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Department of
Agriculture

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE • TEXAS

Helping People Help the Land



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NRCS Activity Report

November 2016



MESSAGE FROM NRCS STATE CONSERVATIONIST SALVADOR SALINAS



First and foremost, thank you for the best, most effective, and successful conservation partnership. Through your

support, NRCS completed one of its most challenging; but yet, successful conservation years.

Our conservation portfolio expanded to include investments in non-traditional conservation; e.g. Monarch Habitat Improvement Initiative, Climate Change Adaptation Initiative, Urban Conservation, Soil Health Initiative, Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative, partnering with the Beneficial Use Group (BUG) using Houston Ship Channel dredge material to construct marsh lands and bird sanctuary islands, outreach to non-traditional customers and established new partnerships through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

As the agency's services, programs and initiatives portfolio expands, so has the number of new and non-traditional clients. Outreach events and clinics continue across Texas, and I thank SWCD Directors and District employees for helping to plan and

participate in these events. Urban farming in Fort Worth, establishment of community gardens in Dallas, San Antonio, Houston and Weslaco; assisting producers growing free range chickens, and organic producers are but a few of our results.

Our partnership effort results for fiscal year 2016 follows:

- Technical Assistance contacts – 70,354 people
- Conservation Plans written – 7.8M acres
- Conservation applied to improve water quality – 6.4M acres
- Conservation applied to protect and improve grazing lands – 6.6M acres
- Conservation applied to improve fish and wildlife habitat – 2.6M acres
- Conservation applied to improve environmental quality – 7.8M acres
- Soil Surveys mapped or updated – 6,297,009 acres
- EQIP – 3,241 contracts; 2.0M acres; \$84M
- RCPP (EQIP) – 36 contracts; 7,902 acres; \$1,315,736
- CSP – 169 contracts; 502,000 acres; \$12.6M
- ACEP – 10 Projects; 10,966 acres; \$6.4M
- Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative – 30 tunnels, \$706,635
- Urban Conservation – six community

- gardens established
 - Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWPP) – 90 projects for \$25.5M
 - Watershed Rehabilitation – 16 Dams
- Texas NRCS employees have collaborated, engaged, and provided critical input to national teams, served on international assignments, served on multi-state initiative teams; all while also working on their Texas responsibilities.

A lot of outstanding conservation work was put on the land in fiscal year 2016. We can see it across the Texas landscape. To begin our next conservation journey, we will focus on three major priorities:

- Expanding and implementing the Conservation Stewardship Program
- Increasing our Conservation Planning
- Focusing on and stressing Voluntary Conservation

Thank you for your support, partnership and conservation leadership in Texas.

Salvador Salinas

PROTECTION FOUND IN DEEP ROOTS AND STEWARDSHIP

By Donnie Lunsford, Public Affairs Specialist

As you move closer to the stream, you begin to see turkey, deer, song birds, and other wildlife. Most people picture a stream as an area which is well manicured with the well-manicured grass banks and big trees with no brush underneath with a stream free of curves. If you agree, according to experts in that field, you would be wrong.

The Head of the River Ranch, just outside of Christoval in Tom Green County, hosted a Riparian Health Workshop with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Tom Green Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). Ryland Howard, owner of the Head of the River Ranch, gave the history of the ranch. Steve Nelle, consultant and retired NRCS biologist, led the discussion and presented multiple topics on basic hydrology such as base flow, undercuts, watersheds or catchments, riparian vegetation, and grazing riparian areas. Local ranchers Charley Christiansen and Drew Sykes led a discussion from a land manager's perspective based on their experience with riparian buffers. Ryan McClintock, NRCS wildlife biologist, presented information on technical and financial assistance that is available from the NRCS.

"This ranch has been in my family since 1902 and our springs are the headwaters of the Concho River which we can now protect since implementing a plan to increase woody and herbaceous vegetation needed to restore our riparian area," said Howard. "This has included livestock deferment for a period of ten or more years."

