NRCS signs first Regional Conservation Partnership Program agreements in West Virginia

In January, the Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the selection of two West Virginia recipients as part of the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Representatives gathered together to sign agreements, officially marking the partnerships, May 5.

"Today we signed RCPP agreements to solidify our commitment to projects demonstrating the strength of public-private partnerships and the collaborative ability to deliver positive solutions to natural resource concerns in West Virginia," said Bill O'Donnell, NRCS Programs Assistant State Conservationist. “With so many strong project proposals, the national and state project selection process was extremely competitive. West Virginia is very fortunate to have two proposals selected and hope for more in the future.”

Over one hundred high-impact projects across all 50 states, including West Virginia, will receive more than $370 million. In West Virginia, two proposals were selected and will receive more than $9 million. RCPP is a 5-year $1.2 billion USDA commitment.

One selected project is the West Virginia Chesapeake Headwaters Conservation Partnership project, which addresses water quality degradation and inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife in the Bay. The local lead organization for this project is the West Virginia Agricultural Land Protection Authority.

"The West Virginia Chesapeake Headwaters Conservation Partnership is grateful to receive the RCPP award as all entities are eager to continue our conservation work for the Chesapeake Bay," said Lavonne Paden, West Virginia Agricultural Land Protection Authority Director. “We look forward to working with landowners to protect West Virginia farmland and sensitive areas in the Bay region, in turn to continue safeguarding the water quality for the Washington D.C. metropolitan area.”

Also selected, the Cerulean Warbler Appalachian Forestland Enhancement project, a multi-state endeavor covering West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to address the national priorities of at-risk species habitat for the Cerulean Warbler, a neotropical migratory songbird whose core range is within the central portion of the Appalachian Mountains.

The Appalachian Mountain Joint Venture is an existing partnership of local and national agencies collaborating to ensure the long-term sustainability of native bird populations that breed in the Appalachian Mountains.

“The Cerulean Warbler Appalachian Forestland Enhancement will create a tremendous opportunity for our partnership to engage private landowners and promote contiguous areas of viable working forests to help ensure long-term conservation of Cerulean Warblers,” said Todd Fearer, Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture Coordinator.

“Cerulean Warblers are one of our partnership's highest priority species and approximately 75 percent of their distribution occurs on private land. Sustainable forestry practices on private lands can improve the habitat for Cerulean Warblers and multiple other game and nongame species, while enhancing forest health,” said Fearer.

More than 600 pre-proposals were submitted for RCPP in 2014. Of those, over 200 were invited to submit full proposals. Remaining projects that were not selected in this first year may be resubmitted in subsequent years. In addition to USDA funds, partners' will contribute an estimated $400 million, more than doubling USDA's investment.
NRCS Teammates and Partners in Conservation,

As many of you are aware, the former State Conservationist, Kevin Wickey recently departed West Virginia. We wish him much success in his new role serving the Chief as the Central Regional Conservationist. The lingering question could be, what now? The State Conservationist vacancy has been advertised and recently closed. I would expect Tony Kramer, Acting Northeast Regional Conservationist and Chief Weller to conduct interviews and make a decision regarding West Virginia’s new State Conservationist in the near future.

In the meantime, I continue to serve as the Acting State Conservationist and have enjoyed my experience so far in West Virginia. I’ve had the opportunity to attend the Conservation Agency’s State Committee meeting as well as some field time experiencing the state Envirothon competition at Camp Caesar. A little bit about me, I consider myself a Wyoming native as that is where I attended college and started my NRCS career. I started as a Soil Conservationist moving up through the ranks to District Conservationist and Area Conservationist before moving to Oregon as the Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy. I moved to Oregon for my current position as the Assistant State Conservationist for Strategy Management. During my time in West Virginia, I am eager to examine processes and get a better perspective of what is important and what we are most proud of.

My philosophy is simple, I value each employee and the unique contribution they make to the agency. With that said, I strongly believe every position should provide value and support to the field as they are the interface with our customers and the conduit to deliver conservation technical and financial assistance. Our relationship with local partners is crucial to find positive solutions to complex conservation problems. I was happy to engage with some partners at the West Virginia State Technical Committee meeting in May.

