

ARKANSAS CONSERVATION NEWS

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

Third Quarter
2020

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Helping People Help the Land

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From the State Conservationist

Thank you for reading the latest edition of the Arkansas Conservation News Newsletter.

What a year 2020 has turned into. Our farmers, ranchers and foresters are facing tough times in an unprecedented situation as our nation and the world takes on the coronavirus (COVID-19).

Through it all, our Natural Resources Conservation Service employees have continued to assist agricultural producers through our USDA Service Centers. Many of our NRCS offices in the state have begun to re-open through a phased approach and others continue to be open for business by phone appointment only.

Please call your local NRCS office to see what their status is or you can log on to farmers.gov/coronavirus/service-center-status.

Our program delivery staff are working with customers either in person or by phone and utilizing online tools whenever possible. Online NRCS services through the www.farmers.gov portal are available to our customers.

Through Box and OneSpan, USDA offers services that make it easier than ever for producers to conveniently access, sign and share documents online. These tools do not require any software downloads – you can get started with a simple username and password for Box or, for OneSpan, a quick identity verification.

By using these tools, you can digitally

complete business transactions without ever leaving your home or agricultural operation. Both services are free, secure, and available for multiple FSA and NRCS programs.

Box and OneSpan do not replace existing systems using eAuthentication for digital signature. To learn more, visit farmers.gov/mydocs.

In this newsletter, you will see information on: projects that address water management, water quality and flood control; how conservation protects pollinator habitat; the conservation agricultural mentorship program; and several articles on how some of our employees have continued to provide customer service to our farmers and ranchers despite the coronavirus pandemic.

They have been innovative utilizing a balance of telework and field work to ensure our customers' conservation needs are addressed.

Through our voluntary conservation programs and working with our partners, NRCS will continue to provide technical and financial assistance to producers to help them protect and conserve their natural resources on private lands.

With 61 offices statewide, NRCS employees continue to provide the information, tools, and delivery systems necessary for producers to conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources.

We will continue to work together to



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Sullivan".

Mike Sullivan, State Conservationist

provide the best service through working relationships with all of the customers we are privileged to serve and partner with while we execute our agency's mission and vision.

Please enjoy this newsletter and contact us about any program, initiative or service our agency offers. Take care and stay safe.

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Please send submissions to [Reginald L. Jackson](mailto:Reginald.L.Jackson@aphis.usda.gov), State Public Affairs Specialist, or [Creston Shrum](mailto:Creston.Shrum@aphis.usda.gov), Public Affairs Specialist at: Room 3416, Federal Bldg.; 700 W. Capitol Ave.; Little Rock, AR 72201
Phone: (501) 301-3133
Fax: (855) 681-7044

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Persons with disabilities who wish to file a program complaint, please see information above on how to contact us by mail directly or by email. If you require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, etc.) please contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

Programs



USDA Expands Farmers.gov Features to Help Manage Conservation Activities

New self-service features on [farmers.gov](https://www.farmers.gov) will help farmers and ranchers manage their conservation activities online and request assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

“These conservation features join a number of others already available through farmers.gov, including the ability to view NRCS application information,” said State Conservationist Mike Sullivan. “As more content and capabilities are added, farmers.gov is quickly becoming the online hub for producers to find resources, submit applications and assistance requests and make connections. Now, amid this pandemic, we recognize the importance of online options for producers to manage their USDA business.”

Producers can access these conservation features by desktop computer, tablet or phone. They can now:

- View, download and e-sign documents;
- Request conservation assistance;
- Reference technical terms and submit questions;
- Access information on current and past conservation practices; and
- View detailed information on all previous and ongoing contracts, including the amount of planned and received cost-share assistance.

The new conservation features enhance the request process with a customer-friendly unified mapping tool that allows farmers to locate areas of interest in minutes, with high-resolution aerial imagery and multi-layered display functionality.

The new features include the most popular functionalities from NRCS’s Conservation Client Gateway (CCG) while providing enhanced functionality and an improved user experience. CCG is the NRCS portal for producers, but now these functionalities

are being moved to farmers.gov to give producers one place to do business with NRCS, Farm Service Agency and other USDA agencies.

Managing Conservation Online

To access their information, producers will need a USDA eAuth account <https://www.eauth.usda.gov/home/> to login into farmers.gov. After obtaining an eAuth account, producers should visit [farmers.gov](https://www.farmers.gov) and sign into the site’s authenticated portal via the “Sign In / Sign Up” link <https://www.farmers.gov/sign-in> at the top right of the website. Current CCG users can use their existing login and password to access the conservation features on farmers.gov. CCG will continue to be actively maintained and supported until all core components have been migrated to farmers.gov later this year.

Currently, only producers doing business as individuals can view information. Entities, such as an LLC or Trust, or producers doing business on behalf of another customer cannot access the portal at this time, but access is being planned.

Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox or Microsoft Edge are the recommended browsers to access the feature.

More Information

USDA is building farmers.gov for farmers, by farmers. Future self-service features available through the farmers.gov portal include: authority for FSA and NRCS customers to work in the portal and act on behalf of their active power-of-attorney entitlements and their current authorities for business entities, updated e-sign capabilities to enhance the single and multi-signer functionalities and a robust document management system that enables customers to download, upload and interact with their important conservation practice and contract documents.

