



United States Department of Agriculture

Arkansas Conservation News

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Phone: (501) 301-3100 • Web site: www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov

New USDA portal enables farmers, ranchers to request conservation assistance online

Farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners can now do business with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through a new online portal.

Conservation Client Gateway, will give producers the ability to work with conservation planners online to access Farm Bill programs, request assistance, and track payments.

"What used to require a trip to a USDA service center can now be done from a home computer through Conservation Client Gateway," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "USDA is committed to providing effective, efficient assistance, and this portal is one way to improve customer service."

Conservation Client Gateway enables farmers, ranchers and private landowners to securely:

- Request NRCS technical and financial assistance;
- Review and sign conservation plans and practice schedules;
- Complete and sign an application for a conservation program;
- Review, sign and submit contracts and appendices for conservation programs;
- Document and request certification of completed practices;
- Request and track payments for conservation programs; and



• Store and retrieve technical and financial files, including documents and photographs.

Conservation Client Gateway is entirely voluntary, giving producers a choice between conducting business online or at a USDA service center.

"Our goal is to make it easy and convenient for farmers and ranchers to work with USDA," Vilsack said. "Customers can log in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to electronically sign documents, apply for conservation programs, access conservation plans, report practice completion, or track the status of conservation payments."

Through Conservation Client Gateway, producers have their conservation information at their fingertips and they can save time and gas money by reducing trips to USDA service centers."

Conservation Client Gateway is available to individual landowners and will soon be extended to business entities, such as Limited Liability Corporations. It is part of the agency's ongoing Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative, which will feature additional capabilities in the future.

For more information about Conservation Client Gateway, visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/clientgateway.



NRCS assistance is accelerated because of our Great Conservation Partners!

NRCS works with many partners to provide conservation planning and technical assistance to producers to help them address natural resource concerns – soil, water, air, plants, animals, and energy – in order to maintain or increase agricultural production while protecting the environment. Assistance is provided through local conservation districts that establish local priorities and provide additional staff to help address identified concerns. The Arkansas Conservation Partnership, led by Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts, the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission, and NRCS, has a long history of working well together and encouraging collaboration among conservation organizations to achieve common objectives better and faster.

The University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, Arkansas Association of Conservation District Employees, Arkansas Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils, and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff serve in critical roles to improve and accelerate conservation assistance. Our other conservation partners including state agencies such as the Arkansas Department of Agriculture and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; academia such as the University of Arkansas system and Arkansas State University; non-governmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and Ducks Unlimited; other local entities such as local watershed improvement and water management districts; and other federal agencies such as the Farm Service Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, help to form what I believe is the strongest and best conservation partnership in the nation.

Across Arkansas, there are many natural resource challenges. Landscape scale projects and special initiatives are used to accelerate the pace at which we address the most pressing resource concerns. NRCS invests technical and financial assistance and leverages partner resources to help implement cost effective systems of conservation practices where they are most needed. With the tools and resources provided through the Farm Bill, NRCS and our conservation partners are making a major difference not only in soil health, water quality, water quantity and wildlife habitat, but also in the lives of farmers, ranchers and foresters and the communities in which they live and work. The Conservation Partnership in Arkansas enables Arkansas NRCS to help people help the land better and faster than ever before!

We hope you enjoy the latest edition of Arkansas Conservation News.



Mike Sullivan
State Conservationist

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael E. Sullivan". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

The Arkansas Conservation News is published quarterly by the Arkansas Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Please send submissions to Reginald Jackson, state public affairs specialist, or Creston Shrum, public affairs specialist at: Room 3416, Federal Bldg.; 700 W. Capitol Ave.; Little Rock, AR 72201

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For more information on Arkansas NRCS visit: Web site: www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov; Twitter: <https://twitter.com/arkansasnrcs>

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Arkansas NRCS, University of Arkansas Extension Service team up to promote irrigation water management planning

Arkansas NRCS and the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service have teamed up to hire an Irrigation Education Area Specialist to help producers better manage their irrigation water. On May 1, Mike Hamilton moved from his position as the Poinsett County Extension agent to work in the Jonesboro NRCS Technical Service Center, side by side with NRCS employees in the north eastern part of the state.

