Home Sweet Home
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Learn more about how sugar cane farmer, Buddy Gravois is improving the land while increasing his bottom line on pages 4 and 5.

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United States Department of Agriculture

Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

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Notes from the Acting State Conservationist

Thankful, that is what we are. Thankful, for you, our hard-working customers and producers, for our partners, employees, and fellow USDA agencies. It is harvest season, and what better time to celebrate the bounty of the land and count our many blessings.

In this issue we meet, Buddy Gravois with Sweet Home, LLC. Buddy is a third-generation sugar cane farmer in Assumption, Lafourche, St. Charles, St. James, and St. John Parishes. Through his work with the Lower Delta Soil and Water Conservation District and the Donaldsonville NRCS Field Office, he has planted cover crops and has seen a remarkable improvement in soil health. So much so, that he talked his neighbor into giving cover crops a try, too!

Although I’ve enjoyed my time as acting state conservationist, and I’m thankful for the experience, I am also pleased to announce the new state conservationist for Louisiana is Chad Kacir. Chad will formally introduce himself in next month’s issue, but here is a little bit about him and his background.

Chad is a native of Victoria, Texas, and graduated from Texas Tech University in 1986 with a degree in Agricultural Economics. He worked in the private sector and ran a successful cow-calf operation where he was first introduced to NRCS. Chad has worked for NRCS for 17 years, starting as a soil conservationist in two locations in south Texas. He served 4 years as a district conservationist in Oahu, Hawaii, and has served the last 8 years as assistant state conservationist for field operations for the east zone of Oklahoma.

Please join me in welcoming Chad into the Louisiana conservation family.

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.
On a brisk, November morning in south Louisiana, the sun is breaking through cumulus clouds gathering above the fields. Surrounded by sugar cane reaching toward the sun, you will find sugar cane farmers hard at work during harvest season. This is a busy time of year, getting crops out of the fields and into sugar mills. Just several weeks earlier these same sugar cane farmers were making use of the good weather. Rising early, heading to the fields to plant sugar cane and continue working till dusk. Spread over Assumption, Lafourche, St. Charles, St. James and St. John Parishes, is Buddy Gravois’ family sugar cane operation, Sweet Home LLC. Buddy is a third generation farmer, dedicated to conservation and the betterment of his land. With the fourth generation coming up alongside him, now more than ever, Buddy and his family are protecting and conserving natural resources on his farm. Buddy and his work crews plant by hand, “I prefer to plant about four stalks to a furrow with each “eye” or joint producing a new stalk of cane,” Buddy explained. He continues to explain the cycle of planting, growing and harvesting cane. “Last year’s cane is planted this year, it goes dormant in the winter and starts growing in March, and then we harvest in the fall.” Buddy continues, “This land is our livelihood and we want to keep it going strong for many years to come,” Buddy explained. Arnelis Crespo, district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Donaldsonville Field Office agrees whole-heartedly, “The Gravois operation has worked with the Lower Delta Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS for 15 years and during that time they have utilized several conservation practices that benefited not only the land, but also the bottom line of the farm.” Through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) the Gravois’ planted cover crops, installed low drip nozzles to spray chemicals at a lower pressure, ensuring a controlled application and reducing waste. Mitch Mouton, assistant state soil scientist with NRCS explains, “Mr. Buddy stepped outside of traditional sugar cane production practices by implementing cover crops in his operations.” Sweet Home has integrated cover crops during the fallow period instead of cultivating the soil and leaving it bare. Mouton continues, “A diverse mix of cover crops protects the soil from erosion, increases organic matter, improves infiltration and reduces nutrient inputs.”

John Newchurch, district technician for the Lower Delta SWCD and life-long resident of Assumption Parish, agrees with Mouton. He has worked with the Gravois family and watched the progression of their conservation journey. “Buddy is conservation oriented. He wants to do everything he can to care for the land. He works to produce the best sugar cane possible for his land owners, for the sugar mills and ultimately for the end consumer.” In addition to CSP the Gravois incorporate conservation enhancements through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). “Many of Buddy’s fields are laser leveled. By reducing ditches and inconsistencies in the fields, that reduces run-off into local waterways,” said Newchurch.

Nutrient management through precision fertilizing has also been very helpful for Sweet Home, LLC. Instead of applying the same amount of fertilizer for all fields, precision fertilizing allows the Gravois to target certain areas of the field and apply fertilizer only where it is needed. “We have become so much more effective and targeted when it comes to minimizing waste and reducing cost,” said Buddy. “It is also keeping excess chemicals out of our ground water.”

The relationship between NRCS and the Gravois family is only growing stronger. “NRCS has been so good for our operation and for our family,” Buddy explains. Buddy is an advocate for NRCS as he talks with his neighbors and friends. “I’ve shared my experience with planting cover crops and the other conservation work taking place on my land,” Buddy said. “My neighbor is working with NRCS now, and he also sees the improvement in his soil health.” Mouton agrees whole-heartedly, “Having sugar cane farmers like Mr. Buddy at the fore-front of conservation, incorporating cover crops in his rotation, will help sustain one of Louisiana’s most valuable crops.” We can all raise a glass of tea sweetened with Louisiana cane sugar to that!
Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Project Specialist, Rapides SWCD

The Dean Lee Research Station was the site of a two-day Annie’s Project Workshop which was made possible through an outreach agreement that NRCS has with the LSU AgCenter. Maria Bampasidou an assistant professor at LSU is the Annie’s Project State Coordinator. The mission of Annie’s Project is to empower farm women to be better business partners through networks and by managing and organizing critical information. Annie’s Project is based on the life of a farm woman named Annette Kohlhagen Fleck who grew up in a small town in northern Illinois.

