Soil Health in Cajun Country

Photo Courtesy of Glenn Simon

Projects • Successes • Partnerships
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Learn more about how the Simon’s are improving soil health on their farm in Acadia and Vermilion Parishes, on pages 4 and 5.

On the Cover

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Notes from the State Conservationist

Summer is officially here, and I think we’ve all gotten the memo, it is HOT! I know for you, our conservation partners and agricultural producers you continue to be out in the fields and working hard. We are right there with you! It is our goal to continue to provide exceptional customer service from all of our 44 field offices state-wide.

In this issue we travel to Acadia and Vermilion Parishes and meet the Simon family. A multi-generational farming operation that is consistently utilizing the most innovative and creative technology to solve conservation issues. I’ll give you a hint, airboats are involved in the quest for better soil health!

On the back page, learn more about new self-service features added to Farmers.gov to help farmers and ranchers manage their conservation activities online and request assistance from NRCS. USDA is continually working to add new features to better serve our customers. If you haven’t visited the Website, I encourage you to go take a look at all of the self-service tools that are currently available.

I’m thankful for the hard work and dedication of all NRCS employees. They continue to serve their offices and communities. Join me in giving them a “virtual high five.”

As always, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

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 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
Located in Acadia and Vermilion Parishes is Simon Farms, a multi-generation family farm, known far and wide, for their dedication to conservation. This close-knit family has a passion for soil health and a thirst for knowledge about ways to improve their agricultural production.

The Simon farming legacy began years ago with Glenn Simon’s grandfather and father who loved farming. In fact, Glenn recalls that his dad wanted to talk about farming all the time. “Dad liked the land more than he did most people,” Glenn laughed. All joking aside, “My dad was very passionate about farming and the land; because of dad’s hard work and perseverance, we have what we have today.”

Glenn is the first to say that he has taken what his dad started, spread his wings to grow the business, and now Glenn’s two sons (Lucas and Wes) are working to take the operation to the next level. Glenn smiles, “But, we would not be where we are today without my dad.”

Today Simon Farms has grown to about 9,000 acres that includes 4,100 of rice, 3,100 of beans, 1,200 acres of crawfish with the balance of the land in pasture. With 70 percent of their land in Acadia Parish, the Simon’s have established a successful partnership with the Acadia Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the NRCS field office in Crowley.

“The technical and financial assistance that we’ve received from NRCS has helped us utilize technology in a way that conserves our natural resources,” said Glenn. Over the years, the Simons have worked closely with Kody Meaux, District Conservationist in the Crowley Field Office. “I really love working with the Simon family,” explained Kody. “They are so interested in learning new information and improving their operation, I know I can share the latest articles about innovations in conservation and they will run with it!”

Utilizing technology has been integral in the success of Simon Farms. Glenn recalls, “Our operation has evolved since I started 42 years ago after graduating from college.” He continues, “Changing with the times is so significant, I’ve observed over the years, those who are not willing to embrace change and adapt are no longer in business.” Glenn adds, “That shows you how critical technology has been and still is to our farming operation.”

Over the years Simon Farms have utilized multiple programs with NRCS including the Environment Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and conservation technical assistance, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Clean Water Act Section 319 Program offered through the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry’s Office of Soil and Water Conservation. Precision land leveling, just one of the many conservation measures utilized, has made a huge difference by using less water to flood the fields. Wes explains, “We are doing the best we can to produce more grain, on the same acre, with less water, less fertilizer and less diesel burned.” It is a whole farm approach to conservation, conserving water and disturbing the soil as little as possible.

A great deal of work was put into leveling the rice fields. So much so, that when crawfish season rolled around and the traditional paddle boats were creating ruts in the newly leveled fields. Lucas, who oversees all the crawfish fields, knew something had to change, adapt and evolve. And it did. The Simons started using airboats. Not the run-of-the-mill kind, but a newly designed airboat. Glenn explains, “We purchased the hull of the boat then we retro-fitted it for crawfishing.” The seat is low and on the side, you drive with your feet, so hands are free to grab the cages and put in bait. Wes adds, “The airboats have helped us become more so much more efficient.” He continues, “Now when crawfishing season is over, we don’t have to go in the fields and repair the soil, there is no disturbance so there is nothing to repair.”