NRCS promotes a systems approach to irrigation which includes efficiently delivering irrigation water, tailwater recovery systems for capturing runoff during the entire year and planning to effectively manage the water.

Irrigation water management is the central hub of this system of conservation practices. Producers in Arkansas currently have Environmental Quality

Incentives Program Contracts for 561 Irrigation Water Management Plans (IWM). Many of them have yet to be developed and most have not yet been implemented.

Irrigation Water Management plans consist of basic inventorying of a producers crop rotation, determining water needs, evaluating existing water sources, and developing alternatives for making improvements in water use. Many plans are developed for the conversion from groundwater to surface water systems. Others are developed to make the



Photo by Creston Shrum

Irrigating soybeans with polypipe.

existing system more efficient. One such improvement is through the use of computerized hole selection for irrigation with polypipe.

Hamilton is an expert in the use of computerized hole selection including expertise in both PHAUCET and PipePlanner software. Hamilton, in his partnership with Arkansas NRCS, will work with producers to develop these IWM plans in several of the state's northeastern counties, including Mississippi, Poinsett, Craighead, Green, Clay, Independence, Lawrence and Jackson counties. Arkansas NRCS funds approximately 50 percent of Hamilton's position.

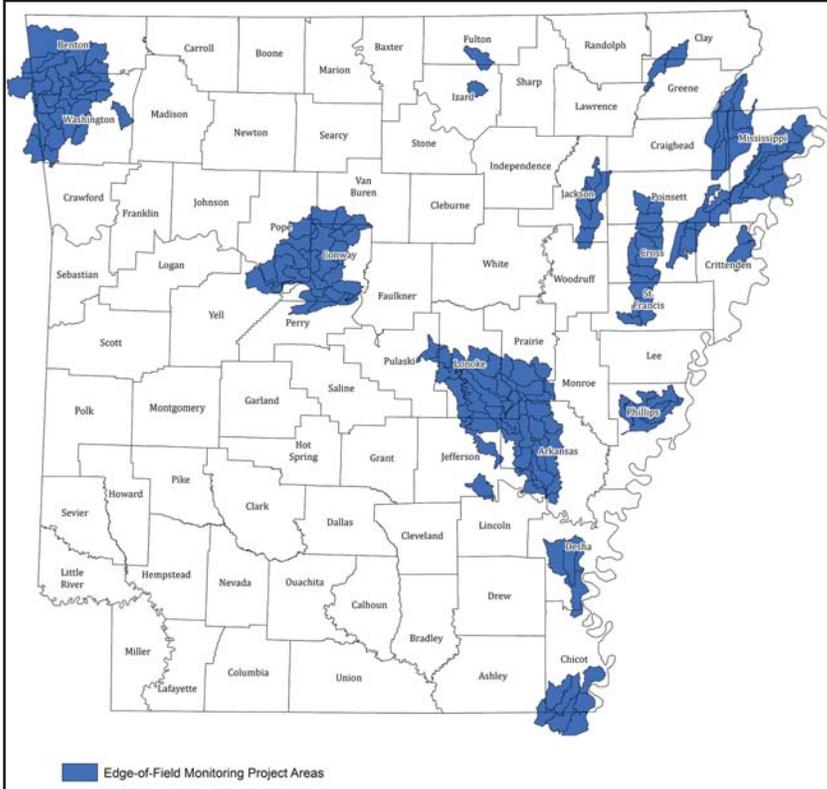
Hamilton said he had already been contacted by several growers in the White River Valley area seeking help to design a furrow irrigation system for about 20,000 acres of farmland.

"We could hit home runs

everywhere but to get such a call in the first week of work for about 20,000 acres, that kind of catches your eye," he said

Hamilton will not only be working one on one with producers but also side by side with NRCS employees to pass along his expertise in computerized hole selection. He'll also learn the criteria of irrigation water management plans.

State Conservationist Mike Sullivan said, "This is a great example of how NRCS can partner with other agencies to help solve our natural resource problems."



Notify NRCS of operational changes that impact contracts

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contract participants have the responsibility of notifying the agency of changes that take place on their operations. If you have a CSP contract with NRCS you need to make sure you are within policy. The transferor, who is the original participant, is responsible for contacting the transferee about assuming the contract obligations on the transferred land.

