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On the Cover

Learn more about how Sonja Vice is working with NRCS to improve the land she inherited from her parents, on pages 4 and 5.

Save the Date

LOUISIANA WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE
ALEXANDRIA, LA | FEB 24 - 26

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Notes from the State Conservationist

Here we are at the end of July, with August just around the corner. We have all been working hard and not only that, we have all been adapting to a new way of doing business. Over the past several months, as a nation we have experienced challenges that we have never encountered before and because of those challenges we have witnessed great successes!

These successes are big and small, they include learning new ways to communicate and utilize technology with our customers. In addition, NRCS staff continue to go the extra mile to make sure our partners, customers, and friends can get the business of agriculture accomplished.

In this issue of the Conservation Update, we visit Bossier and Webster Parishes, and the ranch of Sonja Vice. Here in north Louisiana, Sonja raises cattle, in fact, she has received her designation as a master cattleman and as of January 2020 she also received the master farmer certification. After you read her success story, you will easily see, she is a conservationist at heart.

Also featured in this issue is a Longleaf pine success story in Vernon Parish. Charles Lewis and his family worked with local NRCS offices to develop a conservation plan that is re-establishing Longleaf pine where it once grew. Through the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) great work is being accomplished to bring back this diverse eco-system that benefits wildlife, and natural resources.

Last but not least, I’d like to remind landowners if you are interested in developing wildlife habitat on your property with long-term protection, or if you have land that is marginally productive or prone to flooding, NRCS is accepting applications for the Agricultural Conservation Easements Program – Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE). While applications for ACEP-WRE are accepted on continuous basis, landowners are encouraged to apply by September 25th to be considered for funding in 2021.

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

https://www.youtube.com/user/LouisianaNRCS
After inheriting a ranch on the Bossier Parish and Webster Parish line from her father, Sonja Vice and her brother struck out to address some of the resource concerns on the land but did not know where to turn for help. After encouragement from her son, Sonja visited the Bodcau Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and Bossier City NRCS office for assistance.

A first-time customer of USDA, Vice worked with the Farm Services Agency (FSA) to obtain a farm and tract number. Once that process was complete, she immediately began working with Andrea Bridgewater, District Conservationist in the Bossier City Field Office and Cindy Beard, Area Technician to get a conservation plan for her land and begin addressing the resource concerns on her ranch. After getting started on her conservation journey in Louisiana, Vice contacted the District Conservationists in Panola and Rusk Counties in Texas to begin the journey there as well.

The land she inherited in Louisiana is approximately 1,890 acres of primarily pasture and loblolly forest. The pasture stays wet a large portion of the year which makes grazing cattle difficult, which is why she made initial contact with the Bodcau SWCD and NRCS, hoping that her drainage problems could be improved. However, the land has very little fall and no good outlet to take the water off of her ranch. In addition, road ditches are not adequate. Although NRCS was unable to address the drainage issue, other resource concerns were identified and the work to address them began.

“When my dad passed away and I inherited this land, I was overwhelmed and needed help. I am glad I found NRCS. It is because of the professionals on the staff there that I have been able to accomplish so much,” says Vice.

She currently has 167 head of beef cattle consisting of Hereford, Brahma, Longhorns and Angus, grazing on this property in Bossier Parish. To improve the conditions of the pastureland, Vice utilized financial assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install cross-fencing, watering facilities, livestock pipeline, brush management, herbaceous weed control and heavy-use protection areas. Since she has completed the recommended improvements through EQIP, she is now applying for additional financial assistance through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to plant pollinator habitat on the riparian borders of her forested acres.

Already a Master Cattleman, Bridgewater encouraged Vice to become a Certified Louisiana Master Farmer. “She was already doing additional things on her land and had attended many educational courses to help her enhance production and profitability, so attending additional educational opportunities to help her further address environmental issues on her land to become a Louisiana Master Farmer was a natural fit,” stated Bridgewater. Vice received her certification in January 2020.

“I believe that if you are going to do something, that you do it to the best of your ability. You must be fully knowledgeable about all aspects of your operation and the different ways to improve it,” said Vice. “You can never learn too much.”
One might ask if there are future plans for additional conservation practices on her ranch? If you know Sonja, then you know the answer is a definite YES! She has been working with NRCS's State Forester, Rick Williams, and Area Forester, Wayne Roberts, along with a consultant forester to come up with a management plan for the forested acreage at the ranch that includes benefits for the trees, soil and the cattle.

