



United States Department of Agriculture

Arkansas Conservation News

Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Strong conservation partnership, landscape initiative result in delisting of segment of Illinois River

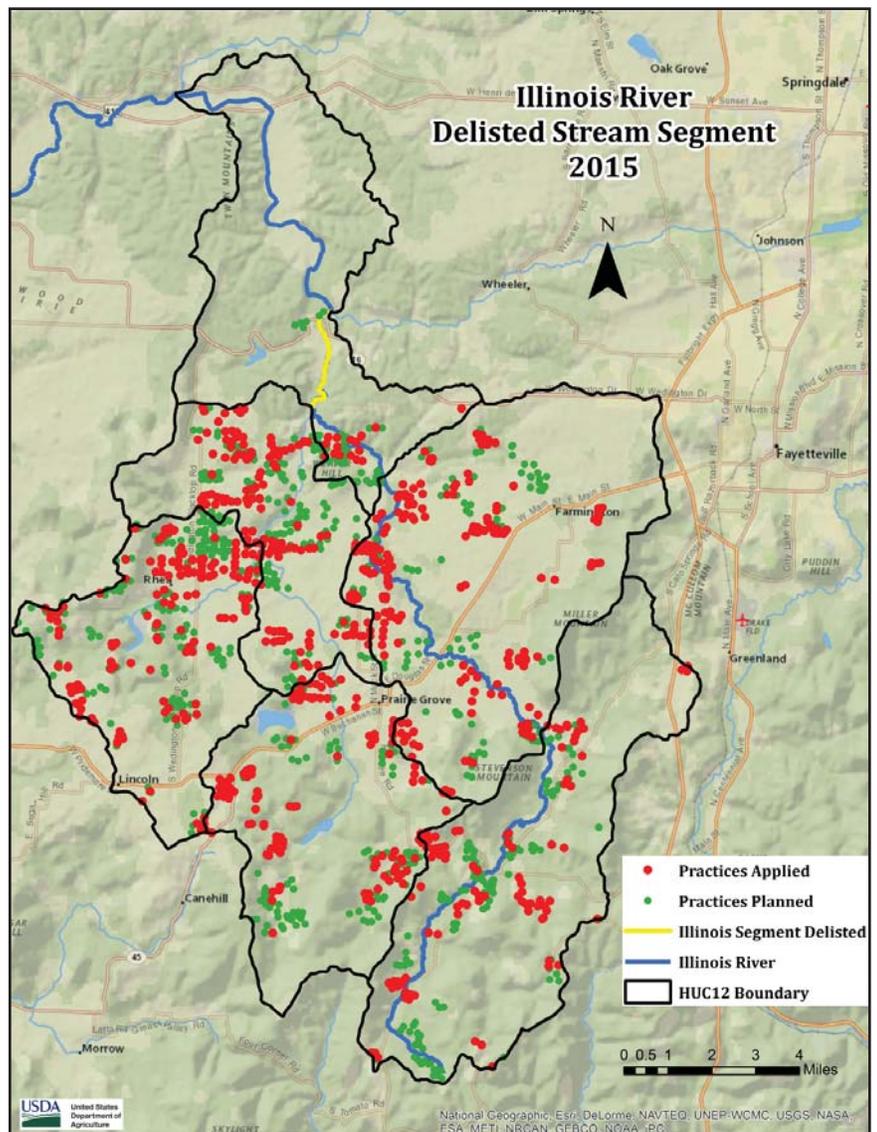
Four years into an 8-year initiative to improve water quality in the Illinois River Sub-Basin and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed (IRWI) progress is being realized with a portion of the river in Arkansas being removed from the state's 2014 Clean Water Act section 303(d) impaired waters list.

Since the IRWI began in 2011, NRCS has funded 538 contracts totaling more than \$15.5 million to apply conservation practices on 43,681 acres in Arkansas. The 1,315,673 acre initiative includes 576,517 acres in Benton and Washington counties in Arkansas and 739,156 acres in Oklahoma.

