



Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

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Iraq Veteran Finds Peace on the Farm

The adjustment from the military to civilian life has not been easy for Dylan Thomas. Starting a family farm with his wife Abbi is helping.

“It’s awesome, this is better medicine and more therapeutic than anything the VA can give us,” said Thomas. “It’s quiet.”

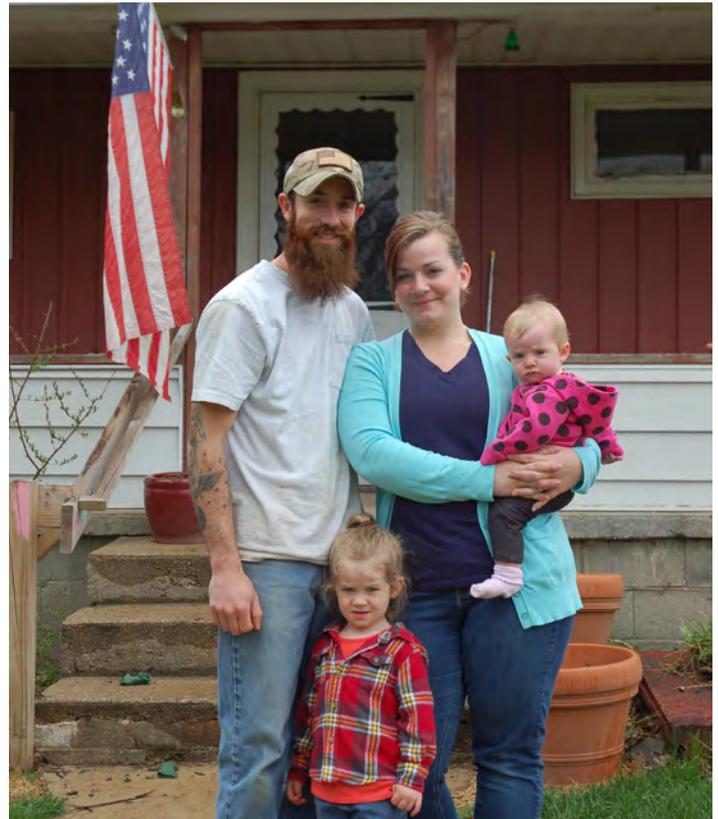
Thomas spent eight years in the Army, including two tours in Iraq. Dylan and Abbi were living in the state of Washington when he decided to end his Army career. Upon leaving the service he was diagnosed with PTSD and traumatic brain injury. He worked several jobs after leaving the Army but none of them worked out. Dylan and Abbi decided to try and find a farm, someplace quiet where they could raise a family.

They met in Tennessee, Dylan’s home state, where he was working as an Army recruiter. When they left Washington they were willing to live anywhere, they ended up buying a farm outside of Marcellus, not far from Abbi’s hometown of Schoolcraft.

“I never thought I’d move to Michigan,” said Dylan.

Even though the upstairs of their current home had been uninhabited for years, they knew they wanted to buy it immediately. They moved on to the farm in 2012 and Dylan worked different jobs, including on a nearby hog farm, before deciding to try and make a living from their 12-acre farm.

Thomas’ first projects were a small hog lot and a chicken house. He’s had help from his neighbors,



Dylan and Abbi Thomas and their daughters CoraLee and Blakely live on family farm in Cass County.

who also brought the family a 1948 tractor that originally was used on their farm.

“This place hadn’t been a farm in a long time,” Abbi said. “Everything we’ve done was with plain old hard work.”

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State Conservationist's Message

Of all the things that NRCS employees do, none is more important than conservation planning. Walking the land with a farmer or forest owner and identifying resource concerns is the foundation of everything we do as a conservation agency.

To emphasize the importance of conservation planning, NRCS-Michigan is conducting its first conservation planning sign-up. Landowners who enroll in the sign-up before June 12, 2015, will have a conservation plan developed before the end of the year. This means that landowners who participate in the sign-up will have a conservation plan completed when 2016 conservation financial assistance is available. This does not guarantee that the producer will receive conservation financial assistance, but it does assure that this important first step is completed before program cut-off dates are announced.

Careful conservation planning results in more efficient use of USDA conservation financial assistance to address high priority resource concerns. It also result in producers making thoughtful decisions on how to address their resource concerns in a way that fits their priorities, schedules and budgets. It's important for landowners to know that conservation planning is done at no cost and a plan does not obligate them to enroll in USDA programs or to implement conservation practices. Participation in USDA conservation programs is always voluntary.

