



United States Department of Agriculture

TEXAS NRCS 2013 Annual Report

StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity



A Message from the Texas State Conservationist

Salvador Salinas



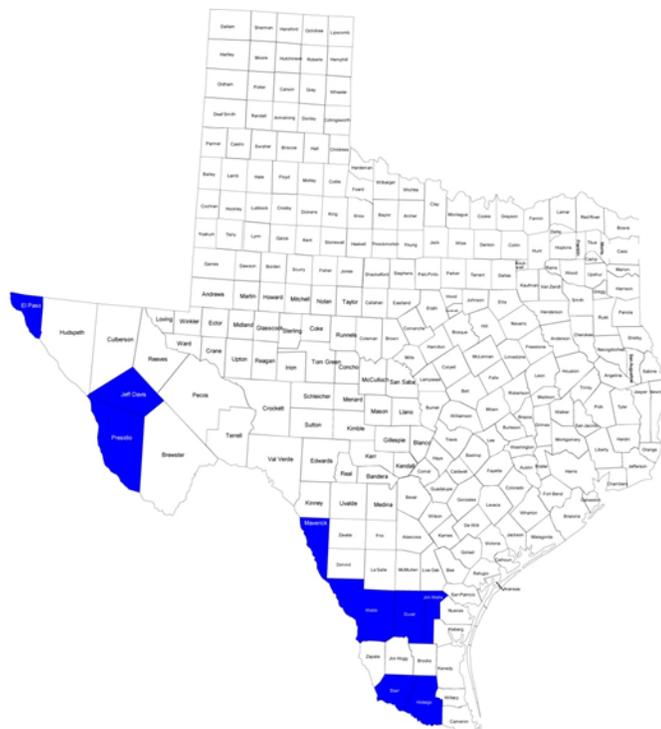
Texas is one of 16 states participating in the recently expanded U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity initiative announced March 26, 2013, by USDA Agriculture Secretary Vilsack.

This USDA initiative is designed to provide relief in persistent poverty counties - 90 percent of which are in rural areas. StrikeForce efforts through USDA agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Rural Development (RD) help to increase awareness of USDA programs, while also increasing opportunities for NRCS to work hand-in-hand with private landowners to assist them in determining how to best utilize available financial assistance to address their land’s natural resource concerns.

The Texas NRCS has nine StrikeForce counties: El Paso, Jeff Davis and Presidio in West Texas and Maverick, Webb, Duval, Jim Wells, Starr and Hidalgo in South Texas. Six of these counties border Mexico. NRCS, collaborators and partners are focusing additional outreach efforts and assistance on accelerating the delivery of NRCS’ available technical and financial assistance to farmers, ranchers and communities in these counties.

In 2013, Texas NRCS provided more than **\$2.9 million** through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to farmers and ranchers in the nine designated StrikeForce counties. These contracted monies will address resource concerns, such as water quantity and quality, on more than **96,119 acres**.

This annual report highlights some success stories, outreach efforts and funding accomplishments in FY13 by NRCS, USDA agencies, partners, CBOs and community stakeholders.



StrikeForce Success Highlights

Through the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity, NRCS technical and financial assistance efforts continue to make a difference in the lives of landowners such as Willie Utley of Duval County. Utley is all too familiar with the day-to-day struggles of persistent drought. In 2013, the rancher hauled livestock water to a drought ravaged pasture for months when a windmill-powered water well and livestock tank had both run dry. The need for livestock water lead Utley into his local NRCS field office. He applied for and received funding from NRCS to help install a solar-powered water well for his livestock with EQIP funds made available through the StrikeForce initiative. Utley took the steps needed to efficiently manage his ranch through the drought. Once forages on the drought-stricken pasture have had some time to recover, he hopes to move his cattle back to the pasture where the new water well has been installed.



"It's going to be a big improvement and not having the worry of not having water when you need it."

Willie Utley, Duval County, Texas

Or, consider Jorge Espinoza of Laredo in Webb County. Despite the 2013 drought, people were still wanting to get into the cattle raising business. A growing segment of these new beef producers are the non-traditional small-tract landowners. Espinoza is a passionate beginning rancher who recently purchased his first 50 acres. It was word of mouth that brought him into his local NRCS field office. He was looking for technical assistance on long-term conservation planning on his mesquite and cactus covered land. That's when he learned there was some financial assistance available through StrikeForce EQIP funds to install a solar pump on a recently established water well. These StrikeForce funds have now freed up money that Espinoza can use on other conservation practices.



"I'm not a big rancher. I'm new at this and everything always takes money to start."

