



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

July 2018

Working With Louisiana's Veterans

Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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On the Cover



NRCS is working with America’s veterans across Louisiana. To learn more about how NRCS is working with the Veterans Administration Hospital in Rapides Parish, see 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



Here we are in the dog days of summer, the good news is that there is a silver lining to all this heat and humidity. Sweet corn, watermelon, and home grown tomatoes, to name just a few. If you are like me, I take advantage of the long summer days... working in the yard, getting ready for hunting season and enjoying time with my family and friends before the hectic fall schedule starts up again.

This time of year, we know, is busy for you, our producers and customers. As I've been traveling the state along Louisiana's highways and byways, the evidence of your hard work is all around. Green, lush fields abound indicating that harvest time is just around the corner.



This issue of the Conservation Update is dedicated to our nation's veterans. As many of you know, USDA is committed to reaching out to veterans. Those who are returning home after active duty and looking for career opportunities or those who utilize agriculture as a hobby. NRCS offers a variety of programs to help veterans get started in the right direction.

NRCS in Louisiana has an outreach agreement with the Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital located in Pineville. Through this agreement, and partnership, the VA hospital staff and administration have established raised bed gardens that the patients use for recreational therapy. And for many of the VA nursing home residents, the garden has given them a new found hobby.

We hope you enjoy reading about these wonderful men and women. I know you join me when I say, "God Bless the USA!"

Timothy J. Landreneau
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.

Working with Lou



“Have you ever seen tomatoes like this before,” a Veterans Administration Hospital (VA) employee asked. Every plant in sight is standing tall, even though they are weighed down, heavy with ripe tomatoes. Everyone laughs as we all stand in amazement at the bumper crop of tomatoes and bell peppers growing in the raised bed gardens on the campus of the VA hospital in Rapides Parish.

This garden is tended by the veterans who are part of the in-patient unit of the (VA) located in Pineville, for recreational therapy. But, these gardens were not always here. In fact, these raised bed gardens were recently installed and planted with the help of an NRCS outreach agreement.

Robin Joffrion-Sawyer, the hospital’s Supervisory Recreation Therapist explains, “At one point we had a large horticulture program, we had the space, we had the facilities, we just didn’t have the technical knowledge or funding to get a garden up and running.” That is where NRCS came into the picture.

NRCS has a multitude of programs designed to meet the needs of our nation’s veterans. Those who are coming back from active duty and exploring the idea of agriculture as a new career or those who utilize agriculture as a hobby or for therapy. There is a program that can assist and provide direction and resources.

“The VA engineering staff built the raised beds, then we had a work day back in April when we added the soil and planted all the vegetables,” explained Joffrion- Sawyer. That is when the project really got off the ground.

There are three locations of the raised beds at the VA, by the in-patient area, the Alzheimer’s unit and the long-term care facility.

“This is my first time to garden,” said Rodney Beaudion, Recreational Therapist at the VA. “When I first met with the folks with NRCS, Chris Coreil, the State Agronomist and Dexter Sapp, the Outreach Coordinator, that is when I really learned about plants and gardening.”

The VA Recreation Therapy staff have taken up the torch to reinvigorate gardening at the VA. They have witnessed first-hand the benefits the patients receive helping with the gardens. “The fresh air and sunshine, socializing with the other veterans and working on a common goal is extremely beneficial for the residents,” says Joffrion-Sawyer.

Beaudion started bringing his group to the garden daily to water, weed and care for the plants. In just a few short weeks they saw the results of their hard work. “I work with the psychiatric unit and every morning I bring the patients here and we spend time in the garden,” he explains.

“This is very therapeutic for the patients,” said Beaudion. He has seen a dramatic change in their over-all outlook. “There is a big difference in the veterans from when they enter the program until they go home, Beaudion explains. “Many of them are amazed at what they are able to accomplish by planting then caring for the vegetables while they grow.” Beaudion continues, “When they are

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able to pick and eat what they have grown, they feel a great sense of accomplishment.”