May 1, was an important day for conservation in Michigan. The lead partners for the four Michigan-led initiatives under the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program signed partnership agreements that will provide over \$82 million in conservation assistance available to farmers and forest owners in Michigan,

Indiana and Ohio. RCPP combines the resources of the USDA and private and public partners to expand conservation assistance in defined project areas.

The four 2015 projects include the Tri-State Western Lake Erie Basin Phosphorus Reduction Initiative, involving Michigan, Indiana and Ohio. The St. Joseph River Watershed Conservation Partnership, including



State Conservationist
Garry Lee



Representatives from The Nature Conservancy, Michigan Agri-Business Association, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources met together on May 1, to sign RCPP partnership agreements.

portions of Michigan and Indiana. The lead partner for these two projects is the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Saginaw Bay Watershed Conservation Partnership is led by The Nature Conservancy and the Michigan Agri-Business association. The Training Michigan Foresters to Enhance Sustainable Management of Private Forests initiative will be led by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Non-USDA partners will contribute over \$47 million

in financial and technical assistance to these four projects. In addition to the lead partners, a large number of private and public organizations are contributing financial and technical support for these projects.

In addition to the four Michigan-led projects, NRCS-Minnesota and the American Bird Conservancy are leading a RCPP project to improve forest habitat for the golden-winged warbler and other threatened species in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

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Farming Provides Quiet Transition to Civilian Life

The solitude of working on his own farm, surrounded only by Abbi and his daughters Blakely and CoraLee, has been satisfying for Thomas.

“You feel like you’re doing something for yourself, but you’re also giving back.”

Like some other Iraq War veterans, being in public can be stressful for Thomas. In crowded places he finds himself looking for threats. On the farm, there is only his family and the animals.

“A lot of veterans want to do what we’re doing,” said Thomas.

Thomas has received help from veterans and is eager to help other veterans in return. One place he’s received help is the Farmer Veteran Coalition. The coalition is a national non-profit organization that provides assistance to veterans who want to become farmers. Thomas calls FVC for advice including help with a farm business plan and questions on food laws.

“I don’t like asking people for stuff,” said Thomas. “It helps going to another veteran.”

The organization has a marketing program called Homegrown by Heroes so consumers can support veterans by buying what they grow and raise. Thomas and other Michigan veterans are working with Michigan Food and Farming Systems to start a local affiliate of FVC.

Abbi and Dylan have plans to produce more income from their farm. Dylan is completing an associate’s degree in business from Southwestern Michigan College and plans to complete two certification programs through the school in fruit and vegetable production and agriculture technology. They hope to begin selling vegetables with the possibility of a seasonal high tunnel and a community supported agriculture business. Dylan is planning to expand his pasture land and sell cuts of pasture-raised pork. Although they have plans, the Thomas’ will put family first and not grow too fast.

“Homesteading is popular now,” said Abbi, “but there are a lot of risks and so many variables.”



Dylan Thomas and his daughter Blakely look over the chickens in a chicken house the family built on their farm near Marcellus in Cass County.

She oversees the farm’s finances and is careful not to take on debt until they have the revenue to support it.

In addition to supporting their family, Dylan and Abbi hope their farm can help other veterans. Dylan would like to have veterans interested in farming stay on the farm to get first-hand experience. Abbi wants to share what she has learned about the economics of starting a farm from scratch.

“Veterans, a lot of times aren’t going to ask for things, advice is just as valuable,” said Dylan.

Home Grown by Heroes

The Homegrown by Heroes logo lets consumers support veterans by identifying food produced by military veterans. The marketing initiative was created by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. It was expanded to a national scale by the Farmer Veteran Coalition.



Secretary Vilsack Visits MSU for Climate Announcement

In a speech at Michigan State University, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack laid out a comprehensive approach to partner with agricultural producers to address the threat of climate change.

Building on the creation of USDA's Climate Hubs last year, the new initiatives will utilize voluntary, incentive-based conservation, forestry, and energy programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase carbon sequestration and expand renewable energy production in the agricultural and forestry sectors.

Through these efforts, USDA expects to reduce net emissions and enhance carbon sequestration by over 120 million metric tons of CO₂ equivalent per year – about 2 percent of economy-wide net greenhouse emissions – by 2025. That's the equivalent of taking 25 million cars off the road, or the emissions produced by powering nearly 11 million homes last year.

"American farmers and ranchers are leaders when it comes to reducing carbon emissions and improving efficiency in their operations. That's why U.S. agricultural emissions are lower than the global average," said Vilsack.

