The Conservation Update is distributed monthly by mail and e-mail.

If you would like to receive monthly issues of the Conservation Update, please send your mailing address or e-mail address to:

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
3737 Government Street
Alexandria, Louisiana 71302

Attention:
Amy Robertson
State Public Affairs Specialist
amy.robertson@la.usda.gov
or
Adele Swearingen
Public Affairs Specialist
adele.swearingen@la.usda.gov

On the Cover

Learn more about how Cameron Parish cattle producer Leslie Griffith is recovering on his ranch following Hurricanes Laura and Delta, on pages 4 and 5.

Table of Contents

Notes from the State Conservationist ....................3
Tethered to the Land .................................4
Story from the Field ....................................6
A Laura Story: Hope Among the Longleaf Pines
Farmers.gov ........................................7
Outreach Corner ......................................8

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

Follow us on Twitter: http://twitter.com/NRCS_Louisiana

USDA
Natural Resources Conservation Service
3737 Government Street
Alexandria, Louisiana 71302
(318) 473-7751
Notes from the State Conservationist

On Thursday, August 27, 2020, southwest Louisiana was devastated by Hurricane Laura and then just 43 days later, Hurricane Delta came ashore once again impacting an already fragile southwest Louisiana. Even as I write this, more than eight weeks after the initial storm, residents in Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes are still working hard to recover. Unlike many hurricanes before Laura, impact was felt from the coast, to central Louisiana and then up through north Louisiana. Damage was seen across our state in the destruction of homes, farms, barns, fences, trees, nothing was exempt from the powerful wind of Laura.

RESILIENT. That is how I describe all of my fellow Louisiana residents. Our state has taken some hard knocks over the last couple of months. Many of you suffered damages to your personal property and business. According to the LSU AgCenter, Hurricane Laura caused over $530 million in damage to Louisiana farmers and $1.1 billion to the Louisiana timber industry. Although, Louisiana producers are known for their toughness and perseverance, even the strongest among us need support and assistance through these hard times.

If you look up the word resiliency in the dictionary you may very well see photos of the two producers that are featured in this special issue of the Conservation Update. Leslie Griffith of Cameron Parish and Austin Arabie of Beauregard Parish along with their families share their stories. I was able to visit with Mr. Griffith and his wife in Grand Chenier, and walk the land where his house once stood. Although the pain of their loss was palpable, so was their determination to pick-up the pieces and keep moving ahead.

That is where NRCS and our sister agencies come in - our colleagues at the Farm Service Agency (FSA) have programs in place to assist producers affected by natural disasters. NRCS has designated Hurricane Laura fund pools to address requests that are not offered through the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) at FSA. We will utilize the normal Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) process and and help producers address resource concerns caused by these two hurricanes. Right now, our offices are accepting applications for EQIP, and we will continue accepting applications and setting aside funds for hurricane recovery for as long as it takes. Although we accept applications on a continual basis, the first round of applications are due by November 20, 2020.

I know so many of you, in addition to the Griffiths and the Arabies, suffered damages and losses. Please know that you and your family are in our thoughts and prayers.

Chad Kacir
State Conservationist

New Video

Have you ever wondered what it’s like to work for NRCS? NRCS in Louisiana recently completed production of a brand new recruitment video. We have worked hard to put together a video that explains who we are as an agency and why someone should choose NRCS for a rewarding career. To find out what it’s like to work at NRCS in Louisiana scan the QR code or visit https://youtu.be/3KXHeiDqJns.
On Thursday, August 27, 2020, Hurricane Laura roared across the state and life changed for Leslie and Peggy Griffith of Grand Chenier, Louisiana. The Griffiths are no strangers to hurricanes. As life-long residents of coastal Louisiana, hurricanes have been a part of their lives just as much as the brine is to the marshes and the outstretched boughs on the live oaks are to the land of Cameron Parish.

As a child, Leslie Griffith recalls riding out Hurricane Audrey in 1957, together with his parents and grandparents, in this very same spot. That night in 1957 left an indelible mark on Griffith's memory. Today the physical reminder is an oak tree, still standing, that bears the scar of where the Griffith family clung to their roof (which had become a raft) as it hit the tree over and over throughout the night.

Laura proved to be a hurricane the Griffiths and most of their neighbors, fellow producers and friends will never forget. All of Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes (along with the entire state) prepared for Laura’s impact. Days before the storm the Griffiths transferred 190 head of cattle to their land in Welsh, Louisiana, an hour and a half from their home in Grand Chenier. They tied down and secured what could not be moved and prayed, as they drove away, that their home, barn and equipment would be there when they returned.