Easements



Photo by Creston Shrum

Farmers, Private Landowners Help Arkansas Wetlands Thrive

Arkansas is a wonderful state to view and appreciate the wonders of wetlands. Wetlands protect plants and provide habitat for wildlife, including endangered or threatened species. They also filter water, reduce soil loss, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, reduce flooding and recharge groundwater. And they provide recreational opportunities such as hunting and fishing.

Farmers, ranchers and private landowners in Arkansas have worked with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to create, restore and enhance wetlands for decades. They have incorporated wetlands into their operations for the benefits to the environment and their land. To help realize these benefits they have worked with USDA for assistance through its programs and services.

NRCS offers financial and technical assistance to farmers and private landowners through programs to create, restore, and enhance wetlands. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)'s Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) component offers opportunities to put marginal cropland and other eligible land into permanent and 30-year easements. NRCS accepts ACEP WRE

applications year round but applications are ranked and funded by enrollment periods. Each state sets the application deadlines for enrollment periods.

Arkansas has 702 wetland easements covering 264,585 acres. The state is second in the nation in number of wetland acres enrolled in the easement program.

NRCS is using creative methods to help farmers and private forest landowners meet Farm Bill goals through its Wetland Mitigation Bank Program. Wetland mitigation banking helps restore, create or enhance wetlands to compensate for unavoidable impacts on wetlands at other locations. Working with states, local governments, and American Indian tribes, NRCS helps them develop wetland mitigation banks.

If you are a farmer or private landowner interested in learning more about wetlands, please contact your local USDA Service Center. For additional information, log on to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/acep/>, or contact Assistant State Conservationist for Easements Randy Childress at randy.childress@usda.gov.



Photo by Creston Shrum

Conservation Protects Pollinator Habitat, Boosts Crop Production

The next time you snack on almonds, add blueberries to your smoothie or eat pumpkin pie, thank a pollinator and thank farmers, ranchers and private forestland owners who work hard to create and maintain their habitat.

Pollinators, such as honeybees, bumblebees, butterflies, birds, bats, flies and many others, play a critical role in crop production. Without pollinators, we wouldn't have many crops.

Pollination occurs when pollen grains are moved between two flowers of the same species, or within a single flower by wind or insects and animals. Successful pollination results in healthy fruit and fertile seeds, allowing the plants to reproduce.

The extensive and critical world of crop pollinators is a \$20 billion a year industry. About 75 percent of crop plants are pollinated by billions of animals and insects every year.

Many federal, state and local government agencies, non-government organizations and universities have launched extensive efforts to protect pollinators, especially honeybees and the Monarch butterfly. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) works closely with farmers, forest landowners and other private landowners to increase pollinator habitat in targeted areas nationwide.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), offers financial incentives to agricultural producers and private forest landowners who enhance pollinator habitat by voluntarily implementing conservation practices such as cover crops, wildflower and native plantings in buffers and areas not in production.

As owners and stewards of the land, many farmers, ranchers

and private forest landowners manage their natural resources to work to achieve their production goals, they are protecting the rich and diverse ecology on or near their operations.

When we protect pollinators, we protect our ability to grow food. We thank our farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners for who offer a safe haven for pollinators and grow the products we enjoy.

Whether you are a large commodity producer, a small and diverse organic producer or even a suburban homeowner, you can have an important role in saving pollinators Arkansas.

You can help protect pollinators by doing the following:

- Plant appropriate vegetation. Use conservation practices and create habitat that sustains and enhance pollinators on the farm, forest or the yard.
- Use pesticides, herbicides and insecticides carefully on and off the farm, ranch and private forests. Keep your operation pollinator friendly.
- Protect flowering plants and potential pollinator nesting sites such as areas of undisturbed ground and native vegetation.

Do your part to help protect pollinators. By taking action to diversify and beautify your operation or property, you could ensure that many fruits and vegetables are available and plentiful for future generations for many years to come.

For more information about pollinators and what you can do in Arkansas, please contact NRCS State Resource Conservationist Helen Denniston at helen.denniston@usda.gov or your local USDA Service Center <https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

Conservation On the Ground

Faulkner County Livestock Producer Continues to Persevere Through Conservation in the “New Normal”

by Reginald Jackson
State Public Affairs Specialist

2020 has been a year unlike any other in recent history. Coronavirus (COVID 19) hit the area in mid-March. The pandemic took a hold globally and no one has been immune to the impact it is having on our way of life, the economy and on our farmers, foresters and ranchers.

Despite continued concerns with the growing pandemic, one conservationist, Faulkner County livestock producer Raymond Kelley perseveres to make his farm more sustainable with conservation practices that help promote clean air and water, healthy soil, and resistance to extreme weather events, such as drought.

“I bought my first three cows when I was 17 years old back in 1972,” Kelley said. “I put them behind my grandmother’s house. She helped me with the fencing and I’ve been farming ever since. I went on to buy my first farm in 1980 when I was 25 years old and utilized the Soil Conservation Service (now the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)) to install a pond.”

Voluntary conservation programs help producers make conservation work for them. Together, NRCS and producers invest in solutions that conserve natural resources for the future while also improving agricultural operations.

“My wife and I farm 110 acres of



Raymond Kelley, a Faulkner County livestock producer, checks on his cattle.

Photos by Reginald Jackson

livestock with 50 cows and 35 calves,” he said. “All of my children are grown with their own careers, but my 12-year-old grandson helps out when he comes to visit. We call him ‘Top Hand,’” he said with a chuckle.

With assistance from NRCS, Kelley was able set up an infrastructure of fence and water for his rotational grazing pasture system.

