



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

November 2016

A Place to Call Home

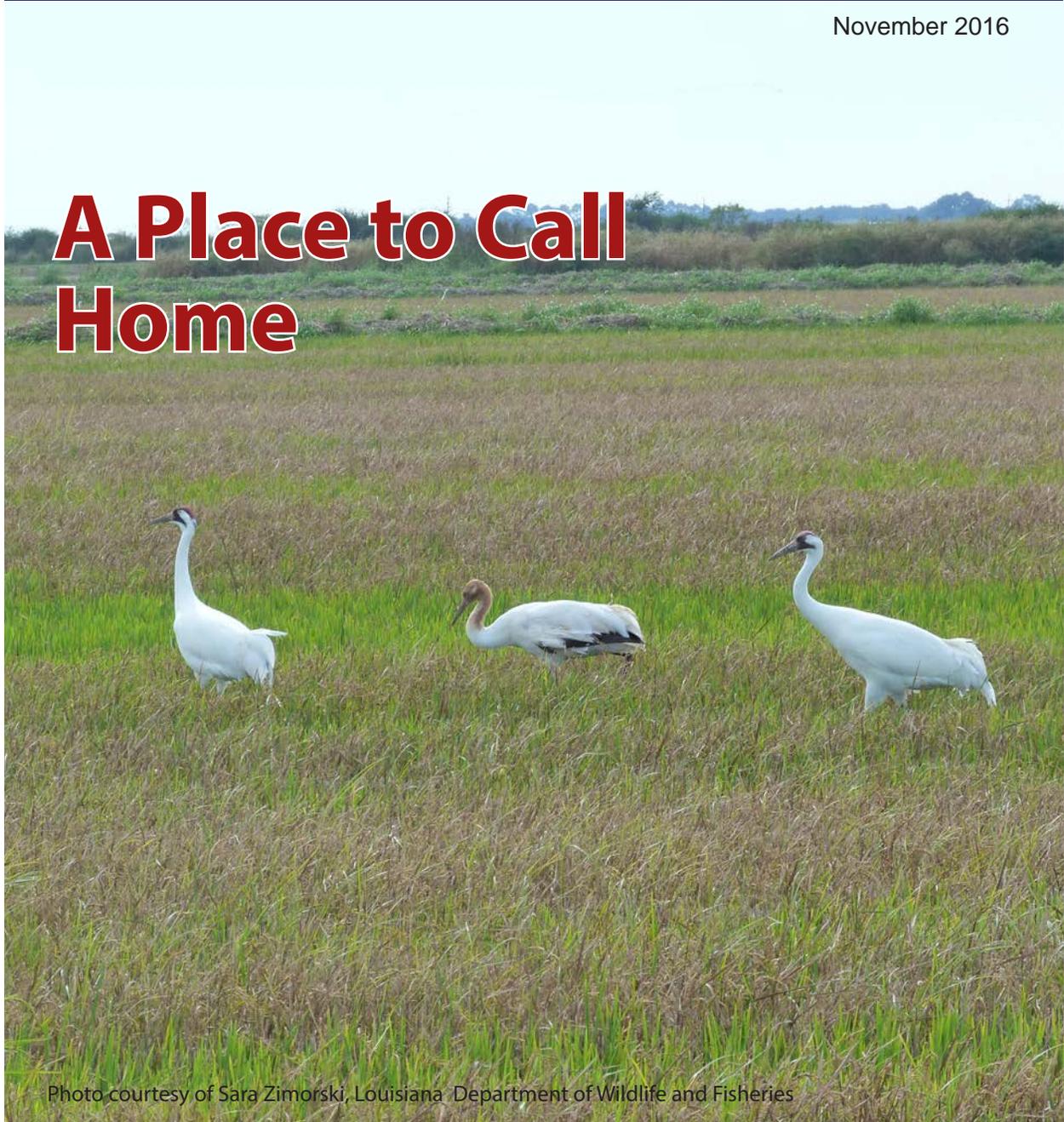


Photo courtesy of Sara Zimorski, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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On the Cover



For the first time in over 75 years, whooping crane chicks hatched in Louisiana. Find out how Chad and Rae Hill and Alan Hebert worked with NRCS to provide habitat for this endangered bird on pages 4 and 5.

