Cover Crops Growing
Soil Health in Tensas Parish

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On the Cover

Learn more about how Tensas Parish farmer, Kellon Lee is working with the Tensas-Concordia SWCD and NRCS to grow cover crops for soil health on his operation on pages 4 and 5.

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Notes from the State Conservationist

Welcome to 2021! I know we can all agree that saying goodbye to 2020 was the easiest thing we did all last year! With the new year, I'm looking forward to new beginnings and continuing with the great work that we accomplished in 2020. Together, we emerged on the other side stronger, wiser, and more connected to each other and to the land than ever before.

In this issue of the Conservation Update, we visit Kellon Lee in Tensas Parish, a cotton, corn, and soybean farmer who is a firm believer in the benefits of planting a conservation cover crop. This winter, Kellon planted more cover crops than ever before because he has experienced first-hand the power of protecting the soil during the rainy and cold winter months.

Speaking of beginning again, if you or someone you know is searching for a new job opportunity, look no further than the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Louisiana. Right now, we have a variety of positions open and we are looking for folks who share our passion for conservation and working with agricultural producers. To learn more look on page 7.

NRCS in Louisiana will continue to provide excellent customer service to our customers, partners, neighbors, and friends all while following CDC guidelines and social distancing measures. We all have family and friends who have been sick and some who have experienced loss over this past year. Please know that you are never far from our thoughts and prayers.

Here is to 2021, a new year and new beginnings for us all!

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
On a cold wintry day, Kellon Lee, a cotton, corn, and soybean farmer in Tensas Parish, looks out over his land and describes it as “pretty”. Instead of seeing brown barren fields they are green and lush, filled with a variety of cover crops growing strong. For Lee, his father and uncle, planting conservation cover crops has become a way of life.

Eddie Foster, Resource Conservationist for NRCS in the St. Joseph Field Office explains, “Like many of the producers in Tensas Parish, they have sandy soils and during the rainy winter months they were experiencing a lot of erosion. Their beds were washing down. They wanted to address that problem by incorporating cover crops plantings.”

When the Lees reached out to Foster at the St. Joseph Field Office with their concerns about erosion, the conservation planning process began. Foster visited their land and took survey data and explained the process: “We came up with alternatives - a multitude of practices that could be utilized. Then the Lees decided what they wanted to do.” That is where the working relationship between NRCS, the Tensas-Concordia Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and local farmers is established.

The Lees began their partnership with NRCS and the Tensas-Concordia SWCD as participants in a special project that included the Lake Bruin and Van Buren Watersheds for the Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI). This special initiative was designed to improve water quality in the watershed and cover crops were one of the best conservation practices to achieve that goal.

In addition to improved water quality, cover crops offer a multitude of benefits. Foster explains the important role of cover crops in creating healthy soils, “Carbon is being pumped into the soil with the growing of winter grains and/or legumes as cover crops. The cover crops will help hold row integrity, create biomass to improve organic matter and water filtration, and provide soil structure and stability for nutrient-holding capacity for the plant growth of their next cash crop.”

Lee is in absolute agreement, “There are so many benefits to the soil from adding cover crops. We are getting a better crop to harvest for the next year and we’re keeping our soils where they need to be. Lee continues, “We’re also reducing runoff in our streams.”

Lee and his family realized they wanted to plant more cover crops so they worked with Foster and applied for financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) which allowed them to incorporate more cover crops than ever before. This year, more than 50 percent of their 4,500 acres are planted in winter wheat and cow peas. Through EQIP the Lees were able to increase the number of acres of cover crops planted.

“We get our cover crops planted as soon as we can in November, sometimes in September,” explained Lee. Cover is left on the fields for three to four months. Over time, producers will not only see an improvement in the quality of their soil health they also will see a reduction of input costs.” EQIP allows you to get started down the path. Essentially, you get the same yield but you reduce inputs.
- like the cost of fertilizer and water. Essentially, the same yield for less,” said Lee.