“We’ve provided conservation technical assistance to Mr. Kelley with cool season grasses, cross fencing, a well, four

watering tanks, rotational grazing, heavy use area, electric fencing, and a pond,” said Faulkner County Soil Conservation Technician Jody Rodgers. “He’s had two Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts with us and will be working on another one soon.”

NRCS can help livestock producers with practices such as pasture and grazing management, diverse pasture plantings, fencing, and walkways, watering facilities, and shelters for animals.

Pastures can become overgrazed which can harm animal health and damage natural resources. One key practice is rotational grazing. This practice separates open fields into a series of closed paddocks that regularly directs animals to fresh pasture.

Fences can control erosion or impede animal access to sensitive areas like ponds, streams, wellheads or protected habitat, while gated paddocks can be opened and closed to provide cattle access to fresh pasture. Diverse pasture plantings on provide livestock with well-balanced, nutritious forage that keeps them healthy.

“I went to a conservation field day in Faulkner County where Tony Uekman (White County soil conservation technician) and LeVonna Uekman (Clebune County district conservationist) were doing demonstrations on their farm,” Kelly



Jody Rodgers, soil conservation technician, and Raymond Kelley, a Faulkner County livestock producer, discuss his conservation plan.

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Producer Perseveres Through Conservation

From Page 6



Raymond Kelley, a Faulkner County livestock producer, checks his electric fence, with Jody Rodgers, soil conservation technician.

said. “That’s when a light switch went off in my head about cool season grasses. When I saw what they were doing with rotational grazing, I said right then that I was going to do that!”

The Uekmans regularly hold field days on their farm to share with other local farmers the benefits of USDA programs and to increase participation in those programs.

“Raymond has been to almost all of the field days that we’ve had,” Rodgers said.

“NRCS helped me prepare my conservation plan and helped me outline my goals for improving the soil, water, plants, and air on my land,” Kelley said. “I’ve been fortunate to have NRCS work with me over the years on my farm and they’ve not missed a beat working with me since COVID-19 hit. And even through this pandemic, it’ll be a process, it’s just going to be a process, and we’ll get through it together.

“I’ve received assistance from Joe Tapp (retired Faulkner County district conservationist) Jody, Jeremy Huff, (NRCS Grassland Specialist) Claire Whiteside (NRCS grassland specialist), and others. Everyone I’ve ever worked with have been

professional and courteous. NRCS always goes above and beyond in explaining everything about the conservation practices real thorough. All of them have a wealth of knowledge and really try to help to the best of their ability. I tell other producers about how NRCS can help all the time.”

“We’ve enjoyed working with Mr. Kelley over the years,” said Rodgers. “We look forward to working with him in the future. He’s interested in a seasonal high tunnel, so that may be our next project we can provide additional technical assistance to him.”

To learn more about EQIP, contact your local NRCS office. An NRCS conservationist will talk with you and evaluate the natural resources on your land. NRCS will then present a variety of conservation practices or system alternatives to help you develop a conservation plan to address those concerns or management goals to improve or protect the natural resource conditions on your land.

Please visit <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/eqip/> for more information on to how apply.

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program Provides Relief to Producers

Are you a farmer or rancher whose operation has been directly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic? The Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) provides direct relief to producers who faced price declines and additional marketing costs due to COVID-19. USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue announced that the deadline to apply for CFAP has been extended to Sept. 11, 2020.

Producers self-certify when applying for CFAP, and documentation is not submitted

with the application. You may be asked for additional documentation to support your certification of eligible commodities, so you should retain the documentation used to complete your application. Information on additional documents is provided at farmers.gov/cfap/apply.

While most USDA Service Centers are open for business by phone appointment only, USDA Farm Service Agency is working with producers by phone and using email and online tools to process

CFAP applications. Please call your local USDA Service Center to schedule an appointment. To find your local service center and agency office, please visit offices.usda.gov. To check the status of your local USDA Service Center visit farmers.gov/coronavirus/service-center-status.

A CFAP Call Center is also available for producers who would like additional one-on-one support with the CFAP application process. Call 877-508-8364 to speak directly with a USDA employee.

Conservation On the Ground

USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program Project Improving Wildlife Habitat in 14 North Arkansas Counties

*By Marcus Asher
Arkansas Game and Fish Commission*

Lance Landers purchased 500 acres in North Central Arkansas more than 30 years ago because he wanted a place to hunt. Over time, his property has become much more than a hunting retreat, in fact, it has become his favorite place to be.

Landers now enjoys improving habitat on his land equally, if not more than the hunting aspect.

“Doing the work gives me an outlet for getting-away, clearing my head, and even planning my next business decisions,” Landers said.

He was first introduced to the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2013 when he worked with Sharp County NRCS District Conservationist Becky Long. Through an NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contact, he completed prescribed burning, firebreaks and native grass plantings on his property.

“Mr. Landers is a very good steward of the land and tends to over excel on any practices or enhancements that are suggested he complete on his property,” Long said.

Now, thanks to an NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project in his area, he is again working with NRCS, along with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) to improve wildlife habitat.

In 2019, NRCS awarded AGFC an RCPP-EQIP project to partner in providing financial and technical assistance to agricultural and forest producers through the North Arkansas Quail Focal Landscape Project.

The RCPP project covers 14 counties in northern Arkansas with an emphasis on areas surrounding wildlife habitat management areas. RCPP is a voluntary conservation program that enables producers and landowners to install and maintain conservation activities to address priority natural resource concerns.

After reading through the details of the RCPP project, Landers visited the USDA Field Service Center in Sharp County and signed an RCPP application.