The Griffiths returned on August 29th and what they found was totally unrecognizable. Griffith explains, "I don't even know where my house is?" With 150 mile per hour winds and an estimated storm surge of up to 19 feet. Their home, that was built to withstand strong storms and high water, was swallowed by the Gulf. "The pasture behind my house has over 100 sheets of tin that came off my barns, they are all over the field, the pasture is solid tin," sighed Griffith.

Griffiths’ father started Lazy Acres Cattle Ranch in 1954 on family land that is as much a part of his life as his own DNA. “It’s in your blood, it’s a way of life,” Griffith recalls. “My family has been in the cattle business for over 200 years.” Griffith describes his family land as being so nutrient rich he doesn’t have to put out hay for his cattle, they graze in the marshy areas. Griffith shakes his head, "This is good land except for these storms."

Tethered to the Land

On Thursday, August 27, 2020, Hurricane Laura roared across the state and life changed for Leslie and Peggy Griffith of Grand Chenier, Louisiana. The Griffiths are no strangers to hurricanes. As life-long residents of coastal Louisiana, hurricanes have been a part of their lives just as much as the brine is to the marshes and the outstretched boughs on the live oaks are to the land of Cameron Parish.

As a child, Leslie Griffith recalls riding out Hurricane Audrey in 1957, together with his parents and grandparents, in this very same spot. That night in 1957 left an indelible mark on Griffith's memory. Today the physical reminder is an oak tree, still standing, that bears the scar of where the Griffith family clung to their roof (which had become a raft) as it hit the tree over and over throughout the night.

Laura proved to be a hurricane the Griffiths and most of their neighbors, fellow producers and friends will never forget. All of Cameron and Calcasieu Parishes (along with the entire state) prepared for Laura's impact. Days before the storm the Griffiths transferred 190 head of cattle to their land in Welsh, Louisiana, an hour and a half from their home in Grand Chenier. They tied down and secured what could not be moved and prayed, as they drove away, that their home, barn and equipment would be there when they returned.

The Griffiths returned on August 29th and what they found was totally unrecognizable. Griffith explains, “I don't even know where my house is?” With 150 mile per hour winds and an estimated storm surge of up to 19 feet. Their home, that was built to withstand strong storms and high water, was swallowed by the Gulf. “The pasture behind my house has over 100 sheets of tin that came off my barns, they are all over the field, the pasture is solid tin,” sighed Griffith.

Griffiths’ father started Lazy Acres Cattle Ranch in 1954 on family land that is as much a part of his life as his own DNA. “It’s in your blood, it’s a way of life,” Griffith recalls. “My family has been in the cattle business for over 200 years.” Griffith describes his family land as being so nutrient rich he doesn’t have to put out hay for his cattle, they graze in the marshy areas. Griffith shakes his head, “This is good land except for these storms.”

Macandol Parker, NRCS District Conservationist in Lake Charles, is the first to agree that the land here is productive and the Griffiths are good stewards of their land. Lazy Acres Cattle Ranch consists of over 3,600 acres in Cameron Parish and over 84 acres in Jefferson Davis Parish. “Mr. Griffith has participated in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and is currently participating in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP),” said Parker.

“Mr. Griffith recently signed an EQIP contract for the livestock operation he relocated from Cameron Parish to Jefferson Davis,”

“My address will always be 1003 Oak Grove Highway.”

Leslie Griffith
explained Parker. Under this EQIP contract, Griffith is planning on installing livestock pipeline, heavy use area protection, a watering facility and portable livestock shelter/shade structure. Parker explains, “The Gulf Coast Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS have worked with Mr. Griffith since 2016 through a variety of farm bill programs assisting in his cattle operations, and we will continue working with him through the aftermath of Laura and Hurricane Delta.”

One of the biggest challenges is where to stay while recovering from the storm. “Everyone who lived in our area, they don’t have a home to come home to,” said Griffith. “Some are staying in shelters, some with friends and family and some are in hotels. There is no place to live.” The Griffiths are living in a camper on some friends’ property and will eventually try to move the camper closer to their home place in Grand Chenier. Right now, the Griffiths are cleaning their property and salvaging everything they can. “We are working hard to find hay for the cattle we moved to Welsh,” explained Griffith.

