

ARKANSAS CONSERVATION NEWS

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

2nd Quarter
2023

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2023

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Helping People Help the Land

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

From the State Conservationist

March is Women's History Month, a time for us to recognize how women always demonstrate the strength, capacity and tenacity needed to achieve the goals they set for themselves, their families and their careers. We also honor and pay tribute to the accomplished, visionary, and trailblazing women farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who provide the food and fiber to help feed the world. They serve as an inspiration of expanded opportunity and endless possibilities for all women and girls.

I am honored to work for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which has placed a commitment to building a modern workplace that advances diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, and that supports women leaders at all rungs of our organization. I am also very proud of the women who make up our Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) workforce. We celebrate the assistance they provide to our customers in helping them get conservation on the ground.

In addition, March 21 was National Ag Day, a time for us to thank farmers, ranchers, forest landowners and all

those who work in the agriculture sector across Arkansas for feeding, sheltering and powering our nation. This year's theme was Agriculture: Growing a Climate for Tomorrow. Climate change is happening, evidenced by persistent drought, frequent tornadoes and storms, and larger and more powerful wildfires. Our agricultural communities are on the frontlines. Now is the time for us to act, and Arkansas producers are doing their part.

NRCS is continuously working to improve our programs to ensure we are giving producers the best tools to conserve natural resources. We want a broad array of agriculture to see themselves in this effort, including small and historically underserved producers as well as early adopters.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced in February USDA is making funding available for agricultural producers and forest landowners nationwide to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided an additional \$19.5 billion over five years for climate smart agriculture through several of the conservation programs



that NRCS implements. NRCS is making available \$850 million in fiscal year 2023 for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

These funds will provide direct climate mitigation benefits. They will also expand access to financial and technical assistance for producers to advance conservation on their farm, ranch or forest land through practices-

(see STC on Page 3)

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

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National Ag Day

STC (continued from Page 2)

like cover cropping, conservation tillage, wetland restoration, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, tree planting and more. For more information, please contact your local NRCS office at the USDA Service Center by logging on to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/arkansas>.

I want to welcome to the Arkansas NRCS leadership team Stephen Smedley, who was recently named State Conservation Engineer and Rebecca Fox, who was recently named State Soil Scientist. Congratulations to you both.



Mike Sullivan, State Conservationist

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Did you know you can subscribe to receive free email and text message updates from USDA related to conservation here in Arkansas?

Whether you're scrolling through emails on your break or checking a text message between tasks, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) wants to keep you posted on the latest news on our programs and initiatives. Subscribe now to receive emails and text messages about important program information in Arkansas.

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Diane Petit, Public Affairs Specialist for USDA Farm Production and Conservation

Fifty years after the creation of National Agriculture Day, America's farmers, ranchers and private forestland owners find themselves on the front lines of climate change. They are uniquely positioned to deliver solutions by implementing climate-smart practices that conserve natural resources, build healthier soils, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and sequester carbon.

National Agriculture Day is a day to recognize the best stewards of our land: America's agricultural producers. They are not only providing food, forage, and fiber for today, they are also growing a climate for tomorrow.

USDA is growing a climate for success for all people involved in farming, ranching and private forest land management. We are working to create an equitable and climate-smart food and agriculture economy built to support both rural and urban communities and empower producers who feed the world; improve the health, nutrition, and quality of life of all Americans; and yield healthy lands, forests, and clean water.

From crop insurance to farm loans, and from conservation to disaster assistance, USDA programs are helping

producers conserve natural resources and keep families farming for future generations.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) represents the single largest investment in climate and clean energy solutions in American history. This is an historic, once-in-a-generation investment in the rural, suburban, and urban agricultural communities that USDA serves. We are committed to implementing the IRA quickly and effectively to give producers the tools and resources they need to keep their operations productive and resilient.