The Conservation Update is distributed monthly by mail and e-mail.

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New Feature

New Partnership with TWILA

NRCS has a brand new partnership with “This Week in Louisiana Agriculture” (TWILA) to bring you even more of the conservation story featured in each monthly issue of the Louisiana Conservation Update. Check your local listings for program times or visit the TWILA website at <http://www.twilatv.org/>.



Follow us on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/LouisianaNRCS>

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Notes from the State Conservationist

This is my favorite time of year. Cooler weather, football games, family gatherings and an abundance of good food. All of these are things to be thankful for and I trust that all of you, our friends, partners and producers had a wonderful Thanksgiving.

Now, with the beginning of the New Year just around the corner, it is an opportunity to reflect over the past year. 2016 brought many challenges for all of us, especially our customers and producers impacted by the two devastating floods. In typical Louisiana fashion, we all worked together, gathered around and supported those who needed help.



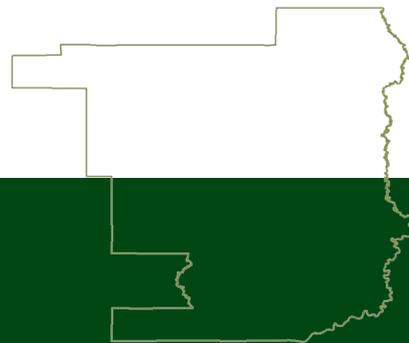
In this issue of Conservation Update we meet some rice/crawfish producers who are not only growing a crop but also providing critical habitat for one of the rarest birds in North America, the whooping crane. How you might ask? The answer is in the largest conservation program in the nation, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In this program land owners and farmers have the opportunity to reach a higher level of conservation and that is exactly what happened in Jefferson Davis Parish. Habitat established by Chad and Rae Hill, along with Alan Hebert through CSP gave the whooping cranes a place to nest and for the first time in 77 years, chicks were hatched in Louisiana.

This success story shows that NRCS working with private landowners can accomplish major conservation goals. With our friends and partners working along with us we continue to make great strides in conservation.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of our partners, customers and my fellow NRCS and conservation district employees a very happy and healthy holiday season. This past year, with all of its challenges also brought great successes. I am proud of the work we have accomplished together, working side-by-side with our partners. As an organization we strive to provide excellence in all we do, and we plan to continue that in 2017.

May you and your family have a wonderful holiday season. From my family to yours, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! We stand together #LouisianaStrong.

Kevin D. Norton
State Conservationist



Jefferson Davis Parish Ag Facts

There are 656 farms in Jefferson Davis Parish.
265,036 acres of land is in farms.
70% of the land is in crops, 14% is in pastures and 8.5% is forest land.
Rice is the #1 commodity of the parish.

<http://www.agcensus.usda.gov>



Photo courtesy of Sara Zimorski, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

A Place to Call Home

Deep in the heart of Jefferson Davis Parish lies a special place, a welcoming habitat and home to a family of the endangered whooping crane (*Grus americana*). The family is part of an experimental population being established in southwestern Louisiana by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF). Whooping cranes normally pair for life and these are the first to become parents in Louisiana in more than 75 years.

A simple drive by these fields and most would describe them as healthy and vibrant rice and crawfish fields, which they are. But, a closer look will reveal that they are much more than that.

This place has been created, like a bed “made” for special guests. The bed is a watery mix of rice stubble, crawfish and all manner of plants and micro-organisms intermingling. For the whooping crane it’s the Ritz Carlton of habitats. A perfect place to nest and make a home.

So this is where the story begins and there are many questions to be answered, like: How do you go about

making a home for an endangered species? Who is responsible for making this habitat? Where and who do you turn to for advice on what to do? It all starts with a very simple concept and then it grows from there.... “Have a heart for conservation.”

