



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

June 2018

Chicken Farming Made Better



Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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Learn how Union Parish farmer, Benny Archie is using new technology to create compost on his poultry operation on pages 4 and 5.

The Conservation Update is distributed monthly by mail and e-mail.

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Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

June 24, 2018, is my final day to serve as your Acting State Conservationist. Although I look forward to returning to family and work in Texas, I will miss the staff and conservation partners with whom I have had the pleasure of serving along for the past four months. As I write this, Louisiana NRCS leadership is preparing to attend the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation Convention in New Orleans. Another excellent example of the great partnerships for agriculture and conservation here in Louisiana.

Since the beginning of March, NRCS has made significant progress toward better customer service. Most recently, the Department has approved the hiring of 1100 additional NRCS employees nation-wide. This is a tremendous step to improving our delivery of conservation planning and programs. Louisiana will be adding critical staff that will better serve the farmers, ranchers and foresters in all Parishes.

On June 15, 2018, Dexter Sapp, Louisiana NRCS Strikeforce Coordinator, and I attended the Minority Landowner Magazine's annual conference in El Paso, Texas. This conference connects farmers, ranchers and landowners with agricultural resource professionals and agency representatives. Our outreach efforts are critical so that all landowners have access to our services and programs without unintended barriers.

Finally, Kevin Norton has asked Tim Landreneau, Assistant State Conservationist for Easement Programs, to serve as Acting State Conservationist. Tim will lead Louisiana NRCS until Kevin's return. It has truly been a wonderful opportunity to sit in Mr. Norton's chair and work with a great staff.

May our paths cross again.

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.



Chicken Farming Made

As a young boy Benny Archie remembers getting off the school bus, running into his house to get his gun and darting out the back door to get his squirrel dog, to go hunting in the woods behind his house. "I'm talking about the woods that used to be right here, where four chicken houses stand today." So much has happened since that time. So many things have changed for Benny Archie.

Tucked in the corner of this parcel of land, located in Marion, Louisiana, also stands the home where Archie was born. He recalls, "It was a childhood dream of mine to one day own cattle, and now I do." In fact, today at this location, he owns 93 acres where he runs four chicken houses and 40 head of cattle. His farming operation has over 185 head of mama cows.

Archie got into chicken farming, almost by necessity. He needed chicken litter for the hay he was growing for his cattle. "I started off with my first cow nine years ago. Now I have 185 head of cattle." When Archie purchased this farm it had four chicken houses being used as barns, that he ultimately retrofitted to grow chickens.

There is more than meets the eye when it comes to chicken farming, a whole lot more. The process is precise, Archie grows a nine week bird. Each chicken house holds about 15,400 birds. Part of the process of growing healthy birds is knowing that a portion of them will die.

Archie explains, "I can average 300 to 350 dead chickens at the end of the nine-week cycle. Several things contribute

to those deaths including heat, stress, heart attacks and other factors. So what happens to those chickens? They have to be disposed of properly and that is the responsibility of the chicken farmer.

There are several ways to dispose of the chickens including incinerators and composters. Both are labor intensive and time consuming. But, now there is a new innovative approach to disposing of the chickens.

This new technology utilizes air, heat, wood shavings and the birds. The machine is a drum and rotates. With every rotation, the birds begin to break down and as it works through the process compost comes out the other end.

According to Archie, economically there is no doubt, using this piece of machinery is far better than any other method he has tried before. "This drum runs off electricity powered by a one-horsepower motor," said Archie. "The only time this is using electricity is when it turns or about every 30 minutes when the fan comes on to dry the contents." On average the drum uses about \$40.00 a month in electricity.

The key to the process is to keep moisture out of the mix. The more moisture you have the slower the break-down is going to be. Ultimately, the finished product will be clean, almost odor free and dry. The shavings can be utilized more than one time. The material that is the result of the process can be used as fertilizer on another part of the farm or mulch for flower beds.



Better

The partnership with the D'Arbonne Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS began when Archie started raising cattle and has continued to grow. "I started working with the D'Arbonne SWCD and NRCS with my cattle operation and they helped me with several projects," recounted Archie. NRCS came out and looked over my property to assess the erosion problems I was having, developed a conservation plan and then helped implement those practices.

For Archie, his family farm is a dream come true! There is something very special about a family farm that grows cows, chickens, and other products. You can look at Archie's face and tell how much this all means to him. It all began with a boy shooting squirrels for his family to eat and just look at it now!

NRCS District Conservationist in Farmerville, Stephanie Cruse, went the extra mile for Archie. "I attended a meeting and learned about this new technology, I approached Stephanie to see if NRCS had any programs that would assist me in getting the new technology on my farm," explained Archie. "She looked into it and helped me through the process." Ultimately Archie was able to get assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and become the first NRCS customer in Louisiana to implement the new machinery and composting technology.

Archie smiles big, "Stephanie gave it a shot, I applied, was approved and the rest is history!"

To find out how to achieve your conservation goals, contact your local NRCS field office.



