CELEBRATING
700,000 ACRES & 25 YEARS
OF WETLAND RESERVE SUCCESS IN
Arkansas, Louisiana & Mississippi

Projects • Successes • Partnerships
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Notes from the State Conservationist

October has been a busy month for all of Louisiana agriculture. This issue is dedicated to a specific conservation program and the broad partnership that has accomplished so much over the past 25 years. This partnership recently celebrated an important milestone, the celebration of 700,000 acres enrolled and 25 years of Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) success in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. On October 20th, in Tensas Parish, conservation leaders and partners from across the south joined together to recognize the significant contribution of the WRE program. In Louisiana alone, we account for over 300,000 acres of the 700,000 acres of wetlands easements in the lower Mississippi delta. There is no other place in the United States where this program has achieved as much success and been so popularly embraced by the landowners and conservation partners.

Primary to the incredible success of the WRE program is the dedication and stewardship of landowners and the passion for conservation they share with NRCS and our partners. Working together, landowners have voluntarily enrolled their lands into permanent easements that restore the wetland functions and benefits to wildlife, water quality, water quantity, and agriculture sustainability. We have changed the landscape of our state for the better. Allowing marginal farmland to return to its wetlands has proven to have incredible benefits for our state. The delisting of the Louisiana Black Bear from the threatened species list is the most recent example of a significant benefit from this private lands conservation effort.

In this issue we meet Bonner Wiggers, a member of the Wiggers Family Partnership. The Family Partnership is also a WRE landowner in Franklin Parish. Mr. Wiggers, just like all of our WRE landowners has a love for the land passed through the generations beginning with his great grandfather, and a desire to see his family and future generations enjoy the abundance of wildlife and beauty that he enjoys on his land. Through his story and the story of the three generations of Wiggers family active on the farm today, you will find threads of sustainability, adapting to changes in production agriculture, operational efficiencies, expanding goals, and generational changes on the farm. These threads weave together a tapestry that represents our Louisiana farm, ranch and forest landscapes, economies and most importantly the families taking care of these private lands.

The WRE program is one of several tools available to private land farmers, ranchers, forest landowners and operators to sustain their natural resources today and into the future. We encourage you to visit with your local NRCS office to find out if a WRE would be right for you. As always, our knowledgeable field staff are ready and eager to help you achieve your conservation goals.

Kevin D. Norton
State Conservationist

The 2018 Louisiana Women in Agriculture will be held on February 22 & 23, 2018, in Alexandria, Louisiana at the Holiday Inn Downtown.

To pre-register or sponsor visit LouisianaWomeninAG.com. Registration is $50 and includes meals. Special room rate code: LWA

Keynote Speakers:

Kimberly Ratcliff,
Manager of Caney Creek Ranch
East Central Texas

Sarah Calhoun
Founder and Owner of Red Ants Pants
White Sulphur Springs, Montana
A light fog hugs the Mississippi River as the sun rises to welcome a cool, beautiful day in Tensas Parish. Hues of purple and fuchsia fill the sky. Today is different from many others, because on this day, Friday, October 20th, a milestone celebration took place and not just any celebration. Conservation leaders from across the south came together with a united voice to recognize that in the past 25 years over 700,000 acres have been enrolled in the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi.

WRE is more than just an NRCS program. WRE has changed the landscape of America for the better. It is a voluntary conservation program that offers landowners the opportunity to restore, enhance and protect their property through easements; marginal farm land is taken out of production and converted to its original wetland state. In doing so, incredible benefits are provided to the environment, wildlife, eco-systems, floodwater retention areas, and overall water quality.

Restoration is defined as the action of returning something to a former owner, place, or condition. Tim Landreneau, Assistant State Conservationist for Easements in Louisiana, explains, “The intent of the WRE program is to take marginal land out of the rotation…and concentrate the farming operation on the most productive land.” Landreneau goes on to say, “Mr. Wiggers and his family are the perfect example of how returning land to its original status can reap many benefits.”