Mary Guillory, District Conservationist for Jefferson Davis Parish is the first to point out that these two landowners (who happen to be neighbors) are not only friends, but stewards of the land. Chad and Rae Hill and Alan Hebert have worked with NRCS for several years and have been involved in a variety of programs. “The Hills and Mr. Hebert enrolled in the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) in 2010,” explained Mary. In 2015 when they renewed their CSP contract they decided to extend the time water is held on their fields using the animal enhancement part of CSP. “Closing structures and holding water creates a habitat for the whooping cranes, as well as, other migratory and wading birds,” said Mary. Typically after winter, farmers will open up their structures and allow the water to drain off their fields. When the fields

are dry, migratory birds including the whooping crane are left with little habitat. CSP allows landowners to hold water longer than they normally would have, giving migratory and shore birds much needed habitat. CSP is currently it is the largest conservation program in the United States with approximately 70 million acres of productive agricultural and forest land enrolled. It is designed to help land owners and agricultural producers take conservation on their land to the next level. Troy Mallach, State Biologist with NRCS is excited when he sees the positive impact that CSP is having on endangered species. “Private land owners are so important to the recovery of endangered species. Without them, the fact of the matter is we are not going to be able to recover many species, including the whooping crane” said Mallach. “With some species, over 90 percent of the habitat they use is on private lands.”

Sara Zimorski, Wildlife Biologist with the LDWF, agrees the cooperation and support of private land owners and farmers has been essential and is critical to the long term success of the reintroduction of whooping cranes to



Louisiana.” Sara goes on to say that they were originally surprised at how much the whooping cranes were utilizing private lands, especially rice and crawfish fields that essentially act as shallow wetlands for the birds.

Troy goes on to explain the significance of these whooping cranes. “It has been over 75 years since we have had a whooping crane nest and hatch chicks in Louisiana. As one of the largest and rarest endangered birds in North America this is really a great success story of how NRCS working with private land owners can have a huge positive impact for all aspects of conservation, especially in this case with wildlife.”

Chad and Rae Hill couldn’t agree more, “When we found out we had a nest it was exciting, we had whooping cranes on our property before but, we have never had a nest with babies,” recalls Rae. Chad and Rae’s two young children have enjoyed going out near the nest and watching the chicks grow. After the chicks were born the Hills thought that LDWF would want to take the babies but instead they chose to leave them and see how long they would survive in their natural habitat. One of the chicks survived and one didn’t, the one remaining is healthy and will reach maturity in February 2017.

“We feel honored that we have been able to experience this with our children,”

explained Rae. “The fact that this is the first nest and chicks that have hatched in Louisiana in such a long time and it happened on our land, is really remarkable,” said Rae. Whooping cranes have a life span of about 30 years and they mate for life. With any luck this pair will remain in the area and continue to nest and have chicks for years to come.

Alan Hebert, a Louisiana Master Farmer, owns land right next to the Hills and together they have worked with NRCS to enhance productivity on their land and create this much needed habitat. Hebert agrees that the NRCS programs that he and the Hills have utilized have made a difference for wildlife but also for their bottom line. Hebert explains, “We are a business and have to be profitable, so the programs that we utilize with NRCS help us incorporate conservation practices. It’s important to us because we love this land and want to leave it to our children better than we found it.”

Establishing a resident population of whooping cranes that live and breed in the wetlands, marshes, and prairies of Louisiana is the overall plan. With NRCS, private land owners and all of the conservation partners working toward the same goal, the hope is that many birds will find a place to call home right here.



Louisiana StrikeForce Update

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, NRCS StrikeForce Coordinator

When you grow up in a rural community you are surrounded by agriculture. You pass the fields of corn, soy beans, cotton, or cattle grazing on a daily basis. The large tractors cutting hay and combines harvesting crops are as normal an occurrence as going to school or work. Many hear the old folks talk about their days growing up on the farm and deep inside you dream that you too could do just that. Then reality hits you! You don't own and cannot afford to lease 1,000 acres. You don't have a clue where to locate the financing to buy that tractor or harvester. Your credit has been destroyed by a list of life challenges that can run the gamut from unemployment or divorce to incarceration. Slowly you bury your dream and with it a part of your spirit. Eventually your dream dies and so do the dreams of your family, friends and neighbors. Finally, your community sinks into poverty.

