



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

October 2019



Conservation Gumbo

Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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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

October marks the beginning of the new fiscal year, a time to look back on conservation accomplishments we've made together in 2019. We will have firm numbers in our Conservation Investment Report that we publish in early 2020, but right now as we reflect on working land programs; EQIP, CSP, and RCPP approximately \$49,700,000 was obligated on 1,266 contracts on over 343,000 acres; For ACEP Wetland Reserve Easements, approximately \$16,900,000 was obligated on 31 new easements on over 5,000 acres; and approximately \$4,800,000 was obligated on 39 new EWP-Floodplain Easements.

Two new projects authorized by the PL-566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act moved into planning phases and two additional projects were proposed for funding. Multiple Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) projects moved through various phases of planning, design, and construction.

Additionally, under Conservation Technical Assistance, over 436,000 acres were included in conservation plans written, and over 236,000 acres of conservation was applied to improve environmental quality.

And the list of accomplishments goes on.... All these amazing accomplishments were due to you, our customers and to our hard-working employees, who together, with all our partners are getting the job done!

Speaking of partners, in this issue we visit Eric Unkel, a rice and crawfish farmer in Kinder, Louisiana. Unkel's operation is a perfect example of partnership at it's finest. Through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) working with Ducks Unlimited and USA Rice, Unkel's operation has grown more efficient all while helping his bottom line.

Please join me in celebrating the great work we have accomplished in 2019 and anticipate the great work we have ahead in 2020.

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.

For more information, contact Amy Robertson at 318-473-7762 or by e-mail at amy.robertson@usda.gov or Adele Swearingen at 318-473-7687 or by e-mail at adele.swearingen@usda.gov.



Conservation Gumbo

What makes the best gumbo? Some say the Cajun trinity of ingredients (onions, bell pepper and celery) ... many argue the roux is the basic building block for creating the ultimate gumbo. But everyone agrees that the best gumbo is one that utilizes a combination of ingredients that, with time and careful attention, achieves the quintessential cool weather staple of the South. In the world of natural resources, partnerships are the roux in the recipe for a successful conservation gumbo.

In the rice fields of southwest Louisiana, the Unkel family farm is cooking up some of the best conservation gumbo around. Eric Unkel is one third of a big family farm. "I'm the third generation ... Our family has been farming this land since the early 1920's," explained Unkel. The fourth generation, Aaron (Eric's nephew), is following in his family's footsteps and farming alongside both of his uncles. Unkel's portion of the farm consists of 3,600 acres of rice and crawfish, with some cattle on the side.

The base of this conservation gumbo began in the early 2000's when the

price of fuel sky rocketed. "That was one of the biggest motivators, we were looking for ways to become more energy efficient and more conservation minded," Unkel explained. "Our relationship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Allen Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) began with laser leveling a few rice fields at a time." (The process of precision land leveling reduces the amount of water it takes to flood fields). "We could see the difference it was making by lowering energy costs and reducing soil erosion, so we kept adding field after field, right now about 90 percent of our fields are precision leveled," said Unkel.

Unkel recalls the work completed on his farm with the technical expertise and financial assistance of NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), "We are so much more efficient now, through land leveling we have gotten rid of over 100 levees, not to mention the grade stabilization structures and irrigation pipeline installed."

Barrett Lyons, district conservationist for the NRCS Oberlin Field Office completely agrees with Unkel about the improvements that have been made. "We started working together originally to increase efficiency and over the years we have addressed more resources concerns including nutrient and pest management." Lyons continues, "So in addition to improved land conservation, the Unkel's have better farm management and ultimately increased financial stability."

One of the most significant contributions to the Unkel farm is being made through a partnership between Ducks Unlimited (DU), USA Rice, SWCD's and NRCS in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Scott Edwards, assistant state conservationist for programs with NRCS explains, "Through RCPP, we promote coordination between conservation partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges that result in positive outcomes tied to the resource concerns they are addressing."



Unkel explains, "RCPP is providing us the technical expertise and financial assistance to install several ditch pumps, which will create a tail water system." Unkel continues, "We will be able to recycle the water coming off the fields back into the fields. We are getting a lot more use out of the water we are using."

Kyle Soileau, rice stewardship coordinator for Louisiana with Ducks Unlimited is pleased with the work he sees happening on the Unkel land. "What Eric is doing with his land is exactly what we are trying to achieve with RCPP." Soileau goes on to explain, "There are two parts to RCPP, the first is through EQIP when farmers like Eric make the switch from using ground water to surface water to decrease pressure on aquifers. Here on the Unkel farm we were able to cost share on bayou pumps and pipeline," Soileau said.

