



United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS in TEXAS

StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity

2015 Annual Report



A Message from the Texas State Conservationist

Salvador Salinas

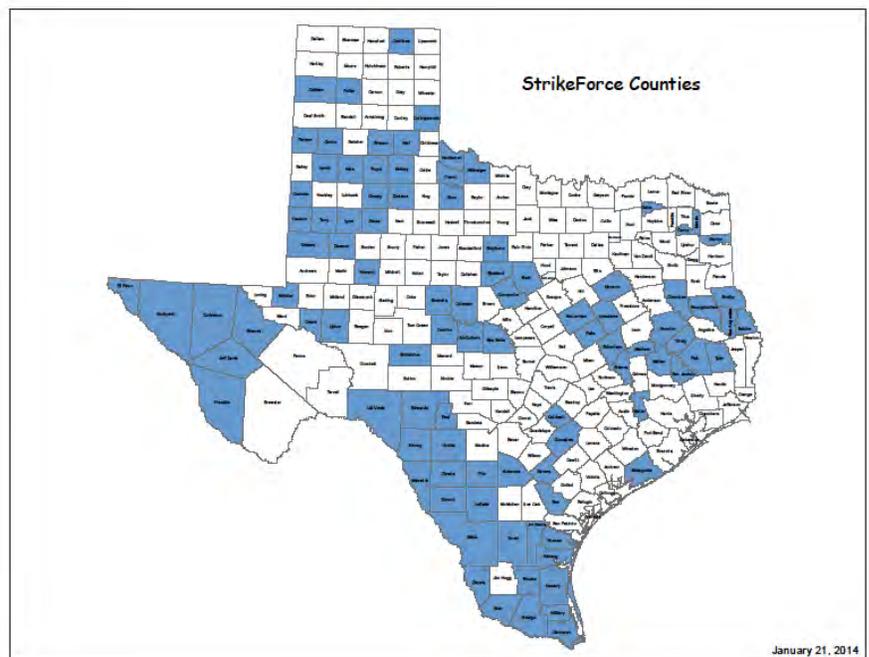


Texas is one of 21 states and Puerto Rico participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative announced March 26, 2013, by USDA Agriculture Secretary Vilsack. Since 2014 when the initiative expanded from 9 to 96 counties in Texas, the state continues to achieve notable successes in StrikeForce counties thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA), Rural Development (RD) and invaluable agency partners.

This USDA outreach initiative, designed to provide relief in persistent poverty counties - 90 percent of which are in rural areas, falls right in line with NRCS Chief Weller’s priority of broadening our reach to customers and partners. This past year, an increase in the construction of seasonal high tunnels and dedication of community gardens in StrikeForce rural and urban communities provided new opportunities for NRCS in Texas to increase awareness and accelerate delivery of USDA program assistance to customers and partners. Some of these successes are highlighted throughout this report.

Whether working in a rural or urban setting, NRCS continued its foundational efforts of working hand-in-hand with private landowners, farmers and ranchers, to assist them in determining how to best utilize available technical and financial assistance to address their land’s natural resource concerns. In 2015, Texas NRCS provided more than \$1,053,036 million through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to farmers and ranchers within the 96 designated StrikeForce counties. These contracted monies will address resource concerns, such as water quantity and quality, on more than 3,160 acres.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about StrikeForce in Texas through the pages of this report.



2015 StrikeForce Highlights

At-a-Glance

- Five two-day workshops focusing on Seasonal High Tunnels were completed in cooperation with Victor Harris of the Minority Landowner Magazine. The workshops included a one-day hands on installation of a seasonal high tunnel.
- A StrikeForce radio program was developed in partnership with the Rio Bravo RC&D Council which reached out to two Spanish radio stations covering numerous counties throughout the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. StrikeForce announcements were also recorded in Spanish.
- For the first time ever west of the Mississippi, NRCS hosted the Minority Landowner Magazine’s annual conference in Houston, Texas.
- NRCS worked in partnership with Texas AgriLife Extension to host and participate in two “Battleground to Breaking Ground” workshops for military Veterans. They were held in Williamson and Bexar counties with a total of 76 participants.
- NRCS worked in partnership with the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) to provide technical support in an Armed to Farm workshop in Medina County with 26 military veterans in attendance.
- NRCS provided support and speakers for the Texas Organic Farmers and Ranchers Annual Conference. Attendees included new, beginning farmers and ranchers, and underrepresented and limited resources producers.
- In cooperation with other USDA agencies, nonprofits and state entities, participated in 39 outreach events to provide technical and financial information to underrepresented groups in StrikeForce counties.
- Worked in partnership with other USDA agencies to provide support in the training of Hispanic Serving Institutions staff in the application process for grants from USDA agencies. Approximately 250 students participated from colleges and universities throughout the state of Texas.
- Participated in the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) National Conference and the Latinos in Agriculture Conference to promote the NRCS and other USDA agencies to recruit minority students.
- Community Garden Initiative – Provided financial and technical support to the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley for the installation of a garden to serve the surrounding community.



