From the office of the State Conservationist

Ann English

South Carolina NRCS

Helping People Help the Land

Greetings NRCS employees and conservation partners,

I am pleased to present you with this edition of *Conservation Matters,* SC NRCS' newsletter, which is an opportunity to communicate with you all about the exciting things going on in South Carolina and in the world of conservation.

First, I want to extend my thanks and appreciation to the SC employees who received and responded to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). By law, each executive agency must conduct an annual survey of its employees, but not all employees receive the survey. The Office of Personnel Management determines the target population for the survey, and randomly selects who receives it. The purpose is to measure employees' responses to questions that cover topic areas such as Talent Management, Leadership and Knowledge Management, Performance Culture, and Job Satisfaction. The survey is designed to measure the level of employee engagement. We will receive the results from this year's survey soon, and will then use the feedback to implement the goals outlined in our action plan (also known as the 2-2-2 plan). I hope that the listening sessions we hosted provided you with an opportunity to express your thoughts and ideas. I am confident that by working together, and keeping a positive attitude, we can create and sustain a productive, supportive, and enriching workplace.

I am pleased to announce that SC's Civil Rights Advisory Committee is hard at work planning *Cultural Awareness Day 2014*. On August 14, we will gather in Columbia for an engaging and educational day of learning about diverse cultures and traditions from around the world. Mark your calendars, and stay tuned for more details on this exciting event.

Finally, I wanted to let you know that I was presented with the opportunity to serve a detail to national headquarters as the Acting Regional Conservationist for the Northeast. I will serve in this capacity for 120-days, beginning July 14. Jack Lewis, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in Athens, Georgia, will report to South Carolina as Acting State Conservationist. I hope you will welcome him to our state, and show him the great work that we are doing to assist South Carolina's farmers and landowners. I am looking forward to the opportunity to experience the conservation work that is being done in another part of the country during my detail, but of course will look forward to returning to the Palmetto State.

Keep up the great work. I am proud of the work we are accomplishing this year and I thank you for your dedication and perseverance.

ANN ENGLISH

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Lee County Farmer Honors Great-Grandfather's Conservation Ethic

Amy Overstreet, Public Affairs Specialist and Outreach Coordinator

Joe Jenkins, great-grandfather of Hallie Robinson, of Lee County, SC, inspired her to carry on a tradition of conservation farming.

Mrs. Hallie Robinson, of Lee County, SC, is a small farmer with an enormous amount of energy, excitement, and ingenuity. She and her husband William have been farming since 1979, and farm three acres of vegetables, and raise ducks, geese, goats, and cows. As one of fifteen children, Mrs. Robinson watched her great-grandfather, Joe Jenkins, work this same land, and her ties to this land are unbreakable. She was inspired by his dedication and passion for farming, and she has poured her heart and soul into continuing the conservation ethic he instilled within her. She has worked with her local USDA-NRCS District Conservationist, Lori Bataller, as well as NRCS Soil Conservation Technicians Larry Garner and Rich Williamson, to erect a seasonal high tunnel through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). "This conservation practice helps farmers extend their growing season and can improve plant quality, soil health, and reduce nutrient and pesticide transportation," said Bataller. Mrs. Robinson says the high tunnel symbolizes her past, and the legacy her great-grandfather started, as well as the future, and what she hopes to do on the farm. "I am using what he taught me and taking it to a new level with this high tunnel."

Mrs. Robinson speaks of her great-grandfather as a hero. "He had limited education and could not read or write, but he had wit and wisdom," she explains. "He provided a living for his family by working as a sharecropper and he saved his wages to buy farming equipment and buy this farm." She describes him as a pioneer when it came to farming, and proudly displays his old plow up against the high tunnel. "That plow is a good reminder of how hard it must have been breaking new ground to provide a living for his family," says Robinson. "For many years, I planted as he did—starting in January and ending in October." One day she read an article about extending the growing season, and was introduced to high tunnels. She called her local NRCS office, and applied for cost-share through EQIP. "I felt that if my great-grandfather had known about this, he would have seized the opportunity to use this as a way to extend his season too."

Mrs. Robinson, left, and NRCS' Lori Bataller, survey the growth of produce in the high tunnel.

