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Learn more about Jeff Davis producer’s, EJ and Nancy McCann and their seasonal high tunnel, on pages 4 and 5.
Notes from the State Conservationist

We just celebrated Memorial Day, it is a time to be reminded of the brave men and women who have given the ultimate sacrifice for our country. I trust you and your family enjoyed the long weekend and took some time to remember those who have gone before us and served our country with valor.

This will be my first summer in Louisiana, but, growing up in South Texas, I’m all too familiar with heat and humidity. I know you continue work busily this time of year, and we are right there with you! (At least six feet apart for social distancing) As we head into June, we will slowly begin to transition into what will be become a new way of conducting business in our 44 offices state-wide.

We do not know exactly how that will look right now, but what we do know is that we will continue to provide excellent customer service, and our field staff will continue to give sound technical advice and provide you with information about all of our programs and services.

Just like those included in this issue of the Conservation Update. This month we meet EJ and Nancy McCann in Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana. These folks worked with their local field office and now have a flourishing high tunnel that in turn, has inspired others to learn more about NRCS and what we can provide for landowners across the state.

We have 44 offices state-wide and a team of professionals waiting to work with you.

Chad Kacir
State Conservationist

USDA Service Centers are Open for Business by Phone Appointment Only

Program Delivery Continues while taking Safety Measures Related to Coronavirus

USDA is open for business. Our team is continuing to provide the best customer service we can while also prioritizing the health of our employees, the health of our customers, and the health of our partners. USDA’s Service Centers are open in Louisiana by phone appointment only. While our program delivery staff will continue to come into to the office, they will be working with our customers by phone, by email, and using other online tools whenever possible.

To learn more about USDA programs and the Department’s response to the Coronavirus visit farmers.gov/coronavirus
Let’s play a game… name that Louisiana town! This hometown is a place where neighbors are like family, where most folks have either gone to school or church with your mom, dad or first cousin. It is also a place where you barter home-grown tomatoes in exchange for your next door neighbor’s tractor (at least for a couple of hours.) Tucked into the southwest portion of our state, on the edge of what is known as the Cajun prairie, is Kinder, Louisiana in Jefferson Davis Parish. Seeped in history and culture, Kinder is also home to EJ and Nancy McCann. EJ and Nancy have been married for 42 years and spent most of it right here on their property in Kinder. Over the years, they built their own home, raised a family, started a pick your own blueberry farm and currently have a state-of-the-art blacksmith shop. In fact, EJ is known far and wide as someone who can create, fix, or build just about anything you can imagine.

For the McCann’s growing a garden is in their DNA. EJ grew up watching his dad cultivate an expansive garden, “Even though we grew up in the city, my dad always had a big garden next to us,” recalled EJ. Over the years, EJ and Nancy grew their own gardens, always experimenting and searching for the most effective and innovative way to grow produce. “Every year we would have this beautiful garden, we would do well for a while, then bad weather would hit, or we would have two weeks of rain and we would lose everything,” explained EJ.

Fast forward to 2019 when the McCann’s visited a family member with a high tunnel and witnessed first-hand the amazing results of growing in a seasonal high tunnel. “That is what inspired me to get one,” smiled EJ. Knowing only that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) had a program that offered technical and financial assistance for establishing a high tunnel, EJ made a trip to the Jefferson Davis Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS office in Jennings and met with the District Conservationist at that time, Mary Beth Guillory.

“I didn’t really know much about the process of applying for a high tunnel,” explained EJ. “Mary Beth and Erin Hamilton, Jennings Acting District Conservationist, worked with me, provided guidance, explained what I needed to do, and really helped me through the process.” EJ continues, “I tell everybody I know about NRCS, the programs available and the benefits of having a high tunnel.” Once the McCann’s were approved, the high tunnel was installed in June last year.

EJ wasted no time, he worked in the soil, fertilized, utilized compost and planted his garden from seed. The fruits of...
his labor were evident when the McCann’s picked over 300 bell peppers in December, just six months after the high tunnel was built. One of the greatest benefits of the high tunnel is that it protects plants from hard rains and extreme weather, that previously destroyed their gardens. EJ spends on average about three hours a day working in his tunnel, he an avid reader and researcher, and is continually experimenting. So, it is no wonder EJ and Nancy have one of the most productive high tunnels around, filled to the brim with sky-high tomato plants heavy with fruit, squash, bell peppers and cucumbers.

“I’ve learned so much from Erin and the folks with NRCS and the Jefferson Davis SWCD. I also utilize Facebook and YouTube groups dedicated for high tunnel growers,” said EJ. Keeping a journal is invaluable for EJ, he keeps notes on what has worked well, and what hasn’t.