Also attending was Tony Kramer, who enjoyed his visit to West Virginia. Having him see firsthand the great work employees are doing across the state was a wonderful opportunity. I appreciate the warm welcome received and look forward to my time here in West Virginia. I advocate for an open door policy so feel free to reach out or stop by and we can visit further. I hope to meet as many of you as possible and gain knowledge on your West Virginia perspective.

Tom Watson
Acting State Conservationist

**Editor’s note: The Employee Spotlight is intended to recognize the positive contributions of NRCS West Virginia Employees through work related or personal achievements. Please send your nominations to stacy.ouellette@wv.usda.gov for consideration.**
New farmers use Strikeforce Initiative, build seasonal high tunnel

By Stacy Ouellette  
Public Affairs Specialist

One of the major successes in West Virginia has been the increase of seasonal high tunnels (SHT), a conservation practice funded through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) with special thanks to an initiative developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. USDA established the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity initiative in 2010 to work with community based organizations, state based agencies and local partners to increase economic opportunities in rural counties suffering persistent poverty. In 2014, West Virginia along with Kentucky, Louisiana and Tennessee were states added to the StrikeForce initiative. Producers in 21 of 29 StrikeForce counties across the state were selected and received funding for seasonal high tunnels to increase healthy food access and encourage growth in impoverished counties statewide.

"Having the StrikeForce initiative kick-off here was another example of USDA's commitment to providing support and targeted technical assistance to local communities," said Tom Watson, Acting State Conservationist.

"NRCS is proud to collaborate with Rural Development, Farm Service Agency and other USDA agencies to find positive solutions for the 29 counties in West Virginia most in need of support and services." Lisa Sickler is one of 67 producers in West Virginia awarded funding through the Strikeforce Initiative to build a seasonal high tunnel.

She and her husband Jeff began their journey as new farmers in 2009, when they purchased property in Philippi. Jeff and Lisa relied heavily on the expert technical support and financial assistance offered by local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"We could not be farming if it was not for NRCS and the programs offered," said Lisa Sickler. "Farming is our major source of income right now and we intend to build it into a family business. Our son graduated from WVU (West Virginia University) and works for us."

The Sicklers sell their produce and flowers grown in seasonal high tunnels at farmer's markets in Philippi, Morgantown and Westover with hopes of expanding into Elkins next year.

"We do a lot of mission work and relied on prayer to figure out what we wanted to do with this new property," said Lisa Sickler. "Sure enough, Jason Teets (NRCS soil scientist) called us with information about an NRCS program we could apply for and that got everything started."

Sickler Farm has three seasonal high tunnels, funded through EQIP. They recently finished the construction of one SHT funded through the EQIP StrikeForce Initiative and will use a rotational cropping sequence with the other two.

"We grow flowers and produce – lettuce, tomatoes, peppers," said Sickler. "The newest seasonal high tunnel will help us with rotating crops. It's also larger than the other two. It truly does extend the growing season as we have items earlier and later than normal."

On occasion, they have been able to provide produce for Barbour County schools. They are working with the organization Heart in Hand House, Inc., a non-profit mission project providing emergency assistance to Barbour Country residents.

"If a producer is definitely interested and serious about growing food, do it," said Lisa Sickler. "Our NRCS contacts have the knowledge and expertise to walk you through how to do it. They give you a hand up for you to help yourself. It's exciting and they encourage you to do it properly to help you without hurting the land."

More than 700 rural counties, parishes, boroughs, tribal reservations, and Colonias in 20 states have been identified as sub-county pockets of poverty. As areas of persistent poverty are identified, USDA staff work with state, local and community officials to increase awareness of available assistance programs and increase participation through intensive community outreach.
NRCS employees make a positive difference in West Virginia

By Stacy Ouellette
Public Affairs Specialist

Each year, employees from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) give back to local communities by public outreach activities. In April, more than 20 employees joined local conservation districts for two annual competitions: the West Virginia Envirothon and the state Grasslands Evaluation Contest. The Envirothon is a conservation education program that focuses on five subject areas: aquatics, forestry, soils, wildlife, and a current environmental topic. High school students formulate teams for the event and the winning team is sent to the National Envirothon competition.