Working Lands for Wildlife



As interesting as it is illusive, the Louisiana pinesnake is one of the rarest snakes in North America. Known for living underground and feasting on pocket gophers (another underground dweller), capturing an accurate count of these reptiles has proven to be difficult. However, wildlife biologists agree that open pine forests, managed by frequent fire, herbivory and thinning, with a well-developed ground cover, are perfect conditions for the pinesnake, making Louisiana and parts of East Texas a veritable Ritz Carlton for these rare creatures.

This large North American snake is unique. Reaching a length of over five feet, though rarely seen, the snake can be very noticeable when spotted. Another interesting thing about the snake is that it has the largest eggs of any North American species, five inches long and two inches wide! However the clutch size is very small, three to five eggs. This low egg production poses an additional threat to the species.

Studies show that the snake prefers well drained, sandy soils and open pine woodlands. Growing longleaf pine, which is regularly thinned and prescribed burned can improve the habitat for a multitude of wildlife species, including Eastern wild turkey, white-tailed deer, numerous songbirds, and for the Louisiana pinesnake.

In October of 2017, a decision to list the Louisiana pinesnake under the authority of the endangered species act was tentatively planned. With the possibility

of the Louisiana pinesnake being listed as an endangered or threatened species, NRCS in Louisiana and Texas took action and partnered with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to establish a new “Working Lands for Wildlife” program for the Louisiana pinesnake.

The Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) project, works with partners and private landowners to focus voluntary conservation on working landscapes. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers and forest landowners, helping them plan and implement conservation practices that benefit target species and priority landscapes.

Landowners who sign-up for the Louisiana pinesnake WLFW project would continue to utilize active management practices, like prescribed fire, thinning and herbivory to maintain forest land. Additionally, any incidental take of a Louisiana pinesnake would not be held against the landowner, as long as they were following their conservation plan established in the WLFW project.

John Pitre, State Resource Conservationist, with NRCS explains. “NRCS took the initiative to consult with USFWS developing the Louisiana pine snake WLFW project so rural, non-industrial, private forest landowners within the Louisiana pinesnake geography could work with NRCS managing their forest lands without worry.”

Pitre continues, “The last thing we want to see are these lands go unmanaged. Leaving the lands unmanaged would not benefit the people relying on the forest as a retirement investment or a possible means to fund their children’s education, and it certainly would not benefit the wildlife which rely on early successional habitat.” Many benefits are derived from following a NRCS management plan, and productivity, monetary profits, aesthetics, outdoor recreation opportunities and the good feeling derived from knowing that you have done something good for the land and the wildlife that live there.

Realizing that forestry is the leading agricultural crop in Louisiana, NRCS and the USFWS, want to make the Louisiana pinesnake WLFW project one that will give landowners the flexibility to continue with their conservation and management practices, while at the same time allowing the ecosystem and habitat for the Louisiana pinesnake to thrive.

“With our long growing season, high rainfall, and increasing number of exotic species, a forest manager (especially in longleaf pine) needs to take an active role in “bio-mimicking” the forces under which southern pine forest evolved (especially fire and herbivory). This project will hopefully give the forestland manager confidence to move forward with active management,” said Pitre.

Troy Mallach, State Wildlife Biologist for NRCS adds, “Any temporary impacts to the Louisiana Pinesnake population from implementation of conservation practices associated with the project will be far outweighed by the benefits of creation, restoration and maintenance of Louisiana Pinesnake habitat. Not only will you know that you are helping a wildlife species, there will be benefits to the land that you can see and be proud of.”

For that reason, participating landowners receive Endangered Species Act predictability, which provides coverage for “incidental take” that may occur during practice implementation as long as conservation measures are followed.

Without management, protection and conservation of the historical areas where these species have occurred, declines in populations are expected.

So, what is a land owner to do? The first step is to contact your local NRCS office, have a conservation professional come out to your land and determine if you are located in the area targeted for the Louisiana pinesnake. NRCS field staff will work with you to develop a conservation plan that will act as a road map to conservation and stewardship success!

Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, State Outreach Coordinator

Betty Weathers was the grand prize winner of a potted tomato plant at a recent Campiti Field of Dreams sponsored USDA Outreach Meeting. Tallowah's Farm Manager, Waylon Breaux, presented the gift to Mrs. Weathers.

The meeting took place at the Bienville Parish Library in Ringgold, Louisiana on May 11, 2018.



Meeting participants got a chance to learn about the services that the LSU AgCenter provides, as well as the financial and technical assistance each of the USDA agencies provide.

As a result of the meeting USDA received Requests for USDA Assistance from six new customers.

Volunteer Spotlight

Tanner Colbert

Submitted by: Brandy Hinds, Natchitoches SWCD

Tanner Colbert is a sophomore at Natchitoches Central High School (NCHS) and a member of the NCHS FFA Agronomy and Meat Evaluation Team. During 2017-2018 school year he placed second in both Agronomy CDE and Meat Evaluation CDE in the state competition. Tanner is on the varsity football team and plays center. During his down time, Tanner enjoys fishing and hunting when he is not participating in school related events or volunteering for the NRCS Earth Team. Tanner is also a volunteer and member of the United Sportsman Youth Foundation, where he participates in fund raising events and outreach.