A transferee that becomes eligible within 30 days of the land transfer may assume the obligations of the contract with respect to the transferred acreage by completing the contract transfer agreement within 60 days of the transfer of interest.

If the transferee cannot become eligible within 30 days or elects not to assume the obligations of the contract with respect to the transferred acreage, the transferor is in violation and subject to termination and forfeiture of payments received on the transferred acreage.

If the contract is terminated, liquidated damages may be assessed at a rate of ten percent of the original obligation of the conservation program contract.

It is also the CSP participants responsibility to ensure all scheduled enhancements are implemented on schedule and reported to NRCS before September 30 to be eligible for annual payments. If unable to complete the contract according to the schedule, a specific request justifying an extension should be made to the NRCS state conservationist.

Producers interested in enrolling land in CSP must be the operator of record. Producers listed as “owner,” “other tenant,” or “other producer” must make a written request to Arkansas State Conservationist Mike Sullivan before the ranking period closes for a waiver of this requirement.

For additional information, contact Kenneth Lee, assistant state conservationist for programs, at kenneth.lee@ar.usda.gov or visit your local USDA service center field office.

Application deadlines quickly approaching

The following program application deadlines are closing soon:

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program - Project pre-proposals due July 8
- Caney Creek (a portion of Cross County), Strawberry River (portions of Fulton and Izard counties) and Upper Cache River (portions of Clay, Greene and Lawrence counties) Mississippi River Basin Initiative projects - EQIP applications due July 17
- Illinois River Sub-Basin and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed Initiative (portions of Benton and Washington counties) - EQIP applications due July 17
- Edge-of-field monitoring (149 watersheds, see map above) - EQIP applications due July 17
- Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP) - Proposals must be submitted to the state office by July 31

To learn more about the project areas and conservation practices, visit the Arkansas Web site at www.ar.nrcs.usda.gov or the local NRCS office.

Arkansas NRCS Feral Swine Pilot Project

Feral swine have increased their range drastically in the last two decades. In Arkansas, populations of wild pigs have persisted in low numbers for over 150 years, but historically they were relegated to the more remote areas of the state such as the large, forested river bottoms and the Arkansas highlands. Today, feral swine are found in every county in the state.

Water quality is negatively impacted by feral swine, as well as soil health and wildlife habitat.

Swine “root” when they feed, disturbing soil and causing erosion. They prefer damp soils, which exacerbates water quality issues since many preferred feeding areas are in riparian zones that are sensitive to soil disturbance. They compete directly with native wildlife for resources, as indicated by declines in whitetail deer and eastern wild turkey populations in areas with high hog density.

They are omnivores, and as such, are important nest predators for ground nesting birds of all types. They impact commodity crops, with corn and sorghum being preferred food sources during the late summer. Young pine and hardwood plantations are negatively impacted by their rooting behavior, and pastures and hayfields are often destroyed in areas with high hog density.



Feral hogs can cause extensive damage to crops, forests and pastures.

Methods for control of feral swine have improved in recent years in response to hog population increases. Currently, the best method for removal of an entire sounder involves trapping with bait and utilizing remote accessible cameras and trap gates.

Arkansas NRCS has partnered with USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Wildlife Services, and conservation districts in an effort to assist producers with feral swine control and to remediate natural resource damage after the pigs have been removed.

This partnership builds on the strengths of each organization, with APHIS providing trapping expertise, conservation districts providing local knowledge and organization, and NRCS providing funding for monitoring and surveillance equipment as well as planning and treatment of resource damage.

Initially, Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding for this project will be available in three areas in Arkansas.

- Western Arkansas River Valley - Pope, Yell, and Searcy counties. This area has an emerging hog population.
- Southeastern Arkansas - Drew, Desha, Chicot and Arkansas counties. This area was determined to have the best opportunity for effective NRCS assistance in an area with an established population.
- Southwest Arkansas - Sevier County.

For additional information, contact Jim Baker at (501) 327-6509 ext. 108, or your local district conservationist in any of the counties listed.



Photo by Jeremy Huff

Feral hog damage in a pasture.