The McCann’s are quick to share their past gardening experience and knowledge with others. When friends and neighbors hear about the McCann’s high tunnel, they are curious and want to stop by to look for themselves. In fact, one of the McCann’s neighbors has already reached out to the Jennings NRCS Field Office. Erin Hamilton beams, “I’m glad we are helping people, the word spreads fast, when you have such a successful high tunnel, like the McCann’s.” In fact, one of Mr. EJ’s neighbors called our office, I’m going to visit her property and discuss the idea of a high tunnel with her.”

What does the future hold for the McCann’s? “Soil health is extremely important to me, so I want to continue to enrich the soil in my current high tunnel,” explained EJ.

“My next goal is to hopefully install another high tunnel and plant what I consider traditional crops like corn, okra, and field peas.”

“Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) landowners have the opportunity to apply for high tunnels,” explained Erin. . High tunnels are an excellent way to protect crops from sun, wind, excessive rainfall and extreme cold weather and ultimately they extend the growing season. Erin continues, “High tunnels are energy efficient and help reduce the use of pesticides, too.”

Most days you can find EJ working in the tunnel, weeding and tending the robust plants inside. Even though the high tunnel requires dedication and hard work, EJ is happiest when he is tending his garden. “It is gives me a sense of being self-reliant, especially right now, it is something I can do. It gives me a profound sense of satisfaction providing for my family and friends. “I’m an outside kind of guy and I enjoy helping people, so being able to grow food and share with others is a little bit of heaven to me.”

For more information about the technical and financial assistance NRCS provides, visit your local office.
Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Project Specialist, Rapides SWCD

Tours were a part of the Louisiana Women in Agriculture 2020 Annual Conference. I participated in the forestry tour where our first stop was at the David Daigle Farm in Ragley, Louisiana.

Since 1982 David Daigle, his wife, Mary Ann, and daughter, Clara Ann, have been grazing cattle on native longleaf pine habitat. Although David was unable to be present during the tour, Corby Moore, the district conservationist in DeRidder and Leesville, spearheaded a team of presenters consisting of Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist, Cecelia Richmond and Jason Sloan from the U.S. Forest Service who gave an excellent overview of the Daigle Farms’ operation.

The fact that David Daigle is the recipient of the 2020 Hugh Hammond Bennett Award for Conservation Excellence for his innovative conservation efforts on his farm is a testament that he is a good steward of the land.

The Roy O. Martin OSB (oriented strand board) Plant in Oakdale, LA was the next stop for the tour group. Completed in January 2007, the Roy O. Martin OSB plant is one of the largest and most technologically advanced facilities of its kind in North America. The plant employs around 165 people. The group enjoyed the tour of the plant where we observed how pieces of wood were compressed into panels which can be used in the place of plywood for such things as roof sheathing, wall sheathing, and subfloors.

Hosted by the U.S. Forest Service, the group’s last stop was in the Kisatchie National Forest in southern Rapides Parish. The tour proved to be very exciting where the group listened to presentations about the native longleaf pine stand.

The group was treated to a demonstration by a Forest Service employee who showed the group how to climb a longleaf pine tree in order to access a Red Cockaded Woodpecker nest. The Forest Service can also use a yellow fiberglass telescopic pole with a camera mounted on it to peer into the Red Cockaded Woodpecker nest. On this day when the camera was inserted into the nest cavity it showed a squirrel inside the nest.

The Forest Service also had a Louisiana pinesnake at the site allowing participants to get some first-hand experience in snake handling. The Louisiana pine snake is considered to be one of the rarest snakes in North America. This powerful nonvenomous snake is notable because of its large eggs and small clutch size. The snake is indigenous to West-Central Louisiana and East Texas.
USDA Announces Grants for Urban Agriculture and Innovation Production

USDA announced the availability of $3 million for grants through its new Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production. The competitive grants will support the development of urban agriculture and innovative production projects through two categories, Planning Projects and Implementation Projects. USDA will accept applications on Grants.gov until midnight July 6, 2020.

“These grant opportunities underscore USDA's commitment to all segments of agriculture, including swiftly expanding areas of urban agriculture,” Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation Bill Northey said. “Such projects have the potential to address important issues such as food access and education and to support innovative ways to increase local food production in urban environments.”

“We are proud to be able to offer support though this cross-agency effort,” said Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Greg Ibach. “In creating this grant opportunity, USDA will build upon its years of experience providing technical support, grant funding and research to help farmers and local and urban food businesses grow.”

