Taking Conservation to the Next Level in Eros, Louisiana

Projects • Successes • Partnerships
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On the Cover

Learn more about NRCS outreach partner and new and beginning farmer, Donna Isaacs and her farming operation on pages 4 and 5.
Notes from the State Conservationist

If you are like me, July is one of my favorite times of year. During long summer days, I enjoy the endless bounty of fresh sweet corn, home-grown tomatoes and of course watermelons. In this issue of the Conservation Update, we visit an outreach partner, Donna Isaacs, who also happens to be a new farmer who grows her fair share of summer produce.

Donna Isaacs and her farm De la Terre (meaning of the earth) in Eros, Louisiana, is making a positive impact in her community. She and her team are passionate about soil health and raising healthy produce they in turn sell to local restaurants, neighbors, and friends through a CSA program. Donna exemplifies what NRCS seeks to accomplish through partnerships. I know that you will enjoy reading about her journey as she pivoted from her role as an outreach program manager to owning her own farm.

We have a lot to be thankful for this July including celebrating the birth of our nation and all the freedoms that we enjoy. Let us never forget to give honor to those brave men and women who served in the armed forces. NRCS is proud to stand with our military veterans, in fact, we have programs designed specifically for veterans to begin their own journey in agriculture. Don’t hesitate to reach out to one of our 44 offices located throughout the state to learn more.

Chad Kacir
State Conservationist

16 Pathways Student Interns Joined NRCS in Louisiana This Summer

Sixteen Pathways student interns joined NRCS in Louisiana this summer. These students are located in field offices throughout the state. The students were in Alexandria for orientation on June 16th and 17th. As part of their orientation, the students were able to visit the Kisatchie National Forest to learn more about forest resources in Louisiana and were given the opportunity to hold a Louisiana Pine Snake, one of the rarest snakes in North America. In addition, Dr. Mike Lindsey had the Soil Health Trailer on hand to give the students a presentation on healthy soils.

If you know a college student who is interested in a career in agriculture please tell them to visit usajobs.gov this fall for Pathways opportunities available with NRCS next summer!
Deep in the heart of Jackson Parish is a small town called Eros. Just outside the close-knit community of 213 people, on Louisiana Highway 34, is DeLaTerre Permaculture Farm and its owner Donna Isaacs. Although Donna is considered a beginning farmer, she is no stranger to the world of agriculture or to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

In fact, Donna has been partnering with NRCS since October 2014. In those early days, as the Executive Director of Campti Field of Dreams, a non-profit that focused on building strong rural communities by offering workshops and classes to educate and train locals on programs available through NRCS.

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Dexter Sapp, Program Specialist with the Rapides Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), describes the partnership between Campti Field of Dreams and NRCS. “When we first met Donna, we started with an outreach agreement with her, she coordinated and held outreach meetings from Hammond to Ruston and all points in-between,” smiled Dexter. “Those meetings focused on reaching a whole new type of USDA customer, many times people who had never heard of NRCS before.”

Chad Kacir, State Conservationist in Louisiana, believes in the power of partnerships and collaboration with local organizations to improve rural communities. Chad emphasizes that NRCS is not focused solely on large-scale agricultural producers but also serves new and beginning farmers, like Donna.

Donna recalls those early days, “When our partnership began, our initial projects included developing a community garden with students from the afterschool program at Campti Community Development Center and coordinating outreach meetings describing the diverse programs provided through NRCS. Meetings were held in libraries, churches, municipal buildings; during the day, evenings, and weekends to make it convenient for participants.

Over the years, Campti Field of Dreams has grown allowing Donna to provide more as an organization. After years of coordinating outreach meetings, Donna realized that she too would like to own her own land and start working with NRCS as a new customer/farmer.

“What Donna is doing is very interesting, she’s been teaching new farmers and now by putting NRCS programs into practice, she is a farmer,” explained Chad.

Dexter believes that Donna participating in the NRCS programs she has promoted for so long is a great success and demonstrates what can be accomplished. “What Donna is doing is a model, she is showing other small-scale farmers what they can do.” Dexter continues, “You must have that drive...
and can-do spirit as a farmer, and Donna exemplifies all of those attributes."

Donna’s operation is unique. The 14-acre diversified farm has chickens, ducks, pigs and two acres in vegetables that she sells directly to consumers through her online market. She is enrolled in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and has installed two high tunnels for year-round vegetable production. She then uses her farm as a tool to teach others about EQIP and other programs by hosting workshops and hands-on classes that give students the real-life experience they need to go back to their own land and get started.