“Work by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and our partners, such as the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission (ANRC); Illinois River Watershed Partnership (IRWP); and the Washington and Benton county conservation districts; and landowners in six sub-watersheds in the IRWI project area contributed to the delisting,” said Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist in Arkansas.

Surface erosion and agricultural activities led to high turbidity levels in the upper Illinois River. As a result, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) added 10 segments of the Illinois River to the state's 2006 Clean Water Act (CWA) section 303(d) list of impaired waters for turbidity. Turbidity levels on one 2.5-mile reach declined, prompting the state to remove it from the list for turbidity impairment.

Six sub-watersheds (Goose Creek – Illinois River, Headwaters Illinois River, Lake Weddington – Illinois River, Lower Muddy Fork – Illinois River, Moores Creek – Muddy Fork and Upper Muddy Fork – Illinois) contribute to the stretch of river in



The delisted segment of the Illinois River (shown in yellow) and practices applied (red dots) in the watersheds that contributed to the delisting.

See Illinois Delisting, Page 9



It's my pleasure to present the latest edition of Arkansas Conservation News. NRCS works with our conservation partners and landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit the soil, water, air, plants and animals that result in productive lands and healthy ecosystems.

The conservation work depicted in this newsletter portrays only a snapshot of the benefit Arkansas farmers, foresters and ranchers receive from our dedicated NRCS staff and conservation partners.

Fiscal year 2015 was another great year for putting conservation on the ground through the 2014 Farm Bill. NRCS staff provided technical assistance to thousands of landowners across Arkansas. With the tools and resources provided through the Farm Bill, NRCS and all our conservation partners continue to make a major difference not only in soil health, water quality, water quantity and wildlife habitat, but also in the lives of producers and the communities they work in.

Healthy land and waters is the foundation that ensures working farms become more productive, resilient to climate change and better prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century. When we target voluntary conservation efforts to the places most in need, we all see better results.

A number of landscape-level efforts, including the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) and the Illinois River Sub-Basin and Eucha-Spavinaw Lake Watershed Initiative, enabled producers to improve the quality of water and habitat in watersheds across the state. This targeted work helped landowners implement a suite of conservation practices that trapped and reduced runoff of nutrients and sediment into rivers and streams. Recently, streams in both these initiative areas have been delisted.

By bringing our partners together to address water quality concern in the Illinois River and Mississippi River basins, we were able to get results. The initiatives show that improving water quality and maintaining viable agricultural operations can go hand in hand

The purpose and passion for conservation is shared by many in our state. As we look ahead to fiscal year 2016, we will continue to make improvements and deliver outstanding assistance throughout Arkansas helping people help the land.



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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Avian influenza preparedness requires following biosecurity measures

The flu is coming, the flu is coming! We hope the alarms being sounded will all be for nothing but many of the animal health experts are predicting avian influenza (AI) will be transmitted to the commercial and backyard poultry flocks in Arkansas when the waterfowl migration begins.

Growers can protect themselves by following their integrators biosecurity procedures.

NRCS employees and partners will also be following strict procedures such as only visiting one farm per day, staying away from the production area, and cleaning and disinfecting footwear and vehicles.

Growers can also prepare by reviewing their nutrient management plan to see if they have a predetermined mass burial site. If they do not, now is a good time to

request NRCS to do a soils investigation to determine if there is a suitable site. Suitable sites have at least six feet of good clayey (GC, CL, or CH Unified Classification System) soil above the seasonal water table or bedrock.

Burying catastrophic mortality may be the easiest short term solution but the birds may take years to decompose and great care should be taken to choose a site which will not seep the liquids from the decomposing bodies.

There are other options growers should consider such as in-house composting. In-house composting takes approximately four weeks to kill the virus and then an additional 21 days of quarantine, but there are minimal long-term effects.

USDA's Role

Since December 2014, USDA has confirmed several cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5 in the Pacific, Central, and Mississippi flyways (or migratory bird paths). The disease has been found in wild birds, as well as in a few



backyard and commercial poultry flocks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers the risk to people from these HPAI H5 infections to be low. No human cases of these HPAI H5 viruses have been detected in the United States, Canada, or internationally.

