



# Columbia County Orchard and NRCS Combat Erosion and Enhance Pollinator Habitat

In October 2023, Joe O'Hara from OHF Orchards LLC contacted USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for assistance. Joe manages approximately 120 acres of apple, pear, and peach trees. He had known about NRCS through his dealings with the local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office in Columbia County, Pennsylvania. He also connected with the Pennsylvania Veterans to Agriculture Association, which connected him with a fellow veteran recently taking on a management role at NRCS. This personal connection made it easier for Joe; he says, *"Partnering with someone is always easier when you have a contact, and you feel good when reaching out for help."*

Joe expressed concerns about erosion on one of his orchard fields and access roads. The farm's hilly terrain caused severe washouts during heavy rains, with gullies forming along the field edges and water flowing onto the access roads. Joe applied for assistance from NRCS to address this issue. After a visit with the Conservation Engineering Technician, practices were developed to meet

Joe's goals. These included installing a grassed waterway along one field to capture runoff and adding nine water bars with rock-lined outlets on the access roads to help control erosion. Since the estimated cost was under \$20,000, Joe qualified for the Minor Soil Erosion Fund Code and secured funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for fiscal year (FY) 2024.

Joe worked closely with the field technicians and engineers, showing them his equipment and explaining how the farm operates in the affected areas. This hands-on approach helped the team design an effective system that met the farm's unique needs. Joe elaborates on how the team's consistent communication was essential, stating, *"This helped them to understand what type of system to design."* Joe appreciated their patience and willingness to collaborate.

After signing the EQIP contract, Joe wanted to expand his conservation efforts. He applied for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) funding to plant one acre of pollinator habitat on his 35-acre orchard, a plan that was approved for CSP in FY24. Joe and his



partners were excited to add monarch butterfly enhancement and pollinator habitat to the farm, with wildflowers planted the following spring.

Joe values the positive experience of working with NRCS. He emphasized that the NRCS team was fully committed to helping address the farm's challenges. Joe explains, *"Working with them has been easier than expected. Honestly, they are there to try and assist you in fixing your problems."* Looking ahead, Joe hopes that the conservation efforts will restore several heavily damaged areas of the farm while preserving additional land for wildflower planting.

Joe advises other farmers beginning partnerships with NRCS to *"be patient, clearly explain their needs, and do not hesitate to ask questions."* While some may worry about paperwork or privacy, Joe noted that his only focus has been resolving his identified issues. He reiterates that his own experience has been positive. The idea for the wildflower planting came from the NRCS team. OHF Orchards LLC is currently implementing the grassed waterway and water bars, and Joe is optimistic and excited for the future.