After the introductions and opening comments on the first day of the workshop, the 16 attendees got the chance to participate in a True Colors Workshop – Communication and Team Building exercise. The exercise proved to be a fun way of exploring one’s own and their co-worker’s distinctive personality traits.

Other agenda topics from 20 presenters at the two-day workshop included estate planning, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry programs, production risk, LDAF – feral hogs, basic financial documents, interpretation of financial statements, women and money, 2020 Louisiana Women in Ag Conference and Expo, Farm Bureau Women’s Leadership Committee, grain marketing, farm safety and insurance, NRCS programs, Web Soil Survey, farm labor and crop insurance.

Maria Bampasidou’s next step after the Annie’s Project Workshop is to bring Annie’s to more women farmers and ranchers by conducting a facilitator training on the campus of LSU. The trained facilitators will be able to offer the project to in their geographical area of the state in order the address the needs of the stakeholders.

New Employee

Chris Ebel is the new state rangeland management specialist in the NRCS State Office in Alexandria, Louisiana. Chris graduated from Oklahoma State University in 1986 with a Bachelor of Science in Animal Science and in 2006 from New Mexico State University with a Masters of Science in Rangeland Management. From 1980 - 2004, Chris worked on ranches and farms in Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas. Chris has worked for NRCS since 2006 as an area rangeland management specialist.
Upcoming Events

January 8 - 10, 2020
74th Annual LACD Convention

The Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts will host their 74th Annual Convention on January 8 - 10, 2020, at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

January 10, 2019
Advanced Master Cattlemen Program

The LSU AgCenter will host the advanced master cattlemen program on January 10, 2020, from 8:30 am - 4:30 pm at the DeWitt Livestock Show Facility located at 100 Gregg Marshall Drive in Alexandria, Louisiana. For more information, contact Guillermo Scaglia at gscaglia@lsu.edu.

January 17 & 18, 2019
Ag Expo

The North Louisiana Agri-Business Council will host Ag Expo 2020 on January 17 & 18, 2020, at the Ike Hamilton Expo Center located at 501 Mane in West Monroe, Louisiana. Advance tickets are $5 and can be purchased during normal business hours from Louisiana Land Bank in Monroe, the Ike Hamilton Expo Center in West Monroe and Irrigation-Mart in Ruston. Children 6 and under are FREE.

Around the State

October 21, 2019
Waterfowl Migration and Trends Workshop

The Trailblazer RC&D sponsored a waterfowl migration and trends workshop on October 21, 2019, in Ruston, Louisiana. The featured speaker was Larry Reynolds, a biologist with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. The workshop was attended by 45 people. This same workshop was also held in West Monroe and Bossier City. The local district conservationists also gave presentations on technical and financial assistance available from NRCS.

October 28, 2019
Veterans Therapy Healthy Garden/Walking Trail Ribbon Cutting

A ribbon cutting ceremony was held on October 28, 2019, for the Veterans Therapy Health Garden at Joe Delaney Memorial Park in Haughton, Louisiana. The garden/walking trail was a project sponsored by the Trailblazer RC&D, Bossier Parish Police Jury, Town of Haughton and NRCS.

November 13, 2019
FFA State Land Judging Competition

On Wednesday, November 13, 2019, the FFA State Land Judging CDE was held at Louisiana Tech University. Soil scientists and local field office staff assisted with the event. Despite freezing temperatures the event was a huge success! Congratulations to Rayne High (1st), Beau Chene (2nd), North Central (3rd), Acadiana (4th) and Franklin (5th). Good luck to all five high schools when they compete at Nationals in Oklahoma!

The event also presented a unique opportunity for soils scientists to speak with students who attend the Louisiana School for the Deaf. The students were able to get their hands dirty and learn about soils. Students got the chance to examine in-situ soil profiles for different horizons, and learn about soil formation of North Louisiana soils. They practiced their soil texturing skills, and learned how to place each soil into a land capability class.
USDA Announce Funding to Control Feral Swine in Louisiana

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced on November 21, 2019, it is awarding $1.5 million to fund a pilot project to control feral swine in Louisiana and nine other states across the country.

These projects are part of the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program (FSCP) – a joint effort between USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to help address the threat that feral swine pose to agriculture, ecosystems and human and animal health.

“Feral swine cause significant damage to crops and grazing lands, while also impacting the health of our natural resources,” said Tim Landreneau, NRCS acting state conservationist in Louisiana. “By collaborating with our partners nationally and here in Louisiana, our hope is to control and eradicate this invasive species – improving operations for farmers while also protecting our natural resources for the future.”

NRCS and APHIS are working with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry on a pilot project in Louisiana to reduce feral swine populations in three pilot locations where local Soil and Water Conservation Districts have taken initial steps.

NRCS is awarding more than $16.7 million this year for feral swine pilot projects in select areas of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. The funding limit for a single award is $1.5 million. Awardees are required to provide at least 25 percent of the partnership agreement budget as a match to NRCS funding. APHIS is providing $23.3 million this year to the Wildlife Services programs located in the pilot projects states.

The 2018 Farm Bill provides $75 million for the Feral Swine Eradication and Control Pilot Program. These funds are for the life of the farm bill and divided evenly between NRCS and APHIS.

Additional information on NRCS's feral swine control work can be found at http://nrcs.usda.gov/fscp.