A Match Made in Heaven...
Rice and Crawfish, the Perfect Union

Soils, Culture and People

A cooperative partnership with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D)

Projects • Successes • Partnerships
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On the Cover

The Durand’s are successfully farming rice and crawfish in sugarcane country. To find out more about their operation, see pages 4 and 5.
Notes from the State Conservationist

The holiday season reminds us to be thankful for the abundant blessings we have in our lives; family, friends, good food and passing on time honored traditions. I trust that our producers, partners, friends and co-workers had a wonderful Thanksgiving and will have a joyful holiday season. With the new year fast approaching, I’m looking forward to great things happening at NRCS.

This time of year is also synonymous with hunting, camping, hiking and enjoying the great outdoors. Our state is known as “Sportsman’s Paradise” and has some of the best wildlife habitat in the south. Nowhere is that more evident than in the rice fields of central and south Louisiana. As coastal marshes gradually fade from our coast, flooded rice fields play an instrumental role in providing wildlife habitat for ducks, geese, shorebirds, wading birds and secretive marsh birds.

For all of us who enjoy crawfish boils or a good crawfish etouffee; raising crawfish, another valuable product of rice farming, is extremely important. I believe we can all agree that rice is a vital crop, not only for its traditional uses, but also for the productivity of the fields after harvest, with crawfish farming and providing abundant habitat for wildlife.

In this issue we introduce you to Jeff Durand and his brothers C.J. and Greg who carry on the family partnership of rice farming and crawfish production in St. Martin Parish. The Durand family exemplifies the very best of rice production, that includes crawfish farming and vibrant wildlife habitat. The future of farming certainly is in good hands with the Durand family.

Producers in Louisiana continue to lead the way in producers signing up to use NRCS’s Conservation Client Gateway, an on-line approach to getting conservation and financial business accomplished. In December, we will participate in the USA Rice Federation conference in New Orleans. I’m also looking forward to the 70th Annual Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts (LACD) Convention in January.

Between signing up new folks for our programs and working with our existing customers, I know we will make great strides in conservation for Louisiana. From our NRCS family to yours, may 2016 be a healthy and prosperous year!

Kevin D. Norton
State Conservationist

St. Martin Parish
Ag Facts

There are 340 farms in St. Martin Parish
75,909 acres of land is in farms
76.7% is cropland and 8.9% is forestland
Sugarcane is the #1 commodity of the parish

From www.agcensus.usda.gov
Driving down Hwy 347 passing massive Live Oaks dripping with Spanish moss is a sea of sugar cane, as far as the eye can see. Standing in the midst of all this sugar is an island of rice, the Durand family rice farm, or as it is known in the spring, THE place to buy crawfish (Teche Valley Seafood). Jeff Durand his two brothers, CJ and Greg along with his three sisters (Margot, Joanna and Connie) work side-by-side to grow rice, farm crawfish and provide habitat for wildlife on their property located in St. Martinville.

1980 was a watershed year for the Durand family. It was the year they began growing rice in earnest but, their love of the land started many years before.

“Our dad and his brother cleared some of the property we farm today; he had someone else growing rice in the 60’s and 70’s and we farmed crawfish,” explained Jeff. “As soon as we were old enough to start going to the ponds, all my brothers and sisters would go after school and run crawfish traps.”

At one point, the farmer that was growing rice on our land retired and the next farmer started growing soybeans that hurt the crawfish business. “So that’s when we decided that we would grow rice ourselves,” said Jeff. “We also cleared some more family property at that time and continued to grow the family farm.”

Over the years, the operation has changed and adapted. At one point crawfish was the biggest crop but today more acres are devoted to rice production. The Durand’s plant about 900 to 950 acres a year and rest about one quarter of the land, usually 250 to 300 acres, that is left idle. They also “double crop” the rice making two cuttings, known as a ratoon. Jeff goes on to say, “Almost half of our acres are harvested twice.”

NRCS programs have played an integral role in helping the Durand’s reach their conservation goals. “We first started utilizing NRCS programs in the late 80’s and we’ve been partnering ever since,” explained Jeff.

From opportunities like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) … NRCS programs have made all the difference to the Durand’s.

“The technical assistance has really been helpful,” said CJ. The conservation practices used by the Durand’s have set them apart from other producers. “We do a lot of no till or minimum till on our farm; we try to improve the quality of our soil,” explained CJ.

The brothers use a chain harrow that disturbs very little soil, laying the rice stubble on the ground and leaving it to decompose over the winter. By leaving residue on the surface during
the winter months, water quality has significantly improved. Muddy surface water pumped in is almost clear by the time it runs off the property.

“We’ve done a lot of laser leveling; we have moved a lot of dirt,” said Jeff. “One rice field had 32 levees but after the laser leveling that field now has three levees, which is huge for water conservation.”

