Growing Grass-Fed Beef in Grant Parish

Healthy Soils
Clean and Capture Water

USDA Grant Provides Educational Opportunity for Urban New Orleans School
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:

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On the Cover

John Butterfield always dreamed of owning a farm. Find out how he is working with NRCS to make his farm the best it can be on pages 4 and 5.
Notes from the State Conservationist

This month marks the 80th anniversary of Black Sunday, a day when a great dust storm boiled up on the drought ravaged Great Plains and sent eastward the cloud that bore witness of the environmental, social and economic devastation affecting the region. In just a few short weeks following this event, Congress and President Roosevelt established the Soil Conservation Service.

In the beginning of this movement, the early conservationist worked under the following stated objective: “The basic physical objective of the soil conservation activities by Department agencies shall be the use of each acre of agricultural land within its capabilities and the treatment of each acre of agricultural land in accordance with its needs for protection and improvement.” Over the years, we have seen agriculture production and technology progress, and our tools, and our programs change. Our customers have become more diverse and an increased level of accountability is required by the public. However, our adherence to this imbedded philosophy of helping each private land steward with each acre of their land continues to drive our service to our customers and our nation’s food security.

As I look across our wonderful state, I marvel at all that has been and continues to be accomplished with our farmers, ranchers, forest land owners and our coastal land stewards. We are producing crops on our most suitable soils and with the advances in plant genetics and production techniques achieving per acre yields that were unimaginable 25 years ago. We are returning wetlands on soils that were ultimately unsuitable for annual production due to ponding and flooding. We have pine forests in areas cropped and scarred by gullies from water erosion. We have coastal basins that have the necessary protection to build land where once there seemed little hope to stem the loss of marsh.

Although the Dust Bowl occurred some distance from here, the conservation needs of our state, land and producers have been no less challenging. I encourage you to visit our local offices and find out more about the technical and financial assistance that NRCS has available.

Kevin D. Norton
State Conservationist

Grant Parish Ag Facts

There are 238 farms in Grant Parish
47,977 acres of land is in farms
32% is in pastureland and 23.8% is forestland
Forestry is the #1 commodity of the parish

From: www.agcensus.usda.gov
John Butterfield comes from a long line of agricultural laborers, 17 generations of them to be exact.

Butterfield is the owner of Butterfield Farm, a family owned and operated grass-fed beef operation in Grant Parish, Louisiana. His cows eat two things, their mama’s milk and grass.

“ Agriculture is in my blood,” said Butterfield. “Owning a farm has always been my dream.”

Butterfield’s father was raised on a dairy farm in Iowa. In 1953, he left farming and Iowa behind and moved to Louisiana to pursue other opportunities. Although Butterfield didn’t grow up on a farm, he spent his life trying to get back to the farm.

Butterfield was raised in the city of Alexandria, Louisiana. His family moved to rural Grant Parish when he was in junior high school and bought one dairy cow. He spent every day milking the cow until he graduated from high school.

“While friends of mine spent their time milking, thinking of ways to get off of the farm, I spent my time figuring out how to buy two cows to milk,” said Butterfield.

For years, Butterfield worked and saved to be able to purchase some land for a farm. He also spent the last 15 years bailing hay for other people to earn extra money to buy a tractor, while working full time as a contractor.

Five years ago, Butterfield was finally able to make his dream a reality when he purchased 46 acres of timber land in Grant Parish. Once he had the land, the real work began. He had to clear it, burn it, build some fences and plant grass before he could put cattle on it.

Once he got the land ready to farm, he visited the Grant Parish Soil and Water Conservation District and NRCS office in Colfax because he wanted a pond. Instead, he left with an appointment for the district conservationist to visit his farm to work on a conservation plan for his landfarm.

Through conservation technical assistance and funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Butterfield has been installing conservation practices on his farm since 2011.

He began by building cross-fencing to divide his pastures so...
he could apply rotational grazing practices. Butterfield’s cows are rotated between five areas of pasture every seven days so that overgrazing is not a problem. He installed pipelines and watering facilities to ensure that his cattle have an ample water supply in each pasture. Heavy use area protection has also been installed to protect areas of high traffic against erosion.

His pastures have been planted with clover to provide diverse forage for his cattle. Since the clover is a legume it can transfer nitrogen from the air to the soil to feed other plants.

The work on his farm is not finished yet. He currently has plans to install a water control structure and a few creek crossings. Because he wants his farm to be the best it can be, he continually educates himself on the best management practices for his operation. Butterfield attends local workshops, demonstrations, and field days. He has also attended several grass-fed beef conferences at Texas A&M and was recently certified as a Louisiana Master Cattle Producer.