USDA can only succeed in its mission to help American agriculture thrive—and can only live up to President Lincoln's description of it as the "People's Department"—if it ensures that the Americans who need its services most receive them. Equity is vital in all we do at USDA. We ensure that our programs and investments are available to everyone and we ensure that underserved producers prosper because of our work.

USDA is working across its agencies to support urban producers to grow fresh produce, create jobs, beautify their neighborhoods, and increase-

(see National Ag Day on Page 15)

Programs

USDA Requests Public Input on Key Water Quality Initiatives Public, Partner Comments Requested by April 7

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is asking for public input on two water quality conservation initiatives, the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) and the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). Through the Federal Register notice published today, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) seeks feedback on how best to target program benefits, quantify impact, and improve program delivery and outreach in the future.

"In watersheds across the country, we have seen the benefits of targeting resources, working one-on-one with farmers and ranchers to voluntarily implement conservation practices that improve water quality and often have climate co-benefits" said NRCS Chief Terry Cosby.

"We're proud of what the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative and the National Water Quality Initiative have accomplished, and we look forward to continuing to improve our efforts to ensure they provide the greatest impact for producers, communities and our nation's waterways."

Information gathered through the Federal Register notice will help inform NRCS efforts to identify and prioritize improvements to these initiatives starting in fiscal year 2024.

This is a 30-day public comment period. Public comments should be submitted through the Federal Register notice by April 7, 2023. Questions should be sent to SM.NRCS.LandscapeConservationInitiatives@usda.gov.

Launched in 2009, the 12-state MRBI uses several Farm Bill programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to help landowners sustain America's natural resources through voluntary conservation. States within the Mississippi River Basin have developed nutrient reduction strategies to minimize the contributions of nitrogen and phosphorus to surface waters within the basin, and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. MRBI uses a small watershed approach Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC 12) to support the states' reduction strategies. Avoiding, controlling and trapping practices are implemented to reduce the amount of nutrients flowing from agricultural land into waterways and to improve the resiliency of working lands.

Over the past ten years, MRBI has helped farmers and ranchers:

- Implement conservation on nearly 1.5 million acres.
- Reduce sediment loss by more than 2.4 million tons.
- Reduce phosphorous loss by more than 5.5 million-



pounds.

- Reduce nitrogen loss by more than 20.2 million pounds.

NWQI was launched in 2012, and is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to identify and address impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation. Through NWQI, NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance to help farmers apply conservation practices to protect water resources.

Over the past ten years through NWQI, NRCS helped farmers and ranchers:

- Reduce sediment loss by more than 1.1 million tons.
- Reduce phosphorus loss by more than 3.1 million pounds.
- Reduce nitrogen loss by more than 13.5 million pounds.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the Biden-Harris administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America.

To learn more, visit usda.gov.

Programs

USDA Offers Expanded Conservation Program Opportunities to Support Climate-Smart Agriculture in 2023

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announced several new and expanded opportunities for climate-smart agriculture in 2023. Updates include nationwide availability of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) option and EQIP Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF). These improvements to NRCS's working lands conservation programs, combined with continued program opportunities in Arkansas, are part of the Biden-Harris Administration's broader effort to support climate-smart agriculture.

"America's farmers, ranchers, and forest owners are leading the way in implementing climate-smart solutions across their operations," Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan said.

"We are continuing to support the adoption of conservation approaches to assist Arkansas producers in their work addressing the climate crisis and building more resilient operations.

We are continuously working to improve our programs to ensure we are giving farmers and ranchers the best tools to conserve natural resources. We want a broad array of agriculture to see themselves in this effort, including small and historically underserved producers as well as early adopters."

EQIP CSAF

NRCS held signups to support climate-smart agriculture and forestry through voluntary conservation practices. This assistance, available through EQIP will help agricultural producers plan and implement voluntary conservation practices that sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impacts of climate change on working lands.