A healthy river, stream, or creek system has its banks covered in vegetation with many curves and meanders. These grasses, sedges, rushes, and trees will protect and stabilize banks, create a large floodplain to dissipate energy of



Springs can be seen coming out of the fractured rock in the creek.

flood events, and wooden debris and large fallen trees that slows the water allowing sediment to be deposited to build a healthy riparian area.

"The riparian zone is like a sponge where the areas with tall grasses creates large pores to absorb and hold the water instead of going onto your neighbor's property and improves water quality by trapping sediment and nutrients," said Nelle. "Leave flood debris alone and keep the downed trees in the water because that is what slows down the water in future floods."

Nelle showed photos that were taken over a span of years from one site that illustrated the land differences after grazing was deferred and then properly managed once the vegetation was established. The time lapsed photos showed improvement on a once scoured creek with little water and vegetation that turned into lush habitat with a healthy creek over the span from 6 to 20 years depending on the area.

"We can't control the weather but with the proper management, a creek will fix itself 99 percent of the time through vegetation, proper grazing management, and basic knowledge of hydrology," Nelle said. "You are the water managers of Texas and vegetation is the key to fix and manage these critical areas."

McClintock finished the presentation portions by introducing the NRCS's role of technical assistance, conservation planning, and farm bill programs that can help landowners be good stewards of the land.

"We start by developing a conservation plan by addressing resource concerns based on the landowner's goals and objectives," explained McClintock.

After lunch, everyone went to the Head of the River Ranch where Howard and Nelle identified vegetation types, siltation from vegetation and woody debris, stable banks and flood plains due to the exclusion of grazing by fencing off the area. The springs that feed the headwaters of the Concho River could be seen and are now protected and function properly due to proper management.

"We can develop fences and add water troughs to improve grazing management with the technical and financial assistance of the NRCS," said Howard. "I don't have all of the answers and that is why workshops like this help. We get experts like the NRCS, Steve Nelle, and other landowners to educate others that might need to see to believe."

GROW ME THE MONEY! RESOURCES FOR ORGANIC FAMILY FARMS

By Beverly Moseley, State Public Affairs Director

NRCS State Resource Conservationist, Kristy Oates spoke recently at Texas Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (TOFGA) Grow Me the Money! Resources for Organic Family Farms event in Austin. As part of the agenda, attendees learned about USDA-NRCS technical and financial assistance opportunities. Numerous USDA agencies were represented during the two-day event. Oates, along with NRCS State Conservationist Salvador Salinas and NRCS State Public Affairs Director, Beverly Moseley, attended the Organic Production Gap day-long meeting which served as a round table opportunity for Texas organic producers and partners to gather and discuss challenges, barriers, solutions and opportunities for reducing the gap between consumer demand and the supply of Texas organic produce. NRCS and USDA agencies expressed continued commitment to this growing segment of Texas agriculture.



TEXAS SWCDs PLAN CONSERVATION GOALS FOR THE COMING YEAR

By Quenna Terry, Public Affairs Specialist

One of the guiding principles of the 2014 USDA Farm Bill is that conservation programs are locally led. Through Local Work Group (LWG) meetings the public is given an opportunity to help local conservation leaders set program priorities.

On behalf of the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), meetings in Texas are led by the local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and provide an opportunity for input and comments from farmers, ranchers, local agencies, organizations, and agri-businesses that have an interest in natural resource conditions and needs.

NRCS Assistant State Conservationist Darren Richardson in Lubbock said, "The LWG meetings this year are especially important as the NRCS faces continued implementation of the Agricultural Act of 2014, and we are uncertain of the technical and financial assistance funding in the coming year."

Each county in the state concluded their 2016 annual public meeting before the end of the fiscal year (September 30) to help develop a conservation needs assessment,



Community leaders attend a local work group meeting at the unique Pioneer Memorial Museum in Crosbyton.

identify priority resource concerns, identify high priority needs needing assistance, and gather input from local partners regarding conservation issues, and recommend NRCS conservation program application and funding criteria in their local counties.

