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Louisiana Conservation Update
Projects • Successes • Partnerships

Twenty Years in the Making...
Wetland Reserve Success in Catahoula Parish

April 2019
On the Cover

Learn more about how Steve Stephens turned his marginal crop land into an oasis for wildlife with a wetland reserve easement on pages 4 and 5.

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

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Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

In 1939, Hugh Hammond Bennett, the founding father of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) wrote, “Out of the long list of nature’s gifts to man, none is perhaps so utterly essential to human life as soil.” Over 80 years later, those words still ring true. April marks the anniversary of the founding of NRCS. On April 27, 1935, congress passed the law that formed the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), that eventually became NRCS. Since that time, we have worked hand-in-glove with America’s farmers providing technical and financial assistance, so they can make sound land use decisions and produce the food, fiber and fuel that our nation depends on.

In this issue of the Conservation Update, we meet one of those farmers, Steve Stephens from Catahoula Parish. Stephens has worked with the Catahoula Soil and Water Conservation District and NRCS to turn marginal crop land into a thriving wildlife habitat. Enrolling 235 acres into a permanent wetland reserve easement has proven to be an excellent decision for Stephens and he highly recommends the program.

From 1935 until 2019 the business of NRCS is all about working with our customers and helping them achieve their conservation goals, increasing their sustainability, productivity and ultimately the bottom line. I encourage you to reach out to one of the 44 NRCS and SWCD offices located across the state and learn how we can help you!

On a personal note, my tenure as acting state conservationist is coming to a close on May 3, 2019. I cannot find words to convey how much I have enjoyed being a part of the conservation team in Louisiana these past few months. The work that producers, NRCS, and a host of partners are doing to protect this beautiful state’s natural resources is amazing. I look forward to implementing some of your great ideas back home in Arkansas. Your congenial spirit and can-do attitudes made my time here a delight. I wish you all continued conservation successes and…Geaux Team Louisiana!

Amanda Mathis
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.

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.
Twenty years ago, when Steve Stephens enrolled his 235 acres into a permanent wetland reserve easement, he had a vision that he brought to fruition with technical and financial assistance provided by the Catahoula Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

When Stephens purchased this marginal crop land, he tried to grow soybeans for several years with dismal results. He then paid a visit to the Catahoula SWCD and NRCS for assistance.

The district conservationist visited the property, created a conservation plan and recommended that Stephens consider enrolling this land in a wetland reserve easement. At that time, the Wetland Reserve Program was a relatively new program administered by NRCS and Stephens was unsure of what to expect.

As part of the restoration, 197 acres of bottomland hardwood timber was established by planting species such as nutall oak, water oak, willow oak, bald cypress, green ash and mayhaw. In addition, a 58-acre shallow water area was created and four acres of micro-hydrology.

Since that visit 20 years ago, Stephens, in partnership with NRCS and the SWCD, has created a virtual oasis for the wildlife that call this 235-acre wetland area home, including the Louisiana black bear, deer, squirrels, ducks and geese.

“Since creating this habitat, the deer population on my land has quadrupled,” said Stephens.

Dustin Farmer, easement program planning and implementation team leader with NRCS, went on to say that, “The increase in wildlife happened as soon as the habitat was created and has only grown in the last 20 years, and will continue to grow. The benefits to wildlife are endless.”

The wetland has also created a filter for the water that drains from the land into the local watershed. The water that leaves his property is not muddy, but very clear which helps improve the overall water quality of the watershed.

“Working with the SWCD and NRCS has been paramount to the success of this easement. If I ever have a question, they are a quick phone call away and are always willing and able to answer my questions,” says Stephens.

Stephens is the first to recommend the program to others who have marginal crop land, “If you are a farmer or
landowner with marginal crop land, I encourage you to visit your local soil and water conservation district and NRCS office to find out more about wetland easements. It’s a win-win for the land, the wildlife and the landowner.”

As a matter of fact, he is proud of the work that he has done and is happy knowing that it will be passed down to future generations of the Stephens family.

To find out more about achieving your conservation goals, contact your local soil and water conservation district and NRCS office.
Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Project Specialist

Amanda Mathis, acting state conservationist for Louisiana, was one of the opening speakers at the Campti Field of Dreams’ 2019 Back to Your Roots Conference that was held on the campus of Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, on March 7 - 9, 2019. Over 135 attendees registered for this year’s conference.

“If last year’s conference was about inspiration, then this year’s conference is about implementation” says conference sponsor and Campti Field of Dreams Executive Director Donna Isaacs. “We are excited to bring you over 20 experts in their field, from near and far, to share their knowledge with you. This conference is designed with two objectives: first, to give you the tools you need to be successful and second, to foster a local food network that helps our rural communities thrive” continued Donna.

At the Friday morning opening session Amanda Mathis gave an NRCS PowerPoint presentation that focused on what NRCS does as an agency, the agency’s anniversary and how the Dust Bowl was the foundation of the agency. Amanda also shared some examples of success stories from producers that have implemented various conservation practices on their land. Dr. Tim Seipel, Plant Ecologist with Montana State University was the Friday morning keynote speaker. Dr. Seipel was introduced by Jane Watts the Executive Director of the Ross Lynn Charitable Foundation which is named after her late son.

