



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

November/December 2020



It's In My Blood

Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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On the Cover



Learn more about how Union Parish beginning farmer, Casey Towns is working with the D'Arbonne SWCD and NRCS to address resource concerns on his operation on pages 4 and 5.

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Notes from the State Conservationist

As we close 2020 and begin to think about what lies ahead in 2021, I think we can all agree that 2020 cannot end soon enough! Through the trials and challenges that 2020 hurled our way, the strength and resiliency of you, Louisiana farmers, ranchers, forest landowners, our partners, neighbors and friends has remained constant.

Despite COVID-19, numerous named hurricanes and multiple tropical storms, NRCS Louisiana and our sister USDA agencies have continued to move forward safely while providing invaluable customer service. Each of our 44 field offices are working hard to continue to provide excellent service, while keeping customers and our employees safe.



C.S. Lewis famously said, "Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny." I believe that each one of us is prepared and equipped to accomplish the work ahead of us. As an agency, NRCS prioritizes the safety and well-being of its employees and customers while continuing to provide the customer service needed to advance the work of conservation and agriculture through these recent hardships.

Stephanie Paul, Senior Planner in Farmerville is one of so many NRCS employees who have continued to provide exceptional customer service. In this issue of the Conservation Update we meet her customer, Casey Towns. Casey is a beginning farmer with a cow-calf operation that started out with 20 acres. Casey's operation has grown over the past few years, in fact Casey will become a certified Master Farmer this year! Join me in congratulating Casey on achieving this honor.

In honor of Veterans Day on November 11th, we talk with Brandon and Lauren Breaux, owners of Cockeyed Farms located in Folsom. This dynamic young couple has a passion for agriculture and working with their fellow military veterans. The next big mission for the Breauxs is to establish the Louisiana chapter of the national organization, Farmer Veterans Coalition (FVC). NRCS is committed to working with our nation's veterans and assisting the Breauxs, as well as, many other veterans working in agriculture across the state.

As the Holiday season approaches, and we all look forward to 2021, I want to wish each of you a Merry Christmas and happy and healthy new year!

Chad Kacir
State Conservationist



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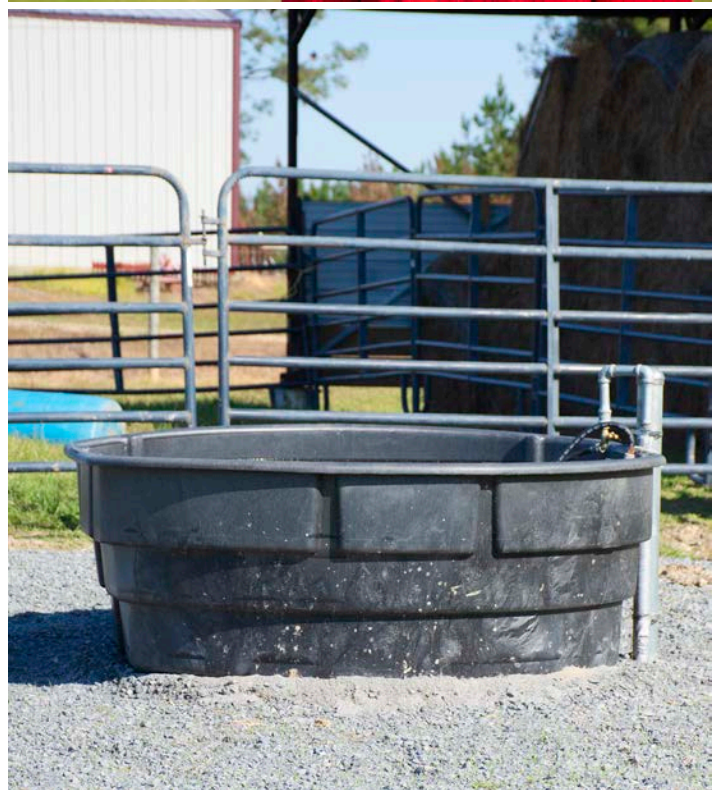
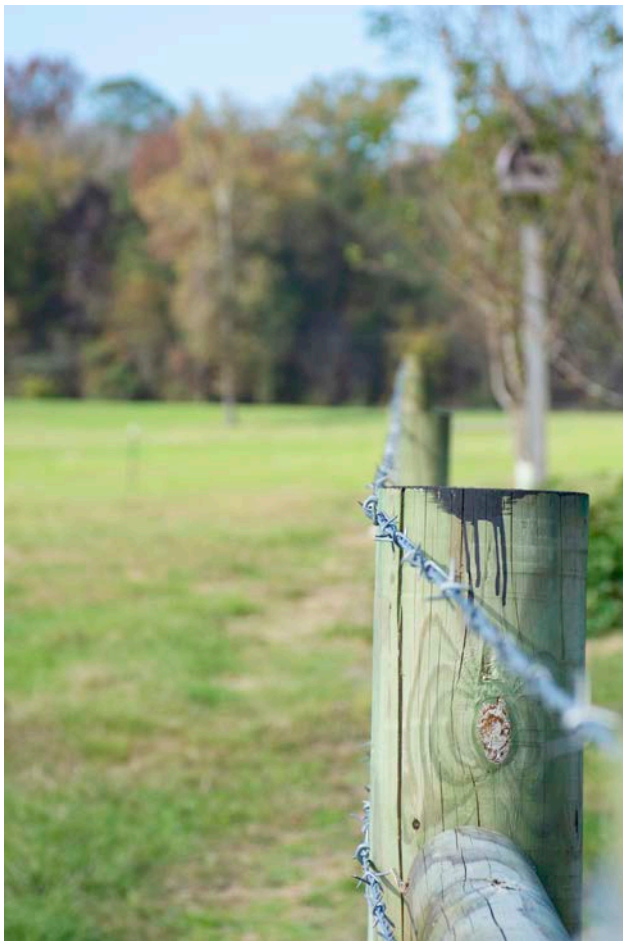
Program Delivery Continues while taking Safety Measures Related to Coronavirus

