

# CONSERVATION footprints

*A quarterly publication by, for,  
and about NRCS-WA employees.*

## A Message from Roylene



Welcome to spring in the Northwest! If you're like me, you have been enjoying spring's arrival with flowers blooming and trees sprouting leaves.

As we finished up our roundtable sessions at the end of March, it became apparent that employees are looking for ways to get outside, exercise more, and socialize as co-workers. In response, Debbie Williams and the NRCSEA has been putting together a Wild West Poker Run fitness challenge. This will be similar to last year's fitness challenge where each team logged their miles of exercise. The challenge map starts at Selawick National Wildlife Refuge in Deadhorse, Alaska. Each time your team

continued on p. 2



Oklahoma State University "sweatless soil sampler."

## Soil Health Study Underway

Submitted by Ecological Sciences staff

**"We've never lost sight of our roots. In the coming weeks and months, we're getting back to our roots, focusing more even more attention on soil health and educating our customers and the public about the positive impact Soil Health Management Systems can have on productivity and conservation,"**

*- Dave White, former NRCS Chief,  
April 24, 2012.*

The Pullman Plant Materials Center (PMC) and five other PMCs across the nation are participating in a national soil health study. The goal of the study is to evaluate cover crop mixes in rotation with a commodity crop and the effects it will have on the soil properties that determine soil health.

Each participating PMC is charged with seeding three cover crop mixes at three different rates in the fall. A

continued on p. 2

## IN THIS ISSUE

- p.3** Summer of Devastating Western Wildfires
- p.4** A Rose, Dairy Energy Update

- p.5** Coming to Your Neighborhood: Ecological Sites Descriptions
- p.6** Asian Market, Doug Allen New AC, Busting Stress

- p.7** HR Tidbits
- p.8** Civil Rights, NRCS Graphic Artist Wins Comm Awards

*Click titles to take you to article.*



## Congratulations to the following employees who recently received promotions!

**Ray Gekosky**, Resource Conservationist, Prosser Field Office, effective 12/30/2012.

**Doug Allen**, promoted to the East Area Conservationist, Spokane East Area Office, effective 4/7/2013.

## A Message from Roylene

continued from p.1

reaches the next designated site, you will receive a card for your poker hand. When all the teams arrive at the final destination, which is San Diego, they will reveal their poker hands. Teams can start logging their miles on May 27. Watch for more details that will be coming out soon!

The state leadership team met on April 17, and we spent a large part of the afternoon reviewing comments from the roundtable sessions. We drafted goals and action items to address some of the needs that were voiced during the roundtables. I will continue to keep everyone updated on results from those sessions as the leadership team takes action.

Enjoy the spring,



## Soil Health Study Underway

continued from p.1

commodity crop will be seeded in rotation with the cover crops. This cover crop-commodity crop rotation will run for three full cycles. Soil temperature, bulk density, soil resistance, biological activity, soil chemistry, percent cover, and commodity crop yield data will be collected over the course of study.

A two-acre field on the PMC south farm was selected in 2012 for the study. Scott Bare, NRCS Soil Scientist completed an Order 1 Soil Survey of the field in July. 2012 proved to be a tough year to begin the study. No rain occurred in late summer and the soil was so hard and dry that the PMC's double-disk drill would have proved entirely ineffective for a direct seeding. The 8,000 pound offset disk was our implement of choice to work down the residue and loosen the top three inches of concrete-like soil. The study was seeded at Pullman on October 3, 2012 into bone dry soil. Rains were slow to arrive but were in time to allow for the cover to establish.

Soil samples were collected from each plot and sent to ARS scientists to quantify soil biological activity and soil nutrient levels.

The samples were collected using the Oklahoma "sweatless soil collection apparatus." One hundred twenty plots were sampled in less than eight hours. A soil penetrometer was acquired to compare soil resistance and data were taken soon after seeding.

Cover data taken in November show that we were quite successful in establishing most of the cover crop species. Triticale, a very cold tolerant cover, was very noticeable. Oats, vetch, forage radish, canola, and red clover were observed this fall but time will tell if they survive a Palouse winter.