NRCS will rank applications for funding based on expected climate change mitigation benefits. Priority conservation categories in Arkansas include:

- Improving conservation management for rice production
- Includes producers in Craighead, Poinsett, Cross, Lonoke, Prairie, Phillips, Jefferson, Arkansas, Mississippi, Crittenden and St. Francis counties



- Improving agroforestry, forestry and upland wildlife habitat

Includes producers in Saline, Hot Spring, Clark, Nevada, Hempstead, Lafayette, Columbia, Grant, Dallas, Ouachita, Union, Bradley, Calhoun, Cleveland, Jefferson, Ashley, Drew and Lincoln counties.

NRCS accepts program applications on a continuous basis but sets dates to batch and rank applications as funding allows. Farmers and landowners in Arkansas who submitted applications to their local NRCS office by March 31, 2023, will be considered for this round of funding. Applications received after March 31 will be considered in later funding periods, subject to funding availability.

EQIP CIC

Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC) address priority resource concerns, including sequestering carbon and improving soil health in high-priority areas. Through these contracts, NRCS works with producers to strengthen the quality and condition of natural resources on their operations using management practices, such as irrigation water management, drainage water management, feed management, and residue and tillage management that target resource concerns, including degraded soil and water quality, available water and soil erosion.

CIC offer producers annual incentive payments to implement management practices as well as conservation evaluation and monitoring activities to help manage, maintain and improve priority natural resource concerns within state high-priority areas and build on existing conservation efforts.

(see Climate Smart on Page 8)

Programs

Inflation Reduction Act Funding for Climate-Smart Agriculture



NRCS photos by Reginald Jackson

National Black Growers Council President P.J. Haynie, NABC Executive Director Dr. Hazell Read, and Lee County producer Roger Smith meet with Secretary Vilsack in Lonoke County to discuss farming in Arkansas.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced in February the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) made funding available for agricultural producers and forest landowners nationwide to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided an additional \$19.5 billion over five years for climate smart agriculture through several of the conservation programs that USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) implements. NRCS is making available \$850 million in fiscal year 2023 for its oversubscribed conservation programs: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

"The Inflation Reduction Act provided a once-in-a-generation investment in conservation on working lands, and we want to work with agricultural and forest landowners to invest in climate-smart practices that create value and economic opportunity for producers," said Vilsack, who

spoke at the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting in New Orleans. "We know that agriculture plays a critical role in the nation's effort to address climate change, and we are using this funding to bolster our existing programs, maximize climate benefits, and foster other environmental benefits across the landscape."

The IRA funding includes an additional \$8.45 billion for EQIP, \$4.95 billion for RCPP, \$3.25 billion for CSP, and \$1.4 billion for ACEP. The increased funding levels begin in fiscal year 2023 and rapidly build over four years. These additional investments are estimated to help hundreds of thousands of farmers and ranchers apply conservation to millions of acres of land. Additionally, the IRA provides \$300 million to quantify carbon sequestration and greenhouse gases (GHG) through the collection and use of field-based data to assess conservation outcomes. Information gained through this effort will be used to improve practices and technical assistance to customers.

(see IRA on Page 7)

Programs

IRA *(continued from Page 6)*

Further guidance on this important work will be provided as the implementation this portion of the IRA continues. “These funds will provide direct climate mitigation benefits,” said Mike Sullivan, NRCS state conservationist in Arkansas.

“They will also expand access to financial and technical assistance for producers to advance conservation on their farm, ranch or forest land through practices like cover cropping, conservation tillage, wetland restoration, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, tree planting and more.”

To ensure we can quantify the benefits of these IRA investments, NRCS is working to support Department-wide work on Measurement, Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MMRV). The IRA provided targeted funding to support this effort. In administering the Inflation Reduction Act climate investments, USDA will also support other environmental co-benefits, including – among other things –water conservation, wildlife habitat improvements, and reducing runoff.

NRCS plans to roll out the next RCPP funding opportunity in early spring, which will include IRA funds from fiscal year 2023.