USDA is making available $1 million for Planning Projects that initiate or expand efforts of farmers, gardeners, citizens, government officials, schools and other stakeholders in urban areas and suburbs. Projects may target areas of food access, education, business and start-up costs for new farmers and development of policies related to zoning and other needs of urban production.

USDA is making available $2 million for Implementation Projects that accelerate existing and emerging models of urban, indoor and other agricultural practices that serve multiple farmers. Projects will improve local food access and collaborate with partner organizations and may support infrastructure needs, emerging technologies, educational endeavors and urban farming policy implementation.

A webinar, which will be held on June 3, 2020, from 2 to 4 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time, will provide an overview of the grants’ purpose, project types, eligibility and basic requirements for submitting an application. Information on how to register and participate in the webinar, or listen to the recording, will be posted at farmers.gov/urban.

The Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production was established through the 2018 Farm Bill. It includes representatives from many USDA agencies, including Farm Service Agency and Agricultural Marketing Service, and is led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. More information is available at farmers.gov/urban.

Additional resources that may be of interest to urban agriculture entities include AMS grants to improve domestic and international opportunities for U.S. growers and producers and FSA loans.

USDA Announces $5 Million in Wetland Mitigation Bank Program Funding

The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announced the availability of up to $5 million for wetland mitigation banks. This funding through the Wetland Mitigation Banking Program is available to help conservation partners develop or establish mitigation banks to help agricultural producers maintain eligibility for USDA programs.

“Wetlands are critically important to the health of our natural resources -- filtering water, reducing soil loss and providing habitat to our nation's wildlife while also helping to sequester carbon from the atmosphere,” said Chad Kacir, State Conservationist for NRCS in Louisiana. “Through the Wetland Mitigation Banking Program, we're working with experienced wetland mitigation partners to give farmers another option to meet Farm Bill requirements.”

Wetland mitigation banking is the restoration, creation or enhancement of wetlands to compensate for unavoidable impacts on wetlands at other locations. The Farm Bill's wetland conservation provisions, commonly called Swampbuster provisions, aim to remove certain incentives to convert wetlands or to produce agricultural commodities on converted wetlands.

Producers seeking benefits through most USDA programs must comply with wetland conservation provisions by affirming they will not impact wetlands on their lands. In situations where avoidance or on-site mitigation is challenging, the Farm Bill allows for off-site mitigation through the purchase of mitigation banking credits.

This competitive grants program helps states, local governments and other qualified partners develop wetland mitigation banks to restore, create or enhance wetland ecosystems.

Applications must be submitted through Grants.gov by 11:59 p.m. ET on July 6, 2020.

NRCS is accepting proposals from eligible Indian Tribes, state and local units of government, for-profit entities and nongovernmental organizations.

For more information on wetland mitigation banking, visit our website.
**Partner News**

**USDA Launches 2020 Agricultural Resource Management Survey**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is collecting data from approximately 50,000 farmers and ranchers for its annual Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS). The survey looks at all aspects of U.S. agricultural production, the well-being of farm households, farm finances, chemical usage, and various farm production characteristics. The survey also collects detailed information on production practices, costs, and returns for different commodities on a rotating basis. In 2020, the survey will take a closer look at corn, rice, soybean, hog and pig production in the United States.

At this time NASS has suspended in-person data collection. Farmers and ranchers are encouraged to complete their survey online at agcounts.usda.gov with the 17-digit survey code that was mailed to them.

“Data from ARMS are used to gauge the financial health and resource use of today’s farmers,” said Barbara Rater, Director of NASS Census and Survey Division. “The information gives us an annual snapshot of the role of the farming industry in the U.S. economy. The information producers provide through the survey influences national and state policy-making decisions. In addition, ARMS data are used to calculate the farm sector portion of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is an important measure of the U.S. economy.

The survey is conducted in three phases from May 2020 through April 2021. The current (first) phase screens participants to make sure they have the commodities of interest that are needed to accurately represent the entire U.S. farm sector. During the second phase, NASS will collect information on production practices and chemical use for specific commodities. In the final phase, NASS will survey producers on farm income and production expenditures.

“We strongly encourage every producer contacted for ARMS to participate, as their response represents not just their own farm, but many other similar operations across the country,” added Rater. “To make responding as safe and convenient as possible, the survey should be completed online at agcounts.usda.gov.

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

Online reporting is fast and secure. Producers can also complete and mail or fax the paper form to us.”

All information from respondents is kept confidential, as required by federal law, and reported so that no individual operation or producer can be identified. For more information on how NASS protects information, visit www.nass.usda.gov/confidentiality.

ARMS is a joint effort of NASS and USDA’s Economic Research Service. For more information about the 2020 Agricultural Resource Management Survey, visit nass.usda.gov/go/ARMS.

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