

Conservation Matters

In the Palmetto State

Information for Employees and Friends of SC NRCS



From the Office of the State Conservationist

Ann English
South Carolina NRCS

Helping People Help the Land

Greetings NRCS employees and conservation partners,

I am pleased to present you with this edition of Conservation Matters, SC NRCS' newsletter.

First, I would like to say that I am happy to be back in the Palmetto State, and I appreciate the great conservation work that continued in South Carolina during my extended detail at national headquarters as the Acting Regional Conservationist for the Northeast. While in NHQ, I had the opportunity to learn about Chief Weller's vision and priorities for the growth of our agency, including revisiting our conservation planning and working with partners to adopt NRCS planning procedures.

The agency is continuing to move forward with Administrative Transformation, and I would like to congratulate Jada Burrell as our new **Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy**. As part of an effort to ensure NRCS is the agency of choice for those seeking new opportunities, we are currently in the process of seeking candidates for new positions. Two positions in the state office, Finance Leader and Business Leader, as well as six Soil Conservationist positions in Georgetown, Bamberg, Aiken, Sumter, Florence, and Marlboro Counties, so stay tuned for those announcements in the future.

We are now mid-way through the 2015 fiscal year, and I'm excited about the strides we've made to put more conservation on the ground through increased partnerships. We received funding through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) in January for two projects in South Carolina, a state project and a multi-state project. We also received funding through the Chief's Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership for the Indian Creek Woodland Savanna Restoration Initiative, a joint partnership effort between NRCS, the US Forest Service and other conservation partners. NRCS also has a permanent seat (one of six) on the newly formed South Carolina Quail Council, chaired by SC DNR, as we work together to improve quail habitat in South Carolina.

I am proud of the accomplishments we have made thus far in 2015, and look forward to more success in the second half of the fiscal year. Please keep up the great work.

ANN ENGLISH

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74th Annual SC Conservation Partnership Conference



The SC Conservation Partnership Conference was held in Columbia, SC at the downtown Marriott Hotel on February 24-25, 2015, and featured a variety of speakers, an awards luncheon and a legislative appreciation banquet. The theme of the conference was the “International Year of the Soil”, and featured a presentation by David Lamm, National Soil Health & Sustainability Leader for NRCS. The title of his presentation was, “Soil Health Farming in the 21st Century: A Practical Approach to Sustainability,” and he engaged the audience with a soil slake test demonstration.

The Outstanding District Employee of the Year award was presented to Amanda Roberts, District Manager for the Lancaster SWCD. The Lancaster Soil and Water Conservation District also received honors, taking home the Outstanding District of the Year award. Kenneth Mullis, Jr., of the Richland SWCD received the Outstanding Commissioner of the Year award.

SC NRCS employees also gathered for a meeting with Michele Brown, National Volunteer Coordinator for the Earth Team. Brown provided Earth Team training for NRCS District Conservationists.

Celebrating the International Year of the Soil





Under Secretary Robert Bonnie Visits South Carolina

By: Sabrenna Bryant, Public Affairs Specialist, SC NRCS



Under Secretary Robert Bonnie gives the keynote address at the Graduation of Sustainable Forestry Land Management Participants.

Robert Bonnie, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, visited Charleston, SC on April 10-11, 2014. He was the keynote speaker at the Center for Heir's Property and Preservation's (CHPP) Graduation of Sustainable Forestry Land Management Participants. The graduation ceremony was held for over 60 families participating in the program, and from these participants, 26 landowners were honored as "Woodlands Advocates". The Advocates received additional training to serve as the Center's "evangelists" to teach the economic importance of properly managing forested and agricultural land to others in the community. Bonnie, along with NRCS State Conservationist Ann English, presented the graduates with certificates of completion.

The "Sustainable Forestry African Land Retention Program" launched in June 2013, and was funded through a \$425,000 grant from US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, NRCS and the Forest Service, as a 30-month pilot project to address the need to restore and conserve African-American forested acres. Through this program, CHPP and USDA are educating landowners on how to increase their land's value and productivity, leading to increased economic benefits.