Other opportunities for agreements and partnerships at the state level will be announced for fiscal year 2023 in the coming months. The IRA provides funding to support those strategic partnerships with local, regional and national organizations. This will include outreach to underserved producers to ensure IRA climate funding is reaching those who have been previously unable to access conservation assistance.

Water Supply Investments

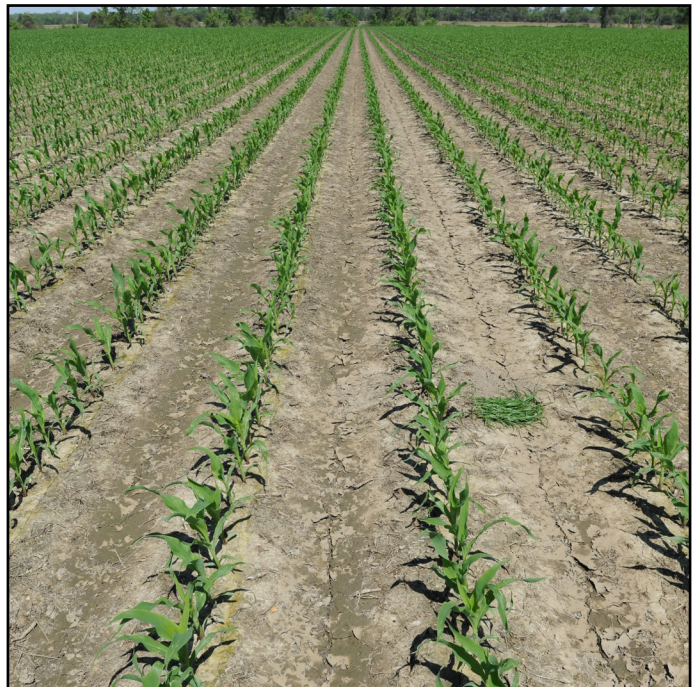
USDA also released the Western Water and Working Lands Framework for Conservation Action that identifies 13 strategies that guide NRCS’s investments for helping agricultural producers and communities respond to the significant challenges resulting from threats to the water supply in the Nation’s most arid landscapes. Assistance delivered through these water-related strategies also helps build resilience to climate-change impacts such as droughts, wildfires and floods. Many of the resilience-focused activities and systems are also Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry mitigation activities, which support carbon sequestration or greenhouse gas emissions reductions. Climate-smart mitigation activities are supported by

work for Conservation Action, USDA is also announcing and highlighting other drought focused investments, including the WaterSMART Initiative <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/watersmart>.

On Nov. 21, 2022, USDA published a Federal Register Notice requesting public input on implementation of the funding provided by the IRA and sought comments on program delivery and outreach, especially for underserved producers. That notice closed on Dec. 21, 2022, and NRCS received over 450 comments from the public, which the agency is using to guide actions in fiscal year 2023 and will continue to identify and adopt additional changes based on that public feedback in fiscal year 2024 and in future years.

On Aug. 16, 2022, President Biden signed the IRA into law. It is a historic, once-in-a-generation investment and opportunity for the agricultural communities that USDA serves. The IRA will help producers stay on the farm, prevent producers from becoming ineligible for future assistance and promote climate-smart agriculture by increasing access to conservation assistance.

For more information on IRA, log on to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/priorities/inflation-reduction-act>. For more information on Western Water and Working Lands Framework for Conservation Action log on to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/western-water-and-working-lands-framework-for-conservation-action>.



Events

NRCS Participates in Arkansas Grown Conference & Expo

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture hosted the Arkansas Grown Conference & Expo January 25 through January 28 in Little Rock. The event focused on the Arkansas agriculture industry, the state's largest industry, and was geared toward the farmers and producers who grow for our local food system. NRCS Arkansas had a chance to participate in the conference by hosting a booth. State Conservationist Mike Sullivan also participated in the conference by being a member of the "Federal Support from the USDA" panel on January 27.