Dexter Sapp, NRCS Outreach Coordinator, agrees wholeheartedly. “This is a model project and one that can be replicated on similar VA facilities nationwide.” In fact, this project inspired similar projects across the state. The Village of Athens, Louisiana, through an outreach agreement with Trailblazer RC&D, constructed a veteran’s therapy garden/ walking trail.

Ricky Broadnax, an Army veteran, originally from Caldwell Parish, is now a resident at the VA long-term care facility, and has taken a special interest in the gardens. “Every morning I have my ritual,” Broadnax smiles. “I water the plants, then later in the day I come out and check on them, weed them if they need it.” Broadnax says that he takes pride in caring for the garden. “I’ll pick the vegetables and then give some to the other residents and to the VA staff.” According to Broadnax there’s nothing like “gettin’ your hands dirty.”

Janice Riggs, Recreation Therapist at the long-term care facility, sees first-hand the many benefits of the gardens, “The garden brings the residents together. The guys will gather outside and reminisce about times when they were children, helping with gardens when they were growing up.” The gardens have established a sense of community and a common goal for the residents.

Next steps in this project? The next goal for the VA is to work closely with their dietary department to incorporate the vegetables grown on the campus into meals prepared at the hospital and also develop some recipes that the in-patients and long-term care veterans can enjoy.

Working with veterans is a priority for NRCS Louisiana and for USDA nationwide. As an agency, our commitment is to work alongside veterans and assist them in the process and provide the technical knowledge they need to get started in a life of agriculture.



Story from the Field

The Cowboy Way of Life - A Girl, Her Horse and Her Dog Living the Dream!

Submitted by: *Cindy Beard, Area Civil Engineering Technician*

The definition of a cowboy is a hard working, honest and proud person that herds and works cattle and horses. They wear large hats with wide brims, boots, chaps and bandanas. Cowboys help the neighbors with their cattle operations. The cowboy way – to treat people and livestock the way you would want to be treated. They use horses and cattle dogs to work the cattle. It's a lifestyle rarely found today, but it's Ginger's way of life.



Virginia Johnson "Ginger" grew up wanting to be a cowboy. She loved spending time with her Uncle Loye Willis and the ranch hand Dan Warren. She followed Uncle Loye around the ranch as a child and young adult learning about cattle, forages and the cowboy way. As a young cowgirl she came to the ranch on weekends and every chance she could to help her Uncle

Loye with cowboy chores. She learned about breaking colts, deworming cattle, re-pairing fences and producing hay. Dan Warren kept her busy trying out and working with new colts and horses he would trade. She said Dan taught her everything about horses. Ginger got her first horse when she was 12 years old.



In 1974, Ginger moved to the ranch full time. Her non-farm job was as a biochemist. Soon her knowledge and love of horses had become a good source of income. She had 40 brood mares and 5 stallions. Their bloodlines were of Poco Bueno and Doc Tari, well known for cutting and performance horses.

Cattle was a constant for Ginger and Uncle Loye. Ginger was always researching and looking for improvements that could make the cattle and forages better. Uncle Loye was only doing the minimum to get by. She said it was a real chore to convince Uncle Loye to make changes.

In 1991 Ginger became the sole owner and decision maker for the 370-acre ranch. She started with 6 Brangus cows and a

bull. She keeps the best 10% of her heifers and now has 5-6 different herds. Ginger keeps complete records, showing the genetics and performance for each cow. Her Ultra Black herd (Brangus and Angus) is very impressive. Ginger is setting an excellent example for women ranchers and farmers in the area. She has managed and made the decisions on this land since 1991. Her hard work has made the land a show place.