The Center has worked with 40 families through the Sustainable Forestry Program (SFP), both heir's property owners and non-heir's property owners, who have a total of over 4,103 acres of rural land. NRCS works with CHPP and SFP participants to help them qualify for cost-sharing program assistance. Currently, 40 families have developed a forest management plan with NRCS or the Forest Service, and 71 families have applied for cost-share reimbursement through NRCS/EQIP for work done to their land.

The economic benefits of implementing sustainable forestry practices has had a huge impact on several families. Currently, two families that participated in the Sustainable Forestry Program are finalizing easements estimated at a total of \$2.2 million dollars, and 11 families are finalizing harvest sales estimated at a total of \$1.1 million dollars in income for the 2015-2016 year.

The Sustainable Forestry Program has proven to be a success, as well as the partnership between NRCS and the CHPP. The partnership officially began in September 2012 with a one-year Cooperative Agreement for CHPP to conduct Heir's Property and Sustainable Forestry seminars for historically underserved landowners in Beaufort, Berkeley, Charleston, Colleton, Dorchester and Georgetown counties. Over the next two years, the partnership grew and strengthened as CHPP received two Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) in September 2013 and September 2014 to continue conservation outreach to underserved landowners.

This partnership has been instrumental in helping NRCS reach a segment of landowners that were previously unknown, many of whom had no prior knowledge of USDA programs and services, and bringing these landowners to the table. The Graduation of Sustainable Forestry Land Management Participants was an opportunity to showcase the importance of this partnership, and how the Center for Heir's Property and Preservation and NRCS are truly making a difference in the lives of South Carolina landowners.



Sustainable Forestry Program participants were presented with certificates of completion by Under Secretary Robert Bonnie and NRCS State Conservationist Ann English.

Growing Sustainable Farmers in South Carolina

By: Sabrenna Bryant, Public Affairs Specialist, NRCS

Contributions by: Chanda Cooper, Richland SWCD



Dirt Works, SC's first incubator farm, gives beginning farmers a low cost, low risk option to start a farm.

Across the nation, communities and organizations are coming together to address concerns about the infrastructure of farming and local food distribution while seeking solutions for a more sustainable farming community. In the Midlands of South Carolina, such efforts are being coordinated by the Midlands Local Food Collaborative (MLFC), a working group whose mission is to “cultivate a sustainable local food system, foster land stewardship, and increase equitable food access in the Midlands.”

Comprised of eleven federal, state, and local agencies; universities; and non-governmental organizations, including the SC Natural Resources Conservation Service, MLFC members work together to develop, prioritize, and execute strategies to strengthen the local food economy from farm to table. “The MLFC has provided a forum for us to coordinate our efforts and be efficient rather than redundant. We can accomplish

much more by working together,” says Chanda Cooper of the Richland Soil and Water Conservation District, another MLFC participant.

In the spirit of cooperation, the MLFC traveled to the Charleston/Lowcountry region in January to visit a few organizations that have been key to growing and educating farmers, and creating a support system to help them thrive in that region of the state.

Located on Walnut Hill Plantation in Johns Island, Dirt Works Incubator Farm was the MLFC’s first stop. Dirt Works, an initiative begun by Lowcountry Local First, is the first incubator farm in South Carolina and consists of a total of 10 acres, including a greenhouse and teaching pavilion. It gives beginning farmers a low cost, low risk option to start a farm by providing acreage, farming equipment and farming infrastructure for up to three years, as participants work with mentors to learn the ropes of farming. Through training and educational opportunities, emerging farmers learn first-hand about the realities of farming, which will help prepare them for success and eventual expansion.

The group also visited Sweetgrass Garden, an organic farm also located on Johns Island. Sweetgrass Garden is a seven-acre, 501c3 non-profit aimed at feeding the hungry, and maintained primarily by volunteers. These volunteers cultivate, plant and harvest all the produce, and donate the majority of it to the needy and local food shelters. In addition to growing produce, the farm now has a GAP (Good Agriculture Practices) Shed and a certified farm kitchen on the property. The GAP shed was built by Clemson Extension and the Clemson Center for Architecture Charleston, and the farm kitchen was a combined effort between the College of Charleston’s Farm to School Initiative (funded by the Boeing Company), Clemson Extension, the Clemson Center for Architecture Charleston, and Sweetgrass Garden. This “Crop Stop” will provide farmers with an area to perform post-harvest preparation, such as washing and packaging, while the commercial kitchen, used primarily for produce, will be for value-added food preparation, such as jarring and freezing produce.