NRCS photos by Reginald Jackson

(l to r) USDA Senior Advisor for Racial Justice & Equity Dr. DeWayne Goldmon, Farm Service Agency State Executive Director Doris Washington, State Conservationist Sullivan, Rural Development Program Coordinator Steven Mosher, National Ag Statistics Service Regional Director Eugene Young and Southern US Trade Association's Danielle Coco speak on the "Federal Support from USDA" Panel at the Arkansas Grown Conference



USDA Risk Management Agency Regional Office Director Roddrick Bell, State Conservationist Mike Sullivan and Rural Development Program Coordinator Steven Mosher talk during the break of the Arkansas Grown Conference



Pulaski County District Conservationist Kennard Williams and Outreach Coordinator Alvin Peer provide info to conference attendees

Climate Smart *(continued from Page 5)*

NRCS Arkansas is accepting EQIP-CIC applications in several counties for livestock producers to address soil quality, plant condition, and threats to water quality. Those counties include Cleburne, Columbia, Conway, Crawford, Faulkner, Franklin, Hempstead, Howard, Independence, Jackson, Johnson, Lafayette, Lawrence, Little River, Logan, Miller, Montgomery, Nevada, Perry, Pike, Polk, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Scott, Sebastian, Sevier, Sharp, Van Buren and Yell. Producers had until March 31, 2023, to apply for the EQIP-Conservation Incentive Contracts.

NRCS accepts applications for conservation programs – including EQIP – year-round, however producers and land-owners should apply by state specific signup dates to be considered for each year's funding. That includes Climate - Smart Agriculture Forestry and for the Conservation Incentive Contracts. For additional information, contact your local USDA Service Center.

Arkansas Leadership Team

Smedley named State Conservation Engineer



Stephen Smedley was recently named State Conservation Engineer (SCE) for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas.

Stephen is a native of Faulkner County, Arkansas, and a graduate from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering. His career began in the oil and gas industry. Starting as a field engineer and ending as a water subject matter expert, he gained experience in all water related activities within oil and gas. One contribution he is most proud of during this time is starting a water conservation program to conserve fresh water during well completions.

After oil and gas, he refocused his efforts in dams by becoming a geotechnical engineer and would eventually become the Engineering Supervisor for Dam Safety with the Arkansas Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Division where he oversaw all regulated dams in Arkansas. During this time, he became more intimately involved with NRCS and joining the agency in 2020 as the dam safety Engineer for Arkansas.

"I am very honored to follow in the footsteps of my predecessors and to be a part of the great work that's being done in Arkansas," Smedley said. "Specifically, the irrigation projects set to tackle ground water decline, which exemplifies NRCS's goals of conservation, partnership, and engineering."

Fox named State Soil Scientist



Rebecca Fox was recently named State Soil Scientist (SSS) for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas.

She grew up in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Little Rock and is a graduate of Little Rock Central High School. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Management Systems from Louisiana State University. While at LSU, she began working for NRCS as a student trainee in Southern Louisiana. She spent her first summer with NRCS riding airboats and describing marsh soils for a remediation project.

Fox began working as a soil scientist in 2011 with NRCS Louisiana. She has worked in Arkansas, New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire as a field soil scientist collecting and updating soil survey information. One of the projects she is most proud of is updating the Soil Survey information in the Lake Champlain Basin Watershed to address resource concerns that included a collaboration with NASA.

In 2020, she became assistant state soil scientist in Arkansas. In addition to maintaining soil survey information, she serves on several national focus teams that provide technical guidance and promote soil science efforts.

"I believe that understanding the inherit and dynamic properties of soil is an important step in conservation planning," she stated.

When she isn't working, Rebecca enjoys gardening, traveling, and hiking.