Crosby County in the High Plains set an excellent example with more than 23 producers, agri-businesses and partners attending this year's meeting at the Pioneer Memorial Museum in Crosbyton.

"These meetings are important to the rural communities," said Ed Logan, NRCS district conservationist in Crosby County. "Our role in the field offices is to work with the SWCD board members to plan and organize the meetings. We collaborate in an effort to promote the meetings and to gain input on local priorities for conservation program funding decisions."

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE HOLD RANCH MEETING AND LUNCHEON

By Melissa Blair, Public Affairs Specialist

More than 100 women and 45 men attended the Women in Agriculture Ranch Meeting held September 15 at the East Foundation's San Antonio Viejo Ranch, south of Hebbbronville. This was the largest adult event ever held at the East Foundation's ranch. The workshop was a result of Duval County women wanting to have a workshop in their area similar to one they had attended in San Antonio in February 2016 hosted by the Minority Landowner Magazine.

The agriculture workshop was part of the USDA's StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative, of which Texas is one of 21 states within the initiative. This event exemplifies the initiative's mission of providing assistance to individual and communities in persistent poverty areas for improving their quality of life and creating conservation opportunities in rural communities and tribes across the nation.



Tyler Campbell shares about East Foundation's research, education, and outreach.

TRADITIONAL CADDO HOUSE BUILT IN ALTO

By Beverly Moseley, State Public Affairs Director

Although the Caddo Nation is headquartered in Binger, Oklahoma, NRCS in Texas has worked on their behalf over the years. Most recently, employees at the East Texas Plant Materials Center have been partnering with the Friends of Caddo Mounds museum in Alto, Texas on providing the Nation the Alamo switchgrass used in constructing their traditional grass houses. The plant materials center which had grown the Alamo switchgrass in 2015, agreed to provide enough switchgrass to build a full-size traditional grass house on the museum's property to be used for cultural outreach and resource education. During the fall of 2015, volunteers from the museum and NRCS harvested and bundled the grass in traditional stacks for hauling to the museum for storage. This summer, a Caddo Tribal elder and apprentice traveled from Oklahoma to work with volunteers in constructing the much anticipated traditional Caddo Nation grass house. Since the Elder's June visit, work has been completed on the house and the museum has begun to hold educational opportunities within its thatched walls. A dedication ceremony is scheduled for the spring of 2017.



Jimmy Sterling, Howard SWCD district director, is recognized with the Outstanding Rangeland Stewardship award for his efforts on 214,000 acres in nine Texas counties.

RANGE MANAGEMENT ANNUAL MEETING ATTENDANCE HIGHEST IN FIVE YEARS

By Donnie Lunsford, Public Affairs Specialist

Range managers and range professionals recently gathered at the 2016 Texas Section for Society for Range Management (TSSRM) Annual Meeting that was held in Uvalde, Texas.

This year the theme was Water: How can TSSRM Lead Its Stewardship. With approximately 275 people in attendance, the meeting focused on watershed management and the conservation and management practices needed to accomplish the goals and objectives of many ranches throughout Texas. Research graduate students also presented the most current research being conducted by Texas universities. This meeting allows members and non-members to come together to educate, network, socialize, identify and solve problems facing agriculture, eco-tourism, and range management.

College undergraduates were able to test their plant identification skills by competing in the annual plant ID contest, in turn, also preparing some for the national competition. The Undergraduate Range Management Exam (URME) consisted of a timed exam with 48 questions and problems in six categories: range ecology, grazing management, range improvement, range regions, range inventory and analysis, and multiple-use relationships. A research poster contest allowed graduates and undergraduates to showcase their research that is being conducted.

This meeting is a time for students and professionals alike to network, talk to potential employers, and learn about range professions whether managing a ranch, selling agriculture products, or working for a government agency, like NRCS. The meeting had an awards luncheon and a banquet to recognize the outstanding work in rangeland management and stewardship that is being accomplished in Texas. Scholarships and awards were given to those deserving professionals, students, and stewards of the land.