The study calls for spraying out the cover crop plots this spring and the debris will be "crimped" into the soil using a special roller developed for this purpose. A few days post-crimping, the entire field will be direct seeded with our commodity crop, barley. Barley growth rates and seed yield will be measured for each plot. The entire cover crop-barley rotation will run for three cycles which should provide the NRCS with sound data on the effects of cover crops on soil parameters directly tied to soil health.

## Goodbye and Goodluck to the following employees:

**Rebecca Stuart**, Tribal Liaison, Spokane Area Office, effective, 2/8/13.

**Scott Wolf**, Soil Conservationist, Ephrata Field Office, effective 2/28/13.

**Todd Miles**, Acquisition Specialist (BMLP), Brush Prairie Office, transferred to VA effective 3/10/2013.

**Elayne Hovde**, Rangeland Management Specialist, Davenport Field Office, transferred to Idaho NRCS effective 3/24/13.

## Summer of Devastating Western Wildfires

Submitted by Ryan Terrill, Engineer, Ephrata

Known as the "Summer of Devastating Western Wildfires," the 2012 Washington state fires claimed at least 157,000 acres of forest, grassland, wilderness, and rural areas. Out of all the western states under attack by these devastating wildfires, Washington State was hit the hardest.

Major wildfires lead to numerous environmental changes including loss of vegetation and ground cover, alteration of soil properties, and the reduction of hillside stability. These post-fire changes can last for many years, which can change a watershed's hydrologic response to rain events, and can potentially result in post-fire flooding, debris flows, and landslides.

Through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), who administers the [Emergency Watershed Protection Program \(EWP\)](#), it has been possible to assist central Washington counties like Chelan and Kittitas with 75 percent cost-share of projects that provide relief of imminent hazards to life and/or property. Since the devastating wildfires, these counties have cost-shared the remaining 25 percent and have sponsored over 20 successfully completed projects which include seeding, hazardous tree removal, culvert replacement, fabrication and installation of trash racks on culverts, culvert cleaning, existing channel and culvert improvements, restoration of existing waterways, terraces, and diversions, construction of temporary dikes, swales, water-bars, and eco-block walls, installation of wattles, erosion bales, and check dams, rubbish and brush removal, public meetings and flyers about post-fire flooding, and installation of weather monitoring equipment for immediate



Trash rack installed on culvert.

emergency response that can lead to emergency evacuations if necessary.

Many NRCS folks and the county sponsors have worked very diligently in completing emergency planning, damage survey reports, and designs in order get these projects successfully constructed on the ground. Diligence is the key in making the EWP a success, and in Chelan and Kittitas counties, it got done. Other agencies provided funding for informational flyers and to supply important information in order to prepare for the planning, surveys, designs, and construction of these projects. Some of these agencies include:

- United States Forest Service (USFS)
- Burned Area Emergency Response Team (BAER)
- National Weather Service (NWS)
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Okanogon County
- Chelan County
- Kittitas County
- City of Wenatchee
- Kittitas County Conservation District
- Cascadia Conservation District

Extra thanks goes out to everyone who helped make the EWP a success in Chelan and Kittitas counties. When we work together, anything is possible.

### Items of interest:

**Kathy Kilcoyne**, detailed as Acting District Conservationist for the Northwest Team, effective 10/1/12 thru 12/15/12.

**Amy Hendershot**, detailed as Acting District Conservationist for the North Central Team, effective 12/29/12.

**Will Keller**, detailed as Acting Tribal Conservationist for the Nespelem – Colville Tribal Office, effective 12/29/12.

**Darren Mitchell**, detailed as Acting Resource Conservationist for the Ellensburg Field Office, effective 12/26/12.

**Doug Allen**, detailed as Acting Area Conservationist for the Central Area, effective 1/4/13.

**Ed Teel**, detailed as Acting Area Conservationist for the East Area, effective 1/4/13.

**Lolo Garza**, detailed as Acting District Conservationist for the Big Bend Team, effective 1/4/13.

**Jim Schroeder**, detailed as Acting District Conservationist for the Snake River Team, effective 1/5/13.

**Amy Smith**, detailed as Acting Contracting Officer for the Spokane State Office, effective 1/20/13.

**Konrad Bomberger**, ended his detailed as Acting Tribal Resource Conservationist for the Toppenish Office, effective 2/2/13.