"We can build on this success in a way that combats climate change and strengthens the American agriculture economy. Through incentive-based initiatives, we can partner with producers to significantly reduce carbon emissions while improving yields, increasing farm operation's energy efficiency, and helping



Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack visited Michigan State University on April 23 to deliver a policy speech on climate change and agriculture.

farmers and ranchers earn revenue from clean energy production."

The framework announced by Vilsack consisted of ten building blocks that span a range of technologies and practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase carbon storage and generate clean renewable energy.

Through this initiative, USDA will use authorities provided in the 2014 Farm Bill to offer incentives and technical assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest land owners. USDA intends to pursue partnerships and leverage resources to conserve and enhance greenhouse gas sinks, reduce emissions, increase renewable energy and build resilience in agricultural and forest systems.

Opportunities for Military Veterans in Farming

Under the 2014 Farm Bill, military veterans who are beginning farmers receive a preference when applying for conservation financial assistance from NRCS.

In the Lansing area there are two farm incubators that provide training to beginning farmers, said Andrea Stay, director of the Eaton Conservation District.

MANNA Acres in Mason provides housing where veterans provide farming and animal care. **Lansing Roots**, a program of the Greater Lansing Food Bank, also provides training for beginning farmers.

The **Farmer Veteran Coalition** provides assistance to veteran farmers and also accepts donations to support their mission.

Controlled Drainage can Reduce P Spikes after Rain Events

by Tim Harrigan, Michigan State University Extension

Much of the most productive farmland in the Great Lakes region is tile drained. Tile drainage removes excess water, improves infiltration, increases water storage and reduces runoff, and increases crop yields. While tile drainage provides economic and environmental benefits, heavy rainfall can move crop nutrients through the root zone to tile drains where they can escape to the environment. Healthy soil is porous so soil systems leak. Because of problems related to excess nutrients in the Saginaw Bay, Lake Erie, the Gulf of Mexico and other areas, there is a lot of interest in managing drained crop land to retain drainage water for crop use and recycle crop nutrients.

Larry Geohring has been at Cornell University since 1977 working on drainage water management issues with the objective of improving drainage design and management to sustain crop production and minimize nutrient loss through tile drain discharge. He recently spoke at a conference co-sponsored by the Michigan Chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society and Michigan State University Extension about using controlled drainage and bioreactors to reduce nutrient loss from drained cropland. Most fields are freely drained whereby the tile drain outlets are installed and maintained at a constant height and require little management. Controlled drainage is the process of using control structures – usually located at the outlets – to hold back or release drainage water by raising or lowering the height of the outlet.

Tile drainage increases water storage and reduces runoff, but because soil systems are porous, some



Drainage control structures, like these in Monroe County, are used to retain drainage water and crop nutrients in tiled fields.

nutrient movement to tile drains is unavoidable after large rainfall events. Particulate phosphorus (P) is linked to erosion and is about 26 percent bioavailable and tends to settle out of the water column. Surface runoff typically carries sediment and more total phosphorus (particulate plus dissolved phosphorus, DP) than drainage water; however, drainage water carries a greater percentage of DP which is nearly 100 percent bioavailable. This is alarming because DP stays in the water column and is 100 percent bioavailable for algae and aquatic plants.

A typical drainage control structure consists of a riser at the tile outlet with movable barriers

to raise or lower the height of the outlet and in doing so the height of the water level. A reasonable management approach is to set the control barriers high after harvest and through the winter to hold back nutrients and excess water, then lower them in the spring to drain excess water and prepare for planting. During the growing season, the barriers can be raised to an intermediate level to retain water for crop growth, or they can be raised prior to an anticipated rainfall or nutrient application to hold back the initial surge of drainage water and then lowered as conditions allow. By holding back the initial flow of drainage water, the P has time to sorb to the soil matrix and be retained in the root zone for crop growth.

Based on the results of his work in New York, Geohring expects a 10 to 20 percent reduction in the total P load – the product of the total water discharge times the P concentration – with properly managed control structures compared to conventional free drainage. The control

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Farm Bureau Education Grants Announced

Submitted by Michigan Farm Bureau

Forty Michigan Farm Bureau chapters were selected to receive a total of up to \$90,000 in educational grants through a partnership between Michigan Farm Bureau and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In its fifth year, the grant program helps county Farm Bureaus across the state to develop and implement innovative programs to educate farmers about conservation programs, like the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program.

Developed throughout the spring and implemented throughout the summer, local programs will include activities such as educational bus tours, on-farm workshops, and conservation practice demonstrations including cover crops, conservation tillage, and tile drainage control structures.

The grant program also fosters relationships between county Farm Bureaus and their local conservation districts and NRCS field offices.