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

 <https://www.youtube.com/user/LouisianaNRCS>

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



It's in My Blood

Growing up in the piney hills of Union Parish, Casey Towns spent the long, hot Louisiana summers of his youth working on his grandfather's farm. Although it was always hard work, Towns fondly recalls those summers, "We spent almost every day together. He had a list of chores for me every day, but I enjoyed every minute of it."

Fast forward a few years, Towns is married with children working in Ouachita Parish, but was ready for a new venture. For someone like Towns, it could only be one thing...pursuing the opportunity to branch out into farming on his own. Towns proudly explains, "It's in my blood. It's just something I have always enjoyed."

Towns and his brother found some neighboring property seven years ago to start the farm and for this beginning farmer that is when the real story begins. The brothers have both been drawn to agriculture, Towns with the day to day operations on the farm and his brother as an ag teacher at a local school.

Although continuing his full-time job away from the farm, Towns began actively working on the 20-acre cattle operation. This is when the relationship between Towns and the D'Arbonne Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) began.

Towns learned about the programs and services provided by the SWCD and NRCS from his time spent helping his grandfather and from attending the local cattleman's meetings. Wanting to learn more, he paid a visit to the local SWCD and NRCS office. That is where he met Stephanie Paul, Senior Planner for NRCS in the Farmerville Field Office, and they began to discuss ways to improve his operation.

Once Towns cleared the land and put up perimeter fencing, he visited the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to get a farm and tract number. Paul then visited the farm and the pair began working on a conservation plan to address the resource concerns on the operation.

His operation typically has approximately 85-head of cow/calf pairs and last year he also ran about 80-head of stockers. He rotates the cattle between his pastures and pastures on his grandfather's land. Towns and his brother recently bought more property across the street and that too will be used to expand his operation.

In addition to the technical assistance provided by NRCS, Towns also received financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install various conservation practices including, cross-fencing, clover planting, troughs, heavy use protection pads and livestock pipeline.

Paul explains how the beginning farmer funding process works, "As a beginning farmer, Casey is eligible for a higher pay rate on the cost-share of the conservation practices he installs through EQIP. In addition, there is a special funding pool for beginning farmers that allows farmers like Casey to compete for funding with other beginning farmers in the state." Paul continues, "He is also eligible to compete in the local funding pool with other farmers in Union Parish. If his application is funded, he gets the higher beginning farmer cost-share rate."

Beginning farmers get the higher rate and are considered a new and beginning farmer for the sake of financial assistance through NRCS programs for 10 years. "These benefits for beginning farmers were meant to give them a little boost as they are getting started in farming," stated Paul.

"The financial assistance that NRCS provides is imperative for beginning farmers," said Towns. "Without the cost-share assistance, getting started in farming can be cost-prohibitive."

Towns is continually learning and believes sharing information with other beginning farmers is crucial. Because of his desire for continuing education in farming and conservation, Towns will be certified as a Louisiana Master Farmer this year. "To become a master farmer, Casey had to complete continuing education requirements, attend field days, and complete a conservation plan," stated Paul.