NRCS staff put him in contact with Ciera Rhodes, Quail Forever’s Farm Bill biologist (a position funded by NRCS and AGFC), and AGFC’s Habitat Program Coordinator Rob Willey. Together, Rhodes and Willey wrote management plans, explained in detail the steps it takes to complete each practice and the timeframe in which the practices need to be completed.

Landers’ application then went through a ranking process and was selected for funding.

“If it wasn’t for their guidance, I would have been lost,” he said.

“During our first site visit to review existing habitat conditions on Mr. Lander’s property, forest stand improvement (FSI) was discussed as a good way to increase cover and food for turkey, quail and deer,” Rhodes said.

Landers was initially very uneasy about killing trees and the sight of that on his place. However, Rhodes enlisted Willey’s help to show Landers some of the same FSI work that was going on at Harold Alexander Wildlife Management Area, one of AGFC’s quail focal areas, that is located adjacent to Mr. Lander’s property. Once he was able to see the progression of the opening of the tree canopy and sunlight hitting the ground, Landers was sold. He has completed 75 acres of FSI along with prescribed burning on that same acreage.

“I didn’t like staring at rocks on the ground and cedars everywhere,” Landers said. “I can see now the value in thinning the trees as the wildlife are utilizing the new growth in the understory. At times, I see 70 or more deer in my fields and in and along the edges of the woods. I also see more turkey and several butterflies flying around my woods now, too. I love the way my woods look, as I can see through it and so many colors are now present from the flowers that are coming up in them.”

Landers is continuing to restore habitat on his place using EQIP funding, a state wildlife grant, and has put in another application for the second year of the North Arkansas Quail RCPP. In all he hopes to complete 314 additional acres of forest stand improvement and will maintain this and the previous 75 acres using prescribed burning.



Before Forest Stand Improvement



After Forest Stand Improvement

Conservation On the Ground

NRCS Invests \$66.9 Million in Four Projects to Address Ag Water Management, Water Quality, Flood Control in Arkansas Watersheds

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is investing in one existing and three new multi-year projects in Arkansas that will build vital infrastructure and conserve natural resources.

The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act of 1954 (Public Law 83-566 [PL – 566]) Watershed Program allows NRCS to work with local groups to reduce damages from flooding, protect watersheds, improve municipal and agricultural water management and enhance wildlife habitat.

“Watersheds are natural boundaries,” Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist

Mike Sullivan said. “Using this watershed program in Arkansas helps protect lives and property, improves natural resources, and supports agricultural production within our state’s watersheds.”

The new projects are:

- Grand Prairie Irrigation Project - The project, in portions of Arkansas, Lonoke, Monroe and Prairie counties, will allow continuation of intensive irrigated crop production on 245,400 acres utilizing surface water from the White River once all measures are constructed. The White River Irrigation District and the Arkansas Department of Agriculture are the project sponsors. The \$35.6 million in federal funding includes \$28.3 million for construction that requires a local match of \$9.4 million. An additional \$7.3 million is available for technical services.

“The NRCS funding is great news for the Grand Prairie,” said Dan Hooks, president of the White River Irrigation District. “The goal of the White River Irrigation District has always been to bring affordable water to our farmers and the NRCS funding will help accomplish that goal. The District appreciates the partnership between NRCS, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the State of Arkansas that keeps the project moving forward,” he added.



- Bayou Meto Irrigation Project - This project, in portions of Lonoke, Prairie, Jefferson, Arkansas, and Pulaski counties, is designed to move much of the agricultural water demand to surface water sources and create a long-term sustainable use of the aquifers for municipal users and remaining industrial and agricultural users. The Bayou Meto Water Management District and the Arkansas Department of Agriculture are the project sponsors. The \$28.1 million in federal funding includes \$22 million for construction that requires a local match of \$7.3 million. An additional \$6.1 million is available for technical services.

“There is a critical need for these irrigation projects due to declining levels in the Alluvial and Sparta aquifers that are used for agricultural irrigation, municipal, and industrial water,” Sullivan said. “These projects will balance the use and supply of existing surface and ground water resources so agricultural production can continue sustainably into the future.”

“USDA NRCS has an incredible history of working with a broad range of partners in order to achieve results,” said Arkansas

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Projects Address Water Management, Water Quality, Flood Control

From Page 9



Secretary of Agriculture Wes Ward. “State Conservationist Mike Sullivan and his team continue to go above and beyond to help secure federal funding for our state and our state’s agriculture industry. We are excited about the opportunity to continue working together in order to help move these critically important projects forward,” he added.

- The West Fork of the White River Watershed Project is a joint project between the Watershed Conservation Resource Center, the Beaver Water District, Walton Family Foundation, Beaver Watershed Alliance and NRCS. The \$375,000 funded will be utilized to develop the designs and construction plans for the streambank restoration projects.

“We are grateful to NRCS for helping the Watershed Conservation Resource Center and our partners to create this amazing opportunity to restore reaches of the West Fork White River,” commented Executive Director Sandi J. Formica of the Water-

shed Conservation Resource Center. “Not only will this project reduce sediment and nutrients to the river and Beaver Lake watershed, but it will set a direction to restore aquatic habitat, save valuable agricultural and forests lands, and restore boating and fishing recreation to the local community and the region. This has been a true watershed effort that are the results of scientific-based assessment and planning over two decades,” she said.

- A long-term project, Departee Creek Watershed received \$2.5 million in federal construction funding and \$250,000 for technical services to protect frequently flooded lands along Departee Creek. The overall project will provide flood control benefits and water quality improvements in the watershed.