Just ask Bonner Wiggers, a member of the multi-generational Wiggers Family Partnership. They are a WRE landowner in Franklin Parish. Wiggers, along with his brother, son and nephews form the Partnership that farms over 3,000 acres of land. Years ago after clearing 1,100 acres of land and trying many times to achieve a profitable crop unsuccessfully, they decided to enroll in the WRE. “My dad bought this place for about 5 dollars an acre and I remember as a boy that a great portion of land was covered in trees….oaks and cypress.” Wiggers continues, “I wanted to see the land restored to what it was when I was a boy.” There is a gleam in his eyes as he talks about his great-grandfather establishing the farm and the three (fourth, fifth and sixth) generations currently actively farming the land today. He quickly adds that the next generation is growing.

And that is exactly what has happened. 18 years after enrolling in WRE, the land is a shining example of what a wetland area should look like. After planting trees and installing structures, along with other practices, the land is now a haven for wildlife and a place for recreation for the whole family. “We see deer, squirrels, bobcats, the occasional Louisiana black bear, and we have also heard from folks who have seen cougars in the area,” said Wiggers. He also holds water on parts of the land for ducks and other migratory birds.

One of the greatest benefits to enrolling in WRE according to Wiggers is the concept of heritage and legacy. “Not long ago I was able to see my grandson shoot his first deer, right here on this land and that was a great thrill,” Wiggers recalled. “Knowing that this land is going to be here and only get better for my son and grandson is a wonderful feeling.”

For more information on WRE, visit your local NRCS office.
Celebrating 700,000 acres and 25 years of Wetland Reserve Success

“700,000 acres of WRP and ACEP-WRE enrollment marks a monumental accomplishment for NRCS, our conservation partners and private landowners in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Through voluntary enrollment, agriculture and forestry landowners have made significant impacts on restoring our nations wetlands, restoring critical wildlife habitat, reducing soil erosion and improving water quality and building a legacy of outdoor recreational opportunities for future generations.”

Kevin D. Norton, State Conservationist, Louisiana
Outreach Update
Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Outreach Coordinator

At the request of Charlie West, who works with the Monroe Hope Peer Support Group, USDA recently conducted a joint Saturday Outreach meeting at the group’s location on Bres Street in Monroe, Louisiana. The Monroe Hope Peer Support Group’s Director, Nicole Turner, stated that her organization helps individuals with peer counseling, drug addiction, mental illness, and the organization also does Extra Mile Group Sessions. Nicole hopes to establish an Urban Garden in the back of the facility on Bres Street.

Rural Development’s Area Director, Vernell Wilson-Williams, gave an overview of the programs that RD has to offer including Housing, Business & Industry Loan Guarantees, as well as Community Facility Direct Loans & Grants.

Local District Conservationist, Jamie Shivers, gave an overview of the NRCS agency and he gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Seasonal High Tunnel program. Farm Service Agency’s Ervin Norwood explained the steps that need to be taken in order for a person to obtain a Farm Serial Number. Ervin also urged the meeting participants to complete a Request For Assistance Form as well.

The FSA Loan Officer from the Winnsboro office, Yolanda Wilson, gave an overview of the various loans that are available through FSA.

Overall there were plenty of questions from the participants and multiple handouts were provided as well.

Story from the Field
Submitted by: Scott Breedlove, Soil Conservationist, Oak Grove FO

Cullen Kovac is a cattle producer in West Carroll Parish, Louisiana, and a very active member of the West Carroll Soil and Water Conservation District Board. As a matter of fact, Cullen’s involvement with the board is one of the main reasons he takes such an active role in implementing as much conservation as he possibly can.

Cullen said it best not too long ago, “As a board member I am here to set an example for the rest of the producers in West Carroll Parish. If I’m not doing things the way I should be, why should I expect anyone else to?”

Through conservation technical assistance in addition to financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Cullen is doing just that on a small 60-acre cattle operation he recently bought. Cullen visited the local office to request technical assistance.

Personnel from the Oak Grove Field Office visited his farm to create a conservation plan to help him address resource concerns on his operation, which included water quality and quantity and over grazing.