Soil and Soil Health

Arkansas NRCS soils professionals assist with 2015 National Collegiate Soil Judging Contest

The 2015 National Collegiate Soils Contest (NCSC), hosted by the University of Arkansas at Monticello was held April 19 through April 24. Teams of students in soils, agronomy, geology, earth science and other related majors from 22 schools throughout the country gathered for the 55th annual soil judging championship. The teams qualified for the NCSC at regional contests and participated in a full week of soil studies and competition. The event coincided with the 68th General Assembly of the United Nations declaration of 2015 as the 'International Year of Soils'.

The contest was designed to help students recognize important soil and landscape properties and how these characteristics are used to manage soils appropriately with conservation in mind. Each team spent the week working at sites in MLRA 131B – Arkansas River Alluvium, MLRA 131D – Southern Mississippi River Terraces and MLRA 133B – Western Coastal Plain.

The soils team from Auburn University won first place in the competition, West Virginia University placed second, and Purdue University placed third. The top four students who placed in the individual soils competition were Kristen Pegues from Auburn University (first place); Stephen Geib from Delaware Valley University (second place); third place Adrienne Nottingham, West Virginia University (third place); and Erin Bush, Kansas State University (fourth place).

The top four individual competitors earned the opportunity to represent the United States at the World Congress of Soil Science International Soil Judging Contest in Hungary in September 2015.

Dr. Paul Francis, University of



Photos by Reginald Jackson

Nelson Rolong, Edgar Mersiovsky and Marc Bordelonk, NRCS soil survey leader from Ruston, La., observe the soils contest.



Team from Auburn University.

Arkansas at Monticello Professor of Agriculture, served as the host during the competition.

Arkansas NRCS personnel who assisted with the contest included Edgar Mersiovsky, State Soil Scientist, Nelson

Rolong, Assistant State Soil Scientist, Willie D. Nelson, Soils Survey Office Leader in Pine Bluff, Richard Vaught, Soils Survey Office Leader in Hot Springs and Bryan Hollis, Resource Conservationist in Monticello.

Conservation on the Ground

Progress at Work: LakeView Farms incorporates conservation practices

Christina Spencer says her 300-acre cattle farm is a work in progress. But, others might say it is progress at work.

Spencer, along with her husband, Gary, raise registered Black Angus cattle outside of Powhatan, Ark., in Lawrence County. For the past 8 years, she has worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve her pastures and prescribed grazing system.

“NRCS and the cooperative extension service have been tremendous help,” Christina said.

Working with Christina, Ben Starr, Lawrence County district conservationist, developed a conservation plan to address the resource concerns at LakeView Farms, which sits in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains overlooking the Black River delta.

“With a diverse landscape of rolling hills, forest, bottom land and a lake, the primary areas we needed to address were feed and forage for domestic animals; health and vigor of plants; and sheet and rill erosion,” Starr said.

These resource concerns have been addressed through four Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)



Article and photos by Creston Shrum

Christina Spencer cleans out a watering tank on her 300-acre cattle farm. She received financial assistance to install the tank through an EQIP contract.

contracts. A fifth EQIP application is in the planning stages to address erosion and other issues.

Christina, who retired 16 years ago to pursue her passion of raising cattle, currently rotates her herd on 185 acres through 13 paddocks. She runs bulls on one paddock, cows on another and

replacement heifers on a third depending on the time of year. The cattle are moved to new paddocks every five to seven days. She plans on adding more paddocks in the future.

“This is the first year we didn’t need

See LakeView Farms, Page 8



Conservation on the Ground

LakeView Farms

(Continued from Page 7)

to feed hay until January,” she said. “The prescribed grazing system allowed us to keep the cattle on grass all but three months this year.” In the past, the Spenser’s have started feeding hay in November or December.

Grazing cattle longer into the winter months not only has a financial benefit, forages also provide cattle more nutrition than hay and require less labor.

The longer grazing season was made possible by the work Christina completed through her EQIP contracts. The financial assistance has helped her install two ponds with two freeze-proof tanks to create watering facilities with cleaner water for the cattle. Three heavy use areas around the water tanks and a corral control erosion and water runoff.

Her grazing system has been improved with 185 acres of pasture planting (clover), 96 acres of prescribed grazing and 3,720 feet of electric and barb wire fencing. The fence splits the 185 acres into paddocks and keeps the cattle out of the ponds and an existing 18-acre flood control lake on her property.