StrikeForce Successes Across Texas



Out of 254 counties in Texas, NRCS has 96 StrikeForce counties. NRCS in Texas has five designated Zones as seen in the map to the left. Twenty-three StrikeForce counties are located in the state’s High Plains or South Plains regions, also known as Zone 1.

In the true spirit of StrikeForce, NRCS teamed up with sister agencies, such as FSA to collaborate on the planning and facilitation of intensive outreach meetings and activities within the Zone’s 23 counties to increase awareness of USDA programs and opportunities.

The Lynn County Farm Tour and the Terry County Farm Tour are examples of the outreach efforts taking place in Zone 1. Lynn and Terry counties have two of the largest and oldest Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) farm tours held each year in their communities within the state. These outreach activities include more than 100 community residents who voluntarily participate on tour stops as participants visit local farming and ranching operations.



As of Sept. 30, 2015, the StrikeForce initiative has improved irrigation efficiencies through financial assistance totaling more than \$140,000 on impacted acreage. Workshops like those held in Lynn and Terry counties also take on additional importance due to the fact they lie on top of the Ogallala Aquifer, which underlies eight states. This ancient, 174,000 square mile aquifer is being depleted at a pace that is currently unsustainable. During the tours, attendees were able to learn from agency personnel about conservation planning, conservation programs and available technical and financial assistance through USDA programs.





In Zone 2, the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, a federally recognized Native American Tribe, is getting back to its roots. In 1682, the Tribe settled on the banks of the Rio Grande River near what is now El Paso, growing corn and other plants and vegetables for their survival. Centuries later, the Tribe makes a strong effort to pass on gardening and healthy eating practices to the next generation.

Those efforts were recently boosted when the Tribe worked with NRCS to construct a seasonal high tunnel at the Pueblo’s education center. The high tunnel’s location at the entrance to the Pueblo village provides the opportunity for children to learn how to tend crops, where food is grown, while enjoying fresh produce that they can take home. The high tunnel construction was completed in seven hours as part of a farmer and rancher workshop.



Also consider Gloria Jimenez, owner of the Rancho 4J, who is one producer reaping the benefits of partnering with NRCS. Jimenez and her family farmed in Mexico for almost 30 years. In 2011, they moved their family into El Paso County where Gloria is from. Their excitement about their new start in the United States was soon met with fears for their farm’s survival. With crops in the ground, three wells went dry and the crops soon died. Gloria and her husband reached out to NRCS and developed a conservation plan with District Conservationist Francisco Molinar, who also worked with the Jimenez’s through the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative. Today, Rancho 4J crops are watered through an existing irrigation dirt canal system now lined with concrete, in turn improving the canal system’s water efficiency.



“All farmers live on year to year is hope. This program has given us great hope and a reason to smile again.”
Gloria Jimenez, Rancho 4J, El Paso County



The Chinese proverb says, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life.” Although the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley isn’t giving fishing lessons, what they are teaching will help feed and improve the lives of Valley residents

for a long time to come. Through the NRCS, the Food Bank was able to acquire a \$2,500 grant that has helped them expand their Valley Community Garden. The funds were used to purchase tools and the supplies needed to add a 50 x 35 foot garden plot to the existing garden. Now, more individuals and families can have their own area to tend while participating in the community garden program.

“The Food Bank RGV’s Community Garden is all about collaborating with public and private partners,” says Terri Drefke, chief executive officer of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley. “The collaborating is key in accessing the resources and knowledge necessary to move low income families into a sustainable lifestyle, a healthy lifestyle filled with fresh fruits and vegetables and the possibility of sharing or selling their excess to others in the community.”

The Food Bank funded and started the garden in May 2014 with the assistance of the University of Texas-Pan American’s Texas Rural Cooperative Center under the direction of Rick Carrera, director. Training programs on soil health, how to handle pests and take care of the plants, as well as cooking and nutrition classes are part of the community garden program.

“We want to create a self-sustainable circle by educating the families in classes, as well as hands-on in the garden on how they can grow their own food, and how they can eat healthier by teaching them how to prepare the



produce they grow,” says Christopher Bueno, manager of the Community Garden and the Pharrmer’s Market.