Thorny stems of sweetbriar rose. Note the backward pointing thorns.

## A Rose

Submitted by Ecological Sciences staff

A rose is not just a rose. There are many, many different types of roses in the world. Some are native to the Pacific Northwest, some are not. Some have velvety blooms that the florist races to your door, while others have blooms that are almost mundane.

The Plant Materials Center (PMC) is most interested in the roses used in conservation plantings. Over 1.4 million acres of Washington State cropland was seeded to Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and many of these acres are supporting "wild roses." Roses are also important plants in streambank plantings. We have noticed a surprising increase in rose numbers in eastern Washington. Pamela Pavek, PMC Agronomist, undertook a study of the various *Rosa* species used in conservation practices. She has developed several Plant Guides and Factsheets of this genus and these are being posted on the [USDA PLANTS database website](#). There are two non-native wild roses that are fairly prevalent on CRP, range and pastures. They are dog rose (*Rosa canina*) and sweetbriar rose (*Rosa rubiginosa*). Both have large uneven thorns that frequently point backwards along the stem. Dog and sweetbriar roses are well equipped to move about the landscape. The seeds are borne in hips that are a favorite food of many wild animals. The hips are high in nutrients and the seeds pass through the digestive system with no damage. Once established, the plants develop a root system that is the envy of Kudzu, Himalayan blackberry, and Canada thistle.

Woods' rose (*Rosa woodsii*), baldhip rose (*Rosa gymnocarpa*), and Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*) are native wild roses that are fairly commonly planted in conservation plantings. Woods' rose and baldhip rose have thorns that are far less robust and are fairly easy to identify. Nootka rose has robust thorns but the thorns are generally straight and located at the base of the leaflets.

## Dairy Energy Update

Submitted by Leigh Nelson, State Irrigation Engineer and Paul Majer, Ag Engineer, Ephrata Area Office

In 2011, Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds were targeted to do a pilot study on 25 dairies in Washington. Dairies from Thurston and Yakima counties were evaluated by a producer selected Technical Service Provider (TSP) to complete the Facilities Ag Management Energy Plan (AgEMP). First a little background on the sites evaluated. The pilot was on less than six percent of the 460 dairies in the state but on 17 percent of the dairy cows in Washington. The dairies that signed up ranged from 105 head to 5,216 animals with an average of 1,600 milk cows. This is quite a bit higher than the average dairy size in Washington which is 530 head. The production of milk from these dairies was almost 27,000 lbs/year which was above the state average of 23,000 lbs. of milk per year. These are some of Washington's larger, more productive dairies.

From the energy evaluations the following is a summary of the results.

- At \$0.06 per KWH these dairies spend on average over \$60,000 for energy per year.
- The average savings, if all the practices we implemented from the AgEMP would be 29 percent. This ranged from a high of 51 percent and a low of 8 percent.



- The average energy savings for a dairy was almost 300,000 KWH. The value of this depends on how much the power costs in your area. If the dairies were in Grant County, it would be \$11,600. If they were in Thurston County, the savings would be over \$23,000.
- The cost of the AgEMP for dairies is less than \$2,000, the benefit from the practices recommended is over 5 to 10 times the cost.

If all the practices recommended from the evaluations were implemented, the total energy savings for all 25 dairies was over 7,000,000 KWH, again at \$0.06 this would be almost \$450,000 in energy savings!

From this initial group of energy evaluations, the cost and benefit of the energy evaluation will definitely help reduce how much a dairy spends on energy. **We still have 434 to go, so let your producers know that an energy evaluation doesn't cost, it PAYS.**

## Coming to Your Neighborhood: Ecological Sites Descriptions (ESDs)

*Submitted by Cindy Burton, Natural Resources Specialist, Montesano*

Chances are ecological site descriptions (ESD) are not on your radar. That is about to change. In 2009, NRCS' Soil Science Division was officially given responsibility to "accelerate ecological site development." Now, five years later, much work has transpired behind the scenes to lay the foundation for a nationwide ESD program including standards, interpretations, inventory strategies, reporting formats, and a rigorous approval process. With so much more to do, ESDs remain a workload priority.