Mrs. Robinson's great-grandfather farmed until 1960, and passed away years ago, at the age of ninety, but his presence, and his lasting influence, can be felt on the farm. "I hope that the next generation will continue his legacy, and maybe do something different or improve things, like I'm trying to do here." She loves to show visitors the fruits of her labors inside the tunnel, which is teeming with an abundance and diversity of crops. "I could never get my stuff this green, or grow it this big, without the high tunnel!" she exclaims. "I look forward to many years of fresh vegetables."

Protected Wetlands Bond Kingstree Family through Recreation

Sabrenna Bryant, Public Affairs Specialist

Left to Right: Ed Norris, Brian McClam, Williamsburg SWCD Chair, Tony Norris, Tony Norris, Jr. "TJ" and Tony Norris, III "Little Tony".

Farming isn't always easy, even under the best conditions, and when the land itself doesn't seem to cooperate, it may leave many farmers wondering, "What's next?" Tony Norris was in a similar situation while farming 1,700 acres of cropland in Kingstree, SC. While his overall operation was very productive, he had about 104 acres of cropland that was very low and wet. "With all the wetness and low slope of the land, that portion of the farm was twice as hard to farm as the rest, cost more in nutrients to keep productive, and yielded 40 percent less in crops," stated Norris. This realization, and a great love of nature, led Norris to a good solution: restore the cropland into several small ponds through a permanent Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easement, along with the technical assistance of Trinette Vereen, NRCS Conservation Manager.

Norris was raised on a farm, and continued farming into adulthood when he took over the management of his father-in-law's farm in 1988. Now, his current farm is still a family enterprise, with his oldest son TJ living nearby with his family, and helping to manage the day-to-day operations. As his family grows, Norris thought restoring the previous duck ponds into a series of potholes and swales on his property would be a great way to draw wildlife habitat and bond the family through recreational hunting. "When I first heard about the WRP easement, it sounded like a hunting paradise, and now, it is so relaxing to be out at the site hunting and enjoying nature," stated Norris.

The WRP easement on Norris Farms was established in 2005, and although he received financial and technical assistance from NRCS, restoration of the ponds became a family project between himself, his sons and his father. Together, they created six swales and potholes and inserted ditch plugs in each to create shallow water areas. The ponds are of varying sizes, up to four acres, and have a depth of no more than 24 inches. "Once complete, the project has had great results and was an effective use of his property," stated Vereen. "It has also given him a unique opportunity to spend time with his family, which is priceless."

In addition to restoring the pond, Norris has created a rich and welcoming environment for wildlife at the site through the planting of trees and food plots. "I have been very pleased with my decision to restore the land to its original conditions, and would recommend WRP to others who enjoy nature and would love to see it thrive," stated Norris.

As a reward for being a good steward of the land and implementing conservation practices that benefit wildlife habitat, the Williamsburg Soil and Water Conservation District awarded him with the "***L. Claude McClary Conservation Achievement Award"*** for 2013, in honor of L. Claude McClary who served the Williamsburg SWCD for 31 years before passing away in 2013.

Clarendon Landowner Restores Longleaf and Enhances Wildlife Habitat

Brandon DuRant, District Conservationist, Clarendon County, SC

Stukes, right, discussed the history of Blue Streaks Farm at the Forestry Management Workshop on June 10th, 2014.

Lionel Stukes, operator of Blue Streaks Farm on the outskirts of Summerton, SC, has proven to be a good steward of the land through his forestland management practices. In 2012, he received cost-share assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to replant longleaf pine on 109 acres of land that had previously been clear-cut of mature loblolly pine. The land was prepared for replanting by chemically treating the vegetation in the late summer, and V-blading and planting containerized longleaf pine the following February. While the Longleaf Pine has an 80% survival rate, the majority of Stukes' young trees have grown pass the grass stage in two years.

Stukes also has firebreaks plowed around, and through, the property, and will burn the tract during the winter to help remove some of the fuel and competing vegetation. In addition to the longleaf pine, the property has food plots and a variety of native plants and grasses that attract wildlife. Deer, turkey, dove, and quail have been sited and are using this land for food and cover.

On June 10, 2014, Mr. Stukes partnered with the Clarendon Soil & Water Conservation District to host a *Forestry Management Workshop* on his farm. Forestry professionals, landowners, and NRCS employees gathered to learn more about forestland management and conservation practices. The topics discussed during the workshop included forestry management, tax incentives for forest landowners, and USDA programs.