Conservation On the Ground

Francisco Perez, livestock producer in Crawford County, stands on his farm where he is surveying his land



Agriculture With a Purpose: How Farming Changed the Life of a Beginning Veteran Farmer

*Story and photos by Jasmine Parham
NRCS Arkansas*

Francisco Perez would have never imagined his love for agriculture would arise from a birthday party he attended at age ten. Young and reluctant, he agreed to go only to appease his mother.

“I remember they had a pony in the backyard, and I kept thinking I’ve got to get me one of those someday—so eventually I did,” said Perez.

He grew up in a troubled home in Miami, Florida, struggling to maintain a healthy balance between school and social life. Amid the chaos and disarray, agriculture became a haven for Perez and ultimately saved him.

After being removed from public school, his mother sent him to an All-Boys Ranch where he gained the discipline and structure he longed for. He also gained a passion for farm animals and wildlife.

Faculty and staff at the Boy’s Ranch began noticing the hard work he put in to ensure the well-being of the ranch. This led him to receive the horsemanship award, the highest honor given to a student at the facility.



Crawford County Soil Technician Jane Lowry and Perez

After graduation, Perez briefly worked at a ranch in Florida before joining the United States Marine Corps. After he served his tour of duty with the Marine Corps, he lived in Texas and Florida before deciding to settle in northwest Arkansas. Today, he farms on over 40 acres of pasture land in Crawford County.

He acquired several head of cattle and became a rancher. Eventually he learned about the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the programs they offer.

(see AWP on Page 11)

Conservation On the Ground

Agriculture with a purpose *(continued from Page 10)*

He went to his local USDA Service Center in Crawford County and worked with the district conservationist and the NRCS conservation staff to develop a conservation plan.

A conservation plan identifies a customer's conservation objectives and assesses and analyzes the natural resource concerns on that customer's land related to soil, water, animals, plants, air, energy, and human interaction.

Since Perez is a veteran of the Marine Corps, he qualified for funding assistance as a veteran farmer. Ultimately, Perez received an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract. Conservation programs, including EQIP, can help veterans who are farmers make conservation improvements and strengthen their operations.

"NRCS has been a big help. With my EQIP contract, they have assisted me with installing approximately 1800 feet of fencing and clearing undesirable brush," Perez said.

Brush management is a conservation practice that improves wildlife habitat by removing woody (non-herbaceous or succulent) plants, including invasive and noxious plants. Producers use this practice to create the desired plant community, enhance wildlife habitat, and improve forage accessibility for livestock and wildlife.

He is currently signed up for his second EQIP contract for more pasture improvements to provide water and cross fencing to allow rotational grazing and to do more brush management.



Perez also owns horses in addition to cattle

NRCS assists producers with applying fencing to areas where livestock and wildlife control is needed or where access to people is to be regulated. USDA helps farmers plan and carry out various conservation activities such as transitioning to installing rotational grazing techniques, heavy use area, and water and tire tanks to improve air and water quality.

"My ultimate goal is to raise more cattle and contribute to the community to provide food," Perez said.

Moving forward, Perez hopes to continue working with NRCS to grow his cattle operation and expand and diversify his livestock.

Veterans, like Perez, may be eligible for a cost share of up to 90 percent and advance payments of up to 50 percent for the costs of certain conservation practices. Veterans may also receive preference for payments to help maintain and improve upon existing conservation systems.

Veterans and all new farmers and ranchers are encouraged to visit the USDA's Beginning Farmers webpages <https://www.farmers.gov/blog/are-you-veteran-interested-in-farming-usda-can-help> for more resources.



Perez utilizes rotational grazing and fencing on his cattle operation in Crawford County

Urban Agriculture

Conservation District Helps Create Sustainable Food Source in Crawford County While Educating the Community

*Story and photos by Jasmine Parham
NRCS Arkansas*

As time advances, urban agriculture is becoming more and more progressive. Simply put, urban agriculture encompasses the art of cultivating, processing, and distributing agricultural products in urban and suburban areas. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to support urban agriculture, as it is vital in growing fresh, healthy food—often where grocery stores are scarce. It also provides more job opportunities, responds to climate changes, and enhances neighborhoods.