For example, Washington State currently has only 17 approved ESDs. Fortunately, a multi-pronged effort moves progress forward at a steady pace. Here's what's happening:

1. In the Mount Vernon Soil Survey Office, Kathy Smith (forester), Toby Rodgers (soil scientist), and Phil Roberts (soil scientist) are on the forefront of ESD development. Kathy, Toby, and Phil work as a team to produce modern soil surveys and ESDs for the National Park Service. So far they have completed the soil surveys and 11 ESDs for San Juan Island National Historical Park and Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve in the Puget Sound Trough. Currently the team is finishing 14 ESDs for the North Cascades National Park Complex soil survey. The team is also in their third and final field season collecting vegetation and soils data for the Mount Rainier National Park soil survey and ESD's.
2. In the East/Central Area, ACES employee and former Washington State Forester, Gary Kuhn, is working with soil scientist, Scott Bare and NRCS-Idaho to break out ESDs across Idaho and Washington state boundaries. This team's work has shed light on the varied dynamics of conifer response in the northeast corner of Washington and the Idaho Panhandle.
3. From the West Area, state ESD coordinator, Cindy Burton is working with soil survey leaders Erik Dahlke, Bruce Lindsey and Kelley Paup-Lefferts to initiate a state-wide ESD work plan. Based upon the state's resource assessment and areas of highest resource concern, ESD work will focus on a) Columbia Plateau, b) Puget Sound Trough, and c) other opportunities that optimize workload efficiency.

ESD development is a methodical, science-driven process. Each ESD is initiated after a thorough review of current research, field assessments and extensive data collection and analysis, tempered by on-going interdisciplinary peer review. Rule of thumb is that each ESD takes at least three years from start to approval, but several can be developed simultaneously.

While those of us inside NRCS may not hear much about ESDs, our sister agencies, local universities, tribes and non-governmental organizations are abuzz with excitement on the topic. They want to know more about the process and how they can participate in it. The ESD program is an opportunity to share data, labor and knowledge across jurisdictional barriers in the creation of a product that is valued by all.

*So look for more on the ESD front in Washington State. We hope to be in your neighborhood soon.*



*Conservation district forester, Chris Wiedamann, shares skills and knowledge as part of the ESD field team.*



*Less intensively managed sites, such as Lake Sylvia State Park, can be good locations to collect vegetation and soils data.*

**For more about this topic, please contact Cindy Burton at:**  
[cindy.burton@wa.usda.gov](mailto:cindy.burton@wa.usda.gov)  
 or (360) 249-5900 ext. 110.



Image: Jennifer Crain

Kum Lee of HJ Farms and Jeff Swotek of the Natural Resources Conservation Service inside the "high tunnel" built by the NRCS. The farmers opted to grow peppers in the low-tech greenhouse so they can harvest the profitable crop for an extended season.

## Asian Food Markets Snatch Up Produce From Rochester's HJ Farms

Article in "Thurstontalk.com" by Jennifer Crain

Rows of bok choy, green onions and radish greens stretch across HJ Farms' 107 acres. Kum Lee, one of the farm's co-owners, kneels to pull a daikon radish from the earth. The mild roots are so common in Asian cuisines as to be compulsory – they're often pickled and they're sautéed, grated and diced into everything from condiments and salads to kimchis and stews. The roots, which can range from long and tapering, like giant white carrots, to oblong one-pound tubers, grow fervently under the care of Lee and her partner, B.J. Jin, and the eye of temperate Northwest skies.

The specialty radishes aren't the only things springing from the ground on the Rochester farm. Jin and Lee grow 17 varieties of vegetables common in Korean cuisine for Asian food markets that stretch along the I-5 corridor, from Alaska to Los Angeles. Some, such as spinach and green onions, are familiar to most North Americans. Others, such as sook got (also known as Japanese Mugwort), a spicy herb used in salads and to flavor dumplings and stir-fries, won't be nestled next to the basil in the produce department anytime soon.

[Read full article](#)

## NRCS Announces New East Area Conservationist

Ephrata local, Doug Allen, starts area position in Spokane, WA



Ephrata resident, Doug Allen, was recently selected as the new east area conservationist for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Allen reported to his position at the Spokane area office on April 6, 2013.