The second part of RCPP is the Conservation Stewardship Program component that includes providing habitat for migrating waterfowl by extending the time water is held on agricultural lands. "There is always a winter water holding component in the fall fields that provide habitat for ducks migrating south and provide healthy

habitat when they are on their way back north in the spring.

The partnership between DU, USA Rice, NRCS and the Allen SWCD through RCPP has assisted the Unkel farm in becoming more efficient. In addition to the energy cost savings, utilizing surface water instead of local aquifers. In fact, in 2017 DU completed a pumping plant test on all of Eric's wells and it turns out that \$62.00 an acre is what it cost him to flood his fields. After converting to surface water, results show that his cost will be about \$30.00 an acre.

With RCPP, the farmers bottom line improves but natural resources are also conserved, and water quality improves. "When you pump muddy water onto the rice fields, rice does a tremendous job of cleaning and filtering out all of the sediment, suspended soils and turbidity," Soileau explains. "All the water sampling we've done comparing the muddy water going into the fields versus when it is released show an 83 percent reduction in suspended solids and about a 94 percent reduction in turbidity."

Results like these show the success of RCPP. Kane Webb, director of field services for USA Rice is encouraged by the great conservation work being done

by Unkel and other Louisiana producers. "These growers really do care about the land and the stewardship aspect of agriculture while producing a high quality product that consumers can trust and want to use. Webb continues, "These producers are also making their operations more efficient and leaving a legacy for the next generation of farmers."

Soileau echoes Webb's sentiments, "The partnership that DU has with NRCS, USA Rice, local SWCDs and grower organizations allows us to examine resource concerns from many different angles and then come up with the best solutions; every organization brings a different perspective to the table." Soileau smiles, "Partnerships ... that's how you get great conservation work accomplished."

The new Farm Bill has added much greater flexibility for partners to deliver projects," Scott Edwards, explained. "NRCS has worked to streamline the application process and this will allow greater flexibility for conservation partners across the state."

That is great news, especially for all of us who love rice in our duck gumbo!

Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Project Specialist, Rapides SWCD

Recently Trailblazer Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) partnered with the Bossier Parish Community College (BPCC) in conducting a USDA BIG EVENT as part of the outreach agreement that they have with NRCS.

Jennifer Lawrence, BPCC's director of grants, institutional advancement & grants gave the welcome to the attendees. Jennifer was followed by Bob Brotherton, Bossier Parish police juror and Trailblazer RC&D board president who gave some opening comments.

Thirty-eight people were in attendance and were able to hear presentations on estate planning from Paul Spillers, an attorney from Monroe, Louisiana, who specializes in tax law and estate planning, Farm Service Agency programs from Chuck Hixon and Ervin Norwood, Rural Development Programs by Tony Matlock, and Natural Resources Conservation Service programs from Dexter Sapp.

Closing comments and Evaluations were given by Ellzey Simmons, Trailblazer CEO.

There were seven individuals that filled out Requests for USDA Assistance forms with requests ranging from high tunnels to broadband assistance. Additionally, five individuals signed up to receive NRCS's monthly Louisiana Conservation Update publication

One couple, Mr. Sylvester and Mrs. Sarah Burrell, shown in the photo below drove over 2 ½ hours from Oak Grove, Louisiana to attend the BIG

EVENT. Mrs. Burrell learned about the event from NRCS's Louisiana Conservation Update publication that she receives each month. "I love that Conservation Update and I read it from cover to cover and I am going to tell more people about the magazine," says Mrs. Burrell.



The Burrells received technical and financial assistance from NRCS in Oak Grove and they plan to enroll into more NRCS programs.

Back in Oak Grove the husband and wife duo grow approximately one to two acres of tomatoes. The months of May, June and July are their peak tomato months and they always sell out.



One unique component of the Burrell's operation is that they have a roadside tomato stand as indicated in the photo. The unmanned stand is based on the "Honor System" whereby a customer chooses the tomatoes that they want, weighs and bags them and then places the money in a coffee

can all under the watchful eyes of a gigantic metal sculptured rooster that is perched on the table. Mr. Burrell states that the rooster is a favorite of the kids that accompany their parents to the stand.

For more information about how NRCS can help you, visit www.la.nrcs.usda.gov and to find more events like this one, visit www.trailblazer.org.