What advice would Foster give to other producers considering EQIP and implementing cover crops? “Both are a great way to get started with conservation on your land,” he explained. “With the Lees, we picked the most erosive fields based on their soil types, then we wrote a four-year comprehensive conservation plan that included cover crops on 2,300 acres,” Foster continued.

What is the producer trying to accomplish? Is just one of the questions asked when deciding on which conservation path to take with NRCS. “There are so many different scenarios. My advice is to start small acreage or just a single field and stick with it,” explained Foster. “After three years you will see improvement in soil quality and after five years there will be substantial benefits. Stick with it and you will see dramatic results on your land and your bottom line,” said Foster.

For the Lees, cover crops are an integral piece of their conservation plan. They are committed to improving soil health so their fields will be as productive as possible for as long as possible. “Today, more than ever, consumers want to know what we, as producers, are doing to protect the environment,” said Lee. “We know that implementing these practices on our farm now will make us more sustainable in the future.”

Being good stewards of the land and utilizing sustainable practices, like cover crops, will make sure the Lees’ land will be producing for many years. “We want this farm sustainable, so when the time comes that my wife and I have children, we know that we can farm our land for generations.”
"Get Your Hands Dirty" is the name of the workshop series brought to you by the Campti Field of Dreams in partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "This series will focus on putting in small farm infrastructure funded through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) voluntary financial assistance program" says Donna Isaacs, Campti Field of Dreams Executive Director.

The free and open to the public workshops have been taking place on Saturdays since October 31, 2020, with both virtual and in-person options. The site of the workshops has been the Campti Field of Dreams De La Terre Permaculture Farm located at 9338 Hwy 34 in Eros, Louisiana.

On Saturday, January 9, 2021, I participated in the farm tour segment of the Get Your Hands Dirty Workshop where Donna Isaacs reflected on her 7-year partnership with NRCS. "Through our partnership we have been able to spread the word about NRCS and to educate others about the programs and services that are available through the various USDA agencies by way of outreach meetings, workshops and field days," says Donna.

A couple of years ago Donna was able to purchase a 15-acre farm in Eros, Louisiana. Donna obtained a farm and tract number from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) which allowed her to apply for financial assistance from NRCS to install conservation practices such as seasonal high tunnels, cross-fencing, livestock watering facilities, drip irrigation, and pasture plantings.

Through this 15-acre farm Donna hopes to demonstrate that not only can we feed ourselves, but we can feed a community with locally grown food.

In addition to vegetable production, Donna and the farm manager, Waylon Breaux, raise swine, goats, sheep, layers, broilers, ducks, and geese with plans for an orchard. Their goal is to slaughter between 150-300 chickens per week at their onsite poultry slaughtering facility that is currently under construction.

Donna knows the value of healthy soils. During her October 31, 2020, Compost and Biochar Workshop, workshop participants burned wood in fire pits which yielded over 10 gallons of biochar. The biochar will be used as a natural soil amendment. The event was shared on Facebook and reached 278 people. The farm will also have a 5-bin, 500 square feet compost facility that will make use of the manures, renderings from the poultry slaughtering, vegetable materials, and other materials.

Donna utilizes Vermicompost, and she has two containers which have red wiggler worms, vegetable scraps, hay manure, etc. Donna refers to this concoction as "worm tea." The worm tea is used as a soil amendment for the vegetable production.

