



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service Earth Team

Volunteer Showcase

Earth Team Pivotal in STEP UP Program

For many college students, summer is a time to relax and hang out with friends, but for the past three years, agricultural students from Texas A&M University Kingsville (TAMUK), have spent their summers as Earth Team volunteers for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

These Earth Team volunteers have been critical to the success of the Science, Technology and Environmental Programs for Undergraduate Preparation (STEP UP) program. Started in 2011, STEP UP was developed through collaboration among five Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and multiple state and federal entities.

Over the 10-weeks the students served as Earth Team volunteers at NRCS offices, they worked with conservation professionals to provide technical assistance to landowners. They also learned how to develop conservation plans and implement recommended conservation practices. Students helped with conservation education, including field days, workshops and events.

Since the partnership started, 18 STEP UP students have volunteered 6,400 hours to NRCS – a value of almost \$148,000. Their work not only benefits NRCS and landowners, it also has helped protect and improve natural resources and the environment, while giving the students a look at what it would be like to have a career with USDA.



Joey Cortez (R) learns from NRCS staffer, Reagan Gage, Range Management Specialist, how to measure forage production weight to determine stocking rate

“Working with NRCS as an Earth Team volunteer has taught me that there is more to a professional career than simply receiving a higher level of education,” said Joey Cortez. “There are a lot of different features of the workforce that can be learned through first-hand experience that are not readily available in the classroom, such as working directly with producers.”

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Iliana Rodriquez, an animal science student, worked in the Harris County NRCS office organizing new conservation folders and in the field with practice certification.

“Iliana was a tremendous asset to me this summer, especially with my office being a one employee office,” said Delwin Cannon, district conservationist. “She put her bi-lingual skills to work by translating between a farmer who only spoke only Spanish and the district conservationist, who was very pleased with how professional she handled herself.”

“The summer internship has had a remarkable impact on my life as a student and future professional,” said Sam Young, a student of range and wildlife science. “It has shown me what it takes to be a professional in a government office and how to be successful at it.”

Alfonso Sandoval met new people and gained experience working with the USDA. “My perception of NRCS is that they are an agency that helps people setup plans that will benefit them as a farmer or rancher and also help the land. Overall, the NRCS is a great agency!”

The program provides experiential learning to students in agricultural- or natural resources-based areas of study. The program also allows HSI students, primarily first-generation college attendees, the opportunity to participate in research and career training experiences. Enhancing these skills puts the students in a prime position to replace retiring USDA employees, provides USDA a diverse pool of potential employees.



Earth Team Volunteer Iliana Rodriquez (above) practices her prescribed burning skills.



Earth Team Volunteer Sam Young received training in conducting land surveys.

The Earth Team is the volunteer component of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. If you are interested in volunteering, contact the National Earth Team Office at 888-526-3227 or visit: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/volunteers/>

Helping People Help the Land