Cows, Goats, and Peacocks...Oh My!

Projects • Successes • Partnerships
Table of Contents

Notes from the Acting State Conservationist .......................... 3
Cows, Goats and Peacocks...Oh My!............................ 4
Outreach Corner.................................................... 6
Programs Update.................................................... 6
Volunteer Spotlight................................................ 7
Around the State...................................................... 7
Upcoming Events................................................. 8

On the Cover

Learn how St. Landry Parish farmer, Jennifer Matt is improving her farm one conservation practice at a time on pages 4 and 5.

Follow us on Twitter: http://twitter.com/NRCS_Louisiana
Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

It is a distinct honor and privilege to serve as your Acting State Conservationist while Kevin Norton is in Washington D.C. working with the House Agriculture Committee on the 2018 Farm Bill. Everyone in the conservation community will greatly benefit from his experience and dedication to this effort.

As a native Texan with nearly 30 years with SCS/NRCS, I am excited to support all of the employees and partners as we continue to conserve the natural resources of the Sportsman’s Paradise. One of my main goals while here (besides learning to pronounce the names of the parishes) is to travel across Louisiana and see the wetlands restored, the coastlines protected, wildlife habitat enhanced and soil health improved. I hope to meet and shake the hands of all those who help make this happen.

I truly appreciate good customer service when shopping or dining out. Nothing is more valuable than a good customer experience. Our Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue, is committed to creating a culture of consistent and efficient service to the customers of USDA. I am committed as well to improve the delivery of our conservation technical and program assistance to the Louisiana farmers, ranchers and foresters.

The Southern University Agricultural Land-Grant Campus hosted the 8th Annual Louisiana Small Farmer Conference, March 15-17, 2018, at the Felton G. Clark Activity Center (SU Mini Dome) in Baton Rouge. With this year’s theme, “Transforming and Elevating Louisiana Small Family Farms”, the conference provided opportunities for all of Louisiana’s small agricultural producers to come together and share strategies. NRCS was proud to participate with other USDA agencies to inform the participants about the latest tools and resources that affect the survival of their agricultural businesses.

I am writing this note on March 20, 2018, National Agriculture Day. The theme for this year is “Agriculture: Food for Life”. Thank you for all you do to make our nation healthy and prosperous, and provide a safe, nutritious and secure food supply. I know every day is Ag Day for you.

Claude Ross
Acting State Conservationist

Get Involved With the Earth Team!

Are you interested in volunteering with conservation professionals on private lands to improve soil quality, conserve water, improve air quality and enhance wildlife habitat? If you answered yes, then volunteering as part of the Earth Team at your local NRCS office is for you!

Available to anyone 14 and older, the Earth Team provides a variety of opportunities: full- or part-time; outdoor or indoor activities; and as an individual or group. There is something for everyone.

This is the perfect time for your high school or college aged student to sign up to volunteer and gain valuable work experience while helping NRCS accomplish its mission of “Helping People Help the Land” this summer.

For more information, contact Amy Robertson at 318-473-7762 or by e-mail at amy.robertson@la.usda.gov or Adele Swearingen at 318-473-7687 or by e-mail at adele.swearingen@la.usda.gov.
What do you get when you have a passion for animals and a love of the land? You have a farm full of animals … 4 cows … 1 bull…. 5 does and 1 buck along with 2 fawns….45 chickens and 6 roosters….1 male peacock and 2 peacock hens…7 ducks …7 horses … some goats and a baby lamb.

Sometimes, you may visit a farm in Louisiana, but you are not sure what they are farming and growing. Not the case with Jennifer’s farm, cows, goats, peacocks and more are in front of your eyes!

Deep in the heart of Cajun country, in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, is a small farmer, Jennifer Matt, and she is making a difference in her community… one animal at a time. In November of 2009, when Matt was laid off from her job as an office manager, she decided to take ten thousand dollars out of savings and buy 11 cows and 1 bull. The rest, as they say, is history.

Jennifer Matt, her husband and three children are all in. They have all committed to a farming lifestyle. In 2013, Matt started working with the St. Landry Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) have made all the difference for Matt and her farm. “We basically had one pasture when this all began. We started off with some cross fencing and planted hayseed, and everything has progressed from there,” said Matt.

Kris Davis, District Conservationist for the NRCS Opelousas Field Office explains, “When we first started working with Jennifer she basically had a one-pasture type system, there was no way for her to implement a prescribed grazing plan.” Kris continues, “Since we have been working together she has
progressively put conservation practices into place."