Dexter is proud of the relationship that Donna has grown with her students, he knows that the impact being made will have a domino effect in communities throughout Louisiana. “While people may not be able to feed the world, they can feed their own communities,” said Dexter.

Donna sums up the importance of the work she is doing on her place. “Our focus at DeLaTerre, which is French for ‘of the earth,’ is on improving soil health and getting community members back to the grass roots of gardening and growing their own food.” That goal is something we can all agree on.

Chad concludes, “The healthy food and healthy lifestyle markets are growing by leaps and bounds and NRCS is here to help folks learn how to navigate the road to growing your own food.”

There are 44 NRCS field offices located throughout the state. We work with ag producers with thousands of acres down to a 10th of an acre, NRCS is all about “Helping People, Help the Land.”
Nestled along Louisiana Highway 1042 west of Greensburg, Louisiana, one of the oldest towns in Louisiana, is the farm of Warner Hall. “When I left the farm for college, I said that I didn’t want anything to do with farming,” says Warner Hall. However, for Hall that quickly changed because he went on to get an Ag Business Degree from Southeastern Louisiana University. After a short employment stint with Angola State Penitentiary, Warner was hired by the LSU Agronomy Department in 1972 as a Research Assistant working on test plots of corn and soybean varieties to see which were best suited for Louisiana. Warner’s career with the LSU AgCenter spanned a period of 30 years.

While working for LSU, Warner raised beef cattle. Today he is no longer in the beef cattle business but instead he has a 1 ½ acre vegetable operation. He received financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to install a Seasonal High Tunnel. Before Warner’s father died in 1973, he grew corn at this same family farm location and today Warner is carrying on the tradition of raising vegetables. “Growing vegetables began as a hobby for me when my mother was living and growing vegetables. I gave away what I was growing to people I knew in the community. Dr. Dawn Patin with Southern University encouraged me to expand my vegetable production and start selling my produce,” says Hall. In addition to getting advice from Southern University, Warner received a grant from the Winston County Self Help Cooperative, based out of Louisville, Mississippi, which assisted him in purchasing seed, fertilizer, garden supplies and also allowed for a paid intern to assist with the labor needs.

After retiring from LSU AgCenter, Warner also had a 4-year stint with the USDA-Farm Service Agency and the local Soil and Water Conservation District working as a District Technician. Today, however, one will find Warner Hall at his 1 ½ acre garden site several hours per day where he grows tomatoes, peppers, watermelons, cucumbers, eggplant, squash, peas, okra, and sweet corn during the spring and summer months. His winter crops include cabbages, cauliflower, green onions, mustard greens and turnip greens. This season, Warner has harvested approximately 400 melons from his watermelon patch. Warner is quick to admit that with all the excessive rain, grass and weeds have presented him with some challenges. Warner has experimented with growing 6-7 varieties of tomatoes as well as 6-7 varieties of cucumbers.

Warner developed a type of mini greenhouse using wooden pallets, plastic tubing and plastic to grow seedling transplants. He is a firm believer in soil testing and he uses crop rotation. “Nothing is planted in the same spot for consecutive years, crop rotation helps with disease management,” explains Warner.

In a side garden, there are a few rows of Hibiscus growing which is used to make herbal teas. Studies have shown that out of all the herbal teas, hibiscus has the highest amount of antioxidants. In addition to the herbal tea beverage, Warner has a double first cousin that makes an adult beverage from the Hibiscus that is guaranteed to put a smile on your face.
**Story from the Field**

**Soils Investigations for Pond Construction in Louisiana**  
*Submitted by: Mitchell Mouton, Assistant State Soil Scientist*

It is becoming increasingly popular for people to build ponds around their homes and/or farms. Some are for aesthetics, while others are stocked with fish, used as wildlife habitat or used by livestock. Whether constructing the pond with financial assistance from NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program or constructing one without financial assistance from the agency, technical services provided by NRCS are available for anyone free of charge.

There are many things to consider before constructing a pond like the location, drainage considerations, and size. Contacting your local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and NRCS office should be your first stop. NRCS personnel will make a visit to your land to discuss your plans and explore the available resources. One of the most important resource considerations is if the site has suitable soil or not.