Jorge Espinoza, Webb County, Texas

Likewise, no place has been harder hit by annual droughts than the South Texas border town of Penitas in Hidalgo County. It's along the Rio Grande River, which separates Texas from Mexico, that generations of the Ramirez family have farmed and raised cattle. Today, the father and son team of Jose Ramirez Jr. and Jose Ramirez III, continue to make their living full time from the land. To maximize each drop of water, the father and son ranchers have worked closely with the NRCS on installing irrigation pipeline on their improved forage pastures. Recently they received financial assistance



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through the USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity initiative to install irrigation pipeline on 42 acres. Water is a precious natural resource to ranchers and irrigation water is critical to growing the quality forages, such as KR Bluestem and bermuda grass that support the Ramirez’s cattle operation. Therefore, implementation of efficient and affordable water management practices is crucial to maximizing water usage.



“I don’t know if we could be productive without y’all’s help. I really don’t. It’s just tough.”

Jose Ramirez III, Hidalgo County



StrikeForce Demographics

The nine counties selected along the Texas-Mexico border were targeted due to the high number of colonias, the high poverty rates and the number of socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers based off NASS 2007 Agriculture Census data.

COUNTY	2012 POPULATION	% POVERTY	% UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	MEDIAN INCOME
Duval	11,717	27.1	9.1	\$31,294
El Paso	827,398	24.6	10.3	\$39,116
Hidalgo	806,552	37.3	12	\$31,021
Jeff Davis	2,307	14.1	5.7	\$48,161
Jim Wells	41,754	25.5	6.7	\$39,120
Maverick	55,365	31.2	14.2	\$28,502
Presidio	7,525	23.7	14.3	\$31,297
Starr	61,615	39.3	16.9	\$24,537
Webb	259,172	32.1	8.1	\$35,295
Nine County Totals	2,073,405	28.3	10.8	\$34,260
Statewide Totals	26,059,203	18.5	7.9	\$49,390

StrikeForce Demographics Continued

COUNTY	NUMBER OF FARMS	FARM SIZE IN ACRES	LAND IN FARMS (ACRES)
Duval	1507	678	1,021,206
EL Paso	590	286	168,556
Hidalgo	2,151	336	722,582
Jeff Davis	105	13,247	1,390,903
Jim Wells	1,109	417	462,721
Maverick	312	1,518	473,683
Presidio	148	10,539	1,559,722
Starr	1,104	591	652,780
Webb	663	2,799	1,855,894
Nine County Totals	7,689	3,379	8,308,047
Statewide Totals	247,437	527	130,398,753

StrikeForce Funding By-the-Numbers

TEXAS NRCS STRIKEFORCE INITIATIVE	
EQIP PROGRAM PARTICIPATION	
COUNTY	CONTRACTS OBLIGATED
Duval	13
El Paso	2
Hidalgo	20
Jeff Davis	0
Jim Wells	14
Maverick	0
Presidio	4
Starr	58
Webb	9
TOTAL CONTRACTS	120
TOTAL ACRES	96,119
TOTAL FUNDING	\$2,957,262

Overall, thanks to a number of key conservation programs made possible through the 2008 Farm Bill, as well as NRCS’s conservation technical assistance activities (CTA), landowners in the nine StrikeForce counties applied conservation plans to nearly 800,000 acres and improved water quality on nearly 650,000 acres.

Increasing awareness and participation through outreach and partnerships

Upwards of 55 outreach events took place in Texas in 2013 in the nine designated counties. Previously forged partnerships with the University of Texas at Pan American and the Texas-Mexico Border Coalition Community Based Organization provided an avenue for NRCS, FSA and RD employees to partner together in planning and attending outreach events. Through these cross-agency and partnership collaborations, USDA personnel were able to reach out to numerous new and beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged and female farmers and ranchers. The goal was to provide awareness about USDA Farm Bill programs, along with offering hands-on assistance on the technical and financial support which is available through NRCS and other USDA agencies.

These events met the below NRCS goals:

- ⇒ Identify underserved and non-traditional customers in each of the StrikeForce counties
- ⇒ Amplify partnerships with CBOs and stakeholders to identify customer groups and their specific needs
- ⇒ Develop education and awareness materials to meet the needs of identified customer groups
- ⇒ Work with CBOs and stakeholders to host outreach meetings to explain services offered through USDA agencies and Farm Bill programs
- ⇒ Gather contact information at these outreach events on individuals interested in working with USDA agencies
- ⇒ Schedule one-on-one assistance for landowners to begin the conservation planning process

STRIKEFORCE INITIATIVE	
COUNTY	OUTREACH EVENTS
Duval	3
El Paso	1
Hidalgo	35
Jeff Davis	0
Jim Wells	1
Maverick	3
Presidio	0
Starr	4
Webb	1
BENEFIT TO ALL COUNTIES	7
TOTAL EVENTS	55



Helping People Help the Land

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