In addition to her role of Executive Director of Campti Field of Dreams, Donna Isaacs was recently elected the inaugural President of Potlikker Capital, Inc., a California Nonprofit Public Benefit Corporation, committed to investing 50 million dollars in 300 black farms over the next 10 years. This reparative social finance fund for regenerative agriculture implementation and the scaling of small farms will complement the NRCS EQIP and Conservation Stewardship Program, increase organic food production and create a network of African American and Native American farmers throughout the Southeast and West Coast. Co-founded by Mark Watson and Konda Mason, who bring over 30 years of social entrepreneurship and financial activism to the ownership, production and distribution of food. The organization anticipates accepting applications beginning in Fall 2021.
Civil Engineering Technician (2 Vacancies)
Open and Closing Dates: 12/23/2020 to 07/15/2021
Salary: $35,265 to $69,462 per year
Pay scale & grade: GS-5/6/7/8/9
Full performance level: GS-9
Series: GS-0458
Appointment Type: Permanent
Work Schedule: Full-time
Job Announcement Number: NRCS-21-10990602-DHA-LA-SC
Area of Consideration: Public
Location: Alexandria

Soil Conservation Technician (10 Vacancies)
Open and Closing Dates: 12/23/2020 to 07/15/2021
Salary: $35,265 to $56,790 per year
Pay Scale & grade: GS-5/6/7
Full Performance Level: GS-7
Series: GS-0458
Appointment Type: Permanent
Work Schedule: Full-Time
Job Announcement Number: NRCS-21-10990220-DHA-LA-SC
Area of Consideration: Public
Location: Bastrop, Bossier, Clinton, Coushatta, Franklin, Jonesville, Leesville, Many, Natchitoches, New Orleans, Oberlin and St. Joseph

Rangeland Management Specialist (2 Vacancies)
Open & Closing Dates: 01/08/2021 to 07/15/2021
Salary: $35,265 to $69,462 per year
Pay Scale & Grade: GS-5/7/9
Full Performance Level: GS-9
Series: GS-0454
Appointment Type: Permanent
Work Schedule: Full-Time
Job Announcement Number: NRCS-21-11001265-DHA-LA-SC
Area of Consideration: Public
Locations: Clinton, Jennings and Ville Platte

Soil Conservationist (9 Vacancies)
Open & Closing Dates: 01/08/2021 to 07/15/2021
Salary: $35,265 to $69,462 per year
Pay Scale & Grade: GS-5/7/9
Full Performance Level: GS-09
Series: GS-0457
Appointment Type: Permanent
Work Schedule: Full-Time
Job Announcement Number: NRCS-21-11001059-DHA-LA-SC
Area of Consideration: Public
Locations: Denham Springs, Jennings, Lafayette, Mansfield, Minden, New Iberia, St. Joseph, Shreveport, and Thibodaux

To apply for one of the vacancies above, visit USAJobs.gov. If interested, make sure to submit an application as soon as possible in order to be considered!

Scan the QR code to find out what it's like to work for NRCS in Louisiana!

NRCS has been given direct hiring authority for the positions listed below!

All applicants who meet the minimum qualifications, to include any selective placement factors, if applicable, will be referred to the selecting official. Before a certificate is issued to the selecting official, the resume is reviewed to ensure all the qualification requirements are met. A rating will not be used; veteran's preference does not apply due to the existence of the Direct Hire Authority for the position. These announcements will remain open until all positions are filled.
Story from the Field

Submitted by: Morgan Foster, Civil Engineer

Several years ago, after constructing a new building in Rapides Parish, the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF) contacted NRCS for conservation technical assistance regarding some gully erosion that began shortly after construction.

NRCS engineers, along with personnel from LDAF’s Office of Soil and Water Conservation, visited the site and began investigating the causes of the erosion and alternatives for fixing the issue. Personnel found that the roof runoff from the new building was contributing to the main gully erosion. In addition, they found that an underground 4’ x 3’ concrete box culvert ended before releasing water onto an ideal surface for drainage and that the culvert was currently clogged.

NRCS engineers came up with three alternatives to address the gully. The alternative selected was to install dikes and grade stabilization structures. The dikes were constructed perpendicular to the flow which guided water into new risers that were connected to the existing concrete culvert. This slows down the runoff and allows vegetation to establish while correcting the gully problem.

View these dramatic before and after photos to see conservation at work!