After seeing a story on "This Week in Louisiana Agriculture" on David Daigle's operation in Beauregard and Allen Parish, Vice knew that a silvopasture system is the next conservation technique she would like to use. For those that don't know, silvopasture systems are specifically designed and managed to produce trees, forage and livestock all on the same acreage. To accomplish this, Vice will conduct a commercial thinning to reduce the density of the pine trees allowing more sunlight to reach the forest floor. Additionally, she will install conservation practices such as forest stand improvement, prescribed burning and prescribed grazing.

The process of creating some areas of silvopasture are underway. Selected areas of pine trees have been marked with paint to identify the trees that need to be removed. "Ms. Vice's property sets up extremely well for silvopasture. She has pine stands adjoining her pastures that can be selectively thinned to promote a more robust understory of herbaceous vegetation. The conservation practices identified will greatly enhance the opportunity to convert a single-use pine stand to a dual-use silvopasture system," said Williams.

Why does Vice work so hard to conserve the resources on her land? "My parents worked all of their lives to be able to leave me and my brother something and I want it to be the best it can be for them," Vice proudly stated. "It is equally important to me that I leave the land in better condition for future generations, like my son."

Bridgewater enjoys working with a producer as passionate and willing to learn and take action as Vice. Bridgewater emphatically stated "All of Sonja's hard work is not in vain. The land here has come a long way from what it was the first time I visited and I am proud to say that I, along with other technical specialists at NRCS, have played a major role in the improvement."
Chad Kacir, Louisiana NRCS State Conservationist was able to make a visit and offer some technical assistance to the Veterans Administration Hospital’s Recreational Therapy Staff regarding the VA’s Veterans Therapy Health Garden located on the grounds of the VA Hospital in Pineville, Louisiana.

At the time of the visit, tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers and watermelons were growing in the garden. The hospitalized veteran clients expressed how gardening serves as form of therapy for them. Studies have shown that the physical act of gardening is therapeutic in itself. This is because it is a form of exercise, and all exercise has stress relieving abilities. When you work out hard, endorphins are released, which make you feel good throughout all your body, including the mind.

Among all of the challenges that many veterans have, many veterans find solace in the garden. Being out in the sunshine, tilling the soil, nurturing the plants in a peaceful environment has a positive effect on those that are struggling with mental and physical health issues.

In addition to the therapeutic value of the Pineville VA garden, the veterans are able to enjoy the fruits of their labor by harvesting and preparing such healthy and delicious delights as salsa, broccoli, radishes, salads, as well as mustard greens with a little cured pork meat thrown in for good measure.

During the visit Chad Kacir recommended the use of mulch for the watermelon plants. Chad enlisted the help of David Daigle with the Calcasieu Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to obtain hay, which was generously donated by the Calcasieu SWCD and is now being used for garden mulch.

At one time the VA had a thriving greenhouse operation, Chad suggested to the VA staff members that the greenhouse could be revitalized and put to good use in their Veterans Therapy Garden concept. The Louisiana NRCS is proud to be a partner with the local Veterans Administration through a unique agreement that uses gardening as a tool to aid our veterans in coping with many of the challenges that they face in life.

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=nrcseprd1596019 or contact Amy Robertson at amy.robertson@usda.gov or by phone at 318-473-7762.
Growing Longleaf for Future Generations

When Charles Lewis inherited his family's 500 acres of forest land in the historic longleaf region of Louisiana, he knew he wanted to build a legacy that would honor his father and create a lasting heritage for his children and grandchildren. Conservation roots run deep in western Louisiana, where the Lewis family has cared for their land for sixty-nine years. Growing up Charles recalls planting pine trees as a young boy, becoming all too familiar with a dibble bar.

Over the years Charles' father harvested the pines and years later, Charles harvested as well, with the dream to re-plant the once Slash and Loblolly pines with majestic Longleaf. Charles reached out to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office in Leesville and DeRidder. Through meetings with the NRCS District Conservationist, Corby Moore, and the Soil Conservationist, Adam Malcomb, Charles worked with NRCS to develop a conservation plan, that he used as a road map to re-forest the land.

Beginning in 2016, through the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI), the Lewis family successfully planted over 300 acres of Longleaf. Not long into his conservation journey, Charles realized the need and positive impact that fire would have on the landscape. So, he, along with some family members, signed up for the burn boss course through the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) and received his certification.