Alan Moore, Soil Data Quality Specialist and Geophysical soil scientist has worked 25 years for NRCS. He has dedicated his time and technical expertise to Envirothon competitions in two states. “I have participated in many Envirothon competitions in Kentucky and West Virginia as well as provided training to local teams in both states on the soils aspect of the competition,” Moore said. “I support this event because environmental education is very important to me. The students participating are the future leaders in the various environmental fields. This event is not only a learning experience but an opportunity to make contacts for a possible career.”

This year, Moore was the lead for the soils station supported by NRCS soil science employees. At this station, students are introduced to the physical and chemical properties of soils and how some properties can limit the use of the soils. “Soil health education is important to help farmers understand if their soil is biologically active,” Moore said. “Soil health impacts the choices farmers or landowners make about chemical and physical inputs to the soils that can have long term effects whether positive and negative.”

Preparation for the competition begins months prior with acquiring necessary equipment, creating test materials, and soliciting volunteers. Setting up the soil section site includes digging soil pits, monitoring them during the competition and also teaching the students about soils prior to the competition. “It is a rewarding experience because you get to see the interest and enthusiasm of the students and you are helping mold them for environmental careers and recruiting potential future employees for NRCS,” Moore said. “Students gain valuable experience in the use of soil survey material, learn how to identify soil properties and work together as a team. Teamwork is essential in any work place.”

The West Virginia Grasslands Evaluation contest takes place each year during the West Virginia Beef Expo as the location is central to the state and many students participate in the expo. Gary Redden, District Conservationist for Fayette, Raleigh and Wyoming Counties served on the planning committee for the competition. Redden, who was at a conference years ago, heard about the grasslands evaluation contest and proposed the idea of creating one in West Virginia. Partners and local groups showed interested so Redden traveled to a competition to learn more.

“The entire competition builds around the resources farmers have and how to maximize usage,” Redden said. “The contest ties directly into the conservation planning that we are doing as NRCS employees and partner agencies. We examine carrying capacity for livestock on their pastures and soil needs, which are two major parts of farming in West Virginia. Several of the students that are going through the competition pursue careers in the agriculture field, whether with NRCS, Farm Service Agency or teaching.”

The competition is not easy and the committee conducted a trial with conservation agency representatives on the federal, state and local levels. The USDA-NRCS Appalachian Plant Materials Center in Alderson, provides 25 plant samples for the contest. The plants are in a vegetative state and students are not allowed to touch them. They have to examine the plants and identify each. “One of the best aspects for NRCS employees engaging in these outreach projects is the ability to support the needs of West Virginia agriculture students and share knowledge with partner agencies,” Redden said. “We all get pretty busy so meeting up and having conservations can be tough. It’s a great outreach programs that is hands on and promotes conservation practices.”

Redden is confident that anyone who sees the competition in action and the value students are gaining from it, they will want to participate in the contest. “It’s an intense contest and the kids get a lot out of it,” he added.

“The team that wins this contest goes to the National competition held in Missouri,” Redden said. “The teams we send from here are often in the top three. We relate this contest specifically to West Virginia so we do train the winning team for the competition in Missouri as there are a few things different.”

Another reward for students participating in Envirothon and the Grasslands Evaluation contest are scholarship for teams who place. “The first team we sent from West Virginia to the National competition, we won,” said Jim Foster, West Fork Conservation District Vice-Chair. “One of the best things we’ve done for the young people here is this competition. It teaches them about the natural, renewable resources on this earth. Everything goes back to natural resources, whether people want to see it or not. It teaches the kids how it all works and management skills.”

The West Virginia Conservation Agency and Conservation Districts organize and administer the contests for the state.
Earth Team Volunteers make a positive difference in West Virginia

Volunteering is a way of taking action by putting the needs of someone or something ahead of oneself. Fortunately, there are 36 Earth Team Volunteers here who have answered the call to better our environment and the state of West Virginia.

“The Earth Team volunteers I have worked with have all brought special skills to the work I have been involved with including specialized computer skills and technical expertise,” said Joe Hatton, Easements Farm Bill Specialist. “All Earth Team Volunteers have provided skills which enhanced my capacity to complete tasks and assist our partners with the delivery of conservation.”

For the past two years, the state office in Morgantown has had three student Earth Team Volunteers from West Virginia University: Halley Dawkins, Mariah Hatton and Matt Oliver. Mariah is also daughter to Joe Hatton.