In addition to urban gardens, the USDA is expanding its People's Garden initiative. This initiative is part of USDA's efforts to increase equity and support local food systems. It also encourages conservation and climate-smart practices. School gardens, community gardens, and small-scale farms in urban and rural areas can all be recognized as "People's Gardens."

For a garden to qualify, it must be registered on the USDA website and benefit the community, working cooperatively to educate the public. People's gardens prioritize growing fresh, healthy food and support a resilient, homegrown food system. Educating on sustainable practices is also an important role of a People's Garden.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recognizes the importance of urban agriculture and how partnerships help carry out its mission of 'helping people help the land'.

Among a plethora of partnerships, NRCS Arkansas collaborates with the Arkansas Association of Conservation Districts (AACD) on different projects.

An urban garden project was successfully completed in January 2022 with the help of the Crawford County Conservation District (CCCD). Their district office is in a very unique location. What once was an elementary school is now home to an adult education center, district court office, and the CCCD office. Nestled in between the cross walk-back is the new urban garden.



*(above) Collard greens are one of the first vegetables planted during the winter for the community garden
(below) E-shaped raised beds to house the crops*



Urban Agriculture

Conservation District *(continued from Page 12)*

The idea for the urban garden came to fruition over a year ago following Debbie Faubus', the director of the adult education center, suggestions. Students in the adult education center are the primary caretakers of the garden. They are learning about agriculture with hands-on experience, along with learning about sustainable conversation practices.

The urban garden was built with the help of many community partners, including NRCS and local volunteers.

"We had a lot of help with this project because it took a lot of work. Volunteers showed up in numbers and donated their time, resources, and labor. We wouldn't have been able to complete this without the support," said Sherrie Lech, Crawford County Conservation District coordinator.

Through donations and grants, volunteers acquired materials needed to build raised beds for the garden. Raised beds are beneficial because they create an above-ground growing environment, which allows for fewer pests, improved drainage, and greater accessibility. The bed's unique "E" shaped design was crafted to be handicapped accessible and easy for all.

The urban garden grows mixed-row crops, including collard greens, peas, beans, and herbs. The urban garden produced a handful of harvests in just over a year of growth.

"Ultimately, the idea is to provide a sustainable garden that the entire community of Van Buren will benefit from. We want everyone to provide a sustainable food source for all," said Crawford County district board chairman Gary Baxter.

NRCS funds projects that improve local food access, support farmer infrastructure, and increase the production of urban farms or food forests.

In support of NRCS efforts to prioritize urban agriculture and innovative production, Arkansas recently added an acting urban conservation team. This team hopes to enhance and expand NRCS service to small acreage and urban producers throughout the state. Whether addressing resources such as soil health, water conservation, or nutrient management or assisting a farmer in extending the growing season, NRCS is committed to assisting our producers who feed and heal our communities.



(l to r) Jane Lowry (NRCS), Sherrie Lech (Crawford County District Coordinator), Autumn Grant (Crawford County Adult Education Center Resource Hub Coordinator), Angel Tracy (Crawford County District Assistant), DeWite DeShazo (Crawford County District Board Vice-Chairman), Thad Freeland (Crawford County District Board Member), and Gary Baxter (Crawford County District Board Chairman)

For more information about USDA assistance for urban farmers and the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, visit farmers.gov/urban and usda.gov/urban.



Rain barrel collecting rain water for irrigation

Black History Month

NRCS Hosts Black History Month Program at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Arkansas Chapter of the National Organization of Professional Black NRCS Employees hosted a Black History Month Observance on February 23 at the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service in Little Rock. This was the first in-person Black History Month Observance since the start of the pandemic. The theme for the program was "Black Resistance."