In Zone 3, this community garden exemplifies the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative’s mission of providing assistance to communities in persistent poverty areas for improving their quality of life and creating conservation opportunities in rural communities and Tribes across the nation.



In Zone 4, a record breaking crowd attended the 2015 Minority Landowner Magazine’s 9th Anniversary Conference held in Houston. The NRCS in

Texas hosted the three-day event which focused on agricultural diversity and opportunities on and off farms and ranches. The conference provided a tremendous opportunity for the exchange of information and ideas between an estimated 200 attendees and agricultural industry professionals, agencies and businesses. Attendees came from numerous StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity states and StrikeForce counties within Texas.



“This was the largest conference and NRCS in Texas was excited to serve as a sponsor and in providing additional tools to landowners who attended from across the U.S.,” says Drenda Williams, NRCS assistant state conservationist for management and strategy in Texas. “Breakout sessions included producers who shared how they diversified their operation, along with other topics such as family farm and finances, NRCS conservation programs and estate planning. Exhibits were set up where attendees could visit one-on-one with USDA representatives, along with other agricultural entities.

Frederick Newhouse was one of minority conference attendees. He operates a commercial cow-calf operation in Walker County which is a StrikeForce county. In partnership with the NRCS, Newhouse has developed a whole systems conservation plan for his ranch to ensure he meets his ranching goals and objectives. Newhouse will tell you that sustainability and willingness to adopt change are keys to optimizing and enhancing natural resources, while strengthening the ranch’s economic viability. He currently participates in two Farm Bill programs. Through EQIP, he has applied conservation practices such as cross fencing to optimize rotational grazing of his beef herd and built livestock water ponds. He has planted grasses and overseeded legumes to prevent erosion and stabilize soils, while optimizing grazing resources. He works through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to maintain and enhance his existing natural resource systems. An exceptional



rancher who always seeks to gain and share knowledge, Newhouse is a board member of the 100 Ranchers organization which promotes agriculture at the local level and holds educational meetings. Members are an integral part of sharing information, resources and connecting people through a strong network.



In 2015, NRCS staff in Zone 5 provided conservation technical and financial assistance to historically underserved producers in its 11 designated StrikeForce counties in Central and North Texas. Staff obligated \$22,645.25 in financial assistance through three contracts with two producers located in Knox and Navarro counties. Both of these producers came into the NRCS office with the goal of increasing forage production on their land. Financial assistance through StrikeForce funding will help them implement conservation practices such as brush management, forage and biomass planting, prescribed grazing and installation of a pond and cross fencing. In the long run, this investment in conservation will improve grasses and soil health, while helping decrease production input costs at the same time.

Bernard Porter of Navarro County is one producer that has benefitted from StrikeForce funding. Born and raised on his family’s ranch in Navarro County, the 84-yr-old still manages over 2,000 acres of ranch land owned by him and his wife, Alva Jean, along with his brother and sister and other family members. Porter is a longstanding land steward. He has been utilizing assistance from the NRCS office in Corsicana for several decades. With the additional funding benefits provided through StrikeForce, Porter was able to cross fence a pasture and install a water source for his cattle to improve pasture rotation and forage production, something he would not have been able to do without financial assistance from NRCS.



“This Initiative means a whole lot to me,” Porter says “I’m an old man without much income. I’ve always been a hardworking, successful farmer, I just can’t be as active as I used to be. So this was a great boost for our program here at the ranch.”



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Bernard Porter, Navarro County

StrikeForce Demographics

Source: 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

COUNTY	POPULATION 2014	% BELOW POVERTY LEVEL	MEDIAN IN- COME
Texas	26,956,958	17.6	51,900
Atascosa	47,774	16.4	47,543
Bee	32,863	22.2	43,690
Brazos	209,152	29.8	38,310
Briscoe	1,536	18.6	36,250
Brooks	7,194	38.3	21,865
Caldwell	39,810	18.7	44,152
Cameron	420,392	34.8	33,179
Camp	12,621	21.8	37,079
Castro	7,781	24.1	36,402
Cherokee	50,902	24.5	38,378
Cochran	2,935	15.1	38,650
Coleman	8,430	27.6	31,373
Collingsworth	3,017	20.4	41,576
Comanche	13,550	26.4	36,020
Concho	4,050	16.5	51,411
Crane	4,950	13.8	50,417
Crosby	5,899	26.5	38,187
Culberson	2,266	25.2	37,105
Dawson	13,372	21.9	39,714
Delta	5,238	17.9	40,375
Dickens	2,218	18.8	38,401
Dimmit	11,089	26.5	36,681
Duval	11,533	19.7	34,131
Eastland	18,176	19	34,914
Edwards	1,879	18.4	43,839
El Paso	833,487	23.3	40,157
Erath	40,147	22.3	39,586
Falls	16,989	20.9	32,908
Floyd	5,949	20.3	42,279
Foard	1,275	15.4	33,750
Frio	18,531	24	35,849
Gaines	19,425	16.8	52,910
Garza	6,435	15.5	47,540
Gonzales	20,462	21.9	39,248
Hale	34,720	22.3	41,191
Hall	3,147	23.8	33,006