“Seeing this project come to fruition after nearly 30 years of effort will be a true blessing for this community,” said Departee Creek Watershed Improvement District Board Chairman Matt Mendenhall. “We’ve completed the first stage by removing tons and tons of snags and brush from the stream and it has had an immediate, positive impact. We hope to start on the flood prevention structure next year. That will be the jewel in the crown for our watershed. Improved water quality, greatly reduced flooding, improved wildlife habitat and reduced nutrient loss will be some of the many benefits of this PL-566 project. Of course, none of this would be possible without the NRCS engineers and staff who have guided this project from the start and provided outstanding technical support. There’s no way we could have done this on our own,” he said.

NRCS works with project sponsors, such as conservation districts, local governments and Native American tribes. PL – 566 watershed projects take place in smaller watersheds that cover 250,000 acres or less. The projects are owned and managed by the local sponsors. NRCS serves as the primary technical adviser to project sponsors because of its technical expertise and ability to deliver solutions that provide benefits that exceed costs.



Did You Know?



Kevin Cochran

Cochran named Assistant State Conservationist for South Area Field Operations

Kevin Cochran was recently named assistant state conservationist for field operations (South Area) for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas.

He began his career with NRCS in 2000 as a soil conservationist in Lonoke County. Over the next three years, he worked with farmers, foresters and ranchers in Howard, Jefferson and Pike counties. In 2004, he was selected as the district conservationist in Jackson County. He has also served as district conservationist in Craighead, Lonoke and St. Francis counties.

Cochran also served as Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative Resource Conservationist. In this role, he worked with producers in Arkansas, Lonoke and Prairie counties with the implementation of conservation practices addressing water quality and quantity concerns.

He is a native of Craighead County, Arkansas. He graduated from Arkansas State University in Jonesboro in 2000 with a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Business.

"I am very excited for the opportunities ahead to work with NRCS staff, our customers and our conservation partners in the South Area putting conservation on the ground," he said.

Program Pairs Farmers with Employees as Mentors

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) created a new field-based mentoring and partnership program called the Conservation Agricultural Mentoring Program (CAMP). CAMP is a state-driven, partnership and field-based program working to build strong employee-producer relationships and increase employees' knowledge of production agriculture in their local areas.

Through a mentee/mentor relationship, the program offers new NRCS employees and newly relocated employees an exciting opportunity to grow relationships with local producers and elevate their expertise of production agriculture in their local communities.

How the Program Works:

- The program is designed for customer-facing employees who have fewer than 36 months of experience in the agency or who recently relocated to a different field office.
- District conservationists match producers who volunteer to serve as mentors with employees
- Employees go out on the land with producer mentors 6-12 times per year (at least once every other month) during regular business hours at times convenient for producers
- Producer mentors provide a safe, low-risk learning environment for NRCS employees to advance knowledge of:
 - Common agricultural practices, equipment, inputs and other topics;
 - Types of daily challenges and decisions producers face;
 - Local resource problems and concerns; and
 - How producers use conservation practices to address resource problems.

Are you a farmer, rancher or forester interested in sharing your knowledge with a new NRCS employee? Learn more by logging in to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/people/?cid=nrcseprd1596019> or contact Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations (South) Kevin Cochran at kevin.cochran@usda.gov.

Arkansas Featured in National "Conservation at Work" Video Series



The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service unveiled the Conservation at Work video series in early 2020. The series consists of short videos that highlight common conservation practices being implemented around the country.

The videos shine the spotlight on farmers, ranchers and forestland owners from across the U.S. who tell us their conservation stories, and how practices are helping them protect and improve resources and save time and money.

"By sharing the conservation successes of our customers, we hope the videos will help educate our customers and the general public and motivate more farmers and landowners to consider conservation," said Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan.

Did You Know?

2020 Conservation Stewardship Awards Winners Announced

Over the past few months, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service rolled out the first ever Chief's Conservation Stewardship Awards program recognizing the agency staff who make that stewardship possible. On August 10, NRCS Chief Matt Lohr recognized the recipients of the awards during a virtual awards ceremony recognizing individuals and team recipients for their dedication and exemplary service to NRCS. Under Secretary Bill Northey and Associate Chief Kevin Norton also took part in the ceremony.

The five categories awarded were: 1) New Employee of the Year; 2) Innovation and Process Improvement; 3) Mentor of the Year; 4) Emergency Response; and 5) Community Service.

Two recipients from Arkansas NRCS received awards. Carroll County District Conservationist Kristen Whitmore received the Community Service award and former Assistant State Conservationist for Field Ops – North West Erica Westbrook was a member of a team that received the Innovation and Process Improvement Award – Workload Analysis Team.

Chief Lohr commended the many “outstanding applications received this year” as a testament to the extraordinary work performed every day across the country by our hard-working conservationists.

Arkansas NRCS is committed to helping farmers, foresters and ranchers be responsible stewards of the state's lands, ensuring clean and abundant water,



Kristen Whitmore

healthy soils, habitat for wildlife, and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation efforts. Part of that commitment includes recognizing people at the state level who make that stewardship possible.

Earlier this year, Arkansas NRCS State Conservationist Mike Sullivan presented the State Conservationist's Conservation Stewardship Award recognizing the hard work and commitment of Arkansas NRCS employees. Carroll County District Conservationist Kristen Whitmore received the state Community Service Award, Conway



Erica Westbrook

County District Conservationist Tiffany Williams received state Emergency Response Award and Lonoke County Soil Conservationist Miche'La Martin received the New Employee of the Year Award.