This year the meeting concluded with a ranch tour to the Annandale Ranch located outside of Uvalde. The tour allowed everyone to see some of the conservation efforts such as hillside restoration, prescribed fire, brush management, and proper grazing that are being implemented to improve water flow. This ranch is a working cattle, sheep and goat ranch which offers hunting, bird watching and bat viewing.

TRAVELING EARTH TEAM TROPHY PRESENTED

Kristy Oates (left), NRCS state resource conservationist, presents Elisha Kuehn, NRCS assistant state conservationist for Zone 2 with the traveling Earth Team trophy during the NRCS employee meeting at the 76th Annual State Meeting of District Directors in Waco. Zone 2 had 100 percent participation in FY2016. Every Zone field office had an individual or group of volunteers participating as Earth Team volunteers for a total of 697 volunteers contributing 4,359 hours.



NRCS EMPLOYEES EXCEED FEDS FEED FAMILIES GOALS



By Melissa Blair, Public Affairs Specialist

Last year, NRCS Texas employees helped feed needy families across the state with a donation of 8,415 pounds of non-perishable goods to the annual USDA Feds Feed Families Campaign. In 2016, USDA's goal was to "Beat the Best." It's safe to say that NRCS Texas has met and far exceeded that goal. NRCS Texas donated a staggering 51,853 pounds of non-perishable food during the 2016 campaign. That's nearly

the maximum take-off weight of an F/A-18!

Raul "Ray" Hinojosa, NRCS district conservationist in Edinburg, worked with Wallace Farms to donate 41,172 pounds of watermelons and 1,260 pounds of black-eyed peas to the local food bank. Hinojosa also donated 358 pounds of dry goods to wrap up the campaign. Other NRCS employees who went above and beyond in their contributions were also recognized in the Hall of Fame were Ty Williams, NRCS soil conservationist in the San Angelo field office. He and his family farm donate every year and this year 2,750 pounds of watermelons were donated to the food bank for the Platinum Hall of Fame recognition. Robbie Clemens, NRCS soil conservationist in Gilmer, was also recognized for her contributions of more than 250 pounds of food for the Silver Hall of Fame.



A ranch tour was held in conjunction with the 76th Annual State Meeting of District Directors recently in Waco. Participants included NRCS, Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board field members and guests who gathered at the Riesel Watershed in Riesel, Texas. The tour provided the latest information on research and natural resources. Water quality research and soil health principles were some of the covered topics.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

STOBAUGH HONORED



Bob Stobaugh was honored during a NRCS public affairs conference awards ceremony in Minneapolis, Minn., for his creative contributions to NRCS' "Unlock the Secrets in the Soil" awareness and education campaign. For more than four years, Bob has been a member of a team of public affairs professionals who helped create and execute NRCS' award-winning campaign. "The video products Bob has helped create over the past four years are impressive and substantive," said NRCS Soil Health Campaign Coordinator Ron Nichols. "Bob's contributions, and those of his colleagues, are integral to the success of NRCS' soil health effort and even to the broader soil health movement".

Many NRCS staff in Texas and across the U.S. have had the pleasure of working with Bob out in the field on videos and at events.

Congratulations Bob!

TEXAS FAMILY'S CONSERVATION EFFORTS RESTORE RANCH'S PRODUCTIVITY

By Melissa Blair, Public Affairs Specialist

Becky Sultemeier and her husband, Shelby, run a Red Brangus cattle operation on their 1,100 acre property which straddles the Travis and Blanco county line near Spicewood, northwest of Austin. The property has been in the family since the 1930s and originally belonged to Becky's grandparents, Coke and Helen Hollingsworth and dad, Archie Hollingsworth.