USDA has both an international and a domestic role in controlling the spread of AI and reducing its effects on both agriculture and public health. USDA is aware of and prepared for the emergence of new types of AI virus. The nature of the influenza virus is such that mutations occur easily. Therefore, new strains can occur naturally at any time within avian hosts. The concern is whether the changes would impart the potential to cause severe disease or increase transmissibility between birds or mammals. Regardless of these changes, the USDA plans that are currently in place, which include surveillance, reporting, biosecurity, movement control, vaccination and depopulation, can be adjusted and applied to effectively control any new virus outbreak.

Irrigation Water Management

If you have Irrigation Water Management (IWM) in your Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract, now is the time to start organizing your records.

You will need to collect the records of when you irrigated, how much you irrigated and document why you irrigated.

For instance, the IWM Basic Plan includes options for

determining the soil moisture method by using the feel method or by the use of an atmometer.

All plans also include a section for reviewing last season's irrigation procedures and providing a written narrative as to how next season's irrigation water management will be improved. Producers should check their IWM plan for the specific details.

New positions help relieve contracting workload

Arkansas Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is increasing job opportunities with a new position that helps with contracts management.

Program support specialists (PSS) assist the NRCS Field Service Centers in their assigned team with contract main-



Katie Williams, a program support specialist, conducts a second-level review on a contract.

tenance. These positions are the first of their kind, and the individuals perform tasks once left up to the soil conservationists or district conservationists to handle. Their duties include various tasks from putting together six-part folders to conducting second-level and ROOT reviews to keeping up with payments.

“These program support specialists do so much for our team,” said Ben Starr, district conservationist for Lawrence County. “It’s good to have someone to hand those types of jobs to and know they will be done and done well.”

Lawrence County, part of Team Three which also includes Randolph, Jackson, Independence and Sharp counties, hired one of the first PSS positions for Arkansas in 2013. Since starting, Katie Williams’ responsibilities have continued to grow and develop.

“The DCs send me all the documentation for their Conservation Stewardship Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program second-level reviews and their payments,” Williams said. “I post them and handle any problems that might come up. I have also just started heading up the ROOT reviews for my team, and, of course, I assist in whatever else is needed whether it is entering applications, posting Other Tenant Waivers, or just keeping things organized.”

Since 2013, Arkansas has filled eight Program Support Specialist jobs with more planned.

“They provide a lot of relief for the offices,” Starr said, “I think this is a very good move for NRCS.”

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.

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.

Conservation Client Gateway is available to individual landowners and will soon be extended to business entities, such as Limited Liability Corporations.

Conservation Client Gateway 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.

Southern Agricultural Cover Crops, Soil Health, and Water Management Conference October 28 - 29 in Jonesboro

Farmers across Arkansas and from across the country are invited to the Southern Agricultural Cover Crops, Soil Health and Water Management Conference October 28 - 29 being held at the Arkansas State University Convocation Center in Jonesboro. The conference, co-sponsored by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts (AACD), is designed to assist farmers learn how to successfully adopt a cover crop management system, improve soil health and water management on their operations.

The conference provides a forum for farmers to exchange information, discuss opportunities for collaboration, and learn about new and successful practices related to cover crops, soil and water management. Case study presentations will identify and discuss strengths and pitfalls of real applications.

Specific conference sessions will include: soil management; water management; pest management; growing cover crops to graze cattle on cropland; cover crop management and no-till. Guest speakers will include NRCS and USDA Agricultural Research Service scientists, farmers, crop consultants, and university researchers who have extensive experience with various focal points of the conference. One of the featured speakers for this year's conference will be Gabe Brown who will make a presentation on soil health.

Cover crops enhance soil health, increase soil water retention and keep nutrients in fields. Although cover crops can be effective under conventional tillage, they also improve soil quality and ease the transition to continuous no-till.

"Southern farmers cannot simply rely on the tried and proven management techniques that the Midwest employs to manage cover crops and improve soil health," said John Lee, USDA NRCS state agronomist in Arkansas. "Conditions in the South are different, and we need to plan to improve soil health according to southern agricultural farming practices and conditions farmers are facing here in the south."

