane production. Today the islands have predominately young to old secondary forest because much of the agricultural land has been abandoned. The RaCA

initiative will be a great opportunity for the NRCS-CB to inventory the effects of soil properties, agricultural management and land use on soil carbon stocks.

The Caribbean RaCA project will study a total of 30 sites throughout Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The soil samples will be sent to Dr. Erika Marin-Spiotta, Assistant Professor and Lead Principal Investigator for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Department of Geography, Biogeochemistry and Biogeography Lab. Dr. Marin-Spiotta is studying how environmental and historical factors affect organic carbon turnover in tropical soils through a cooperative agreement with NRCS.

*this very moment,
to finish strong. Let
me tell you that you
all are looking good
as we reach the
finish line for FY
2013. With your
help, I am positive
that we will close
our books
favorably, meet our
end of year goals,
and have some
strength left to
start our new FY
2014.*

Finish strong!

*Yours in
Conservation,
Edwin Almodóvar,
NRCS-CB Director*

During May 2013, the NRCS-CB Soil's staff collected soil samples from 6 different sites in Puerto Rico, including sites in the municipalities of Rincón, Lajas, Guánica, Juana Díaz, Las Marías and Aguadilla. In June, we collected soil samples from 4 sites in St. Croix and St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands.

In early July, Michael Jones, SDQS from WV, visited the NRCS-CB Soils staff and trained us on how to assemble and use the VNIR equipment and how to fill out the RaCA workbook. He also participated in sample collection at a site in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico, on US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) property. An FWS representative and university summer students also took part in that sample collection.



The 11 sites that were recently collected represent a diversity of soils from different Major Land Resources Areas (270-Humid Mountain and Valleys, 271-Semiarid Mountain and Valleys, 272-Humid Coastal Plains and 273-Semiarid Coastal Plains) and under different land uses such as cropland, pastureland, forestland and wetlands.

The Rapid Carbon Assessment in the Caribbean Area has met its goals of 1) sampling a diversity of resources, soils and land uses and 2) involving a diversity of partners and stakeholders in soil sample collections. The large number of people involved in the initiative all contributed to the main objective of this project: to increase our knowledge of how to conserve and increase our soil carbon stocks nationwide. The NRCS National Soil Science Division, the MLRA MO-3, the University of Wisconsin, University of Puerto Rico – Mayagüez professors and students, NRCS field office staff, local and federal agency personnel, land users and NRCS-CB Soils' staff members – ALL are contributing to the success of this project.

The NRCS-CB Soils' Division thanks all our partners for their support!

Seasonal High Tunnel and Organic Transition Initiatives



A new market has developed in the Caribbean Area – customers are willing to pay more for organic and nutritional products. To help local farmers meet increased demand for specialty and organic products, the NRCS Caribbean Area (CB) has launched two new EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) Initiatives: Seasonal High Tunnels and Organic Transition. The Seasonal High Tunnel (SHT) and Organic Transition (OT) Initiatives are voluntary programs that provide

financial and technical assistance to farmers.

The **Seasonal High Tunnel** practice is a polyethylene-covered structure called a Hoop House – similar to a greenhouse but with no electrical, heating, and/or mechanical ventilation system – that is used to cover high-value crops to extend the growing season in an environmentally-safe manner. **Organic Transition** helps farmers to move from standard to organic production by addressing natural resource concerns and implementing new practices to meet the requirements of the National Organic Program (NOP, specifically reduction or elimination of chemical pesticides and fertilizers). Under the controlled conditions used in seasonal high tunnels and organic farming, farmers can greatly reduce water, energy, pesticide and fertilizer use. These practices save resources and are less complex to manage than outdoor/field conditions, where even climate change can affect crops.

This fiscal year, NRCS-CB received 23 applications for these new programs, and 12 more applicants have been deferred to next year. NRCS staff have visited farmers, posted announcements in farm and garden

stores, and delivered public outreach presentations encouraging participation in these programs. Said NRCS Natural Resources Specialist, Ismael Matos, *"I have learned a lot in this new field of planting under roofed conditions, and our clients have developed new methods of planting under semi-organic conditions."*

These new initiatives have helped create several success stories of young farmers starting new agri-businesses and learning to be both employers and farmers. By using seasonal high tunnels, they can produce goods to support a family on a very limited piece of land. NRCS-CB has distributed Hoop Houses around the Caribbean and we expect to have a long list of eligible farmers in both initiatives next year.



"We met successful farmers producing on 500-meter lots using practices such as hydroponics and aquaponics. I made field trips with potential clients to visit these operations and learn from the farmers, and as a result a partnership and network between these farmers was developed!" said Mr. Matos.