The Sultemeier's have been working with NRCS since 2013. Through NRCS technical and financial assistance, three solar pumping units have been installed. One unit went into an existing well. The other two units were put into new wells drilled through EQIP. At each well there is a 5,000-gallon storage tank that gravity flows water through a total of 7,400 feet of pipeline to six different 500-gallon water troughs. This system improves water distribution in pastures and use for rotationally grazing livestock. This in turn can reduce overgrazing, soil erosion, and allow forage to recover faster, especially during times of drought.

"By coming up with that plan on where we needed to put water sources, what fences needed to be re-built, where we could do brush work that was going to benefit the place and now seeing the outcome of the grass growth that we have had in the short period of time is amazing," said Shelby. "Even the water that you are seeing coming up in some of these draws, is all direct results of working through NRCS and partnering with them to clear brush."

To more efficiently allocate the grazing, the Sultemeiers installed 6,656 feet of cross fencing. They cleared 84 acres of cedar in one pasture and re-seeded it with a native grass mix, followed by a full year of deferred grazing. Now they have little bluestem, side oats grama, yellow Indian grass, and switchgrass flourishing in the pasture.



Sultemeier Family

The Sultemeiers conservation efforts are also benefiting the Trinity Aquifer, which contributes to the recharge of the Edwards Aquifer. Hasty said, "By installing these conservation practices to improve grass cover in pastures and not overgrazing, it helps catch and hold the rainfall allowing it to soak in. What does run off will have less sediment in it before it flows into the creeks and eventually the Pedernales River."

They also participated in the Lower Colorado River Authority (LCRA) Creekside Conservation Program, which is a joint effort between LCRA, NRCS, local soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs), and private landowners and producers. The Sultemeiers finished brush clearing 240 acres of cedar this year through their LCRA contract, in which NRCS provided the technical assistance and planning for the brush work.

"The NRCS programs have enabled us to accomplish some of our long term plans in three short years," Becky said. "By working together as a family to complete the programs, with some help from a local contractor, H-5 Land Clearing, we were able to complete the work within the allotted budget. Without the financial assistance, it would have taken us several more years to generate the funds necessary for this work."

Earlier this year, the Sultemeiers were able to showcase their conservation work during a ranch tour for NRCS Assistant Chief Kirk Hanlin, Washington, D.C., when he visited Texas.

"The NRCS programs have enabled us to accomplish some of our long term plans in three short years," Becky Sultemeier, Spicewood, Texas

NEWS BRIEFS

EARTH TEAM VOLUNTEERS RECEIVE WEBB SWCD SCHOLARSHIPS

Each year NRCS partners with Texas A&M University – Kingsville (TAMUK) and Laredo Community College (LCC) to educate students during the summer about USDA and careers at NRCS field offices. These students also serve as Earth Team volunteers and help with NRCS and local Soil and Water Conservation District activities. Six students received \$1,000 scholarships from the Webb Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to help them continue their agricultural education. Five of the Webb County students who received the SWCD scholarships were Earth Team volunteers in the Laredo NRCS field office. The students are Alejandro Trevino, TAMUK; Rebecca Flores, TAMUK; David Rosales, LCC; Samantha Gonzalez, TAMUK and Jorge Chavarria, TAMUK.

BILL THOMAS RANCH HOST MEETING

The Bill Thomas ranch in Richards hosted this year's Deep East Texas Association of Soil and Water Conservation District's annual meeting. More than 50 people across East Texas attended the business meeting which also included a ranch tour of Thomas' cow-calf operation, along with his vineyard. Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board members provided report updates. NRCS State Conservationist Salvador Salinas provided an end of the year summary of NRCS's technical and financial assistance outcomes and NRCS Assistant State Conservationist Kanand Brooks provided a Zone 4 update. Representatives from Congressman Kevin Brady and Senator Charles Schwertner also attended the meeting.

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Or for further details, please contact
Nathan Haile, 817-550-7738 | Charlie Upchurch, 254-216-1473






A TIME TO SHINE

By Quenna Terry, Public Affairs Specialist

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) working through Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) partner with farmers and ranchers each year to showcase new technologies and conservation practices that are conserving natural resources while increasing agriculture sustainability.