"A public-private partnership is essential in getting conservation on the ground to address resource concerns," said USDA State Conservationist Garry Lee. "The USDA can

provide resources but our partners are important to getting the message out that individual farmers can help protect our environment."

Emily Reinart, MFB's agriculture ecology specialist added, "Protecting the environment is vital to the agriculture industry's continued growth. NRCS cost-share programs and MAEAP educate thousands of farmers on how to blend conservation practices into their farming operations."

Earlier this year, Michigan was part of more than \$40 million in federal funds provided to the Great Lakes region through a new NRCS program that allows public-private collaboration on conservation efforts. Michigan Farm Bureau is a partner on two of the programs selected for funding.

The 40 Michigan Farm Bureau chapters selected include: Allegan, Barry, Berrien, Cass, Chippewa, Clare, Clinton, Eaton, Genesee, Gratiot, Hiawathaland, Hillsdale, Huron, Huron Shores, Ingham, Ionia, Iosco, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Lapeer, Lenawee, Mac-Luce Schoolcraft, Mason, Menominee, Missaukee, Monroe, Montcalm, Newaygo, Oakland, Oceana, Ogemaw, Osceola, Ottawa, Sanilac, Shiawassee, St. Clair, St. Joseph, Tuscola, Van Buren and Washtenaw.



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Controlled Drainage

structures held back some of the drainage water, reduced the total drainage discharge and reduced the initial high spike in P concentration, thereby reducing the total P load. The use of control structures did not change the ratio of DP to total P; DP was about 80 percent of total P with free drainage or the use of control structures.

Farm managers can reduce the risk of crop nutrient loss in runoff and drainage discharge by controlling application rates, methods, timing

and placement, but even the best managed cropland is vulnerable to nutrient loss following heavy rainfall.

This article was published by Michigan State University Extension. For more information, visit <http://www.msue.msu.edu>. To contact an expert in your area, visit <http://expert.msue.msu.edu>, or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).

Eaton CD Receives 2015 National Arbor Day Award

submitted by the Arbor Day Foundation

The Michigan Arbor Day Alliance is the recipient of a 2015 Arbor Day Award in honor of its outstanding contribution to tree planting, conservation and stewardship, the Arbor Day Foundation announced today.

The Michigan Arbor Day Alliance is one of 13 individuals, organizations and companies being recognized by the Arbor Day Foundation at the annual Arbor Day Awards. This year's ceremony was held at Lied Lodge & Conference Center, located at Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Nebraska, on Saturday, April 25.

The Michigan Arbor Day Alliance will receive the Arbor Day Celebration Award. MADA is a program of the Eaton Conservation District. The MADA has long coordinated Michigan's Arbor Day Celebration, as they've led the festivities for the past twenty-two years.



During the past decade, this long-standing tradition has seen between 1,000 and 1,200 second and third graders descend upon Potter Park Zoo in Lansing to participate each and every year.

Since 1972, the Arbor Day Foundation has recognized the inspiring and life-changing work of leading environmental stewards and tree planters through the annual Arbor Day Awards.

Award winners from previous years include the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, the United States Forest Service, and Enterprise Rent-A-Car.

The Arbor Day Foundation is a million member nonprofit conservation and education organization with the mission to inspire people to plant, nurture, and celebrate trees. More information is available at arborday.org.

Earth Day 2015



The Calhoun CD held their 15th annual Earth Day Festival at the Calhoun County Fairgrounds. More than 300 second and third graders attended the event. Second graders performed soil borings through layered cupcakes (above) at one of the events learning stations.



NRCS conservationist Jim Marshall (above) talks about the importance of cover crops and tillage in protecting the environment and the resources of the Great Lakes. NRCS was one of the exhibitors at the Earth Day event held in downtown Lansing.

NRCS Recognizes Earth Team Volunteers

NRCS recognized its Earth Team volunteers during National Volunteer Week (April 12-18). The Earth Team is NRCS' volunteer workforce that is making a difference all over Michigan.

Earth Team offers many opportunities for people who are interested in volunteering to improve the nation's natural resources. People who are 14-years-old and older can volunteer. Volunteers can work part-time or full-time, work outdoors

or inside a local NRCS office, individually or as a group. To learn more about volunteering for Earth Team contact your local NRCS office.

Over the past year Michigan had 31 Earth Team volunteers working out of 64 offices. These volunteers performed over 1,600 hours of service to promote conservation in Michigan.

Thank you to all of our Earth Team volunteers!



NRCS Earth Team volunteers honored during volunteer week were Beverly Lind, Cadillac (far left), Dennis Maxwell - East Lansing (center), and Tom Topham (far right) who volunteers at the Rose Lake Plant Material Center in East Lansing.