Allen started his career with NRCS in 1983 as a soil conservation technician in Waterville and Ephrata, WA. He worked a short stint as an engineering technician for Hahn Engineering before returning to NRCS in 1991 with the Moses Lake field office. Allen started

his first management position as a district conservationist in Wenatchee in 1998. He went on to serve as the district conservationist in Ephrata and then for the Big Bend team which included Grant, Kittitas and parts of Adams counties.

A graduate of Ephrata High School, Allen earned an associate's degree in agricultural mechanization at Big Bend Community College, and continued his education at Washington State University and Oregon State University.

As the east area conservationist, Allen will oversee NRCS field offices in Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens, Spokane, Whitman, Adams, Lincoln, Franklin, Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield and Asotin counties as well as the area office staff in Spokane.

**Congratulations Doug!**

## Busting Stress

In March, the employee development committee released a bulletin (WA 360-13-6) that outlined stress management resources available to employees. In addition, the EDC received approval from the state leadership team to order stress management materials that can be checked-out from the Human Resources library. Those materials have been ordered and are starting to arrive.

A new bulletin will soon be issued that lists these materials. The resources include several DVDs that teach stress management tactics and are perfect for use during staff meetings.

# Human Resources Tidbits

## 2013 Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) Contribution Limits

### TSP Contribution Limits

The 2013 tax year (December 16, 2012—December 14, 2013) elective deferral limit for regular TSP accounts has increased to \$17,500. The 2013 tax year limit for the TSP Catch-up remains at \$5,500.

### Attention—Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) Employees

FERS employees receive matching contributions on the first five percent of their contributions each pay period. The match is dollar-for-dollar on the first three percent, and 50 cents on the dollar on the next two percent. Once an employee's total contributions reach the elective deferral limit for the tax year (\$17,500 for 2013), employee deductions and matching contributions stop! Therefore, it is very important for FERS employees to contribute to the TSP each pay period.

### TSP Catch-up Contributions

If you are, or will be age 50 or older during the 2013 calendar year, you may contribute an additional \$5,500 to the TSP if you are already contributing the maximum amount in regular TSP contributions (\$17,500). The biweekly contribution for 26 pay periods (to reach a maximum of \$5,500) is \$212.

*Reminder: The TSP Catch-up automatically ends with the last salary check of the tax year (PP 25). You must make a new TSP Catch-up election each tax year to continue your Catch-up contributions.*

### How to Make Changes

Employees who wish to make electronic changes to their TSP accounts can do so by using the Employee Personal Page or to process an inter-fund transfer go to [www.tsp.gov](http://www.tsp.gov).

Employees who wish to submit paper elections should complete form TSP-1 for regular TSP contributions and form TSP-1-C for Catch-up contributions. These [forms](#) can be found on the [TSP website](#).

## Retirement planning from OPM

People who have a retirement plan are more likely to feel their retirement savings are on schedule than those who do not have plans. Seems obvious doesn't it? Yet the 2012 Retirement Confidence Survey conducted by the Employee Benefit Research Institute found many workers are unaware of much they need to save for their retirement. Less than half of workers (42 percent) report they and/or spouse have tried to calculate how much money they will need to have saved so they can live comfortably in retirement. Two tools that can help you get started are the Federal Ballpark Estimate and your Social Security Statement.

OPM developed the Federal Ballpark Estimate: a savings goal worksheet. You can use the Federal Ballpark Estimate to automatically calculate estimates of future Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) or Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) retirement benefits and Thrift Savings Plan account balances. It will also let you know how well you are doing in meeting your savings goal. The Federal Ballpark Estimate was developed in partnership with the American Savings Education Council (ASEC) of the Employee Benefits Research Institute.

[Social Security Statements](#) are now available online. The online statement also provides estimates for disability and survivors benefits, making the statement an important financial planning tool. In addition to helping with financial

planning, the online statement also provides a convenient way to determine whether your earnings are accurately posted to your social security records. This feature is important because social security benefits are based on average earnings over a person's lifetime. If the earnings information is not accurate, you may not receive all the benefits to which you are entitled. The online statement also provides the opportunity to save or print the personalized statement for financial planning discussions with family or a financial planner.