This hard work not only benefits the cattle but helped Christina qualify for a Conservation Stewardship Program



Ben Starr, Lawrence County district conservationist, and Christina Spenser discuss conservation practices to treat erosion on LakeView Farms.

(CSP) contract. Through CSP, she is enhancing her conservation work with retrofitting watering facilities for wildlife to escape and implementing grazing management to improve wildlife.

With nearly 100 acres of forest, Christina is fencing cattle out of the woodlands to improve wildlife habitat.

“Ben has taught us a lot,” Christina said. “His guidance has helped us make our farm more productive while improving our conservation efforts.”

Pollinator plant seed packets available at field service centers while supplies last

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in partnership with the US Department of the Interior (DOI) and the White House Domestic Policy Council and Pollinator Health Task Force, worked with the W. Atlee Burpee Company (Burpee) to arrange the donation of seed packets containing a seed mix for pollinator-friendly vegetation. The seed mix was specifically designed by Burpee, with input from USDA, so that it would be able to be planted across all parts of the country.

The donation supports the federal

strategy to promote the Health of Honey Bees and Other Pollinators Initiative. It is part of the strategy by the Pollinator Health Task Force to increase citizen engagement, promote planting of pollinator habitats, and a creative public-private approach to restore pollinator habitat.

In support and partnership, each NRCS Arkansas Field Service Center received 40 seed packets to give away to landowners, agricultural partners, rural communities, schools, etc., for home garden and backyard use. The seed packets are being distributed at

NRCS Arkansas field offices on a first come, first serve basis for the purpose of building citizen stewardship for the conservation of pollinators by planting home based pollinator gardens.

The 2014 Farm Bill keeps pollinators as a high priority, and these conservation efforts are one way NRCS is working to help. Landowners can contact their local NRCS Service Center or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov to learn more about NRCS programs, including pollinator and honey bee friendly restorations and planting efforts.

Conservation on the Ground

Conservation planning helps improve farm productivity

Whether farmers and ranchers rent or own their land, a conservation plan is critical to maintain and improve farm productivity. Plans of any kind are important as they set goals and outline how to reach them.

Charming landscapes and the most scenic cities are no accident; they took planning, as do weddings, businesses and events. For farmers and ranchers, conservation plans are road maps for improving their operations while conserving natural resources.

They provide proven strategies that landowners can use to solve identified natural resource concerns and take advantage of conservation opportunities.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service helps farmers and ranchers develop conservation plans. This technical assistance from NRCS is free, and it helps landowners reduce soil loss from erosion, solve issues with soil, air and water quality, reduce potential damage from excess water and drought, enhance the quality of wildlife habitat, address waste management concerns, and improve the long-term sustainability of the country's natural resources.

In the past two years, NRCS has worked with producers to develop conservation plans and provide technical assistance on 37.4 million acres in the United States.

Farmers and ranchers engaged in conservation planning meet with a planner from NRCS for a science-based evaluation of their problems and opportunities on their land. The NRCS staff member, often a district conservationist or conservation planning technician, then an-



Photo by Creston Shrum

Working with NRCS to create a conservation plan will help you set and achieve your goals for your operation.

alyzes the findings and recommends the best strategies to address the problems and achieve valuable opportunities.

Planners and producers use the information collected from the planning process to make decisions, implement the plan and apply conservation practices to solve the identified resource concerns and opportunities. Farmers and ranchers are guided to healthy use and management of their soil and water resources while maintaining healthy ecosystems, landscapes and watersheds.

Almost 70 percent of fish and wildlife habitat in the country is on privately owned lands. That's why landowners are essential in solving natural resource problems and creating and restoring wildlife habitat on their land.

For example, through technical assistance, NRCS has worked with farmers and ranchers to boost soil health on 8.7 million acres of cropland, meaning higher yields and better use of water while ensuring soil doesn't erode and end up in waterways. Similarly, NRCS has also aided farmers and ranchers to improve wildlife habitat on 9 million acres.

Through NRCS, producers can receive the technical assistance they need to develop a free conservation plan designed to sustain their operation while protecting, enhancing, and expanding suitable fish and wildlife habitat.

Stop by our local field office, to get more information on conservation planning and technical assistance available to you.