USDA Strike Force is here to change that but we realize to fight persistent poverty, as the saying goes, "It takes a village." By partnering with grassroots organizations like Campti Field of Dreams, we are able to share information with community members on USDA technical and financial assistance programs. Many times events are scheduled during the week when those who need the information most are at work or school. Realizing this, Donna Isaacs, executive director of Campti Field of Dreams contacted the branch manager of the Natchitoches Parish Library Northeast Branch, Linda Young, and asked if they would host the program on Saturday, November 12th. "We are very interested in hosting programs that enhance the community," said Ms. Young, as she pointed to the quilts hanging in the library to promote the upcoming quilting class by Campti Field of Dreams' president, Clara Silvie. This just goes to prove the words of Andrew Carnegie, "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do

to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert."

The program hosted by the library facilitated short presentations from USDA agencies, Red River Mill Credit Union and Campti Field of Dreams followed by ample time for one-on-one conversations and completion of the request for assistance forms. "One person, one family, one community at a time is how we are going to make a difference in Louisiana," said Strike Force coordinator, Dexter Sapp. "There were 20 non-agency folks in attendance at the meeting and USDA received 10 requests for assistance with 9 of those requests coming from first time USDA participants."

Campti Field of Dreams is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life in underserved communities. Located in the old two story brick building in downtown Campti, which served as the town's first bank, they operate the Campti Historic Museum, two community gardens (Campti and Natchitoches) and a 25-acre sustainable agriculture demonstration farm. Focused on rebuilding the vibrant local economy that Campti once had, they showcase and sell the works of local artists and artisans. For the past three years they have partnered with USDA Strike Force to conduct outreach events in Natchitoches, Grant, Rapides, Caddo, Red River and DeSoto Parishes. On January 19th, they will hold their first event in Sabine Parish in partnership with the Sabine Council on Aging and on January 11th they will be in Red River Parish in partnership with the Red River Council on Aging. However, Campti Field of Dreams is not just a partner; they are also a client.

Realizing that it is hard to ask someone to consider repairing their home or starting a business when they can't afford to put food on the table, Ms. Isaacs has made providing affordable, accessible food a priority. Donna secured her Farm and Tract number through FSA for both the 3-acre community garden in Campti and the 25-acre farm. She worked with NRCS to develop a conservation plan which placed 4 acres into conservation as part of the

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and obtained the funding for her three high tunnels through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Her plan is to grow food, grow farmers and grow community so she shares her knowledge and experience with anyone willing to listen even if it crosses state lines.



She is well equipped to assist the limited-resource, socially-disadvantaged, beginning farmer, because she is one. When the Red River flooded, not once but twice in the same year, the community garden was under 6-feet of water and would have been better suited to be an alligator park. The flood took out three growing seasons and with it the revenue to expand the program. She moved to the farm on higher ground leaving the rich river bed soils which would grow anything behind. The new place is marginal land with acidic soil so she has a much greater appreciation for compost and has learned that the time spent building hugelkultur beds pays off with better yields. She shares her lessons learned with the community in classes like this summer's 2-Week Youth Agripreneurship Program which had seven graduates between the ages of 10 and 16. "When she tells a participant that there is no minimum size to get a farm and tract number, that the paperwork is minimal, and that the agency will assist, they believe her," said Dexter, "Because she has done it!"

We look forward to continued partnership with Campti Field of Dreams and other grassroots organizations as they help us to further our mission of fighting persistent poverty. So if you have a dream to farm, ranch, start or grow an agriculture based business; buy, build or repair your home USDA Strike Force is here to help..

Programs Reminder

USDA Announces Applications Available for Conservation Stewardship Program

NRCS is now accepting applications for enrollment in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the nation's largest conservation program.

NRCS has made several updates to the program this year to help producers better evaluate their conservation options and the benefits to their operations and resources.