Halley Dawkins is scheduled to graduate in May with an Agribusiness Management and Rural Development & Agricultural and Extension Education degree. As a pathways student, Dawkins will continue her career with the Gassaway Field Office this summer.

“I decided to volunteer with NRCS because I wanted to learn more about the agency and what they do,” said Dawkins. “I have learned much more about the amount of work it takes to go into (NRCS) programs. I have always loved how NRCS has helped farmers and people of the local communities. I have found a career that I want to carry out.”

Although Mariah Hatton's father works for NRCS, she was eager to gain her own perspective of the agency as a volunteer.

Currently working on her Masters of Science degree in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Design, Mariah gained a better understanding of NRCS and her classes.

“I started volunteering around the same time that I took my first agronomy class and the outside experience helped me better relate to the class,” said Mariah Hatton. “I have learned a lot about cultural resources from my experience in the field office and actually filling out the Cultural Resources paperwork.”

Matt Oliver is a Resource Management and Sustainable Development doctoral student aspiring to finish his coursework and research in 2017. Oliver began his journey as an Earth Team Volunteer in 2010, while working on his Master’s degree.

Since then, he’s volunteered more than 300 hours for NRCS in West Virginia and a field office in Anderson, Ind.

“I began volunteering for the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (now ACEP-ALE) because I was researching conservation easements on private forestland in West Virginia for my thesis,” said Oliver. “I have gained a tremendous amount of practical knowledge volunteering for the NRCS. It has been just as important to my education and future career as has been the classroom and research. I greatly appreciate the NRCS employees for their contribution to my learning.”

Most Earth Team Volunteers sign up to learn about NRCS, better understand career possibilities and give back to local communities. In the end, Earth Team Volunteers walk away with unique life experiences and relationships with others passionate about conservation.

“I have learned many skills that can be used in the workplace such as time management, confidence, and organizational skills,” said Dawkins. “I found being a volunteer opened my eyes to all of the opportunities out there. Being a volunteer also helped point me in the right direction of a career as well.”

Earth Team Volunteers make their own mark on conservation in West Virginia by bringing their own unique skills to work each day. Anyone can help with conservation efforts by simply volunteering their time and in return will have NRCS technical experts guiding them.

All education levels are accepted and the minimal age requirement is 14 years old.

For more information on becoming an Earth Team Volunteer, contact Nan Kimble, Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator at 304-284-7546 or visit your local USDA Service Center.

Earth Day confessions of a soil health geek: Ron Nichols

(NRCS) have shown us that we can actually build our soils—make them more productive, profitable and resilient to weather extremes like drought.

By farming using soil health principles and practices like no-till, cover cropping and diverse rotations, these farmers are actually increasing organic matter in their soil, increasing microbial activity, sequestering more carbon, improving wildlife and pollinator habitat—all while harvesting better profits and often better yields. Off-the-farm, these practices are improving water and air quality, too.

And that's good news for all of us on Earth Day 2015. As I've worked on NRCS’ “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil” awareness and education campaign over the past couple of years, I've had the privilege of talking with dozens of our nation's soil health farmers. What I’ve learned from them has been inspiring.

I’ve asked these farmers why they changed from “conventional farming” to “regenerative farming,” focusing on soil health. Their answers were essentially the same.

Once they recognized that soil was alive, and that the microbes in the soil were critical “business partners,” they realized that it made sense protect that life. And so they now farm in ways to improve the health of their living soil.

Increasingly, farmers throughout the nation are adopting these soil health management systems.

In doing so, they are growing a new hope in healthy soil. Which makes for one proud and optimistic soil health geek this Earth Day.
State Civil Rights Action Committee discusses challenges, changes

By Stacy Ouellette
Public Affairs Specialist

In every state, there is a group of employees volunteering to be members of the state's Civil Rights Advisory Committee (CRAC). The CRAC serves as advisors to management and all employees within the state to enhance and fulfill equal employment opportunities and program delivery responsibilities.

In West Virginia, the CRAC is made of NRCS employees, with a chairperson, vice-chairperson, and representatives for the state office, north area, south area and each special emphasis program. Nicole Viars, Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy serves as the CRAC advisor.