In the past two years, NRCS has worked with producers to develop conservation plans and provide technical assistance on 37.4 million acres in the United States.

Did You Know ...

Employees participate in Conservation Boot Camp

Arkansas NRCS employees recently participated as trainers and trainees in a Conservation Boot Camp course held May 5 through May 21 in Yukon, Okla.

Northwest Area Resource Conservationist Johnny Chism and White County District Conservationist Amanda Mathis served as instructors providing comprehensive training on the three-phase, nine-step conservation planning process to students from across the nation.

Clay County Soil Conservation Technician Brandon Emmons and St. Francis County Soil Conservationist Dexter Howard attended the course as participants.

Conservation Boot Camp teaches new NRCS field employees how to guide decision makers through a comprehensive conservation planning process that complies with national policy.

The course demonstrates how NRCS and our conservation partners work together to conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources while meeting our customers' needs.

In addition to classroom instruction, students practiced the use of resource concern checklists and various



(From left to right) Brandon Emmons, Aaron Romesser (Nevada), Johnny Chism, Dexter Howard, Misha Vargas (Maine), and Amanda Mathis discuss soil health factors at Conservation Boot Camp.

quantitative and qualitative assessments in the field on a working operation. They received instruction and application on various tools such as the Global Positioning System, forestry tools, and engineering survey tools.

Computer programs such as customer service toolkit, WIN PST, RUSLE2, and WEPS are also taught. The planning

process is documented incrementally using the CPA-52.

Conservation Boot Camp provides participants with instructions in basic conservation planning while focusing on the diversity of the conservation environment in which NRCS employees work to ensure conservation on private lands.

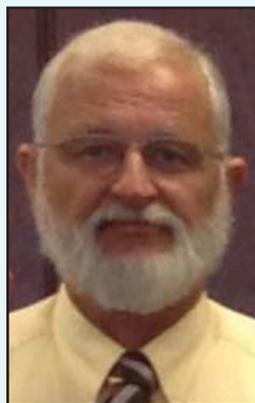
Jacks named new Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, South Area

Steve Jacks was recently named Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in the south area.

He started his career as a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in May 1982 at the Augusta Field Service Center.

Since 2010, he has served as the Assistant State Conservationist for Operations in the State Office in Little Rock.

Jacks received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricul-



tural Business from University of Arkansas at Monticello.

He's been married to his wife Tina for 31 years and they have three children and seven grandchildren.

Pasture Ecology I and II Training

Twenty six NRCS employees and two conservation district employees attended pasture ecology training in May. Pasture Ecology I delivered basic pasture-related technical concepts such as functional plant groups, soil/plant relationships, forage preferences, nutrient management, forage quality, and building relationships with producers.

Pasture Ecology II covered advanced pasture-related technical concepts such as electric fence, watering facilities, pasture layout, H-brace design, and plant growth characteristics.

Did You Know ...

Field staff attends recent Soil Health & Sustainability workshop



Photo by Reginald Jackson

Arkansas NRCS field staff participated in a Soil Health & Sustainability workshop in Helena-West Helena recently. A growing number of Arkansas farmers are using soil health management systems to improve the health and function of their soil—and NRCS is working hand-in-hand with these producers through our technical and financial assistance programs and services to help ensure their success.

State Agronomist John Lee and District Conservationist Marshall Handcock are using a Penetrometer to find resistance in the soil. Pictured from L to R are: Stephanie Daniel, Soil Conservationist, Ash Flat Field Service Center (FSC); Tony Uekman, Soil Conservation Technician, Searcy FSC; Derinda Smith, District Conservationist, Marianna FSC; John Lee, State Agronomist; and Marshall Handcock, District Conservationist, DeWitt FSC.



Photo by Reginald Jackson

Summer interns

Arkansas's summer interns recently attended orientation at the state office. The students will be working at field office across the state. Pictured are: (left to right, front row) Andres Aponte, Raven Johnson, Kassandra Riley, Johnnieshia Frazier, Kaitlyn Terrell, Kim Cumella (back row) Lucas Head, Haley Flatte, Allison Greb, Morgan Burns, Andrew Speroterra, Mathew Dismuke, Jessica Marks and Mike Sullivan, state conservationist.