Farm and ranch field days are hosted by SWCDs in many of the 51 counties of the High Plains and South Plains regions to honor the farmers and ranchers stewardship efforts through the implementation of conservation plans and practices.

Tierra Blanca SWCD in Hereford recently hosted a conservation tour in Deaf Smith County where conservationists, farmers, ranchers and other agri-business leaders could see conservation at work with several irrigation and soil health tour stops across the county.



Tubular radishes are one example of cover crops seen on the field tour.

NRCS Resource Team Leader Shannon Rowley said, "Most of the farmers and ranchers in this county are progressive thinkers and conservation minded. There is always a lot of good land stewardship with some of the most cutting edge technologies being used today."

The tour stops included micro subsurface drip irrigation, soil moisture monitoring, precision application residue management (PARM), pivot conversions and mixed species cover crops.

During the tour, Greg Sokora, NRCS agriculture engineer and Brandt Underwood, NRCS agronomist presented information on conservation practices highlights. After the tour, lunch was provided at the Hereford Community Center followed by a producer and industry representative panel with discussion on cover crops, no-till farming practices, micro subsurface drip irrigation and variable frequency drives (VFDs).

CONSERVATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS FY2016

CTA and EQIP impacts on applied Conservation Acreage:

- To improved water quality – 6.4 M
- To protect and improve grazing lands – 6.6 M
- To improve fish and wildlife habitat – 2.6 M
- To improve environmental quality – 7.6 M

Optimizing Landscape Conservation:

- National Soil Health Initiative – remains a top priority
- High Tunnel System Initiative – 30 tunnels, \$706,635.00, on 742.30 acres
- Urban Conservation – six gardens established
- Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Project – focused technical and financial assistance in 28 targeted counties
- Organic Initiative
- Gulf of Mexico Initiative
- Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative
- National Water Quality Initiative
- Ogallala Aquifer Initiative
- StrikeForce Initiative

Farm Bill Programs:

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

- Investments - \$84 M
- Acres impacted – 2 M

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

- Investments – \$12.6 M
- Acres impacted – 502,000

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) - Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

- Funded 10 projects for 10,954 acres and obligated \$6.4 M
- Received 11 applications for 12,632 acres requesting \$9.9 M
- Projects are leveraged with TPWD Texas Farm and Ranch Lands Conservation Program (state funded easement program)

2015/2016 Storm Events:

- Currently funded for May, October, and December 2015 storm events - 90 projects at \$25.5 M

- 2016 - 70 project requests for an estimated total of \$23 M
- 2016 - Damages for funding are still being assessed

NRCS Watershed Sponsors:

- Soil and Water Conservation Districts - 106
- Counties - 86
- Cities - 50
- Water Control and Improvement Districts - 20
- Watershed Authorities and Associations - 6
- Other Special Purpose Districts -14
- River Authorities -1
- State Recreation Areas -1

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) Projects:

- Improving Working Lands for Monarch Butterflies
- Limited Applied Irrigation Assistance Program
- Fort Hood Private Lands Conservation Initiative

MEETINGS STATE CONSERVATIONIST IS SCHEDULED TO ATTEND

Texas Fruit Conference,

New Braunfels, TX - Oct 31 – Nov 1, 2016

TX Cattle Feeders Assoc Annual Meeting,

Fort Worth, TX - Nov 6- 8, 2016

STAC Meeting

Austin, TX - Nov 15, 2016

NRCS Principal Staff Meeting

Temple, TX - Nov 16-17, 2016

Amarillo Farm and Ranch Show

Amarillo, TX - Nov 29 - Dec 2, 2016

Prescribed Wildfire Summit,

Manhattan, KS - Dec 6 - 10, 2016

Restore America's Estuaries,

New Orleans, LA - Dec 10 - 15, 2016

TOFGA Annual Meeting,

Mesquite, TX - Jan 11 - 14, 2017

NACD,

Denver, CO - Jan 29 - Feb 1, 2017



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