Once becoming a Certified Louisiana Master Farmer, Towns is also eligible to compete in the funding pool for Louisiana Master Farmers for cost-share assistance through NRCS's financial assistance programs.

Towns is happy to share, "Being able to work with Stephanie, has helped me be successful. I can call her anytime and she is able to help me with the paperwork and answer any technical questions that I may have."

Towns' advice for other beginning farmers is "Ask questions!" He explains, "Get with the local NRCS office and make a plan that is best suited to address the resource concerns on your operation. The process is not something that happens overnight, it takes time and effort; but it's worth it."

What does Towns see for the future? His goal is to keep growing the operation and provide his children with the same opportunity to work on the farm, just like he did as a child. "I hope that agriculture gets in their blood too," Towns smiled.

If you are a beginning farmer interested in getting started with NRCS, please contact your local NRCS office. With 44 offices across the state, assistance is only a phone call away.

Story from the Field

Greaux Purple, Bee Gold with Brandon and Lauren Breaux of Cockeyed Farms

Reaching out to military veterans and their families through the founding of the Louisiana Farmer Veteran Coalition.

What do you get when you put a Scout Attack Helicopter Pilot and a real estate agent together? In Louisiana, you get Brandon and Lauren Breaux and their creation, Cockeyed Farms. Their love for agriculture is only surpassed by devotion to each other, their children and the desire reach out and educate other military veterans and their families about agriculture.



The Breaux's journey with agriculture began after Brandon started having severe headaches that lasted for months. After many tests and experimental treatments, Brandon medically retired from the military and his aviation career. Realizing that traditional paths of medicine were not helping, he and Lauren embarked on a new way of life that included cooking with whole foods along with purging prescription medications and processed foods from their diet.

Through extensive research of holistic living, Brandon discovered the healing benefits of American Elderberry. Known as a "super fruit" the Breauxs decided to grow American Elderberry and set out to educate others on its healing benefits. The Breauxs then embarked on a brand-new way of life in farming and they have never looked back.

"Agriculture can be a great fit for transitioning service members because they are used to working long hard hours," explains Adam Malcomb, soil conservationist with NRCS and the Veterans Special Emphasis Program

Manager. Adam continues, "A high level of organization and initiative are instilled into service members and these traits are essential to a successful agricultural operation; because what you put in is what you get out."

NRCS is committed to working with and educating military veterans. "One of the most valuable ways NRCS can help veterans is through technical assistance." Adam goes on to say, "This provides veterans with the knowledge they need in their area of agriculture to become successful more quickly and alleviate some of the pit falls they may have experienced due to lack of information."

The Breauxs have worked with NRCS and believe in the power of knowledge that is shared between local NRCS staff and local producers. Currently, on their farm in Folsom, the Breauxs have over 400 blueberry bushes and have cleared land and are in the process of planting a crop of American Elderberry.

Always in search of the most up-to-date information, the Breaux's learned about the national Farmer Veteran Coalition (FVC) last spring. They attended an FVC organizational meeting and the Louisiana chapter Organization Committee was formed, with Lauren becoming the chair. Since that time, the Louisiana Chapter of the FVC is becoming a reality. Lauren explains the FVC purpose and why it is important, "The future of the Louisiana chapter of the FVC is vital because it will create a network of veteran farmers who will help each other navigate both life after the military and life in agriculture." Lauren continues, "After obtaining our non-profit status, Louisiana FVC will be able to qualify for grants that will enhance programming and ultimately benefit our members."

Currently the Louisiana chapter of the FVC is looking for members and stakeholders. To learn more about the Louisiana FVC contact Lauren Breaux farmvetlouisiana@gmail.com or find them on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter.



Scan the QR Code to watch a short video about the Louisiana Chapter of the Farmer Veteran Coalition on Facebook!

NASS Update

SafeAgricultural Data Collection and Delivery

Posted by: Jim Barrett, NASS Public Affairs

Submitted by: Kathy Broussard, NASS

For over 150 years, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) has been gathering accurate, timely and useful data in service to U.S. agriculture. We have many ways to collect information including from geospatial sources, administrative data from other agencies, and the familiar surveys of farms and ranches. All NASS surveys can be completed online but sometimes we need to reach out by phone or in-person.

In March, we stopped in-person data collection for the health and safety of NASS enumerators, staff, and the farmers and ranchers we serve. Fortunately, many projects were already underway to modernize our operations, allowing us to react quickly. In fact, as we adapt how we work, we have continued to collect and release high-quality data on time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following data security mandates, we have been able to process and release data safely.