His cattle were causing stream bank erosion which led to water quality issues in a local stream and a pond where they were watering. Cullen’s pasture was an open grazing system that allowed for overgrazing. To address these issues, he applied for financial assistance through EQIP to install use exclusion fencing to keep the cattle out of the stream and pond. He also installed cross-fencing to divide the pasture into three parts, so that he could have a rotational grazing system. He then installed a livestock well, three watering facilities and a livestock pipeline to provide water for his cattle, since they could no longer drink from the stream or pond. Since installing these practices, stream bank erosion has lessened, water clarity has improved and his pastures are not overgrazed anymore.

NRCS is also providing financial assistance to Cullen for herbaceous weed control to control noxious weeds. This will reduce competition with desirable forages in his pastures and to plant clover to provide additional forages for his cattle in the winter.

This farm has received a complete make over and in the future will be a fully functional rotational grazing system that is more environmentally friendly and cost effective.
**Around the State**

**September 6 - 8, 2017**
**Louisiana GLCI Bus Tour**

On September 6 - 8, 2017, Louisianans invaded Texas on the Louisiana GLCI “Cajuns Invade Texas Bus Tour”. Attendees visited four farms in Texas, including Santa Rosa Ranch in Crockett, Texas, the ARS Watershed Research Station in Riesel, Texas, Green Fields Farm in Rogers, Texas and 44 Farms in Cameron, Texas. The main purpose of the tour was to learn about different farming and grazing techniques of ranchers in a different state. Submitted by Taylor Frey, LGLCI.

**September 23, 2017**
**National Hunting and Fishing Day**

NRCS participated in the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries’ National Hunting and Fishing Day Event in Woodworth, Louisiana, on September 23, 2017. Visitors to the tent learned about the value of wetlands for wildlife.

**September 30, 2017**
**Veterans Therapy Health Garden and Trail Community Rally**

A community rally for veterans was held on Saturday, September 30, 2017, in the Village of Athens. NRCS is providing engineering and design assistance to the Village of Athens and the Trailblazer RC&D to construct a Veterans Therapy Health Garden and Trail to help veterans cope with PTSD, depression and other health related issues. Attendees learned about therapy gardens and the need for public support for these types of projects.

**October 11, 2017**
**CWPPRA Dedication Ceremony**

The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Task Force hosted a Dedication Ceremony at 10:00 am on October 11, 2017, at Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex, Lacombe Centre in Lacombe, Louisiana to recognize those projects that have recently been constructed in southeast Louisiana. Seven projects were highlighted including the NRCS-sponsored BA-27c Barataria Basin Landbridge Shoreline Protection, Phase 3 project.

After the ceremony, registrants participated in a field trip to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-sponsored PO-104 Bayou Bonfouca Marsh Creation Project. Visit www.lacoast.gov for more information on CWPPRA and the projects.

**October 13, 2017**
**Tallgrass Prairie Workshop**

On October 13, 2017, around 50 people gathered in Eunice, Louisiana for the Louisiana Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative's Tallgrass Prairie Workshop.

Since 2003, Vernon Fuselier and his son, Justin, have been growing native prairie grasses to restore their land. Vernon said restoring a portion of his land to prairie started out of curiosity, but then it became a giant classroom for learning. He stated, "It changed the way we did a lot of things, from the way we graze our cattle to the way we treat our pastures".

At the workshop, NRCS Rangeland Management Specialist, Chris Ebel gave the opening remarks and the introduction to the tallgrass native species. Vernon spoke about the history of his land and the methods he’s using to restore the prairie. He said, "All the plants we see on our country-side and in South Louisiana was not here originally. He said, “In fact, most are species brought in and not at all what was here. What we had here was a native tallgrass prairie”.

NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist, Dwayne Rice and State Conservation Agronomist, Chris Coreil spoke on the current health conditions of the soil. Delta Land Services’ Senior Ecologist and Restoration Specialist Dr. Bill DeLaney spoke on the restoration, ecological function and mitigation factors of the land. LGLCI President, David Daigle, spoke on the managed grazing on native and natural ecosystems, and LGLCI member, Jay Duhon gave his perspective of grazing prairie grasses as a livestock producer. Submitted by Taylor Frey, LGLCI.

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