Today, the landscape reveals gentle rolling hills, bursts of Big Blue Stem and Little Blue Stem grasses, along with a wide variety of forbes that all serve as a “welcome” mat for wildlife to return. And return they have! The sweet call of the Bobwhite quail, a sound that many in this area have not heard in years, can now be heard. Everything from the Eastern Wild Turkey to White Tail Deer make their home in this beautiful land in the heart of Louisiana.

In addition, to providing an excellent home for wildlife, the Lewis' land is also a place for education and outreach. Charles is passionate about conservation and the time and effort that he and his family have invested in their land over the years. So much so, that he cannot wait to share the good news about planting Longleaf and its many benefits, with other landowners and neighbors. Charles has hosted a field day in conjunction with the Wild Turkey Federation to bring awareness of Longleaf and the many programs available to private landowners interested in planting Longleaf. He also partners with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) with projects and programs that promote conservation and build a diverse ecosystem.

When Charles decided to plant Longleaf, he realized that his decision was being made for posterity. The economic investment of planting Longleaf pine was long-term but, one that brings honor to his father and will provide a bright future for his grandchildren. Charles is quick to let you know that the benefits of Longleaf; creating wildlife habitat and re-foresting the land back to its historic natural state are two wonderful by-products. But, the greatest benefit is the knowledge that he is building a legacy for his grandchildren.
ACEP-WRE Program

USDA-NRCS in Louisiana Announces ACEP-WRE Application Period

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Louisiana has announced an application period for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE) in fiscal year 2021. Private landowners across the state are encouraged to apply.

Applications for ACEP-WRE will be accepted on a continuous basis with monthly batching periods. Interested landowners are encouraged to apply by Friday, September 25, 2020, for 2021 funding consideration in the October application batching period. Applications received after this date will be evaluated for consideration in the next application batching period.

The ACEP-WRE program is designed to restore and protect wetlands. Eligible lands include farmed or converted wetlands that can be successfully and cost-effectively restored. The WRE program helps private landowners successfully:

- enhance and protect habitat for fish and wildlife (including threatened and endangered species)
- improve water quality
- reduce flooding
- recharge groundwater
- provide opportunities for educational and recreational activities.

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance directly to private and tribal landowners to restore, protect and enhance wetlands through the purchase of these easements. Eligible landowners can choose to enroll in a permanent or 30-year easement.

“NRCS assists farmers, ranchers and forest landowners through the WRE program by developing highly productive wildlife habitat, reducing the risk of farming flood-prone land, and improving environmental benefits while retaining private ownership,” explained Chad Kacir, State Conservationist in Louisiana. “WRE is an important tool that helps landowners voluntarily provide long-term protection for our state’s wetlands for future generations.”

Easement rates vary by region, but landowners may receive up to $3,950 per acre for enrolling eligible land in WRE. Additionally, NRCS will pay 100 percent of the restoration cost for permanent easements and 75% of the restoration cost for 30-year easements.

For more information on ACEP-WRE visit the NRCS ACEP webpage or your local NRCS office.

Upcoming Events

August 13, 2020
Food Plots Workshop

The Trailblazer RC&D is hosting a workshop on food plots from 6:00 pm - 7:30 pm at the Dr. Charles H. Garrett Community Center in Jonesboro, Louisiana. For more information, please contact Elzey Simmons at ceo@trailblazer.org or by phone at 318-255-3554.

August 20, 2020
LSU AgCenter Sweet Potato Field Day

The LSU AgCenter will hold the 2020 Sweet Potato Field Day at the Sweet Potato Station in Chase, Louisiana on Thursday, August 20, 2020. Registration begins at 8:00 am followed by field tours at 9:00 am. A sponsored lunch will be provided. For more information contact Dr. Tara Smith at 318-557-9501 or Mr. Myrl Sistrunk at 318-267-6712.

September 10 - 13, 2020
Back to Your Roots 2020

The Campti Field of Dreams will be hosting Back to Your Roots 2020 on September 10 -13, 2020. The outdoor conference will be spread across 3 North Louisiana farms in Haughton, Shreveport and Eros. Topics covered include organic fruit and vegetable productions, management intensive grazing and direct marketing. To register, visit www.camptifieldofdreams.net and for more information contact Donna Isaacs at 318-521-4998.

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