The new SHT/OT farmers are learning from each other and sharing ideas, clients and even physical labor! Some of the farmers had previously planted under outdoor field conditions, and decided to move to producing in a controlled environment. Others are new farmers with experience in professional fields (organizing, writing proposals, record keeping) but with little experience in farming. Both groups of farmers were fast learners, and took several workshops on planting organically under a hoop house.

NRCS-CB thanks our partners in these initiatives: our sister agencies (FSA and Rural Development) that provided operational loans to supplement the farmers' budgets, as well as the PR Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension Service and Cooperative Extension Service who provided training and technical assistance to farmers.

For details, please contact Mr. Ismael Matos at 787-766-5206 x 128 or Ismael.matos@pr.usda.gov. Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=stelprdb1046250 to learn more about the USDA-NRCS **Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative** and <http://go.usa.gov/Uo9> or www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip03/Organic.html for details on the **Organic Initiative**. Find out about other NRCS initiatives and programs at <http://go.usa.gov/UoX>.

Join us for the 2013 Feds Feed Families Food Drive!



Summer is underway and NRCS in the Caribbean is again participating in the **Feds Feed Families Food Drive!** This food drive is a perfect way to give back to our communities and help make a difference in the lives of those in need, as another part of our efforts to help people every day, in every way. We will be donating to local charities in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The following list provides examples of non-perishable foods being collected:

- Canned Proteins (tuna, salmon, chicken, peanut butter)
- Canned Fruits in Own Juices or Light Syrup (pineapples, peaches and pears)
- 100% Fruit Juices (all sizes including juice boxes)
- Grains (pasta, whole wheat pasta, rice, brown rice, macaroni and cheese)
- Condiments (tomato sauces, light soy sauce, ketchup, mustard, light salad dressings)
- Low Sodium/No Salt Added Canned Vegetables (mixed, green beans, corn)
- Soups (beef stew, chili, chicken noodle, turkey rice)
- Multigrain Cereal (Cheerios, cornflakes, grape nuts, raisin bran)





The following PR Field Offices are collecting items: Arecibo, Caguas, Juana Diaz and Mayagüez, as well as the State Office. In the USVI, donations can be brought to the St. Croix Service Center (sponsored by RD). Please bring your donations to one of the collection sites before the food drive ends on August 28, 2013. For details on the food drive in Puerto Rico, please contact Nilda González at 787-766-5205 x. 116. For details on the USVI food drive, please contact Rena Elias at 340-778-5224.

Mayagüez People's Garden: Harvesting for the Community



Since its Inauguration on February 27, 2013, the Mayagüez People's Garden has produced over 275 pounds of fresh, high quality produce that has been regularly donated to Casa Belén in Mayagüez. The July harvest included: eggplants, mangoes, peppers, plantains, herbs, passion fruit, and bread fruit.

NRCS-CB staff, interns, volunteers and partners have lovingly tended the garden. They have created an oasis that even local wildlife like to visit! For more information on the Mayagüez People's Garden, please

contact the Service Center at 787-831-3464, or visit www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov.



Left to right: Mayagüez People's Garden July harvest bounty; endemic Puerto Rican boa visits the garden; Mayagüez interns, Carlos S. Pérez and José Rodríguez, sort produce from July harvest.

Caribbean Area NRCS Staff Participate in SEPM Training



Caribbean Area Civil Right Committee members, Luis A. García (top left) and Rafael Sierra Castro (7th from top left) pose with their fellow Special Emphasis Program Manager (SEPM) Training graduates at the July 2013 training. Luis is the Veterans SEPM and Rafael is the Hispanic SEPM for the Caribbean Area.

Farmers: Sign up Now for FSA Reimbursement Transportation Cost Payment Program

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) encourages Caribbean Area farmers to sign-up for the **Reimbursement Transportation Cost Payment Program** between July 22, 2013 to September 9, 2013.

This program reimburses geographically disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, including those in the Caribbean Area, with a portion of the cost to transport agricultural commodities or cost of inputs used to produce an agricultural commodity.

The following agricultural commodities are eligible for the program:

- Aquaculture
- Feed
- Fiber
- Floriculture
- Horticulture, including trees
- Insects or products thereof (like honey)
- Livestock

RTCP payments will be calculated based on the costs incurred by the producer to transport the agricultural commodity or input(s) during a fiscal year, and multiplied by the percent cost of living allowance (COLA) for each specific area during that fiscal year.

For more information or to sign up, please contact your [local FSA office](#).

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Questions for USDA NRCS Caribbean Area? [Contact us](#)
NRCS Caribbean Area
PO Box 364868
San Juan, PR 00936-4868
787-766-5206
<http://www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov/>

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