NRCS offices began processing applications on November 14th and will continue through February 3, 2017.

Anyone interested in the additional opportunities the updated CSP will offer can find information on the new CSP portal, located at www.nrcs.usda.gov/csp.

Visit your local NRCS office for more information.

NRCS Announces ACEP-WRE Sign-Up

NRCS in Louisiana is making available financial and technical assistance through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Wetlands Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE).

Private landowners across the state are encouraged to apply. Wetlands Reserve Easements help private landowners successfully enhance and protect habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species, improve water quality and reduce flooding, recharge ground water, protect biological diversity and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and recreational activities.

NRCS accepts applications for this program on a continual basis. Visit your local NRCS office for more information.



NRCS to Expand Targeted Conservation Effort for Wildlife on Agricultural Lands

USDA is adding dozens of new target species, including four shorebirds, to its premier wildlife conservation effort that helps agricultural producers make wildlife-friendly improvements on working lands.

This project builds on the agency's former Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative, which was launched following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill to enable farmers to improve habitat for migratory birds, providing an alternative to impacted coastal ecosystems.

Four shorebird species are the focus of this Working Lands for Wildlife project but when shorebird habitat is developed or enhanced on working agricultural fields, many other wildlife species benefit especially other waterbirds and waterfowl.

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help producers add a variety of conservation practices on their land.

Visit your local NRCS office for more information.

Upcoming Events

December 11-15, 2016 8th National Summit on Coastal and Estuarine Restoration and the 25th Biennial Meeting of The Coastal Society

Restore America's Estuaries and The Coastal Society will be holding a National Summit from December 11 - 15, 2016, in New Orleans, Louisiana. This year's theme is "Our Coasts, Our Future, Our Choice". For more information or to register for the summit, visit www.estuaries.org/Summit.

Make sure to visit the NRCS exhibit during the conference!

January 11, 2017 StrikeForce Meeting

A StrikeForce meeting will be held at the Red River Council on Aging in Coushatta, Louisiana, on Tuesday, January 11, 2016 from 9:00 am - 11:00 am.

January 11 - 13, 2017 71st Annual LACD Convention

The Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts will be holding their 71st Annual Convention at the Best Western Inn and Suites in Alexandria, Louisiana, on January 11 - 13, 2017.

For more information or to register, please contact Rose Sharbeno at 337-239-2193 Ext. 3.

January 13 & 14, 2017 Ag Expo

The North Louisiana Agri-Business Council is hosting Ag Expo on January 13 & 14, 2017, at the Ike Hamilton Expo Center at 501 Mane Street in West Monroe.

Ag Expo provides a way to educate the public on the many ways agriculture touches daily lives.

January 19, 2017 StrikeForce Meeting

A StrikeForce Meeting will be held at the Sabine Council on Aging on January 19, 2017, from 10:00am - 12:30pm. Lunch will be provided.

Save the Date

Louisiana Women in Agriculture Conference February 9 - 10, 2017 Alexandria, Louisiana



Keynote Speaker: Kim Bremmer

Kim grew up as a farm girl and is a wife, mother of two, graduate of University of Wisconsin-Madison and was a dairy nutritionist for almost 15 years. She is a vocal champion of agriculture everywhere she goes, from the grocery store to the airport. Her true passion is sharing the REAL story of agriculture with everyday consumers.

Kim is the Wisconsin State Coordinator for Common Ground, a national movement of farm women who share information about farming and the food we grow; a regular contributor on Rural Route Radio; and President of Wisconsin Women in Agriculture, an affiliate of American Agri-Women, the nation's largest coalition of farm, ranch and agri-business women dedicated to protecting and advancing agriculture by increasing awareness, building alliances, communication and education. She is also an Academy Member of the National Speaker's Association and a proud member of the American Dairy Coalition.

For more information about Kim, visit <http://aginspirations.com>



New Format



Networking

More Details Coming Soon!

For a current list of our offices visit

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/la/contact/local/>

**Visit our web site at:
www.la.nrcs.usda.gov**

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