Lastly, the group toured Grow Food Carolina, a food hub and produce distribution center located in downtown Charleston. The organization is housed in a 6,000 square-foot warehouse, and its primary goal is to connect local farmers to local buyers, such as restaurants, grocery stores and community institutions. Farmers bring their produce to the warehouse, and Grow Food Carolina markets, sells and distributes the products. Staff inspects all produce and provides product labeling, which allows for food traceability and farm identification.

Continued.....

The organization also ensures that all producers use GHP (Good Handling Practices) and provides training for growers on regulatory compliance, packing, and product traceability. They work closely with participating farmers, making farm visits and providing crop planning advice to maximize the grower's profitability. "At Grow Food Carolina, our main mission is promoting the growers and supporting rural land use," stated Sara Clow, General Manager.

These organizations provide great examples for supporting local farmers and strengthening local food systems, and they are part of a growing infrastructure that will continue to strengthen farm sustainability and the local economy in the Lowcountry and throughout SC. MLFC members gained many insights during their visit to the Lowcountry and are now working together to introduce similar support systems in the Midlands region to help grow sustainable farmers.



The GAP shed at Sweetgrass Garden, above, will provide farmers with an area to perform post-harvest preparation, such as washing and packaging.

Cover Crop Workshop Held in Clarendon County



Buz Kloot, USC-ESRI, speaks with workshop participants about the benefits of cover crops to improve soil health.

improvement to his soil.

During the field demonstration, Kloot and Mikell discussed the various types of cover crop seed mix that is recommended, and the benefits they provide to the soil. Kloot used a soil pit to explain the positive impact cover crops have on enriching the soil and increasing organic matter. Mikell also used a pedometer to explain how compaction of the soil is affected by soil health.

The meeting was part of a three-year Cover Crop Demonstration plan, which includes a cover crop demonstration plot, and was developed and implemented in October 2014. Regular meetings will be held over the three-year period to update local farmers on the impact of the cover crops on soil health.

A cover crop workshop was held on Wednesday, March 19th in Alcolu, SC, near Manning. The workshop was held by NRCS, in conjunction with Clemson Extension and the Clarendon SWCD, and featured NRCS Agronomist Gordon Mikell and USC-ESRI professor Buz Kloot as speakers.

Several local farmers and landowners from Clarendon County were present at the workshop to learn more about the benefits of using cover crops. Topics discussed included soil health, nutrient management, and the importance of organic matter, among many others.

The workshop included a classroom session, as well as a field demonstration on the property of local farmer Harry DuRant. DuRant has been using cover crop for the past three years. He has used cover crops on over 600 acres of farmland, and has seen great



Earth Team

Volunteers in South Carolina



Congratulations to the FY-2014 Earth Team Award Winners!



Ann Christie

SC NRCS Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator of the Year

District Conservationist Ann Christie was presented with an Earth Team certificate and Earth Team globe by SC NRCS Acting State Conservationist Ruth Book for her great recruitment efforts in Lancaster County.



Elyse Benson

SC NRCS Earth Team Volunteer of the Year

Elyse Benson was presented with an Earth Team certificate and Earth Team jacket by SC NRCS Acting State Conservationist Ruth Book for the great volunteer work she continues to do in Greenwood County.

SC NRCS Celebrates Earth Day, April 22nd

Earth Day is celebrated each year, as people around the world recognize the need to protect the earth and the environment. At NRCS, our mission is helping people help the land. Each and every day, NRCS employees are working hard to protect our natural resources and put conservation on the ground. For NRCS, every day is Earth Day!