“Congratulations to all employees who received recognition for these prestigious awards,” said Sullivan. “NRCS employees are dedicated conservationists who continue to provide exemplary customer service to our producers and our conservation partners. Thanks for your continued conservation stewardship efforts to make our agency successful.”

Izard County District Conservationist Receives Young Farmer Award



Monica Paskewitz

Izard County District Conservationist Monica Paskewitz recently received the Young Farmers and Ranchers (YF&R) Excellence in Agriculture Award from Arkansas Farm Bureau.

The YF&R Award was designed as an opportunity for young farmers and ranchers to earn recognition, while actively contributing and growing through their involvement in Farm Bureau and agriculture. Participants were judged on their involvement in agriculture, leadership ability, participation and involvement in Farm Bureau and other organizations.

Paskewitz, her husband Michael and their two daughters, Maddie and Maylee, are livestock producers in Izard County. They are also active on her parent's beef cattle operation in Evening Shade.

She is a graduate of Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia and a past president and current ex officio of Arkansas Women in Agriculture. For the past 11 years, she has served as a district conservationist providing technical assistance to farmers, ranchers and foresters on best conservation practices to improve soil health, water quality and quantity on their operations.

To view Paskewitz's award winning video, log on to <https://www.arfb.com/pages/get-involved/officers-leaders-2020/>.

Serving Customers During COVID-19

MRBI Coordination Keeps Projects Flowing Via Teams Meetings

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas has had a long and successful history with the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) to target conservation efforts in priority watersheds.

“MRBI helps us build on the cooperative work of NRCS and our conservation partners and offers agricultural producers in priority watersheds in Arkansas the opportunity for voluntary technical and financial assistance,” said NRCS Initiative Coordinator Dianne Schlenker.

Since 2018, MRBI has used a two-phase approach where a watershed assessment is completed during a “planning phase” before any financial assistance is offered in an “implementation phase”. Arkansas NRCS has four watersheds entering the planning phase with watershed assessments slated for completion by June of 2020.

“Arkansas NRCS uses a multi-disciplinary approach to conduct the assessments, calling on staff members across several sectors to complete relevant sections,” Schlenker said. “We work with several of our conservation partners who contribute as well. This collaborative process requires a lot of close coordination.”

Normally, meetings are held in person on a monthly basis, but due to COVID-19, an alternative method of meeting had to be utilized to ensure that coordination and collaboration continued. Schlenker organized a Microsoft Teams meeting to conduct regular check-ins for staff members working on assessments. Staff from



Initiative Coordinator Dianne Schlenker (bottom left) leads an MRBI Teams meeting. Photo by Reginald Jackson

Partnerships, Easements, Engineering, Ecological Sciences, Public Affairs and Soils divisions participated in the check-in calls. Pictured are staff meeting via Microsoft Teams to forward progress on the Twin Creeks MRBI Watershed Assessment.

Lonoke County Civil Engineering Tech Providing Customer Service

Shane Harrison, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) civil engineering technician at the Lonoke Technical Service Center in Lonoke County, has been keeping busy with a good balance of telework and field work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Harrison stays in contact with his farmers via telephone to let them know that he and the Technical Service Center staff are working on their behalf. When staff members are teleworking, they have their office phones forwarded to their mobile phones to receive calls.

“I have answered a lot of telephone calls from farmers and contractors concerning their projects,” he said. “It is important to me that our farmers and landowners know that in spite of COVID-19, their projects are still very important to us,” Harrison said.

He is also making field visits and practicing proper social distancing to



Shane Harrison

ensure his producers are receiving the same customer service they are used to.

“I have recently gone to the field and conducted check-out surveys for three participants and completed check-out paperwork for payments on two of them,” he said.

A checkout survey measures the amount and reviews the installation of a

conservation practice to make sure it is installed according to NRCS plans and specifications. It usually includes some type of precise measurement through survey instruments such as GPS.

“I have also conducted three preliminary surveys for irrigation practices,” he added.

A preliminary survey for irrigation practices involves reviewing the farm to determine the irrigation needs and the available water. It includes determining how the water drains off the farm and the potential for tailwater recovery and the capturing of surface water run-off for re-use in irrigation. It also includes discussions with the farmer about his needs and desires.

“When I’m teleworking, I use data from my surveys to design practices, create maps and ensure all necessary paperwork has been completed,” said Harrison. “I am taking this time to do pre-planning and cost estimates for Fiscal Year 2020 applications.”

Serving Customers During COVID-19

South Area District Conservationist Juggles Many Hats while Maintaining Consistent Customer Service During Pandemic

Managing conservation sign-ups, assessments and contracts in four counties, developing schedules for two staffs and training new employees can be difficult under normal operating conditions.

For USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist Derrek Nokes, who oversees Garland, Grant, Hot Spring, and Saline counties in Arkansas, the pandemic has added another level of challenges.

“It has been said that I may be a little bit ‘old school’; I’m used to doing everything in person,” Nokes said. “I had never teleworked a single day in my 17 years working for the agency. Now I’m rotating office time and teleworking three to four days per week.”

When he is not supervising employees, assigning telework tasks, entering information into multiple reports, or listening in on teleconferences, Nokes is focused on contract management, Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) assessments in Conservation Desktop, as well as conservation/contract planning for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) renewals, CSP General, CSP Grasslands Conservation Initiative, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

“We are also continuing to go to the field; only now without producer contact,” Nokes said. “We’re still planning, designing and inspecting conservation practices.”