Ginger began working with NRCS in 2004. She has improved her pastures and hay fields by installing cross fences, watering facilities, planting improved grasses, and herbaceous weed control. She is scheduled to install heavy use area rock pads through gate openings and under watering facilities. Ginger submitted an application for financial assistance through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and is interested in establishing pollinator habitat. She has some pastures that has Plains Coreopsis growing wild in them and coming up every year.

A girl, her horse and her dog making dreams come true at Willis Field in Webster Parish, Louisiana.

Around the State

June 11, 2018 Iberia SWCD Coastal Revegetation Planting Project

The Iberia Soil and Water Conservation District conducted its annual Coastal Revegetation Project on June 11, 2018, along the shoreline of Marsh Island located

in Iberia Parish. Approximately 9,714 plugs of smooth cordgrass were planted for a total of 29,142 linear feet of plantings. This cooperative effort included participants from the La. Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Office of Soil and Water Conservation, USDA- NRCS, Vermilion SWCD, and Earth Team Volunteers.



Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, State Outreach Coordinator

Claude Ross, Acting State Conservationist for NRCS in Louisiana and Dexter Sapp, Outreach Coordinator, recently attended the Minority Landowner Magazine's 12th Anniversary Farmers and Landowners Conference. The conference was held June 14-16, 2018 at the Radisson Hotel El Paso in El Paso, Texas. The theme of the conference was "Focused on the Care of the Farm Focused on the Care of the Farmer."

On the first day of the conference attendees participated in a tour of West Texas. The first stop on the tour was at the San Elizario Historic District. While enroute to the historic district the group passed through the small city of San Elizario which lies on the Rio Grande River which forms the border between the US and Mexico. Approximately 5,000 acres of agriculture can be found in San Elizario and the pecan orchards, alfalfa hay fields as well as cotton are irrigated from the Rio Grande River. NRCS provides assistance to many of the producers in that area.

Other tour stops included the US Border Patrol Museum and the El Paso Museum of Archaeology. In my opinion, the highlight of the tour was the visit to the Weldon Yerby Senior Gardens located near the base of the Franklin Mountains in El Paso. The garden is the oldest community garden in El Paso. The land is made available by the city of El Paso and they supply the water, soil and manure that is used at the garden. A person has to be at least 55 years of age to join. The program was started in 1978 to encourage senior citizens to get exercise and eat healthier. The 3 ½ acre garden has 135 gardeners and the garden is laid out in 4' x 60' plots. Besides the typical vegetable crops grown, some members have figs, pears, grapes as well as flowers that are thriving with the help of irrigation. Produce grown in the garden cannot be sold but can be given away. The Weldon Yerby Senior Garden concept is something that can be replicated all over the nation.

The remainder of the conference included breakout sessions on NRCS Conservation Planning, Updates from the Policy Research Center, and Grant Writing Essentials. Also there were presentations on Farmer and Rancher Mental Health: A Risk Management Approach; Increasing



Minority Participation in USDA Programs through Community Partnerships Project CARE: Conservation and Agriculture Reach Everyone; Heir Property; Crop Production with Micro-irrigation in Dell City, Texas; and High Yield Agriculture on a Small Farm. The presenter that grabbed my attention was Rick Peterson, Professor and Extension Family Life Specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Department. During his Farmer and Rancher Mental Health presentation, he shared with the group that farmers, foresters, and fishermen have the highest suicide rate of any profession. With adverse weather conditions, disease, regulations, low or volatile commodity prices, family dynamics, financial worries and uncertainty can lead to some stressful situations.

Upcoming Events

August 2018 Small Farm Fundamentals

Fresh Central is hosting a series of workshops in August 2018, with topics designed for small, diversified farms, market gardeners and skill-seekers interested in farming and large-scale gardening for fun and profit.

August 2nd - Grow What's Already Sold: Crop Planning will be held at CLEDA offices @900 4th Street, Suite 300, Vault Meeting Room in Alexandria, Louisiana, from 4pm - 6 pm

August 9th - Mastering Social Media to Build Your Brand Awareness will be held at

the CLEDA offices @ 900 4th Street, Suite 300, Vault Meeting Room in Alexandria, Louisiana from 2:30 pm - 3:30pm.