Mark Norman, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician in Lake Charles, was familiar with the property before Laura and was astounded at the condition of the property afterward. As an Army veteran of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, he compared Lazy Acres Ranch after Laura to war torn Afghanistan. “Seeing Lake Charles, this looks like Afghanistan, it looks like a bomb had gone off … just total devastation,” said Norman. From a soil health perspective, it will be hard for producers to not overgraze when there is little to no land available. “Mr. Griffith is one of the largest landowners in Cameron Parish so to replace his fencing alone is going to be a huge task, and it is something that is not going to happen fast.”

Many people have offered to help the Griffiths and numerous people have. Some offered hay, sent gift cards and money. “What we are going to need moving forward is manpower and folks to volunteer with fencing,” explained Griffith. Hearing that request for help, Norman reached out to a group of veterans that assist other veterans in times of need. So far, twenty veterans are ready to assist with debris removal and stringing the barbed wire fencing.

Amazingly, while walking the property Norman found military dog tags that belonged to Griffith. As an Army veteran of Vietnam, the dog tags were one of the treasures Griffith thought he would never see again. Griffith, overcome with emotion, said, “This is amazing, I can’t believe it.” Norman handed the dog tags back to Griffith saying, “I know, as a veteran this is something you want to keep forever and pass it down.”

When asked what the future holds, Griffith passionately declares, “This is a way of life, till I die I’ll be raising cattle on Lazy Acres Ranch.”
A Laura Story: Hope Among the Longleaf Pines

The Arabie family’s tie to their forest land goes back generations and the sentimental value runs deep. “This land has been the passion of our family since the 1950’s,” explains Austin Arabie, “It’s a way of life. It gets in your blood.” The Arabies actively manage their land, and over the years have been amazed at how the land has evolved. Maintained by regular prescribed burning and lifetimes of building fire lanes and access trails, their practices have created this thriving longleaf ecosystem.

“When you talk to people about longleaf, many times people think of just the tree, but it is the total package,” said Arabie, “The ecosystem the tree grows in, with the plants, is a fire dependent system that creates a whole population of fire tolerant plants around it.”

Corby Moore, District Conservationist with NRCS explains, “Strategically timed as a natural disturbance, the Arabies use fire to improve plant structure and composition as well as treating invasive species and other woody brush species encroachment.” Moore goes on to say, “The Arabies use prescribed burning to sculpt and improve their longleaf forest; to increase plant diversity, promote active warm season grasses, legumes and Forbes.”

Arabie agrees, “Longleaf provides a biodiverse ecosystem that’s not fully recognized by the average person. It is interesting and valuable and a great example of a fire dependent ecosystem.”

On Thursday, August 27th, that ecosystem was altered in a dramatic way when Hurricane Laura barreled through southwest Louisiana. Of the 720 acres of forest land the Arabie family owns, almost all of the trees were damaged to some extent. The most severely damaged is 200 acres of longleaf that took a direct hit. “This storm pretty much eliminated the possibilities for prescribed burning and other management practices until we can get some of the timber off the forest floor,” explained Arabie.

According to the LSU AgCenter, initial state-wide estimates show the massive impact that Laura dealt to the state with a total economic loss to the timber industry of $1.1 billion. Of that total value, $767.6 million was attributed to pine timber while $346.9 million was attributable to hardwood timber. Vernon Parish was estimated to have experienced the largest economic loss at $359.7 million. Rapides, Beauregard, Grant, and Allen Parishes were all estimated to have losses greater than $100 million.

Surveying the land, Arabie points out massive pines strewn and contorted in every shape imaginable, downed trees with exposed roots are everywhere you look; the loss is immense, and the path forward will be difficult. Arabie, with a heavy heart, asks questions like, “How am I going to implement my management practices on the land now?” and “How am I going to enjoy my property the way I have in the past?”

With so many questions to answer, Arabie is concentrating on what he and his family can do, like cleaning up areas where there are trees still standing. “We will remove the dead and downed trees and let it naturally regenerate,” explained Arabie. Plans for the longleaf tracts are to clear-cut, go through site preparations and then re-plant longleaf. “We are going to work to re-create our trails and we will pick up our burning routine when it is safe, and go from there,” Arabie said with impassioned determination.

“NRCS will be here to assist the Arabies when they are ready to begin replanting longleaf and when forest management practices are safe to begin again,” said Moore. “They are wonderful second and third generation forest landowners who are steadfast conservationists. We will be right there beside them as they rebuild their forest.”