The second day of the conference will focus on methods to improve water management. Irrigation water management saves money while reducing water use, improving water and air quality, and saving energy.

"Irrigation water management just makes good dollars and sense," said Walt Delp, USDA NRCS state conservation engineer in Arkansas. "Every drop of water that does not runoff is water that is available for crop use and does not have to be pumped."

One emerging field for conservation is selling carbon credits on the environmental market. Several speakers will talk about how to use less water in rice production which in turn will produce fewer greenhouse gases.

Certified crop advisors can earn continuing education units for attending training at the conference.

For more information or to register for the Southern Agricultural Cover Crops, Soil Health and Water Management Conference, contact Debbie Moreland, AACD program administrator, at (501) 682-2915. Registration packages are also available at www.aracd.org.



Beginning farmer builds successful farmers market operation while promoting healthy food to inner city consumers

Every since Mary Bone was a small girl in Lake View, a small community in Phillips County, she loved growing her own food.

“My passion for growing fruits and vegetables came from my grandfather and I never lost it,” she said. She vowed that one day she would become a farmer.

In 2013, she bought a tractor and soon thereafter contacted Arkansas Land and Community Development Corporation (ALCDC), a community based organization in Fargo that works with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. ALCDC gave her assistance on how to start a farming operation.

She acquired 37 acres in Monroe County, one of 48 Arkansas counties in USDA’s StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity which coordinates USDA assistance in the Nation’s most economically challenged rural areas.

She grew squash, cucumbers, watermelon, okra, purple hull peas, tomatoes and other produce. ALCDC provided access to a hoop house and she was able to extend her growing season.

Mary was successful at raising her first crop and decided to start her own Farmers Market. ALCDC contacted Arkansas Baptist College (ABC) a small college in the heart of the African American community in Little Rock. ABC agreed to provide an area near campus for Mary and her husband Rickey to sell their produce.

In 2014, they opened Light House Produce Farms Farmer’s Market.

They sell zucchini, squash, cabbage, watermelons, corn, purple hull peas, okra, jalapeño peppers, and other fruits and vegetables.

“What I would love to do is provide fresh fruits and vegetables to young families in our community,” she said. “They are so used to going to stores and getting food that’s



Article and photo by Reginald Jackson

Alvin Peer, outreach coordinator for Arkansas NRCS, and Mary Bone at her Lighthouse Farms Farmers Market.

already processed. I want to reach young mothers and fathers and help them feed their children fresh vegetables so they can become healthier.”

Farmers markets support the local economy, increase marketing opportunities for farmers and small businesses, provide access to an assortment of local and regionally grown fruits and vegetables, and increase access to healthy, affordable food.

“Once I purchased my tractor, I said to myself, ‘my dream is coming true’,” Mary said. “Through the assistance of USDA programs and community based organizations like ALCDC, farmers can accomplish everything they want to do.”

USDA’s Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food (KYF2) initiative coordinates USDA’s local food efforts.

USDA is committed to strengthening the local food sector, making sure it is a healthy and thriving part of the broader marketplace.

Conservation on the Ground



Abraham Carpenter Jr. (left) and his brother, Albert Carpenter Sr., look over part of this year's watermelon crop.

Article and photo by Reginald Jackson

Carpenter builds farming operation, mentors minority farmers on NRCS programs, initiatives

Strong family values with an appreciation and respect for the land are the keys to Abraham Carpenter Jr.'s success in Grady. He is an exceptional farmer who has built a successful small family farming operation. He and his family own and operate Carpenter's Produce, which services farmers markets all over the state of Arkansas.

He grows over 1,200 acres of produce each year. His operation produces squash, greens, purple hull peas, watermelon, cantaloupe, green beans, okra and other alternative crops. His commitment to conservation has led to major improvements on his farm. He has installed wells to address water conservation concerns, underground pipelines, organic farming and drip

irrigation to limit the effect of soil erosion and conservation tillage. He has participated in the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program for over 20 years, the Conservation Stewardship Program since 2012 to enhance energy, water quality, water quantity and soil quality, and recently became a participant in the USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative. He believes that partnership is a vital tool for any successful farming operation.