As an active Earth Team Volunteer for the NRCS office in Natchitoches, Tanner helps the NRCS staff with EQIP, CSP and WRE programs. Tanner has assisted the NRCS staff with outreach activities, as well as, practice checkouts. The WRE Technician has also been assisted by Tanner during numerous field reviews, in which Tanner has been shown how to utilize the district uAS (Drone) for conservation.



The Natchitoches Field office and the Natchitoches Soil and Water Conservation District have both benefited from Tanner's assistance and involvement in conservation and outreach. The NSWCD has utilized Tanner's help in the feral swine control program. Tanner has assisted the NSWCD in feral swine control and surveillance within the parish.

Each year, in the spring, the District also has an annual tree sale in which Tanner has assisted with the potting of bareroot, the movement of the plants and maintaining the health of the plants for the sale.

Tanner has been an Earth Team volunteer for the Natchitoches NRCS Field Office since 2016 and has logged more than 400 volunteer hours. He is hoping to further his studies after high school to pursue a career in forestry or agronomy. Having worked so closely with the NRCS and District staff he hopes to one day work for NRCS.



If you are interested in volunteering with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, please contact your local service center.

Around the State

May 29 - June 1, 2018 State of the Coast Conference

NRCS recently exhibited at the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana's State of the Coast Conference in New Orleans. Over 1,200 scientists, landowners/managers, federal and state agency personnel, local officials, industry and business leaders, resource users and interested citizens came together to share knowledge for the good of coastal Louisiana. For more information visit stateofthecoast.org

June 13, 2018 Lunchtime Lagniappe

This summer, the Capitol Park Museum in partnership with the Louisiana Natural Heritage Area for Preserving Our Natural Abundance is hosting a series of Lunchtime Lagniappe lectures about the critical environmental issues facing the state and celebrate the ways that people appreciate and embrace Louisiana's natural abundance.

On June 13, 2018, Garret Thomassie and Curt Riche from the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center were invited to give a presentation to participants on NRCS's

efforts related to coastal wetland plants and native prairie grasses.



Upcoming Events

July 11, 2018 Franklin Parish Soil Health Field Day

The Trailblazer RC&D is hosting the Franklin Parish Soil Health Field Day on July 11, 2018, at the Brad Banks Farm located at 2838 Highway 577 in Winnsboro, Louisiana, from 10:00 am - 2:00 pm. The event is FREE but pre-registration is required. To register, call the Winnsboro NRCS office at (318) 435-9425, ext. 3 or e-mail jason.hardie@la.usda.gov. Lunch will be provided.

July 18, 2018 Sugarcane Field Day

The LSU AgCenter will be hosting a Sugarcane Field Day on July 18, 2018, from 8:00 am - 1:00 pm at the LSU AgCenter Sugar Research Station, located at 5755 LSU Ag Road, in St. Gabriel, Louisiana. For more information, please contact Patrick Bollich at PBollich@agcenter.lsu.edu or by phone at 225-765-2876.

July 18, 2018 Northeast Louisiana Row Rice Field Day

The LSU AgCenter will be hosting the Northeast Louisiana Row Rice Field Day on July 18, 2018, from 9:00 am - 12:00 pm at the Colvin Farm and Rayville Civic Center. Please contact Keith Collins at 318-355-0703 for more information.

July 24 & 25, 2018 Beginning/Advanced Organic Farming Workshop with Alex Hitt

Louisiana SARE and the LSU AgCenter are hosting a beginning/advanced organic farming workshop with Alex Hitt on July 24 & 25, 2018, at the Ira Nelson Horticulture Center in Lafayette, Louisiana. July 24th will begin with the basics of organic farming and the 25th will be a discussion-based class where Alex Hitt will focus on topics the class requests. Lunch is FREE with Advanced Registration. To register, visit <https://beginning-advancedorganicfarming.eventbrite.com>. For more information contact Dr. Carl Motsenbocker at 225-578-1036 or by

e-mail at cmotsenbocker@agcenter.lsu.edu, or Sydney Melhado at 225-578-1037 or by e-mail at smelhado@agcenter.lsu.edu.

July 26, 2018 Louisiana Master Farmer Program Sugarcane Field Tour and Soil Health Workshop

The LSU AgCenter is hosting a sugarcane field tour and soil health workshop on July 26, 2018, at the West St. Mary Civic Center in Jeanerette, Louisiana, beginning at 7:15 am. Topics to be covered include weed management, residue management in sugarcane, cover crops for sugarcane, soil health and fertility, and more. Participants can earn Phase 2 credit and CEC's for attendance. For more information, contact Blair Hebert at 337-369-4441, Donna Moran at 318-613-9278, Dr. Lisa Fultz at 225-578-1344 or James Hendrix at 318-235-7198.

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