August 16, 2018 - On-Farm Food Safety: (FSMA) the REQUIRED Grower's Training will be held at the Dean Lee Research Station, Rapides Parish Extension Office at 300 Dean Lee Road in Alexandria, Louisiana from 8:30am - 5 pm. Pre-registration is required and the cost of this workshop is \$20.

August 23rd - Farmers Market Booth Display and Design will be held at the Stache Warehouse located at 1330 Murray Street in Alexandria, Louisiana from 4 pm - 6 pm.

August 30th - Farming & Money: Making it Work will be held at the CLEDA offices @ 900 4th Street, Suite 300, Vault Meeting Room in Alexandria, Louisiana from 4pm - 6pm.

August 10, 2018 Forestry BMP workshop

The Trailblazer RC&D is hosting a forestry BMP Workshop and Field Tour on August 10, 2018 from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm at the Springhill Country Club located at 26746 Highway 371 in Cullen Louisiana. Registration is FREE and lunch is provided. To register, email: ceo@trailblazer.org or call 318-255-3554 and leave a message with your name, contact information and the name of the workshop.

Conference Highlights

Back to Your Roots 2018: A Sustainable Agriculture Focused on Growing Food, Farmers and the Fabric of Our Rural Communities

Submitted by: Donna Isaacs, Campti Field of Dreams

Back To Your Roots 2018 conference (BTYR2018), hosted by Campti Field of Dreams, held May 17-19, at Northwestern State University School of Business and several other sites throughout Natchitoches Parish, attracted a total of 388 participants. The event designed to empower the next generation of farmers, ranchers and value-added producers, with environmentally friendly tools and techniques that generate more income, began with a farm tour at Oakland Plantation, a National Park Service Bicentennial Farm. A welcome reception followed at the National Center for Preservation, Technology and Training and two full days of educational sessions at NSU School of Business. BTYR2018 featured three internationally renowned speakers.

Dr. Chuck Fluharty, Founder, President and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute at the University of Iowa, who has been championing rural communities both nationally and internationally, shared the importance of creative placemaking activities such as this, to build vibrant rural economies that attract and support the next generation.

Jean Martin Fortier shared his use of appropriate technology: tarps, season-extending high-tunnels and the BCS two-wheel tractor to build soil health to support his \$150,000/year market garden on an acre and a half in Quebec Canada.

Joel Salatin, a third generation farmer and author shared his experience rebuilding the soil at Polyface farm in Swoope, Virginia, with intensive rotational grazing and the stacking of enterprises. Joel also spoke about the importance of transitioning the farm to younger generations as his father did with him and now he has done with his son. He also talked about engaging

youth early on as he has done with his grandchildren, each with their own fiefdom from around eight years of age.



In addition to the keynote speakers, Jim Kilcoyne moderated a panel discussion by NSU faculty on the business of farming. Appropriate technology topics included water conservation, season extension, and growing a sustainable farm income. Academics and practitioners: Dr. Naveen Adusumilli, LSU AgCenter, Chris Coreil, NRCS, Drew Coombs, NRCS, Dr. Jackie Robbins, Irrigation-Mart, Danny Coombs, Farmer, Benny Bell, Ebarb High School Agriculture Instructor, Christine Meshell and Miron Gordon, JCM Greenhouse, Brandy Miles, Red Dirt Tractor, Julee Murphree, The Farm Wife, Grant and Allison Guidroz, Fullness Farm, and Ayn Duncan, Laus Deo Farm, shared best practices.

Our take-away, as NRCS helps people help the land, the land helps people to improve the quality of life, health and well-being of those in rural communities.

Special thanks to Connie Jones, Katherine Johnson and all of the volunteers that made this event possible.

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