Carpenter promotes his participation in NRCS initiatives and programs and the positive experiences he's gained from working with partnering entities by hosting demonstration

field days and speaking at agricultural community events. He does this to increase minority producers' awareness and knowledge of NRCS initiatives and programs. He has worked with the Arkansas Land and Community Development Corporation and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Small Farms Program to address the needs of small farmers in Arkansas. He regularly speaks about the importance of land ownership, the plight of limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers, and how to become stewards of the land to community and youth groups. He has mentored minority and limited resource farmers passing on his knowledge and wisdom of agriculture and his entrepreneurial experience.

Conservation on the Ground

Illinois Delisting

Continued from Page 1

Washington County that was delisted. Since 2011, conservation practices have been applied through the IRWI on 3,749 acres through 42 contracts in six sub-watersheds. The top practices installed include: forage and biomass planting; prescribed grazing; fencing; waste storage facility/roof and cover; and amendments for the treatment of agricultural waste.

“This delisting highlights the efforts of federal, state, and county agencies as well as watershed groups and local landowners working together to implement best management practices on agricultural lands along this stream reach that ultimately improved water quality along a significant portion of the river,” said Randy Young, ANRC executive director.

While the initiative benefits the environment, producers and landowners are also seeing a return on their work.

“Agricultural producers know NRCS practices are based on sound science that helps them remain productive and competitive while providing water quality and environmental protection,” said Delia Haak, executive director of the Illinois River Watershed Partnership (IRWP). “Landowners have a great love for their land. They work 365 days year, 24/7 to have an opportunity to live where they do and care for their land. That’s true love! They participate in conservation programs like these in order to take better care of their land and the rich natural resources we have in the Illinois River watershed.”

For landowners like Bruce Norindr, who operates a poultry farm in the Lower Muddy Fork Watershed, the initiative has helped him address water quality and soil health resource concerns through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

“Mr. Norindr needed a way to dispose of dead chickens,” said Rhonda Foster, the Washington County district conservationist. “When he purchased the farm, the previous owner didn’t tell him he couldn’t use the existing stacking shed (used to store chicken litter) as a composter for dead chickens.”

Foster and an Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract through the IRWI provided a solution – a 2,641-square-foot composting facility. The facility uses a mixture of raw organic by-products and chicken litter to dispose of chicken carcasses in an environmentally friendly way.

“This is great and will definitely help my operation. Richard (Guitierrez, an NRCS soil conservation technician) gave me

the recipe,” Norindr said, referring to the proper amount of organic matter and litter.

To help manage the amount of chicken litter produced by the 750,000 chickens Norindr raises each year, the contract calls for alum treatment in his eight chicken houses three times a year. The alum treatment binds and reduces soluble phosphorous in chicken litter by up to 25 percent. Norindr raises six flocks a year with 125,000 chickens in a flock. The birds average 6 pounds each after seven weeks.

“By bringing all of the partners to the table to address the water quality concerns in the Illinois River, we were able to get results,” Sullivan said. “The initiative has shown improving water quality and maintaining viable agricultural operations can go hand in hand.”

The IRWI work also builds on the work of conservation partners in the area.

Beginning in 1998, ANRC used U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) CWA section 319 funds to provide Illinois River watershed landowners with financial and technical assistance to implement best management practices (BMPs) to help reduce turbidity by preventing sediment from entering the water.

The water quality improvement in the Illinois River is the result of partnerships between

local landowners in the watershed, the Benton County Conservation District, the Washington County Conservation District, ANRC, ADEQ, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, University of Arkansas Water Resource Center, University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, IRWP, and the EPA.

A new NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program project aims to further address water quality concerns in the Illinois River Watershed in portions of Benton and Washington counties. The Illinois River Watershed Partnership is the lead partner for the project that covers 484,947 acres. Project goals include: improving water quality by reducing nutrient loads entering the watershed; increasing plant and soil health and decreasing soil erosion; improving energy efficiency; and improving wildlife habitat.