Protecting the land is very important to Matt. Fencing and pasture hay land planting and other conservation measures have proven to work just right for her farm.

The plan for Matt was simple, start off small and gradually add conservation measures. It all began with a fence here and then adding more fence, working into a rotation system and sub-dividing the pasture to ensure successful prescribed grazing.

Matt takes heart when it comes to caring for her animals. And part of that is caring for them in the most natural way possible. "Everything is so over-produced now, I want my kids to eat food that is grown and raised as naturally as possible."

Matt is filling a niche in her area by providing fresh, organic meat to several meat markets in the area. "We sell our cows to slaughter to markets that are interested in organic meat." Matt goes on to say, "We also sell the free-range chicken eggs, about 9 to 10 dozen each week. Actually, we could sell more if we had them."

Matt recently won the title of Farmer of the Year from the St. Landry SWCD. In addition to being surprised and excited she is quick to point out the advantages of working NRCS and her local SWCD. "NRCS has improved the overall quality of life for my animals." Matt continues, "If you don't have good quality grass, your cows are skinny, if you don't have good quality grass it is a lot more work….better grass means better hay."

"If I have any issues, Kris and his staff are always there willing and ready to help answer questions." Matt laughs, "I probably call more than anyone else, if I have a question they get back to me fast and if they don't know it, they find the answer."

Kris is proud of the work that Matt and her family have accomplished in such a short period of time. "Jennifer has done a great job, you have some clients that try to go too far, too fast. They try to implement everything at one time. Jennifer has been progressive in her approach, taking one-step at a time, building on each conservation success."

What does the future hold for Matt? The over-all objective is to one day have 30 cows and a bull. She explains, "Eventually I want to be able to meet the demand for organic meat. There are so many people who want to buy from me right now. And an overall dream of mine is to be able to sustain my farm, while using sound conservation practices."

Kris explains why Matt's farm was a clear choice to win the farmer of the year award. "Jennifer's willingness to protect the land was a clear reason to choose her for the award. With NRCS we don't judge on the size of the operation. You can have 2 cows or 500, we are looking at who is protecting the land and trying to do the right thing. That is what is important to us and the district."

Through the management that Matt is doing on her land, her operation will continually get better and better. Matt beams, "It's been a learning curve but, we love our farm and our animals, this is a lifestyle for us not just a business."
Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, State Outreach Coordinator

The Trailblazer RC&D hosted the 5th Annual Big Event on March 14, 2018 on the campus of Grambling State University (GSU). This year, GSU officials elected to host the Big Event on March 14, 2018, which afforded more participation by the students. The change in the time of the year to host the event proved to be a wise move because there were over 200 participants that attended the event.

The meeting participants got to hear presentations from the Louisiana Forestry Association, Farm Service Agency, Rural Development, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Louisiana Small Business Development Center, Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries, and Attorney Dana Ryan.

Programs Update

USDA Offers Renewal Options for Expiring Conservation Stewardship Contracts

Agricultural producers wanting to enhance current conservation efforts are encouraged to renew their Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contract.

Through CSP, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps private landowners build their business while implementing conservation practices that help ensure the sustainability of their entire operation.

Participants with existing CSP contracts expiring on Dec. 31, 2018, can access the benefits of the recent program changes through an option to renew their contracts for an additional five years, if they agree to adopt additional activities to achieve higher levels of conservation on their lands.

NRCS will mail contract renewal notification letters to all participants whose contracts expire in 2018, which will contain instructions on how to apply for renewal.

Applications to renew expiring contracts are due by April 13.

Through CSP, agricultural producers and forest landowners earn payments for actively managing, maintaining, and expanding conservation activities like cover crops, ecologically-based pest management, buffer strips, and pollinator and beneficial insect habitat – all while maintaining active agriculture production on their land. CSP also encourages the adoption of cutting-edge technologies and new management techniques such as precision agriculture applications, on-site carbon storage and planting for high carbon sequestration rate, and new soil amendments to improve water quality.

Some of these benefits of CSP include:

- Improved cattle gains per acre;
- Increased crop yields;
- Decreased inputs;
- Wildlife population improvements; and
- Better resilience to weather extremes.

NRCS recently made several updates to the program to help producers better evaluate their conservation options and the benefits to their operations and natural resources. New methods and software for evaluating applications help producers see up front why they are or are not meeting stewardship thresholds, and allow them to pick practices and enhancements that work for their conservation objectives. These tools also enable producers to see potential payment scenarios for conservation early in the process.