A wise forester once said the sound of a soft wind blowing through longleaf pines makes a special sound, it creates beautiful music. Working together, over time, the Arabie land will be cleared and cleaned, re-planted and regenerated. Many years from now those longleaf pines will reach toward the sky, sway in the breeze, and that beautiful music will be heard again.
Manage Your USDA Business Online, Conservation Client Gateway Retired

You can now manage your conservation activities and request assistance from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) by logging into your farmers.gov account. These conservation features join several others already available through the farmers.gov portal, including the ability to view farm loan information. As more content and capabilities are added, farmers.gov is quickly becoming the online hub for producers to find resources, submit applications, and request assistance.

Previously, self-service conservation activities were available through Conservation Client Gateway, but that portal was retired on Oct. 15.

But those functionalities are now available through farmers.gov. It was designed and built with the valuable input of USDA customers like you and ready to use for your conservation needs.

Through farmers.gov, you can:

- View, upload, download and e-sign documents;
- Request conservation assistance;
- Request financial assistance, including submitting a program application;
- View and request application details;
- Reference technical terms and submit questions;
- Access information on current and past conservation practices;
- Report practice completion and request practice certification;
- View detailed information on all previous and ongoing contracts, including the amount of cost share assistance received and anticipated; and
- Have 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.

Current Conservation Client Gateway Users

If you are a current Conservation Client Gateway user, your information and data will continue to be available through farmers.gov. To access your information, 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. You’ll sign in using your existing CCG account login information.

New Farmers.gov Users

If you do not have login information for farmers.gov, you can create your login profile, or eAuthentication by following the instructions at farmers.gov/sign-in.

Help and Support

The Conservation Features User Guide gives you step-by-step instructions on how to navigate farmers.gov and the how-to video instructions and fact sheet explain some of the popular features. If you need additional help, personal assistance is available at the farmers.gov Service Desk by selecting the “Help” link located at the top of the all authenticated portal pages and submitting a “Contact Us” request. NRCS field office staff are always available to assist you with your conservation questions and other needs.
NRCS’s Outreach partner, Campti Field of Dreams, recently sponsored a Back to Your Roots (BTYR) 2020 Sustainable Agriculture Conference September 8 – 13, 2020. This year’s conference had to be modified out of concerns for COVID-19 and therefore in-person participation was limited to the state’s maximum meeting requirements. However, meeting participants were afforded the opportunity to participate in the conference virtually.

According to Campti Field of Dreams Executive Director Donna Isaacs, “The 2020 BTYR Conference was designed to empower the next generation of farmers, ranchers and value-added producers, with environmentally friendly practices that produce more income.”

The conference co-starred four internationally distinguished speakers who instructed three 2-day Master Classes. Organic Farmer Jim Riddle presented topics on Organic Fruit and Vegetable Production; Grazing Expert & Consultant Jim Gerrish topics focused on Management Intensive Grazing; and Joel and daughter-in-law Sheri Salatin gave presentations on Direct Marketing.

I participated in the session held on Friday, September 11, 2020, at the spacious barn of Sample Farm in Coushatta, Louisiana. In 2017, Sample Farm was established, and is a fourth-generation farm with a vision for the future in regenerative agriculture. The Sample family has a 3800-acre operation, however Scott Sample has taken 200 acres out of row crop production and converted it to grassland where he pastures his cattle, chickens and pigs. Scott sells his beef, pork and eggs in Shreveport. Apart from extreme heat conditions, the chickens on Sample Farm produces on average around 14-15 dozen of eggs per day.

The featured speaker for the Friday session was Jim Gerrish whose focused topic was on Management Intensive Grazing. Some key takeaways from Jim’ presentation are as follows:

- Overstocking and overgrazing are not the same thing
- Overgrazing is having more animals than the resources can bear
- Overgrazing is allowing animals to bit a plant that is in a negative carbohydrate balance
- Forage production can be increased by irrigation, fertilization, inter-seeding, re-seeding, grazing managements, residual and timing

Before lunch, the meeting participants made a trip to the Sample Farm pastures to observe a model grazing cell layout and design using a single strand of hotwire to contain the grazing steers. Jim Gerrish went into detail in talking about soil health as it relates to forage production. Also, at the pasture site, Jim spoke about the forage species, livestock rotation, animal health and indicators that show when steers are in the finishing stage and ready for slaughter.

The BTYR Conference continued through Sunday, 9/13/2020 where attendees got to participate in a Direct Marketing 2-Day Master Series conducted by Joel & Sheri Salatin at the Mahaffey Farms in Haughton, LA.