Through EQIP, the Durand’s have incorporated practices including grade stabilization structures, underground irrigation pipelines and conservation crop rotation that have made significant improvements to the land and increased their production of rice and crawfish.

So what about wildlife on the Durand farm? “We have lots of it,” laughed Greg.

The rice and crawfish fields create great wetland habitat. Over 250 different species of birds have been documented on the property. The timing of the rice harvest is perfect for migrating birds along their routes in the fall and spring. Not to mention other abundant wildlife including deer, otters, bob cats, raccoons, alligators and even bald eagles.

Looking to the future, the Durand’s have a singular purpose, “Our next conservation effort is examining our soil quality and working to get it at an optimum balance,” explained Greg. “More than anything else we want this land to be healthy and productive for the next generation.”
Soils, Culture and People
Submitted by: Mitchell Mouton, Assistant State Soil Scientist

Soil has been a part of human culture and society from the very beginning. Most of the material used in the making of traditional art comes from soil. Color pigments used to make paint, dyes and ink; sand and mineral to create glass and clay used to make ceramics comes from soil. Most of the permanent writings from early societies were preserved on clay tablets. The tablets were engraved with a sharp object while they were still wet and then dried and hardened allowing them to last for ages.

In present times, soil still has an impact on our culture. The state of Louisiana has many different landscapes consisting of marshes, prairies, swamps and hills with very diverse soils. The soil types found on these landscapes have had a direct effect on the unique cultures found in Louisiana, particularly the soils of the coastal prairie and marshes and its influence on Cajun culture.

Like most cultures, the Cajun culture has been greatly influenced by their local environment. The soils of the coastal prairie are on a level to nearly level landscape and have a clayey subsurface or clay pan. These features allow water to be held for long periods of time at consistent depths which makes these soils ideal for rice and crawfish production. These prairie soils also provide excellent habitat for migratory gamebirds.

The soils of the coastal marsh are level, very poorly drained, have a mixture of mineral and organic soils and can be fresh, brackish or saline. Most of these areas support native vegetation and have a diverse wetland wildlife habitat which is ideal for hunting waterfowl, fresh and saltwater fish, alligators and other game.

The soils found in the coastal prairie and marshes have helped sustain and influence Cajun culture and traditions. From the cultivation of rice as the main staple grain crop, to the abundance of wildlife used in traditional cuisine, the soil has had a major influence on how Cajuns have lived their lives.

Soil is part of our daily lives and has an influence on our culture and traditions. Soil is a natural resource that should be used wisely to support future generations.

“Soil is the great connector of our lives, the source and destination of all.” - Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America, 1977

Upcoming Events

January 10-13
Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts 70th Annual Convention

The Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts will be holding their 70th Annual Convention at the Wyndham Gardens Hotel on January 10 -13, 2016. For more information, or to register contact Rose Sharbeno at 337-239-2193 Ext. 3 or by e-mail at rose.sharbeno@la.nacdnet.net

January 15 & 16
Ag Expo

Look for the NRCS exhibit at Ag Expo on January 15 & 16, 2016 at the Ike Hamilton Expo Center in West Monroe, Louisiana.
**Around the State**

**October 22**

**High Tunnel Workshop**

NRCS, Farm Service Agency, and Rural Development partnered with the Central Louisiana Economic Development Alliance (CLED4) and the Business Acceleration System to host a workshop covering financial assistance available for small-scale producers. Topics included high tunnels and supporting conservation practices, program eligibility and funding timeframe, operating loans, and crop insurance options. In February of 2016, Louisiana Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), the LSU AgCenter, and NRCS will host a series of technical high tunnel workshops. Please keep an eye out for dates and times for these workshops across Louisiana. Tunnel Production Can Help Sustain Your Farm.

**November 12**

**Longleaf Pine Field Day**

The National Wild Turkey Federation hosted a longleaf pine field day on the farm of David Daigle in Beauregard Parish on November 12, 2015.

**November 13**

**Louisiana Women in Agriculture Conference**

Acadiana RC&D and Capitol RC&D hosted the annual Louisiana Women in Agriculture Conference on Friday, November 13, 2015, at the Louisiana School for Agricultural Sciences in Bunkie, Louisiana.

**November 17 - 19**

**Soil Health Workshops**

A series of soil health workshops were held across the state on November 17-19, 2015. These very successful workshops were led by Ray Archuleta. Participants learned about the principles of soil health, utilizing cover crops and were able to view a demonstration of these principles using the rainfall simulation trailer. Attendees then travelled to a local producer’s farm to see a soil health management field evaluation.

**Sign up today for the Client Gateway!**

Visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/clientgateway for step-by-step instructions. If you need additional help, personal assistance is available at (970) 372-4200.

Contact your local office for more information on this new way to work with NRCS.