There was a farmer panel discussion featuring Lee County row crop Producer Roger Smith, Monroe County row crop Producer Derrick Young, and Senior Advisor for Racial Equity to the Secretary of Agriculture Dr. Dewayne Goldmon. The featured guest speaker for the program was Vice President for Agriculture Dr. Deacue Fields, University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Research and Extension.

During the program, State Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Manager Corey Cornelius, received the annual Chester S. Durley Award in honor of 'Outstanding Contributions to NRCS'. Corey graduated from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture Economics in 2004. He began his career with NRCS in 2003 as a student trainee. He has gone on to serve as a soil conservationist in Fort Smith and Hazen, and as a district conservationist in Osceola and Forrest City. He served as a Team Leader for seven years and chairman of the Farm Family committee. In 2020, he became the state EQIP program manager.



(l to r) State Conservationist Mike Sullivan, EQIP Program Manager Corey Cornelius, and Outreach Coordinator Alvin Peer

Chester S. Durley (1915-1987) was Arkansas's first full-time African American USDA Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) employee and Soil Conservationist in Arkansas (in the Marion field office). He earned a Bachelor of Science degree at Arkansas Agricultural Mechanical and Normal College at Pine Bluff (now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff) and a Master of Science degree from Michigan State University. In 1966, SCS promoted Durley to district conservationist where he served until his retirement in 1979. Durley was an active role model and left a profound legacy in his West Memphis community.



State Conservationist Mike Sullivan visits with guest speaker Vice President Dr. Deacue Fields, of the Univ. of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Research and Extension.



NRCS employees and guests observing Black History Month program

Programs

NRCS Earth Team Program offers first hand experience for volunteers to assist putting conservation on the ground



Since 1985, Earth Team volunteers have provided a valued source of talent and enthusiasm to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Every day, these dedicated volunteers work with conservation professionals on private lands to improve soil quality, conserve water and improve air quality.

"How can you volunteer to be a part of the Earth Team" you may ask? Anyone 14 years of age or older who is interested in conserving and protecting our natural resources can join. As a volunteer, you can work part-time or full-time, evenings or weekends, outdoors or in a local NRCS office. You can even volunteer as an individual or with a group.

As an Earth Team volunteer, you will work with professionals on conservation activities in your community. Whatever your talents or interests, there is a volunteer opportunity for you.

You can help professional conservationists who are work-ing directly with farmers and ranchers to:

- Plan, lay out, and design conservation practices
- Make natural resource inventories
- Improve wildlife habitat
- Plant Trees
- Assist with field visits
- Perform clerical duties
- Create communications products
- Aid in field days and banquets
- Computer Support
- Develop and present educational materials
- Test water quality
- Organize conservation tours and exhibits
- Take photographs
- Write Articles

- Speak to community groups
- Produce artwork and publications

NRCS needs your talents and clerical assistance in many lines of exciting work. The opportunities are endless! The Earth Team will also provide you with experience in a variety of different natural resource fields including: conservation, soil quality, water quality, tree planting, brush management and more.

If you're considering a career in natural resources, consider joining the Earth Team to kick start your career! Several NRCS Arkansas employees began their careers as Earth Team volunteers. Join today and gain valuable knowledge

and workplace experience that will help build your resume. With nearly 61 offices in communities statewide, volunteers are needed in virtually every county.

Contact State Public Affairs Specialist Reginald Jackson at reginald.jackson@usda.gov or visit your local NRCS Office to find out more about how you can be a part of the NRCS Earth Team Volunteer Program. For more information on the Earth Team, visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/earth-team.

National Ag Day *(continued from Page 3)*

access to fresh, healthy food in areas where grocery stores are scarce. On National Agriculture Day and every day, USDA is committed to ensuring our programs and investments reach all producers, including underserved producers who haven't always had the opportunity to benefit from the many resources USDA has to offer. Please join us in thanking our nation's producers and wishing them a happy National Agriculture Day!