Some of the topics included in the technical sessions were Vegetables Love Flowers, Using the Lean System to Earn a Comfortable Living on a Farm, Ruminants: General Husbandry and Economics for Direct-to-Consumer Farmers, The Sellers Perspective, Grow Cut Flowers for Profit, Seven Types of Farm Waste, Silvopasture in Practice, Fungal Foray, Providing Aesthetics and Food Using Edible Landscaping; Sustainability in Beekeeping and Growing Season Extension Using High Tunnels.

One of the highlights of the conference the Friday evening Farm to Table Dinner, which was held at the Ruston Farmers Market, had 250 people in attendance. Donna Isaacs’ 25-acre NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program funded Tallowah Farm in Campti, Louisiana supplied the fresh lettuce, greens, pork and lamb for the Farm to Table Dinner. About 5 years ago the Tallowah Farm was an idle woody area but is now a sustainable farm that is in full production.
**CSP Sign-Up**

The next deadline for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) applications to be considered for funding in fiscal year (FY) 2019 is **May 10, 2019**. USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) plans to invest up to $700 million for new enrollments and contract extensions in fiscal year 2019. The 2018 Farm Bill made several changes to this critical conservation program, which helps agricultural producers take the conservation activities on their farm or ranch to the next level.

“CSP continues to be a very effective tool for private landowners working to achieve their conservation and management goals,” said Amanda Mathis, NRCS acting state conservationist in Louisiana. “It is the largest conservation program in the United States with more than 70 million acres of productive agricultural and forest land enrolled.”

**Changes to the Program**

The 2018 Farm Bill authorizes NRCS to accept new CSP enrollments from now until 2023, and it makes some important improvements to the program. These updates include:

- NRCS now enrolls, eligible, high ranking applications based on dollars rather than acres. For FY 2019, NRCS can spend up to $700 million in the program, implementing new conservation activities and maintaining their existing activities.
- Higher payment rates are now available for certain conservation activities, including cover crops and resource conserving crop rotations.
- CSP now provides specific support for organic and for transitioning to organic production activities and a special grassland conservation initiative for certain producers who have maintained cropland base acres.

**About the Program**

CSP is offered in Louisiana through continuous sign-ups. The program provides many benefits including increased crop yields, decreased inputs, wildlife habitat improvements and increased resilience to weather extremes. CSP is for working lands including cropland, pastureland, rangeland, nonindustrial private forest land and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of a tribe.

**More Information**

For additional information about CSP, contact your local USDA service center.

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**Upcoming Events**

**April 30, 2019**
**All About Honey Bees**

The Trailblazer RC&D will be hosting a workshop on the basics of understanding and keeping honey bees on April 30, 2019, at 6:00 pm at the Claiborne Parish Library in Homer, Louisiana. For more information or to register for this event e-mail CEO@trailblazer.org or call 318-255-3554.

**May 18, 2019**
**USDA Outreach Meeting**

The Trailblazer RC&D will be hosting an USDA Outreach Meeting at Bethel Baptist Church #2 in Plain Dealing at 9:30am. For more information or to register for this event e-mail CEO@trailblazer.org or call 318-255-3554.

**May 23, 2019**
**USDA Outreach Meeting**

The Trailblazer RC&D will be hosting an USDA Outreach Meeting in Ringgold, Louisiana, at 6:00 pm on May 23, 2019. For more information or to register for this event e-mail CEO@trailblazer.org or call 318-255-3554.

**June 1, 2019**
**12th Annual Small Ruminant Field Day**

The Southern University Ag Center in partnership with SARE is hosting the 12th Annual Small Ruminant Field Day on June 1, 2019, from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm at the Maurice A. Edmond Livestock Arena located at 14600 Scenic Highway in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. For more information contact Dr. Sebhatu Gebrelul at sebhatu.gebrelul@suagcenter.com.
Two new features were launched recently on farmers.gov.

The first feature is the Farm Loan Viewer. This new feature allows customers and FSA staff members to login to the authenticated portal and view farm loan information, history and payments made on their loans.

Using a desktop, tablet or phone, the “Financial Information” feature enables producers to view:

- loan information
- interest payments for the current calendar year (including year-to-date interest paid for the past five years).
- loan advance and payment history
- paid-in-full and restructured loans
- account alerts giving borrowers important notifications regarding their loans. For example, an account alert will be displayed if a loan is past due.

Currently, access is only available for customers doing business as individuals. Access for entities, such as a trust or LLC, is being planned.

With time, the “My Financial Information” feature on the portal will have additional capabilities, such as the ability to fill out documents, transmit documents to their service center, include other USDA loan programs and support online payments.

The other new tool is one that farmers can use to navigate the application process for H-2A visas for temporary foreign agricultural workers. Focused smaller owner-operators, this farmers.gov H-2A Phase I release includes and H-2A Visa Program page and interactive checklist tool, with application requirements, fees, forms, and a timeline built around a farmer’s hiring needs. Producers can just answer a few questions, select the start date for their workers, and get a “to-do checklist” built around their H-2A hiring needs. The checklist can be printed or downloaded to use as a reference, or the producer can download calendar reminders from the checklist to their personal device.

Visit the website frequently, as new tools and features will be added. You can also keep up with farmers.gov on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

Visit our web site at: www.la.nrcs.usda.gov