EQIP Helps York County Farmer Manage Livestock

By: **LaKeisha Barber, former York District Conservationist** *(current District Conservationist in East Palatka, Florida)

Mitch Adkins was looking for help with his pond in the spring of 2013, when he first called the York Service Center for assistance. Adkins, who works full-time, managed a few cows of his own, and assisted his dad with his herd. However, when his father passed away, he suddenly had more cows to manage at his grandfather's farm. Initially, Adkins was concerned about eradicating duck weed in his pond and sediment in his well. But what he received was even better-- a comprehensive conservation plan, and a new outlook on how he could care for his grandfather's land.

It took over a year for Adkins and York District Conservationist LaKeisha Barber to develop a conservation plan that Adkins felt he could implement, including the decision to plant Bahia grass on a third of his grandfather's overgrazed acreage. After seeking input from NRCS and Clemson Extension, he was pleased with the outcome, and looks forward to rotationally grazing his cattle this spring.

Adkins received financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), with funding set aside for new and beginning farmers. Some of his practices include nutrient management, pasture planting, fencing cattle out of sensitive areas and installing a livestock watering system. "I appreciate LaKeisha taking the time to patiently work with me and help me understand all the NRCS paperwork, and how I could improve my farming operation while lessening the impacts to natural resources," stated Adkins. "My grandfather is excited to witness the improvements taking place on the farm and I am grateful that he's around to see what I can do."



The pictures above depict Adkin's grazing land before (top picture), and after planting Bahia grass on his grandfather's acreage.

Dillon SWCD Host Follow-up Meeting with Ray Archuleta

By: **Angela Baker, Dillon SWCD District Manager**



Ray Archuleta visits Dillon for a second workshop on soil health and the benefits of cover crops.

The Dillon Soil and Water District hosted a SECOND workshop and field day with Ray Archuleta in December 2014. The meeting was open to those that had attended the first meeting with Ray back in August 2014.

This follow-up meeting gave those with the "basic" understanding of the makeup of healthy soils a chance to delve further into the science behind the soil, and what tools are used to analyze, maintain and, possibly, enhance the health of the farmer's fields.

Participants conducted infiltration and slake tests to better understand the impact tillage has on soil structure. There was also a representative from Center Seeds, a cover crop seed company, who's owner, Russell Hedrick, also uses cover crops. The workshop was an all day event and a great success among participants.

Many participants were eager to learn more concerning cover crops, so additional workshops will be planned for the future.

Civil Rights Advisory Committee Update

March is Women's History Month and SC NRCS recognizes the contributions women have made in this agency.

Celebrating Women Pioneers in South Carolina

Celebrating



Jessie Thompson

South Carolina's First Female Employee

Interview by Jackie Heuermann,
Federal Women's Program
Manager, SC NRCS

Jessie Thompson describes in her own words, her experiences as the first NRCS female employee in South Carolina.

Can you briefly describe the career path you have chosen with NRCS, and how it has led to your current position?

I graduated from Clemson University with a degree in Animal Science and a Minor in Agricultural Economics. While working at the unemployment office, a co-worker arranged an interview with the local Area Conservationist. I was first hired at the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as a WAE in 1977. I was promoted to Soil Conservation Technician, and finally to a Soil Conservationist with a permanent, part-time position. I first worked with area watershed construction inspectors and soil conservation technicians to train me to survey terraces, strip cropping and ponds to name a few. I am retired now; after 33 years of service. My husband and I have a beef cattle farm which we have had since 1978.

Have there been any female role models in your life that have encouraged you to pursue a leadership role?

Back in 1977, NRCS was the Soil Conservation Service and males dominated the field office setting. To be the first woman in the field was difficult at times. But over the years, females became more accepted in every position. My female role model was the secretary for the Area Office at the time. Her work ethic and standards were outstanding. She treated all people with respect and she was very nice. I just admired that about her and wanted that of myself. The men I worked with taught me the job, all the while treating me like a person.

Based on your experience, what advice or words of wisdom would you like to pass on to the next generation of female NRCS leaders?

I was hired before equal employment opportunities were enforced and things were quite different when I first started working. My words of wisdom are: work hard, don't lose sight of your goals and always respect your co-workers.