Butterfield said, “I always knew I would have a place like this. Now that I have a farm, I’m going to work on growing it.”
Healthy Soils are a living ecosystem. They are teeming with billions of bacteria, fungi and other microbes that form a symbiotic ecosystem. These tiny critters help soil to be the largest bioreactor on the planet. They can transform and decompose certain types of chemicals. Examples include transforming organic forms of nitrogen into ammonium ions while others change ammonium into nitrate. In wet or flooded environments some microbes convert nitrate to nitrogen gas. Microbes can also decompose some organic pollutants.

The ability of our soils to clean and capture water has an impact on the purity of the water that reaches our lakes and streams. Soil is the world's biggest water filter and learning to utilize this natural system will improve the health of ourselves and the environment.
when he began talking about the garden, he came to life, showing great excitement and enthusiasm about the garden. With pride he showed me the new rock he had put out along the sidewalk the day before to keep people out of the garden.

“Is it to keep people like me out of the garden?” I asked. “Well, yes,” he said “but mostly it’s to try to keep the kids out. This is where we play, but I don’t want them playing in our garden. They need to respect the garden.”

Clifton’s favorite part of gardening at the school is planting tomatoes, watering the plants, making decisions and keeping people out of it. He told me he has learned so much that he has been able to share with his mother that he inspired her to start a garden at their home where he is now teaching her to garden as well. He told me the gardening club meets twice a week, Thursdays after school and on Sunday afternoons.

“Sundays? You must be really dedicated to come here on a Sunday. Do you live nearby?” I asked. “No,” he replied. “We live across the river, my Mom brings me here on Sunday afternoons to work.”

I was dumbfounded. A child and a parent that are so dedicated to learning and understanding gardening and where their food comes from, something so foreign to some in the city, yet so simple to many of us, that they dedicate a Sunday afternoon to come across the river to work in a small school garden was absolutely inspirational to me. And then I remembered that USDA NRCS and the office of Civil Rights was providing this neat little greenhouse in the corner to expand educational opportunities for these kids.

As the formal program began leading up to the actual ribbon cutting on the greenhouse, Dr. Joe Leonard, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, spoke about the importance of connecting kids with healthy food, understanding where food comes from and laying the foundation for young people to grow into healthy adults. As he reminisced on his time as an educator in the New Orleans school system, I began to understand the special significance this particular greenhouse had for him. USDA has provided grants for many schools across the country for these greenhouses and Dr. Leonard had visited several in March, but this one clearly was special.

Elora Turner, Special Education instructor and Garden Club sponsor, spoke about what the garden meant to the school, the students and the philosophies and the teaching methods at KIPP. When she began to compare plants in the garden to students in the school, I was moved. A successful garden must have plants with a healthy root system, you start from the ground up. Plants don’t grow from the top down and education and student development doesn’t happen that way either. You start with a good foundation, or root system, for the students in the form of mentors in the community willing to volunteer their time and share their knowledge, partners willing to provide sponsorships or grants such as USDA and private businesses and of course parents and teachers that encourage the students to grow. Not only are they learning the growing process of plants, they are learning where their food comes from and healthy eating habits.

There are inherent life lessons learned in the garden along the way. The students pick the plants to grow and have, so far, had as many failures as successes. But they are learning from mistakes and celebrate small successes. Elora said that even problems in the classroom can be turned to success in the garden, where patience, trial and error and responsibility can be learned. 8th grade students and garden club members Tzonea Perkins and Javell Desalle said they were “learning by teaching others” and had learned a lot about “patience, hard work, and determination.”

And then Tzonea and Javell cut the ribbon on the greenhouse. And the children cheered. Elora made a passing comment about finding new mentors that could teach them about using this new greenhouse. Clifton said to a classmate “we’ll be using it to grow tomatoes is what we’ll be doing,” and like that, it was over. And I didn’t want to leave or the children to go back to class because they were so captivating. And they were so excited that USDA had expanded their garden. And it made me so proud that we were a part, in a very small way, of something that could truly influence a young mind in the form of a simple school garden.

To learn more about KIPP New Orleans Schools visit www.kippneworleans.org. To learn more about USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity visit www.usda.gov/strikeforce. To see interviews and video of the garden, visit This Week in Agriculture at www.twilatv.org or see the clip at www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsLMwGO8pAM&feature=player_embedded1201.