StrikeForce Demographics Continued

COUNTY	POPULATION 2014	% BELOW POVERTY LEVEL	MEDIAN IN- COME
Hardeman	3,928	26.6	36,377
Hidalgo	831,073	34.8	34,146
Houston	22,741	19.7	33,119
Howard	36,651	15.3	45,612
Hudspeth	3,211	44.1	22,545
Jeff Davis	2,204	7.4	49,056
Jim Wells	41,353	21.7	40,585
Karnes	14,906	23.3	42,862
Kenedy	400	32.8	43,438
Kinney	3,526	25.7	33,257
Kleberg	32,190	24.5	40,566
Knox	3,858	20.8	34,295
La Salle	7,474	21.7	26,756
Lamb	13,574	22.1	36,727
Limestone	23,524	21.5	38,823
Lynn	5,771	20.2	44,375
Madison	13,861	25.2	41,732
Marion	10,149	23.2	31,967
Matagorda	36,519	21.1	43,096
Maverick	57,023	30.5	31,395
McCulloch	8,199	16.6	39,194
McLennan	243,441	22	41,922
Morris	12,743	20.6	37,849
Motley	1,153	25.5	35,845
Nacogdoches	65,301	25.7	36,777
Navarro	48,195	21.1	40,795
Nueces	356,221	18.4	47,057
Ochiltree	10,758	17.3	49,964
Oldham	2,070	14.2	48,929
Parmer	9,908	21.3	44,943
Polk	46,079	20.2	37,855
Potter	121,627	23.1	37,951
Presidio	6,976	24.8	29,634
Real	3,371	20.2	33,885
Reeves	14,349	21.9	40,571
Robertson	16,500	20.7	40,601
Runnels	10,416	21.9	37,667
Sabine	10,350	25.8	32,963
San Augustine	8,610	26.4	28,390

StrikeForce Demographics Continued

COUNTY	POPULATION 2014	% BELOW POVERTY LEVEL	MEDIAN IN- COME
San Jacinto	27,099	20.1	46,107
San Saba	5,622	15.2	37,743
Schleicher	3,162	22.8	50,648
Shelby	25,515	22.1	37,081
Starr	62,955	39.2	24,927
Stephens	9,405	18.8	41,728
Terry	12,739	14	37,679
Trinity	14,224	16.1	34,555
Tyler	21,418	17.4	39,940
Upton	3,454	17.1	51,750
Uvalde	27,117	26.5	34,902
Val Verde	48,974	22.1	40,450
Walker	69,789	26	37,617
Waller	46,820	20.4	50,097
Webb	266,673	31.4	39,449
Wilbarger	12,973	20.7	41,658
Willacy	21,903	40	25,886
Winkler	7,821	12.8	48,992
Yoakum	8,286	11.7	49,340
Zapata	14,319	34.7	31,109
Zavala	12,267	35	25,625

Impacting Land and Lives

In 2015, USDA agencies in Texas continued collaborations with established partners and new partnerships in reaching private landowners and communities with information on USDA agencies and available technical and financial assistance through Farm Bill programs.

Partners such as the University of Texas-Pan American, Texas Mexico Border Coalition and the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers CBO worked at the grass roots level to enhance our outreach efforts to historically underserved, new and beginning farmers and ranchers, limited resource producers and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

NRCS also continued to rely on its strong relationships with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Texas Agrilife Extension, the Texas Department of Agriculture and other state and local governments and nonprofit organizations.

Outreach efforts met NRCS goals through:

- Identifying underserved and non-traditional customers in each of the StrikeForce counties .
- Amplifying partnerships with CBOs and stakeholders to identify customer groups and their specific needs.
- Developing education and awareness materials to meet the needs of identified customer groups.
- Working with CBOs and stakeholders to host outreach meetings.
- Gathering contact information at these outreach events on individuals interested in working with USDA agencies.
- Scheduling one-on-one assistance for landowners to begin the conservation planning process.