Upcoming Events

April 30, 2015

USDA Workshop at the Black Cowboy Agriculture and Agrarian Cultural Festival

The USDA Workshop will be held at the Black Cowboy Agriculture and Agrarian Cultural Festival from 9:30-3:00pm, and will feature presentations on various USDA agencies, including NRCS, RD, FSA and FNS. The workshop is located at Greenfield Farms, 4585 Spencer Road, Rembert, SC 29128.

April 30 and June 30, 2015

USDA Seeks Applications for Rural Energy for America Program (REAP)

USDA, Rural Development (RD) offers agricultural producers and rural small businesses in South Carolina the opportunity to reduce their energy consumption with the assistance of the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP). Grant request can be up to 25% of total eligible projects costs. The maximum grant amount for an energy efficiency project is \$250,000 and the minimum grant is \$1,500. **APPLICANTS REQUESTING \$20,000 OR LESS MUST SUBMIT THEIR APPLICATION NO LATER THAN 4:30PM ON APRIL 30, 2015 AND ON JUNE 30 FOR UNRESTRICTED GRANT AMOUNTS!**

Detailed information about the REAP Program and application process could be found under Popular Topics (Energy) or under Programs & Services at: <http://www.rd.usda.gov/sc>.

May 1, 2015

Envirothon High School Competition

Eighteen teams of South Carolina high school students from across the Palmetto State will compete in the SC Envirothon on May 1, 2015, at the Clemson Sandhill Research and Education Center.

The Envirothon is a yearly competition that tests student's knowledge on natural resource topics, such as soils, water resources, forestry, wildlife and current environmental issues, which centers around urban/community forestry this year. The Envirothon has been in South Carolina since 1997, providing over \$85,000 in scholarship funds to local high school students.

Personnel Update

South Carolina NRCS Welcomes New State Soil Scientist



Kamara Holmes was recently selected as the State Soil Scientist for NRCS in South Carolina.

Kamara has been a Soil Scientist for NRCS since 2000 and has held various positions including Student Trainee/Soil Scientist in Arkansas, Missouri, and Minnesota. She was also Project Leader, MLRA Soil Survey Office Leader, and Soil Data Quality Specialist in Indiana. She worked in Southern California on an extended work detail mapping soils for the Joshua Tree National Park in the Mojave Desert in 2007.

Holmes attended the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agronomy. She began her career with USDA/NRCS as one of the first USDA/Soil Science Scholars.

Welcome to South Carolina Kamara!

- **Catherine MaGee**, Soil Conservation Technician in Hampton, transferred to USCIS in Vermont, effective December 14, 2014.
- **Wayne Henderson**, Engineering Technician in Spartanburg, retired effective January 2, 2015.
- **Tommy Smoak**, Soil Conservation Technician in Barnwell, retired effective January 2, 2015.
- **Jason McKay**, Soil Conservation Technician in Walhalla transferred to NRCS Georgia, effective January 11, 2015.
- **Daniel Compton** is the new Engineering Technician in Laurens, effective January 11, 2015.
- **Amy Overstreet**, Public Affairs Specialist transferred to NRCS Vermont, effective January 26, 2015.
- **Reginald Hall**, Acting State Public Affairs Specialist in NRCS State Office, effective January 29, 2015.
- **Jada Burrell** entered on duty as the new ASTC for Management and Strategy, effective February 23, 2015.
- **Lakeisha Barber**, District Conservationist in York, transferred to NRCS Florida, effective April 6, 2015.
- **David Findley** will be the Acting District Conservationist in York on a 120-day detail, effective April 20, 2015.
- **Curtis Hall** has been assigned to a 120-day detail for the Real Property National Service Delivery Team.
- **Dorothea Martinez** has been assigned to a 120-day detail for the National Service Delivery Team.
- **Tiffany Boyce** has been assigned to a 120-day detail for the National Service Delivery Team.

If you have questions, contributions, or suggestions regarding the newsletter, please contact Sabrenna Bryant at sabrenna.bryant@sc.usda.gov

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