Glenn and Wes agree that soil health is one of the most important aspects of farming and is key to the longevity and success of their farm. Their plans include working with NRCS to incorporate cover crops along with the no-till practice they currently use. “We will continue to focus on conservation, making sure we are energy efficient and using only the water we need for a successful crop and maximizing soil health,” explained Wes.

“When we pass the torch to the next generation we want a good flame and not just a flicker, so the next farming generation will be able to succeed,” said Glenn. “What my dad did for me I’m extremely grateful and I know that my boys are grateful for what I’ve passed on to them,” beamed Glenn. “Now it’s our job to make sure we have put conservation measures in place that will ensure soil health for the generations that follow us.”

“We will be long gone one day, but this soil will still be here,” Wes said. “And hopefully, the work that we’ve done, and the conservation measures we have put into place with the help of NRCS and the Acadia SWCD, the soil will continue to provide food for our family, state and nation.”
Minden Farm and Garden owned by retired NRCS Technician, Randy Thomas, and his wife, Mitzi, was site of the recent Trailblazer RC&D sponsored “All About Pollinators” Meeting.

The meeting was well attended with 25 pollinator enthusiasts present. Ellzey Simmons, Trailblazer RC&D CEO, recognized the ongoing partnership that the organization has with NRCS which has made these types of outreach meetings possible.

James Shivers, District Conservationist in Monroe and Columbia, gave a presentation on the programs and services that NRCS provides. He characterized the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) as NRCS’s “flagship program.” Through EQIP, producers can get financial for conservation practices including prescribed burning, tree/shrub site preparation and establishment, cross fencing, water troughs, forage and biomass planting, heavy use area protection, conservation cover which includes pollinator habitat, irrigation pipelines, and seasonal high tunnels. With 44 field offices, NRCS provides assistance to producers across the entire state.

Sabrina Claeys, Quail Forever Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist, gave a presentation entitled “What’s all the Buzz about with Pollinators”. Sabrina gave a definition of a pollinator which is an individual that carries pollen from the anther of a flower to the stigma of another flower. Bees, butterflies, moths, flies, bats, birds, and mammals are pollinators. More than 3,500 species of native bees help increase crop yields. Honeybee pollination has an economic value of $14.6 - $18.9 billion/year. In her presentation Sabrina stated that 1 in 3 bites of food that we eat are because of pollinators. Although pollinator habitat is on the decline, we all help by planting the right flowers, starting a garden, being educated and spreading the word, supporting local farmers and starting a hive.

Trailblazer RC&D is scheduling “Conservation/Natural Resource” Educational events with Farm & Garden Supply Stores, Public Libraries, and other venues. Contact Ellzey Simmons to discuss scheduling an event in your community.

EMAIL ceo@trailblazer.org; TEXT: 318-243-9194; CALL 318-255-3554.

New Program

Are you a farmer, rancher or forester interested in mentoring a new NRCS employee?

The Conservation Agricultural Mentoring Program (CAMP) matches an experienced producer with an NRCS field employee. Our goal is to grow critical relationships with the producers we serve, while at the same time advancing employee knowledge of production agriculture.

Once matched with a producer mentor, the employee will go out on the land with them 6 - 12 times per year for a period of 12 - 18 months—always during agreed upon times that are convenient for the producer.

For more information on the CAMP program, visit https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/people/?cid=nrcsprod1596019 or contact Patti Jackson Kelly at patti.jacksonkelly@usda.gov or by phone at 318-473-7907.
New Pathways Students

New Louisiana Pathways Students

Four new Pathways students (student trainees) joined NRCS in Louisiana this summer.

Originally from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Larissa Alexander is a senior at Southern A&M University majoring in Agribusiness. She is a Soil Conservationist student trainee assigned to the Ville Platte Field Office. She learned about the opportunity to intern with NRCS from a staff member at Southern and is looking forward to learning more about NRCS and the programs and services the agency provides to ag producers in Louisiana. She also hopes to learn more about different conservation practices and how they benefit the environment.

Brandon Stelly is spending the summer as a Soil Conservationist student trainee in the Alexandria Field Office. Brandon is originally from Arnaudville, Louisiana and is a senior at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette majoring in Environmental Science with a concentration in Soil and Water Conservation. Brandon learned about Pathways opportunities when NRCS State Soil Scientist, Mike Lindsey, and Assistant State Soil Scientist, Mitch Mouton, spoke during one of his classes several years ago. In addition to learning more about NRCS and conservation planning, Brandon hopes to learn more about all of the possible careers available at USDA while working this summer.