However, due to social distancing, he cannot stand within six feet of a producer to go over the contract they are about to sign or over the maps where conservation practices should be implemented. Now, he mails his producers packets of information for review prior to getting signatures.

“Rather than sitting at my desk or at a producer’s table, going over contract documents and getting signatures, I am meeting with



Derrek Nokes, Garland County district conservationist, inspects installed conservation practices in the field. Photo by Christopher Willis

them in the field, placing the documents on the hood of my vehicle with a bottle of hand sanitizer and sitting inside the vehicle while they review and sign,” Nokes said. “The last thing I want to do is get someone sick while trying to do my job.

“Fortunately, for the most part, producers are very understanding and do not want to risk infection themselves. Most are grateful that we are still trying to assist them.”

“It’s important to be able to continue doing our jobs during the pandemic since deadlines aren’t socially distancing themselves, producers have not stopped producing and resource concerns have not started addressing themselves,” Nokes said. “It’s imperative we find new ways to get things done. Otherwise, we’ll find ourselves in a hole we can’t get out of.

Williams Teaches Daughter Real World Lessons While Teleworking

For Conway County, Ark., Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist Tiffany Williams teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed her to take her daughter to work every day. This year’s National Take Your Child to Work Day was set for April 23, but it started a bit early when schools were closed for the rest of the school year.

That means for Tiffany and many other parents, working from home has forced her to construct a new normal. While her job responsibilities haven’t changed, she now has a new ‘helper’.

“My daughter, Katie, wants to do everything I do,” said Tiffany. “Watching me work from home allows her to see what my job entails. So, while I’m on the phone talking to clients and drawing maps in conservation desktop, she pretends to talk on the phone and plays with maps on Google Earth.”

It’s too early to tell, but maybe one day Tiffany and Katie can look back and see if the past month or two led to Katie’s career as an NRCS conservationist.



While Tiffany Williams, Conway County district conservationist, (at right) teleworks, daughter Katie imitates mom. Photo submitted

Serving Customers During COVID-19



Brandy Dacus

Cultural Resource Work Still Vital During the Age of COVID -19

For some people, COVID-19 has not had much of an impact on the way they do business. While most of the nation is teleworking, Brandy Dacus, an archeologists/cultural resource specialist working for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through an agreement with the Arkansas Department of Agriculture, social distancing comes with the job.

For Dacus, who works out of Jonesboro, doing solo cultural resource surveys is typical, but she is minimizing contact with producers and limiting stops at public places while conducting field visits.

While the field office or wetlands staff usually communicates with producers and landowners about the field visits, if someone is living on site, Dacus gets their phone number so she can communicate with the landowners during her visit if there is a need.

"I'm able to do the same reviews for NRCS projects as I was pre-COVID," Dacus said. "Now, I'm teleworking more frequently when I write up my reports. I am surveying and consulting with our partners to complete projects that require a cultural resource review as fast as possible."

Dacus, who has worked with NRCS for more than a year, performs cultural resource surveys and writes reports before conservation practices can be installed where there is the potential to disturb a cultural resources site.

Soil Conservation Tech Adapting to Social Distancing While Assisting Producers in Faulkner, Perry Counties

Jody Rodgers, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Soil Conservation Technician at the Faulkner County Field Service Center in Conway, has been very busy with a balance of tele-



Jody Rodgers

work and field work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

"It has been an adjustment to telework as a field office technician," he said. "I have been teleworking most days, and in the field office a couple of days a week, following social distancing guidelines."

While teleworking, some of the tasks he's been working on are Conservation Desktop, inventorying, assessment and ranking of new applications for 2020.

"The farmers are continuing to finish practices on the farms, and they have contacted me through Client Gateway, phone calls and emails to request check-outs," he explained. "Once the check-out and certifications are done, the farmers have been using Client Gateway and emailing to sign for the payments. If they stop by the office to sign paperwork, social distancing guidelines are followed."

Greene County DC Still Putting Conservation on the Ground

Producers in Greene County, Arkansas, are relying on the strong working relationship they have with NRCS District Conservationist Adam Eades, and the field office staff, to overcome the obstacles created by the coronavirus pandemic.

"The partnership with NRCS in

Greene County is great!" said Joey Massey, a local producer. "It's something we have to have to make our conservation plans work. We need the advice and the help."

For Eades, "trusting and adjusting" is proving successful in dealing with the "new normal" caused by COVID-19.

"We are used to shaking hands and customer service being one of the most important things we do," Eades said. "We're having to shift how we do business by maximizing the technology and tools we have such as Conservation Client Gateway."



(left to right) Producer Joey Massey and Adam Eades, Greene County district conservationist, discuss conservation planning while practicing social distancing

Conservation Client Gateway is a secure web portal that lets producers work with NRCS online. Landowners can track their payments, report completed practices, request conservation assistance, and electronically sign documents.

"Implementing the new Farm Bill was going to make 2020 a challenge to start with and now COVID-19 is adding to the challenges," Eades said. "But, like always, we will rise to the occasion, get the work done and find the best way to do it right."

Serving Customers During COVID-19

Arkansas NRCS Forester Helps Forestry Landowners

For Josh Smith, south area forester for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Arkansas, helping forest landowners during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical.

As has been seen across the country, some of the most important items to consumers during this outbreak has been wood fiber products like toilet paper and paper towels.