For a few surveys, data collection methods have not dramatically changed. Field sampling of corn, soybeans, cotton and wheat for NASS's Objective Yield survey continues, though we work with producers by phone instead of in person. Field enumerators are entering and submitting information over the growing season using their tablets.

For other surveys, we have modernized the online questionnaire, making it an easier and more convenient way for farmers and ranchers to complete surveys. In fact, nearly half a million farmers and ranchers filled out the 2017 Census of Agriculture online. For NASS, online survey response reduces processing time and costs since we don't need to print, mail, or scan paper forms.

Our data and reports remain on time and maintain the highest quality standards. They are available in multiple ways including the nass.usda.gov website; the Cornell University Mann Library (a USDA repository); website and e-mail report subscription services; the Quick Stats database and API; and JSON files for principal economic indicator data.

We continued to host virtual free public data users' meetings in April and in October. We, along with our sister agencies, shared recent and pending program changes, and asked for input on various data and information programs important to agriculture.

Modern technology and tools have allowed us to safely gather data and deliver on-time, objective, and accurate results that help you in your work. We thank producers across the country for responding to their surveys by whatever way is best for them, and especially for responding online whenever possible.

Upcoming Events

January 10 -13, 2021

American Farm Bureau Virtual Convention

The American Farm Bureau Federation recently opened registration for the 2021 American Farm Bureau Virtual Convention and unveiled the lineup of featured speakers including Mike Rowe, Rorke Denver and Beth Ford.

The AFB Virtual Convention will be held January 10 - 13, 2021, and for the first time ever, registration fees are being waived to give all Farm Bureau members and anyone interested in agriculture the opportunity to experience one of agriculture's premier events.

This open invitation is a rare opportunity to attend the American Farm Bureau convention free of charge. Registration will provide access to live sessions as well as special on demand programs focused on hot topics in agriculture.

For more information and to register visit <https://www.fb.org/events/afb-convention/>.

Outreach Corner

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, Project Specialist, Rapides SWCD

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Outreach partner, Trailblazer RC&D, conducted two back-to-back pond related workshops in two parishes in north Louisiana recently. The first Farm Pond Construction and Management Workshop was held in Ruston, Louisiana. Brant Bradley, NRCS District Conservationist in Ruston, gave a presentation on NRCS Program Assistance and Cost Sharing. Jacob Paul, NRCS Supervisory Engineer, gave a presentation on Pond Site Selection, Finding a Contractor, and Cost Sharing/NRCS Assistance.



The Red Oak Lake Lodge in Haughton, Louisiana, was the site of the second Pond Construction & Management Workshop. Lodge owner Tim Holland partnered with Trailblazer in hosting this workshop under a big tent. Approximately 26 people attended this workshop. Andrea Bridgewater-Fair, NRCS's District Conservationist in Bossier City, gave an overview of the technical and financial assistance that is available from NRCS. Jacob Paul gave a presentation on ponds that

included some information about the 17-acre Red Oak pond located at the meeting site. The pond was built in 1942 and it is around 12-13 feet deep. The watershed around the pond is all woods.

Jeff Sibley, a biologist with Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) talked about pond stocking and recommended fish species. The workshop attendees walked down to the pondside whereby LDWF personnel gave an Electroshock Demonstration. While in their boat, the LDWF personnel delivered 1,000 -1,200 volts of electricity to the water in the pond. Stunned fish floated to the top of the water whereby they were dipped up. Jeff Sibley stated that electroshocking was a better method and less stressful on the fish. Tissue from some of the caught fish were going to be analyzed and the results would be emailed to the meeting participants.



Jeff stated that the most common issue with a pond is imbalance. He stated that the best time to check for fish population in a pond is early summer or the fall of the year. Some other key points stated by Jeff were as follows:

- Water clarity or fertilization is key to pond management;
- Think of your pond as a new garden;
- Liquid fertilizer is better;
- Liming a pond at the time of construction is excellent;
- Fertilize ponds March through October every two weeks until the water begins to turn a light shade of green with growing plankton.

NRCS had resource materials on hand for all the workshop participants and LDWF had Management of Recreational and Farm Ponds booklets available as well.

Many thanks to Tim Holland, who provided a delicious barbecue meal for meeting participants.

Trailblazer RC&D has a brand new YouTube channel where they are posting educational videos about a wide range of topics. To learn more about farm pond construction visit Trailblazer RC&D's video at <https://youtu.be/kG14E2npt4I>.

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