Producers interested in CSP are recommended to contact their local USDA service center or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted.
Volunteer Spotlight

Lacy Bellanger, Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center

Lacy Bellanger received the Individual Earth Team Award for Louisiana as well as for the Southeast Region for her work at the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center (PMC) in fiscal year 2017.

While in college, Lacy volunteered at the Golden Meadow PMC with a group. After graduating from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette with a Bachelor of Science in Environmental and Sustainable Resources and serving two years in the Peace Corps, Lacy returned to the PMC to volunteer again.

Lacy brought considerable soil and plant knowledge with her to the volunteer position. She volunteered part-time 5 days a week for nearly 4 months.

Lacy provided much needed help in the vegetative increase of plant releases that are distributed yearly to commercial growers, who then provide the necessary plants for coastal restoration. Her assistance helped increase the plant production at the PMC to nearly four times more than the previous capacity. Some of the plant species she assisted with were “Caminada” seaoats, “Brazoria” seashore paspalum, “Timbalier” gulf bluestem, “Fourchon” bitter panicum, and “Vermilion” smooth cordgrass.

The experience she gained as an Earth Team volunteer led her to begin a career in conservation. Lacy is now a district technician for the Lafourche-Terrebonne Soil and Water Conservation District.

Volunteering for the Earth Team is an excellent way for someone to “try on” a career in conservation with NRCS. The experience gained can be used on a resume, the same way a paid position is used.

Earth Team volunteers provide a valuable service in Louisiana. If you or someone you know is interested in volunteering for NRCS, please contact Amy Robertson at 318-473-7762 or by e-mail at amy.robertson@la.usda.gov.

Around the State

February 21, 2018
Buttonbush Planting in St. Charles Parish

A group of 125 8th grade students from Buffalo, New York participated in planting 75 buttonbush seedlings during a learning event on February 21, 2018, at the Wetland Watchers Park in St. Charles Parish. Harry Hurst Middle School in Destrehan, Louisiana, served as the hosts for the visitors. Employees from the NRCS field office in New Orleans, Louisiana Department of Ag & Forestry and the Lafourche-Terrebonne Soil and Water Conservation District furnished the plants and demonstrated the proper planting technique.

Buttonbush is a small native shrub that is an important food source for wildlife. Bees, butterflies and hummingbirds use its white or pale pink flowers as a nectar source and species of waterfowl eat the seeds.

March 9, 2018
Live Oak Planting on Fourchon Beach

Personnel from the Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCD, LDAF, NRCS and volunteers from Common Ground Relief assisted the Wisner Foundation in planting 500 sand live oak trees on their property on Fourchon Beach. These trees will establish a forest for migrating nesting birds to build nests above ground and away from predators. It will also protect the area from erosion and storm surges.

March 14, 2018
Pointe Aux Chene Vegetative Planting

The Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCD, LDAF and Common Ground Relief assisted members of the United Houma Nation by planting approximately 10,000 linear feet of California bulrush. These plants will assist in slowing erosion and increasing wildlife habitat.

March 15 - 17, 2018
Louisiana Small Farmer Conference

Southern University Agricultural Land-Grant Campus hosted the 8th Annual Louisiana Small Farmer Conference at the Felton G. Clark Activity Center on March 15 - 17, 2018. This year’s theme was “Transforming and Elevating Louisiana Small Family Farms”. The conference kicked off on Thursday, March 15th with a Grant Writing Workshop. NRCS Acting Chief, Leonard Jordan provided the keynote address on March 16th. Claude Ross, Acting State Conservationist in Louisiana participated in the USDA Roundtable to address the needs of small farmers.
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination against its customers. If you believe you experienced discrimination when obtaining services from USDA, participating in a USDA program, or participating in a program that receives financial assistance from USDA, you may file a complaint with USDA. Information about how to file a discrimination complaint is available from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights. USDA prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex (including gender identity and expression), marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) To file a complaint of discrimination, complete, sign, and mail a program discrimination complaint form, available at any USDA office location or online at www.ascr.usda.gov, or write to: USDA, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20250-9410. Or call toll free at (866) 632-9992 (voice) to obtain additional information, the appropriate office or to request documents. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay service at (800) 877-8339 or (800) 845-6136 (in Spanish). USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.