Farming is Poetry for Retired Marine
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On the Cover

Learn more about how retired Marine, Fredie Manes and his wife Patti, have extended their growing season using high tunnels, thanks to technical and financial assistance from the Calcasieu SWCD and NRCS on pages 4 and 5.
Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

Backyard BBQs, fireworks, relaxing and spending time with family and friends are just some of the many ways we enjoy celebrating July 4th. It is also a perfect time to pay tribute and honor to the men and women who have served, and are serving, in our Armed Forces.

In this month’s issue of the Conservation Update we visit Fredie and Patti Manes of Hornbeck, Louisiana. After Fredie retired from a career with the Marine Corps, he and Patti decided to build a house on several acres of land near Fort Polk and take up gardening. However, one thing led to another and with hard work, elbow grease and a lot of ingenuity, the Manes’ created a successful business supplying fresh produce to farmers’ markets in the region.

The Calcasieu SWCD and NRCS worked with the Manes’ giving technical assistance together with guidance on how to apply for a high tunnel. A year later they had their first high tunnel. Now, the Manes’ have two high tunnels and a third one is in the works. Fredie remembered, “If it hadn't been for NRCS and the high tunnels we would have given up.” You will have to read the article to learn “the rest of the story.”

I know many of you have endured a rough few months with a tropical storm, flooding, and soggy soil. NRCS and its fellow USDA agencies are always available to assist you. With 44 NRCS offices state-wide, there is a service center close to you.

As July comes to a close, I believe this quote from founding father Thomas Jefferson, sums up the vital role of the American farmer to our society: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands.” I completely agree.

Please join me in re-affirming our heartfelt appreciation to our service men and woman; and to those who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom.

Timothy J. Landreneau
Acting State Conservationist

Success Story Update -
Raised Bed Gardens at the VA Hospital in Pineville, LA

Last July, we featured the raised bed gardening project at the VA hospital located in Pineville. One year later, the gardens are still growing strong! Patients have successfully grown a spring/summer and fall/winter crops.

Robin Joffrion-Sawyer, Supervisory Recreation Therapist at the VA Medical Center, explains, “We have some patients that were here when we first started the program and when they come back to the program, they are always interested, and want to participate in caring for the gardens.”

VA administrators agree that the gardens have been incredibly beneficial. “It gives the patients a sense of accomplishment, and for so many of our patients it brings back happy childhood memories of parents or grand-parents working in gardens,” explained Joffrion.

The raised-bed garden project was designed as physical and recreational therapy for patients with the short-term (in-patient) area and the long-term nursing facility.
Seeds. That is where this journey begins. Just like his dad, Fredie Manes always wanted to grow something... vegetables, fruits, flowers... anything and everything. "I started when I was in the fourth grade, my dad always had a huge garden," explained Manes. "I begged him for a little place to plant something, so dad tilled up a spot, and gave me some potato and green bean seeds." From that small patch of land, Manes love of agriculture grew.

Throughout high school Manes worked with his dad in their large garden in southwest Missouri. "I always wanted to be a farmer but, when you are 18 years old and fresh out of high school, buying land doesn't seem like an option, and I didn't really have any experience farming, other than gardening."

Fast forward several years, Fredie enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, which meant he traveled extensively. "I guess you could say that my service as a Marine allowed me to have incredible experiences; I tell folks I've probably traveled the world, at least three times," smiled Manes. As an infantry marine, Manes was based and spent time in San Diego, California, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, and a tour at Marine headquarters in Washington, DC. He was deployed oversees multiple times and, ultimately, finished his 21-year career in Hawaii.

During those years the awe and amazement of working in the soil, gardening and agriculture never left him. "I have a life-long subscription to the magazine Organic Gardening by Rodele Press and I would read it cover to cover every month," recalled Manes. Over the years Fredie, his wife Patti along with their two daughters, experimented with growing a wide variety of produce and flowers.

The Manes' retired to Louisiana (where Patti grew up) and, planted a huge home garden. "We were growing so much produce, that people would ask if they could buy fresh vegetables from us," Manes explained. "Eventually, I realized that farming would be a viable business for us."

As the operation grew, the Manes decided to focus on growing lettuce and a variety of greens. Coincidentally, that also happened to be the same year that a cold snap hit Louisiana and within the span of a few months two plantings were destroyed by temperatures that dipped into the 20's.

NRCS to the rescue! Manes reached out to the Calcasieu Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and his local USDA service center in Leesville to learn more about the technical and financial assistance available. Adam Malcomb, an Army veteran and soil conservationist in DeRidder and the veterans special emphasis program manager for NRCS in Louisiana explains, "When Fredie came into our office we discussed several options. After a site visit, installing high tunnels was the clear answer."
Manes cannot say enough good things about this growing technique, “The high tunnels have been a life saver for me, being able to keep the rain and weather off of the crops is a huge help.” In fact, Manes says that if it hadn’t been for NRCS and the Calcasieu SWCD, “I wouldn’t be growing produce at this level, and I wouldn’t be in business.” He goes on to say, “I think high tunnels are worth three times what they cost because it allows us to have a longer growing season.” The high tunnels also protect the soil and crops from erosion. “We are always fighting erosion, so the high tunnels also help us keep top soil in place,” said Manes.

Manes received financial assistance for two high tunnels through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Veteran Farmer and Rancher (VFR) provision in the Farm Bill. The 2018 Farm Bill has special provisions for veterans interested in farming and ranching. Sarah Trichel, NRCS State Program Specialist, explains, “The 2018 Farm Bill expanded the definition of a Veteran Farmer and Rancher (VFR) to include those who have been discharged for up to 10 years.” This expansion of the definition of a veteran farmer/rancher opens-up a new group of veterans that previously were not eligible for VFR status.