## How to Make Life style Changes from GEHA

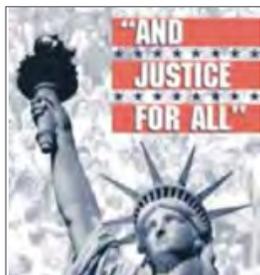
Have you resolved to get healthy and watch your budget in this spring? You can do it! You don't have to spend a lot of money to reap the health benefits of an active lifestyle and balanced diet. Our ["Great Ideas for Getting Fit" e-book](#) offers budget-friendly tips and strategies to help support your fitness resolution.

Also: [Tips on how to stretch your grocery dollars](#) by purchasing food items at particular times during the year, and information on the [importance of flu vaccination](#).

This month's recipes are: [Cajun tilapia with broccoli and brown rice](#), [elegant cheesy spinach cakes](#) and [chicken ratatouille](#).

For additional information about small daily steps that you can take to improve your health and finances, visit Rutgers University's [Small Steps to Health and Wealth™ Web site](#). Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Take the time!

## Your Civil Rights Advisory Committee



Your Civil Rights Advisory Committee, also known as the CRAC, is a group of dedicated and creative employees who strive to make NRCS a fair and equitable place to

work and do business. As the name implies, we are primarily an advisory committee. We do analysis and research to formulate recommendations which are presented to our State Conservationist and Leadership Team for consideration.

### Our Mission

The mission of the Washington State Civil Rights Committee is to advise, assist, and apprise leadership in all matters related to civil rights in order to effect enhancement, edification, and expansion of affirmative employment and program delivery.

CRAC positions include Area Representatives, State Office Representative or Special Emphasis Program Manager for the following groups: Asian American Pacific Islander, Hispanic, GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Transgender), Black, Federal Women, Veterans and Disability, and American Indian/Alaskan Native. Each member works independently and as part of the team to fulfill the mission of the CRAC.

Recent and ongoing projects include a study of small farms in Washington State and development of the CRAC Small Farms Focus Group Report, Diversity Day, Diversity Discussion Group, parity analysis of program delivery, celebration of Heritage Month events and the creation of a variety of products and resources to assist NRCS employees in meeting our civil rights responsibilities.

Look for CRAC vacancy announcements in the future and consider joining the CRAC to contribute to NRCS, your fellow employees, and our clients in new and exciting ways.

## NRCS Graphic Artist Wins Communications Awards



*Submitted by Gina Kerzman,  
Public Affairs Officer*

Jennifer Van Eps, visual information specialist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, was recently recognized for her work as a communications specialist at the annual Spokane Regional MarCom Association awards ceremony on April 24, 2013.

Van Eps received a merit award for poster design for the "NRCS Energy Initiative: A Bright Idea" poster. The poster was used to promote the new energy initiative during the 2012 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) sign up. She also received an excellence award for visual display for the "Protecting a Legacy" wetlands banner stands that she designed in 2012 to promote the Wetland Reserve Program.

The MarCom Spark Awards recognize solo practitioners, agencies of all sizes, large and small businesses, top corporations, non-profits, associations and government agencies that successfully execute marketing communications, education, information and outreach activities to various publics with exemplary professional skill, creativity and resourcefulness. They must meet the highest standards of performance in the profession and are critiqued and judged by professional communications practitioners in various markets throughout the country.

Local professionals submitted more than 70 entries ranging from publications and feature stories to website design and media relations campaigns. The award entries were judged by local professionals in the marketing and communications field that did not submit entries for this year's awards.

Van Eps is a previous Spark Award winner. She's won merit and excellence awards for various brochures, displays and news articles over the last few years (2011-2012). Congratulations Jennifer!

### Have your own conservation success story?

Our successes do not end when we implement a conservation plan. An important aspect of conservation success includes "showing-and-telling" the work we've accomplished. "Highlights in Conservation" is a quick submission process which will help facilitate capturing our accomplishments, like those above. View and download the [submission form](#).

We hope you have enjoyed the employee submitted articles highlighted in this issue of Conservation Footprints. Please feel free to [submit your comments](#), suggestions and/or new articles for an up-coming issue of this newsletter.

[View past Conservation Footprints publications.](#)