Manistee Conservation District Celebration

The Manistee Conservation District celebrated Earth Day by placing a sign at its 40-acre outdoor classroom and education center.

The land has belonged to the district since 1948 but never had a marker. The district has used the property to demonstrate soil conservation practices. During the district's Earth Day event, attendees planted trees at the site.



Manistee Conservation District Chairman Glenn Lottie, with the new sign for the district's outdoor classroom.

Shiawassee CD Honors Rose Lake PMC as Conservation Partner

The Rose Lake Plant Materials Center was honored by the Shiawassee Conservation District as its 2014 Conservation Partner of the Year.

The award was presented by District Board Chair Thomas Braid. The Rose Lake PMC has partnered with the district to conduct research and promote the use of cover crops and conservation tillage to improve soil health. PMC staff also conducted educational presentations at the district's annual agricultural field days.

Shiawassee District Chair Thomas Braid presents the district's 2014 Conservation Partner of the Year Award to Rose Lake PMC Manager John Durling.



NRCS-Michigan Staffing Update

New Hires:

Jeremiah Ferguson, Soil Conservationist – Charlotte (new hire)

Jason Hayes, Soil Conservationist – Marquette (new hire)

Leonardo Marrero-Marrero, Pathways Intern – Reed City (new hire)

Patricia Weir, Program Assistant – Grand Rapids (transfer from state office)

Departures:

Michelle Canfield, Budget Analyst – East Lansing (retired)

Diana Irizarry, District Conservationist – Marshall (transferred to NRCS North Carolina)

Wilbur Sears, District Conservationist – Midland (retired)

Adam Shedd, District Conservationist – Jackson (resigned)

Paul Tikusis, Soil Conservation Technician – Kingsford (transferred to NRCS Wisconsin)

Ruben Torres, District Conservationist – St. Johns (transferred to NRCS North Carolina)

Elyne Tran, Soil Conservationist – Lapeer (resigned)

Sam West, Area Engineer – Flint (transferred to Forest Service)

UP Education on the Farm

The Chippewa/Luce/Mackinac Conservation District is holding an Education on the Farm bus tour on June 27 to highlight conservation efforts in the three-county area of the eastern Upper Peninsula.



The event is a partnership of the conservation district along with NRCS, Michigan Farm Bureau and Michigan State University Extension. The free event starts at Pickford Public Schools with the buses departing at 8:45 a.m. Lunch is provided at no cost. The tour is a MAEAP Phase 1 Event for those interested in participating in the program.

Planned stops on the tour include Sweet Grass Farm near Pickford, Lazy K Ranch and R.M.G. Sugar Bush, both in Rudyard. Topics on the tour include sustainable agriculture and local foods, NRCS and MAEAP information, a forestry walk, invasive weed management and making maple syrup.

Anyone planning to attend is requested to RSVP by calling the conservation district at 906/632-9611 extension 101 or by e-mail at mike.mccarthy@macd.org.

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

May

- 18 Hoophouse Demonstration Build, 11 a.m., Ortega Urban Farm - Detroit, for more information visit the [Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnel Education Initiative Web page](#)
- 18 Crops at the Top: Panel Discussion - marketing locally-grown food, best crops for seasonal high tunnels, crop scheduling, more, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Ohana Gardens - Highland Park, for more information visit the [Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnel Education Initiative Web page](#)

June

- 1-3 Michigan Association of Conservation Districts Summer Conference, Double Tree by Hilton - Bay City, for more information go to the [MACD website](#).
- 6 Native Plant Sale, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Branch Conservation District - Coldwater, for more information go to www.branchcd.org
- 7 Bee Palooza, 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., MSU Horticultural Gardens - East Lansing
- 8-9 Climate Change Adaptation for Forestry Professionals, Treetops Resort - Gaylord, for more information contact the [Otsego Conservation District](#)

June ctd.

- 11-12 Climate Change Adaptation for Forestry Professionals, Michigan Technological University - Houghton, for more information [download a flyer](#)
- 16 Managing a Fruitful Hoophouse/ Workshop for Experienced Growers, 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., Buffalo Street Farm - Detroit, for more information visit the [Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnel Education Initiative Web page](#)
- 27 Education on the Farm Tour - Chippewa/Luce/Mackinac Conservation District, 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., meet at Pickford Public Schools - Pickford, for more information or to RSVP call 906/632-9611

July

- 2 Osceola-Lake Conservation District Soil Health Series, 2 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., Thornton Farm - Reed City, for more information call 231/832-5341

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