

FROM SAVING ANIMALS TO SAVING THE LAND



Dr. Tolani Francisco and rescue horse, Huckleberry, at TJ Farms, Bosque Farms, NM

By Alicia Rodriguez and Luke Luna
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BOSQUE FARMS, NM – It was a crisp early morning around the end of October in Bosque Farms, New Mexico. The sun was just starting to rise. It was right after the last irrigation of the field for the season. Tolani Francisco, done feeding the horses, was out in the field. She was finishing a ceremony and a prayer of thanks for another year of crops when she heard them. Sandhill cranes! She had purchased the five-acre property—the house, the field, and the barn—a few years ago but she had yet to see sandhill cranes come to her property. The land had needed some work when she got it and Tolani had given it work. Just recently a pair of cooper’s hawks settled into nest in the cottonwoods bordering the field. And now there were sandhill cranes! This was a good sign.

Tolani knew this because Tolani knows animals. She’s had a long and successful career working with them, starting out as a veterinarian in private practice, then continuing that work with the United States Department of

Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) the United States Air Force, and now, most recently, with the USDA Forest Service as a Wild Horse and Burro Coordinator. Tolani has a history of saving animals. On her property now is a rescued horse named Huckleberry and a dog she saved named Chubs, who she stitched back together as puppy after getting attacked.

These days, Tolani has added saving the land to her resume and on that October morning, Tolani was happy to hear the sandhill cranes. To her it meant the field was healthier, the water was able to sit longer, and there were more natural bugs to attract the birds. She knew this was just one of the signs that all her hard work was paying off. With her hard work and perseverance and with the help of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), the field was doing good. When she and her husband first bought the place, the property had been neglected and slated to be turned into a residential sub-division. Tolani didn't want that. So instead, she decided to save the land for agriculture.

Tolani Francisco was raised on the Laguna Pueblo homeland where agriculture was a family tradition. Some of her earliest memories include working along acequias with her granddad. Her dad was the first Native American to graduate from the College of Agriculture at Brigham Young University. He became an Agricultural Extension agent and later taught Agriculture with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Both her parents were 4-H instructors. With her dad's agricultural career, Tolani travelled all across the nation. Summers were often spent on her maternal grandparent's family farm in South Carolina on the Catawba Nation reservation. As Tolani explains it, "We've always just been aggies." Tolani continued that tradition when she went to the College of Agriculture at NMSU and then Kansas State University where she earned her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine in 1990. What followed was a long and interesting career that spanned various federal agencies and various places, even taking her for some years to Trinidad, Bolivia before coming back and joining the Air Force as a Captain following 9/11. Eventually, Tolani decided she wanted to come back home to New Mexico. In 2017 she joined the Forest Service as a Wild Horse and Burro Coordinator and she and her husband, Jason Schlie, found a nice place in Bosque Farms.

The property had been a field of Sudan grass and was poorly irrigated by an earthen ditch. Tolani and Jason decided they wanted to grow alfalfa on their field and calculated a five-year window for that to happen. Although retired Major Dr. Tolani Francisco, DVM MPH, now a veterinarian epidemiologist, had extensive agriculture roots and years of study and experience, she soon realized that even she could use a little help. At a conservation meeting in Bernalillo with the Coronado Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), where she had been asked to talk about horses and burros, Tolani learned about the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offered through USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. After submitting her application, Tolani said she felt almost as excited as when she was first accepted into veterinarian school.



Dr. Francisco kicks dirt off a new irrigation valve.



Earthen ditch filled in and replaced with pipeline.

With EQIP, she was able to replace the earthen ditch irrigation system with a pipeline and multiple valves. Before, the earthen ditch wouldn't fully charge, and it took 8-10 hours to fully irrigate 3.5 acres. Now it only takes about 3 hours. Filling up the ditch and moving to a pipeline has saved a *bunch* of time. Tolani doesn't have to continuously clean and clear the ditch of debris and roots and trash, or coordinate that maintenance and care with neighbors, which can be a challenge in and of itself. All this saved time means more available time to work on other activities. And her farming has been successful too. Her alfalfa is in high demand for its good quality and fetches a good price. According to John Waconda, who helps her with the cutting, she has one good field of alfalfa.



Dr. Francisco's laser-leveled alfalfa field, Nov. 2019.



High Quality Alfalfa

The NRCS Los Lunas field office was crucial in helping her from start to present. The office provided help with the application process, finding resources and other kinds of help, such as with cutting. Anytime Tolani had a problem, the Natural Resource Conservation Service was on speed dial. From questions about laser-leveling, weeds, and weevils to helping her with soil health surveys, which reassured her that the horse manure she'd been composting for two years would be perfect for adding humic acid and phosphorous to her fields. "With the NRCS," Tolani said, "you got family."



Dr. Tolani Francisco and Los Lunas field office Soil Conservationist, Jasmine Wilson.

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Tolani wants her whole place to stay green and never get turned into just another residential area, something she says, "hits at the core of her being." She intends to keep working with NRCS to improve her land as her next plan is to turn the field into pasture grass. Tolani and the Los Lunas field office Soil Conservationist, Jasmine Wilson, are already beginning to plan the next steps—cover crops, continued soil testing, and potential

visits to the Los Lunas Plant Materials Center. Someday, Tolani may even work with NRCS to ensure the land stays in agriculture with a NRCS easement program. For the present, she is just happy to have her agricultural oasis that she gets to work on with her father, a nice green place to live with her husband and their animals, both the rescued ones and the wild natural ones like the sandhill cranes.

In the corner of the field near the gate is a red sandstone bench from Laguna that was hand-chiseled by her granddad. She used to play on the bench as a girl, jumping off it and pretending she was a superhero. To many, Tolani is a hero, saving lives and saving the land. Her granddad has passed on but Tolani likes to think of him there, sitting on the bench and watching over her as she works and as the field continues to grow, recover, become healthy, beckoning the return of the natural world back to the land.



Red sandstone bench

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