"The CRAC serves as an advisory committee to the State Conservationist with the role of advising and assisting on all matters related to civil rights," Viars said. "The committee works to ensure that both programs are delivered and employees are treated in a non-discriminatory manner consistent with USDA policies and procedures. My role is to support the committee by making sure they have the resources and guidance necessary to develop and maintain an effective civil rights program in West Virginia," Viars said.

The committee also is a liaison between management and employees to establish communication for civil rights issues, provide feedback on civil rights programs and recommend improvements as needed.

Rebecca Bowers, Romney Field Office Soil Conservationist is the current Chair for the committee. Jeremy Bennett, is the Vice Chair and previously held the Chair position.

"My role is to coordinate activities with our meetings, set the agenda, continue with business plan operations and work with committee members to keep them aware of their duties," Bowers said. "We are here to educate all employees to prevent discrimination and foster a comfortable, respectful work environment for all who interact with NRCS." "As the Vice Chair, I support the chairperson and assist committee representatives in spreading the word about programs, events and concerns," said Bennett. "We are here to fulfill the agency's duties and obligations, which includes raising awareness of cultural differences and promote diversity."

In the last year, there have been many changes as committee representatives serve a three-year term. Viars became the new advisor in 2014 after the former advisor retired. Viars has centered her advising role by keeping all employees informed of CRAC activities.

"My goal is for WV employees to understand the role of the CRAC and strengthen the effectiveness of what we do," Viars said. "I hope to do this through improved communications to our staff and by promoting better employee engagement. Our staff are busy and bombarded with competing interests for their time. By developing a more concentrated method of communicating our goals and successes, I hope to maximize the effectiveness of the message we communicate."

One of the constant challenges the committee faces is finding employees willing to fill positions. When positions open or outreach events occur, it can be a struggle to find employees willing to support.

"I hope to encourage more employees to consider being part of the CRAC and/or participating in activities that promote civil rights and outreach efforts," Viars said.

Additionally, civil rights goes beyond NRCS management and employees. "The committee is here to help promote non-discriminatory behavior, diversity of cultural difference amongst employees and amongst our producers," Bennett said. "It's important to show mutual respect for all people and grow the agency in a healthy manner."

Being a part of the committee can be an opportunity to better understand how civil rights functions impact the agency on all levels. Attending different events and interacting with field offices, students, special emphasis groups and local communities is an education to broaden your horizons, Bowers added.

Currently 12 committee positions that are filled with one vacancy for the Black Special Emphasis program. Anyone wishing to volunteer should contact their immediate supervisor and any committee member. Future vacancies and events will be announced as they become available.

Career and recruitment fairs are attended as part of the committee's outreach and are not limited to members. Volunteers are always welcome with supervisor permission to attend.

"Volunteering to be a committee member is an extra duty with time commitments, but it is rewarding," Bennett said. "With the right time management, you can work duties into your current day to day duties."

The committee is focused on preparing for the state's Civil Rights Review that will take place in June. Members are still always available for support and concerns. Please refer to the list on page 6 to contact any committee member.

Civil Rights Review Information
The WV NRCS Civil Rights review is scheduled for June 15-18, 2015. The following offices have been chosen by the National Civil Rights team for the review:
1. State Office - Morgantown
2. Martinsburg Field Office
3. Weston Field Office
4. Cross Lanes Field Office
5. Summerville Field Office
6. Beckley Area Office

Please contact Nicole Viars with any questions or concerns.

ASIAN AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER HERITAGE MONTH

"MANY CULTURES, ONE VOICE: PROMOTE EQUALITY AND INCLUSION"

MAY 2015

1. State Office - Morgantown
2. Martinsburg Field Office
3. Weston Field Office
4. Cross Lanes Field Office
5. Summerville Field Office
6. Beckley Area Office
The 2015 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey has been sent via electronic mail to randomly selected employees. This survey is sent out annually to provide a safe, anonymous way for selected employees to provide feedback to leadership. All concerns expressed in each survey are important for leadership, managers and the agency to better gauge our progress, determine areas of success and where improvement is needed. If selected to participate, an email will arrive from the Office of Personnel Management. All employees are encouraged to complete the survey by the deadline of June 12, 2015. Currently, NRCS West Virginia is at 56% completion for selected personnel. Thank you for your support!