Once the preliminary location of the pond is identified, NRCS field office staff or a resource soil scientist will bore several holes to analyze soil conditions. Using an auger, the boring will typically take a sample from the soil surface to 80 inches and an assessment will be made. To determine whether or not the soil is suitable the different layers or horizons in the soil will be split by changes in soil texture (relative percentage of sand, silt and clay). As a general rule of thumb, NRCS recommends having soils with at least 25% clay in a sufficient quantity throughout the proposed site for the purpose of increasing water retention in the pond. Typically, field textures are determined by the ribbon test. A sample of soil is wetted to a moist putty consistency and then gently squeezed between thumb and forefinger attempting to create a ribbon. The soil texture is estimated based on the feel of the ribbon, is it gritty, smooth or tacky, and the ribbon’s length before breaking. Using the ribbon test, experienced field office staff and resource soil scientist can estimate the amount of clay to within 2 to 3%. If the material has a marginal amount of clay or the clay content is difficult to determine then samples are run in a field office lab that can more accurately determine clay content.

Mitchell Mouton, Assistant State Soil Scientist, explains, “Not every soil type in Louisiana is ideal for pond construction. Soils that have 25 to 45% clay are typically the best for pond construction because they have a sufficient amount of clay without being too difficult to work and compact.” He continues, “even if the material is good for a pond, not properly constructing and compacting the pond can lead to seepage issues and possible pond failure.” That is why he recommends using an experienced and reliable contractor for the construction of a pond.

Another very important test conducted on the material is a ‘crumb test’ to check for dispersive clays. Brandon Waltman, Resource Soil Scientist explains, “although the material on-site may have enough clay, the chemical makeup of the soil can lead to the clays dispersing, or not holding together. Dispersive clays can cause levee failures in levee-type ponds or could cause the pond to be overly turbid impacting the quality of the wildlife habitat.”

One of the most critical steps in pond construction is determining if the soil on-site is suitable. It is not always a deal breaker, but knowing ahead of time if your site has suitable material or not will potentially save you lots of money and headache!
Upcoming Events

August 3, 2021
The Value of Your Timber

Trailblazer RC&D is hosting “The Value of Your Timber” workshop on August 3, 2021, from 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM as part of “Trailblazer Tuesdays” at the Lincoln Parish Library located at 910 North Trenton Street in Ruston, Louisiana.

August 14, 2021
Wildlife Workshop

The LSU AgCenter will host a wildlife workshop on August 14, 2021, from 9:00 to 10:30 am at the Northeast Research Station located at 4589 Highway 605 in St. Joseph, Louisiana. For more information, contact Dennis Burns at 318-766-3769.

August 24, 2021
Peanut Workshop

The LSU AgCenter will host a peanut workshop on August 24, 2021, from 5:00 pm to 6:30 pm at the Northeast Research Station located 4589 Highway 605 in St. Joseph, Louisiana. For more information, contact Dennis Burns at 318-766-3769.

August 24 - 26, 2021
74th Annual Louisiana Forestry Association Convention

The Louisiana Forestry Association will hold its 74th Annual Convention on August 24 - 26, 2021, at the Golden Nugget Restort Hotel & Casino in Lake Charles. For more information, or to register visit https://www.laforestry.com/annual-meeting

September 7, 2021
Fall Food Plots for Whitetail Deer

Trailblazer RC&D is hosting “Fall Food Plots for Whitetail Deer” workshop on September 7, 2021, from 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM as part of “Trailblazer Tuesdays” at the Lincoln Parish Library located at 910 North Trenton Street in Ruston, Louisiana. Terry Johnston, retired NRCS employee, will be the speaker at this workshop.

September 9, 10, & 11, 2021
Back to Your Roots Conference

The Campti Field of Dreams is hosting the “Back to Your Roots” conference on September 9, 10 and 11, 2021, at the Bossier Parish Community College in Bossier City, Louisiana. Conference registration is $85 and includes all technical sessions, farm tours, welcome reception and the farm-to-table dinner. The conference is limited to 100 people. Register online at http://camptifieldofdreams.net/back-to-your-roots/

September 25, 2021
National Hunting and Fishing Day

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will host FREE events throughout Louisiana in recognition of National Hunting and Fishing Day on Saturday, September 25, 2021. Each location’s event varies, but all include exhibits on LDWF’s research and conservation efforts, shooting and fishing demonstrations, and exhibits from local chapters of Ducks Unlimited, the Safari Club and the Coastal Conservation Association, as well as local businesses.

This year’s events are scheduled at:

- Waddill Outdoor Education Center, 4142 Flannery Road, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. For more information call 225-765-2927.
- Bodcau Shooting Range, 168 Ben Durden Road, Haughton, Louisiana. For more information call 318-371-3050.
- Black Bayou Lake National Wildlife Refuge, 480 Richland Place Drive, Monroe, Louisiana. For more information call 318-343-4044.
- Woodworth Shooting Range, 661 Robinson Bridge Road, Woodworth, Louisiana. For more information call 318-484-2276.