Upcoming Events

November 2, 2019 23rd Annual Beekeepers Field Day

The USDA Honey Bee Breeding, Genetics and Physiology Lab and the Louisiana State Beekeepers Association will hold the 23rd Annual Field Day on Saturday, November 2, 2019 from 10:00 am - 3:30 pm at 1157 Ben Hur Road in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A non-refundable, pre-registration fee of \$35.00 is required for attendees ages 12 and above. Please visit labeekeepers.org for more information and to register.

November 4 - 6, 2019 National Milk Producers Annual Meeting

The joint annual meeting of the National Dairy Promotion and Research Board, National Milk Producers Federation and United Dairy Industry Association will be held on November 4 - 6, 2019, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Orleans, Louisiana. For more information, visit <https://www.nmpf.org/events/2019-joint-annual-meeting/>.

November 15 & 16, 2019 On Farm Composting School

Local Cooling Farms will be hosting an On Farm Composting School on November 15 & 16, 2019 from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm at 57355 Sam Mizell Road in Bogalusa, Louisiana. This course is designed for composting professionals, farmers, ranchers and gardeners. Although the course will focus on composting larger volumes of materials, the same information applies to backyard compost piles just as much as a commercial facility. The cost of the course is \$250 and you must pre-register. Call Grant Estrade at 504-234-3564 or e-mail grant.estrade@gmail.com to register. All major credit cards accepted.

Around the State

September 19, 2019 Lincoln Parish Chamber of Commerce 100th Year Celebration

USDA's Farm Services Agency, NRCS and Rural Development exhibited recently at the Lincoln Parish Chamber of Commerce 100th Year Celebration held at the Ruston Farmers Market. Attendees had the opportunity to visit each agency and learn more about USDA program and services.



September 24, 2019 Union Parish Pasture Walk

Trailblazer RC&D, Louisiana GLCI and NRCS held a pasture walk on September 24, 2019, at the farm of Casey Towns in Marion, Louisiana. Attendees were able to learn about topics such as soil testing, fertilizer basics and drought planning, as well as learn about the programs and services provided by NRCS.



October 9, 2019 CWPPRA Coastal Celebration

The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act Task Force held a CWPPRA Coastal Celebration on October 9, 2019, at the Jules B. Nunez Seafood Pavilion in Lafitte, Louisiana. Seven projects in the Barataria Basin were highlighted, including three NRCS-sponsored projects. Following a brief ceremony, attendees were invited to participate in a field trip to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-sponsored Northwest Turtle Bay Marsh Creation project in Jefferson Parish.



Special Recognition



Kevin Norton, associate chief of NRCS, was recognized for 12 years of dedicated service to the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) Task Force during the meeting held on October 10, 2019, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

During his tenure on the CWPPRA Task Force and as state conservationist in Louisiana, 14 NRCS-sponsored CWPPRA projects were completed along the coast valued at \$237 million.

Projects such as South Shore of the Pen Shoreline Protection and Marsh Creation, Jonathan Davis Wetland

Restoration and Barataria Landbridge Shoreline Protection Phases 1 – 4, are just a few of the CWPPRA projects that were constructed that along with others are working synergistically to protect and restore the critical Barataria Landbridge area on the eastern side of the the coast.

On the west side of the coast, construction was completed on projects like Black Bayou Culverts Hydrologic Restoration in Calcasieu Parish, which improved the hydrology in the Mermentau Basin.

Construction was also completed on Raccoon Island, the western-most island of the Isles Dernieres barrier island chain. This project was an extension of a demonstration project which had proven successful in stopping erosion on a very important barrier island that hosts one of the largest seabird communities on the Gulf Coast. Today Raccoon Island is a thriving bird community because of the combined efforts of LDWF, CPRA,

the CWPPRA community and the leadership of Mr. Norton.

In his quest to always look for new and innovative ways to protect and conserve natural resources, including Louisiana's valuable coast, NRCS sponsored three demonstration projects which were constructed including Non-Rock Alternatives to Shoreline Protection, Sediment Containment System for Marsh Creation and Floating Marsh Creation.

Kevin is known as a leader, innovator and staunch supporter of protecting and restoring Louisiana's unique coast by working closely with private landowners and partners.



New Employee



Zack Remedies is the new soil conservation technician in the New Roads Field Office. Zack grew up in Many, Louisiana, and graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Science in Natural Resources Ecology and Management in December 2016. After graduation, he was hired by the Caddo Soil and Water Conservation District as the targeted watershed technician.

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