“We are honored to lead the RCPP project, working with trusted partners like NRCS to help get the word out about additional financial assistance for landowners in the watershed,” Haak said. “IRWP wants to do everything we can to help agricultural producers be successful and assist them with the tools and knowledge they need to implement best management practices.”



Article and photo by Creston Shrum

Rhonda Foster, Washington County district conservationist discuss a nutrient management plan with Diem and Bruce Norindr.

Did You Know ...

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.



Employees receive training on upgraded computer program for conservation plans

On August 25, Toolkit, a computer program NRCS personnel use to prepare conservation plans for landowners, upgraded to Version 8.

Between July and August 148 Arkansas toolkit users including 114 NRCS employees and 34 affiliate (district) employees were provided hands on training at nine different sites around the state.

Toolkit 8 incorporates several changes to the functionality of Toolkit making the program more user friendly and saving time.

The Arkansas Toolkit team is scheduling and developing lessons for nine beginner classes for newer employees.

There are currently 43 students enrolled.

Mathis named new Assistant State Conservationist (Partnership Coordinator)

Amanda Mathis was recently named Assistant State Conservationist (Partnership Coordinator) at the state office in Little Rock.

She started her career in 2004 as an Earth Team volunteer with NRCS at the Harrison Field Service Center (FSC). Following her volunteering experience, she was a summer intern before becoming a soil conservationist in the Paris FSC. She has served as the district conservationist in Berryville and Searcy.

Mathis received a Bachelor of Science degree in Conservation and Wildlife Management from College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Mo., and holds



a Master of Science degree in Crop, Soil, and Environmental Sciences from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

Did You Know ...



Log A Load donation

George Rheinhardt, the Arkansas NRCS forester, and his sons, donated a black walnut bench they handmade to the Log A Load auction. The bench brought a bid of \$5,500 to benefit the Arkansas Children's Hospital.



Tillman featured speaker at ALFDC conference

James Tillman, NRCS Regional Conservationist - Southeast, is one of the featured speakers during the 35th Annual Arkansas Land and Community Development Corporation Conference Oct. 22-23 in Fargo, Ark.

The conference kicks off Oct. 22 with the annual youth day. Tillman is the featured speaker during the luncheon.

For more information, call Mary Harris at (870) 734-1140.

Tiny wasp released to attack emerald ash borer threat

In 2014, the emerald ash borer, an invasive beetle that is a threat to ash trees, was found in six Arkansas counties. Since then, the beetle has been found in four more counties.

To combat the spread, a 25-county quarantine that banned the transportation of hardwood, ash logs and ash nursery stock outside the quarantine area was implemented in 2014.

In September, with input from NRCS and other federal and state agencies, the Arkansas Forestry Commission, the State Plant Board and USDA Plant Health and Inspection Service released parasitic wasps that target emerald ash borers near Arkadelphia, McNeil and Bluff City.

More wasps will be released this fall and spring under a USDA protocol.

Nutrient management, edge of field monitoring conference

The Nutrient Management and Edge of Field Monitoring Conference, being held Dec. 1-3 in Memphis, will provide an opportunity for researchers, conservation professionals, and farmers from across the nation to discuss edge of field monitoring research, nutrient reduction strategies and activities, and conservation programs that have been successful and innovative.

The conference will have three key breakout tracks focusing on research and monitoring results, the implication of those results for reducing nutrient loads in the basin, and watershed project implementation to achieve nutrient reduction strategy goals.

In addition to researchers and field specialists, keynote conference presenters include Ann Bartuska, Deputy

Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Ellen Gilinsky, Senior Advisor, Environmental Protection Agency; and Bill Northey, Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

The conference will be preceded by an agricultural symposium of the Healthy Soils for Healthy Waters initiative examining four conservation practices: nutrient management and soil amendments, conservation tillage, cover crops, and water management. Producers and crop consultants will share their expertise and experiences with support from research, industry, outreach, and policy participants.

For more information, visit www.swcs.org/nutrientmanagement.