Malcomb echoes the importance of the expanded definition of a VFR, “It’s good to see veterans interested in farming and agriculture as a profitable job and way of life.” Malcomb continues, “For a lot of veterans, it is hard to reacclimate to civilian life; farming gives them an option to participate in their communities as much or as little as they like. A farming lifestyle is typically a really good fit for veterans because they are used to getting up early, putting in long hours and working hard.”

Manes is a self-proclaimed “market gardener” traveling to farmer’s markets around the region. You can easily tell he loves every minute. “I enjoy talking and connecting with my customers; he beams. Not only is Manes a producer, he is also the manager of the Alexandria Farmers Market, operated by the Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance (CLEDA). This fall, his crop will include tomatoes (grown from seed), all types of greens, lettuce, spinach and kale. “If it’s green, we’re going to grow it,” laughed Manes.

“All of the hard work is worth it when you go outside to witness seeds coming up from what you’ve planted,” Manes reflected. “To me that is the miracle …watching the plant bud, leaf out, and take off from seed. It’s like poetry, it’s that kind of a feeling for me.”

“I would encourage any veteran who is thinking about starting out in farming to contact their local SWCD and USDA office,” said Manes. “The application process is not difficult, and the staff are so helpful. They work with you through every stage of the process.”
Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was the site of a Community Garden Workshop. The workshop was made possible through an agreement that the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. (NBC) has with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Sixty-four people attended the workshop.

Through the agreement that the NBC has with NRCS, NBC hopes to increase participation of historically underserved/socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers in USDA programs by providing outreach, training, education and technical assistance to these farmers, ranchers and youth. Ultimately bridging the educational and economic gaps between rural and urban producers allowing them to provide variable food sources to suitable market outlets in rural and urban communities. The NBC was represented at the meeting by Dr. Samuel L. Thompson, Project Director for the NBC and Ms. Candace Mayes, Assistant Project Director for the NBC.

For the workshop, Rev. Demetria Jones-Smith not only invited farmers/ranchers, pastors, landowners, and city officials but she encouraged the adults to bring their children and grandchildren to the workshop. “Child-focused activities will promote good nutrition and healthy living, educate them on where their food comes from, instill positive work ethics and self-esteem through gardening as well as, introduce the youth to a potential career track in agriculture,” says Rev. Demetria Jones Smith of Shiloh MBC. “Shiloh is located in a food desert and we want people to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables”, continues Smith.

During the Saturday workshop, attendees got the chance to hear from representatives from the National Baptist Convention as well USDA representatives from the NRCS, Farm Service Agency and Rural Development. The training covered Youth Loan Programs, Opportunities with NRCS, Program Eligibility/Planning, Rural Development, FSA loans, EQIP program, programs for minority and disadvantaged farmers, community gardens, high tunnels and their usage, and other resources provided by the USDA/NRCS. Stephanie Elwood with Southern University was another presenter who took care of the youth portion of the workshop.

Attendees learned about the financial and technical assistance available from NRCS whether you own forestland, pastureland, cropland or you have urban lot. Special financial incentives for socially disadvantaged groups that participate in NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentive Program were discussed as well.

The Farm Service Agency gave an overview of some of their programs such as the Youth and Microloan Loans, their loan application process, receipt for services, career opportunities and the Request for USDA Assistance. Veterans as well as women were urged to participate in the various USDA Programs.

Rural Development can build a town from the ground utilizing such programs as the Business and Industry Loan Guarantee Program as well as the Community Facilities Direct Loan Program. The Rural Development representative gave details on the agency’s 502 and 504 Housing Program as well as the qualifying criteria for the agency $7,500 grant associated with housing.

Stephanie Elwood with Southern University gave an introduction to gardening with the youth and she led the youth in a Hands-on Gardening Project.

The Workshop concluded with an outside Hands-on-Gardening exercise for both the youth and adults.

Through the NBC agreement Shiloh MBC is in the process of establishing a Community Garden which will not only be a source of fresh fruits and vegetables, but the garden will help to educate people living in the Shiloh Urban neighborhood on where food comes from and will provide them an opportunity to engage with their food system.
Around the State

July 8 - 12, 2019
National Resources Inventory

During the week of July 8 - 12, 2019, NRCS grazing lands specialists from Louisiana assisted with the National Resources Inventory (NRI) Grazing Lands On-site Data Collection in the marshes of southwest Louisiana. The NRI plays a key role in the development of conservation policy and programs for the Nation. It serves to educate the public regarding natural resource issues and provides a comprehensive, nationally consistent source of data for researchers in many fields. Informed and valid decisions are best made when based upon scientifically derived data. The NRCS has been developed to supply this type of information. In particular, data collected on-site will be used to address grazing lands programmatic issues having to deal with water quality and carbon sequestration. On-site data will also be used to evaluate grazing lands and natural resource trends over time.

July 15 - 18, 2019
2019 Southern Cover Crop Conference

Six Louisiana NRCS staff members attended the 2019 Southern Cover Crop Conference in Auburn, Alabama. At the conference, they attended multiple breakout sessions and field trial demonstration where presenters discussed numerous benefits of incorporating cover crops into various management systems and how cover crops are key to improving soil health on our nation's agricultural lands.

Personnel Changes

Josh Anderson is the new district conservationist in the Thibodaux Field Office. Josh graduated from McNeese State University with a B.S. in Natural Resource Conservation and Management. Prior to graduation, Josh worked for the Gulf Coast Soil and Water Conservation District as the coastal vegetation technician and the wetland reserve easement technician for southwest Louisiana. In 2016, Josh was hired by NRCS as a soil conservationist in the Monroe Field Office. While in Monroe, Josh had the opportunity to assist multiple parishes in northeast Louisiana with their conservation needs.

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