Brenea Bergeron is originally from Mandeville, Louisiana, and is a senior at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette majoring in Environmental Science with a concentration in Soil and Water Conservation. Brenea is a Soil Conservationist student trainee at the Opelousas Field Office and is looking forward to seeing some of the things in the field that she has been learning about in class. She is also looking forward to becoming more familiar with common conservation practices used by producers and how they are implemented in different ways based on the situation. Brenea’s favorite part of the training was visiting the Kisatchie National Forest and having the opportunity to hold a Louisiana pine snake.

Amber Reggiatore grew up in Winthrop, Washington, and is currently a senior at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette majoring in Environmental Science with a concentration in Soil and Water Conservation. Amber will be working this summer as a Soil Conservationist student trainee in the Marksville Field Office. She is looking forward to learning more about NRCS and finding out which aspects she is most passionate about and following the path wherever it may lead. Amber enjoyed the field portion of the training where she got to walk around various landscapes and speak to experts in soil, agronomy, forestry and range and see why the collaboration between different scientific fields is important and necessary for conservation.
USDA Expands Farmers.gov Features to Help Manage Conservation Activities

New self-service features on farmers.gov will help farmers and ranchers manage their conservation activities online and request assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

“These conservation features join a number of others already available through farmers.gov, including the ability to view farm loan information,” said Chad Kacir, State Conservationist in Louisiana “As more content and capabilities are added, farmers.gov is quickly becoming the online hub for producers to find resources, submit applications and assistance requests and make connections. Now, amid this pandemic, we recognize the importance of online options for producers to manage their USDA business.”

Producers can access these conservation features by desktop computer, tablet or phone. They can now:

• View, download and e-sign documents;
• Request conservation assistance;
• Reference technical terms and submit questions;
• Access information on current and past conservation practices; and
• View detailed information on all previous and ongoing contracts, including the amount of planned and received cost-share assistance.

The new conservation features enhance the request process with a customer-friendly unified mapping tool that allows farmers to locate areas of interest in minutes, with high-resolution aerial imagery and multi-layered display functionality.

The new features include the most popular functionalities from NRCS’s Conservation Client Gateway (CCG) while providing enhanced functionality and an improved user experience. CCG is the NRCS portal for producers, but now these functionalities are being moved to farmers.gov to give producers one place to do business with NRCS, Farm Service Agency and other USDA agencies.

Managing Conservation Online

To access their information, producers will need a USDA eAuth account to login into farmers.gov. After obtaining an eAuth account, producers should visit farmers.gov and sign into the site’s authenticated portal via the “Sign In / Sign Up” link at the top right of the website. Current CCG users can use their existing login and password to access the conservation features on farmers.gov. CCG will continue to be actively maintained and supported until all core components have been migrated to farmers.gov later this year.

Currently, only producers doing business as individuals can view information. Entities, such as an LLC or Trust, or producers doing business on behalf of another customer cannot access the portal at this time, but access is being planned.

Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox or Microsoft Edge are the recommended browsers to access the feature.

More Information

USDA is building farmers.gov for farmers, by farmers. Future self-service features available through the farmers.gov portal include: authority for FSA and NRCS customers to work in the portal and act on behalf of their active power-of-attorney entitlements and their current authorities for business entities, updated e-sign capabilities to enhance the single and multi-signer functionalities and a robust document management system that enables customers to download, upload and interact with their important conservation practice and contract documents.

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

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination against its customers. If you believe you experienced discrimination when obtaining services from USDA, participating in a USDA program, or participating in a program that receives financial assistance from USDA, you may file a complaint with USDA. Information about how to file a discrimination complaint is available from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights. USDA prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex (including gender identity and expression), marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual’s income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) To file a complaint of discrimination, complete, sign, and mail a program discrimination complaint form, available at any USDA office location or online at www.ascr.usda.gov, or write to: USDA, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20250-9410. Or call toll free at (866) 632-9992 (voice) to obtain additional information, the appropriate office or to request documents. Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech disabilities may contact USDA through the Federal Relay service at (800) 877-8339 or (800) 845-6136 (in Spanish). USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.