“It’s essential that our forest industry continues to operate as normal and that means that our forest landowners in Arkansas need to continue to operate and manage their forestland as normal as well,” Smith said. “If they are out there working, the NRCS needs to be there to provide them with assistance when they need it.”

For Josh, who has served as the south area forester for 3 years, that entails field checks on forestry operations, performing planting inspections for recently planted seedlings and evaluating stand conditions in the southern 29 counties of Arkansas. He’s also been writing management plans for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) applicants and helping develop guidance material for the planners to use in the FY20 CSP signups.

The primary difference for Josh during this pandemic is, “I would meet with the field staff for field visits, now I am visiting these tracts by myself to ensure proper social distancing.”

He recently had to postpone a visit due to concerns of not being able to comply with the social distancing guidelines.

“One of our producers has an EQIP contract for a forest stand improvement thinning, and when the vendor began the work his crew consisted of about 40 workers. Typically, I would try to meet with the crew and go over the plan before they get started to



Josh Smith

ensure that they remove the correct number and species of trees,” he said.

“Due to our social distancing guidelines, we decided that it would be best to not meet in person in the field. Instead, they’ll start the work and I’ll check their progress in the field to ensure the work they are performing is in line with the management plan,” Josh said.

“The producers I have been working with are looking out for their health and following the social distancing guidelines themselves,” Josh said. “They are glad to see us out working and appreciative of us being responsible about doing our part to help keep this from spreading worse.”

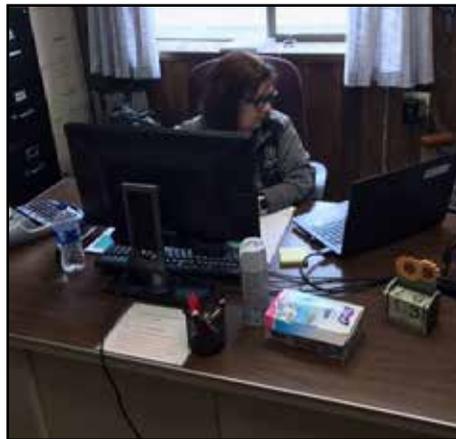
Madison County FSC Finds Innovative Ways to Provide Customer Service

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Service Center offices are continuing to provide customer service while following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) direction for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teleworking and remote operations are protecting the health and safety of federal employees and federal workplaces to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. This action also protects our customers as we work together to continue the delivery of programs essential to rural America.

At the Madison County Field Service Center in Huntsville, Arkansas, seamless operations between the local Madison County Conservation District and NRCS have allowed employees to continue providing their customers the excellent service they expect.

NRCS District Conservationist Thom



Marcia Hall

Dodd teleworks from home in a remote area without cell connectivity. To maintain constant communications, Conservation District Secretary Marcia Hall is assisting by having the office phones forwarded to

her, taking messages, arranging phone appointments, and notifying Dodd by e-mail.

He then conducts phone appointments when he is back in the office and performs any scheduled field inspections. Meanwhile, Marcia processes the associated paperwork while teleworking from her home. This way, they alternate between teleworking, office, and field work, while maintain a consistent workflow.

When customers do not have access to a computer or other technology to electronically access their paperwork, employees place the physical paperwork in a secure District tool shed with pens that customers can keep.

The Madison County Field Service Center is open for business by telephone appointments, and they look forward to continuing their vital work to support those customers who live and work in rural Arkansas.

Serving Customers During COVID-19

“It’s Business as Usual” with local NRCS Offices

Producers in Sharp and Independence Counties are accustomed to seeing Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Conservation Technician Tim Durham in the field, but since the start of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, they are seeing him a lot more.

Following the guidance of Sharp County District Conservationist Becky Long, Durham is spending a lot more of his time where social distancing is fairly simple—OUTSIDE!

“This is an opportunity to spend more time in the field and do some things we just don’t normally have the time to do. During the past 3 weeks, I’ve spent an average of 25-30 hours per week doing field work, which is about one third more than normal,” Durham said. “It’s a challenge to try and find time to catch up on paperwork, but our IT team has been working hard to make teleworking more productive.”

With COVID-19 forcing employers to send people home, many producers are taking advantage of the extra time and warmer weather to get things done around the farm, including implementation of NRCS conservation practices.

NRCS technicians assist in field investigations to determine the problems landowners face and collect the data needed for field offices to develop structural solutions, make sure implementation meets standards and specifications and verifies completed practices to determine if goals were met.

“Having the soil conservation technician’s in the field during this time of year is critical to our producers in implementing conservation programs,” Long said. “With NRCS offices being open, but the doors closed our soil conservation technicians are now the face of NRCS and seeing those faces may just provide a glimmer of hope to our USDA extended family.”

NRCS Offices are open for business. Employees are in the office and we are answering phone calls, writing farm plans and trying to meet 2020 program deadlines. NRCS is here for our producers to answer questions, provide feedback on standards and specifications, and provide timely inspections of conservation practices.

Right now, with the uncertainty of the COVID 19 virus, producers are being very cautious on where they are spending their money. NRCS does not want to add stress to our farmers, especially by delaying cost share payments for completed conservation practices. “Times are hard, and I want to help our producers as much as I can during this crisis,” Durham said.

With the new 2018 Farm Bill well under way for 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has added an elevated level of angst for many of our employees and has increased the workload into an even more compressed timeline.

But, as always, NRCS employees will adapt and be there for our producers.



Landowner Randy Jones (left) and NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Tim Durham discuss Jones’ conservation plan.