Celebrate Pollinators!

The 2014 Pollinator poster, titled ***"Native Orchids Need Their Pollinators,"*** depicts beautiful and diverse orchids, many of which are threatened or endangered, and the pollinators they attract. The poster size is 24"x36".

Order the newest pollinator poster from the NRCS Distribution Center:

http://nrcspad.sc.egov.usda.gov/DistributionCenter/default.aspx

SC's 2014 Envirothon Competition

The 18th Annual *SC Envirothon Competition* was held at the Sandhills Research and Education Center near Columbia, on May 2, 2014. Envirothon is a environmental competition for high school students which cultivates a passion for environmental science and conservation policy. This year, twenty high school teams from around the state competed, and tested their skills in subjects such as ***Wildlife, Soils, Forestry, Aquatics, Orals Presentation and the 2014 Current Topic, "Stainable Agriculture/Locally Grown."***

Spartanburg Day School Team A won First Place with the top combined score. Each student on the First Place team will receive a $500 college scholarship.

Spartanburg Day School Team A won ***First Place*** with the top combined score. Spartanburg Day also took home top honors in the Wildlife, Sustainable Agriculture and Orals Presentation. Each student on the First Place team will receive a $500 college scholarship. ***Second place*** went to Spartanburg High School Team A and those students will receive a $250 college scholarship. ***Third place*** honors were captured by Spartanburg's Dorman High School Team A, with each student receiving a $125 scholarship.

Each year, several NRCS employees provide support at the Envirothon competition. SC NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs Kellee Melton chairs the SC Envirothon Steering Committee. Ayana Brown, Myra Jones, Jackie Reed, Sabrenna Bryant and Taylor Ammons also provided assistance during the day-long event.

Celebrating 23 Years of Conservation Partnership: NRCS and Fort Jackson

Conservation practices, such as this lined waterway, helped mitigate erosion at Fort Jackson.

In 1991, SC NRCS and Fort Jackson, the nation's largest U.S. Army Training Center, located in Columbia, SC, formed a working relationship to address conservation concerns. Ricky Walker, NRCS Civil Engineering Technician, began working full-time on Ft. Jackson in 1993. This July, Walker will conclude his work at Fort Jackson as the thirty-ninth, and final, construction contract is completed.

While stationed at the base, Walker helped Ft. Jackson identify and resolve many resource concerns, including severe erosion, forestry management and the enhancement of wildlife habitat. The partnership has led to a total resource management plan that has been recognized over the years with national and regional awards.

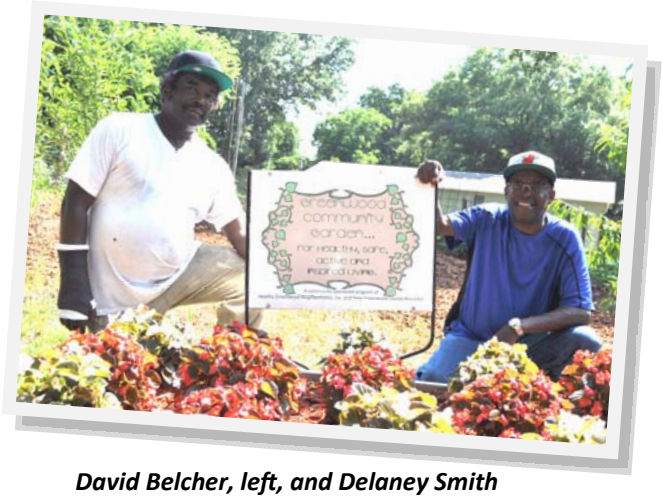
After a well-deserved vacation, Walker will be working out of the St. Matthews Field Office as a Civil Engineering Technician, assisting the Field Engineers with projects in the surrounding counties. "With Ricky's knowledge of erosion control and his experience with construction, we are really looking forward to having him available to assist with NRCS projects," said Eric Fleming, State Conservation Engineer.

Earth Team

Volunteers in South Carolina

Earth Team Volunteer Empowers Community through Community Gardens

Sabrenna Bryant, PAS and State Earth Team Coordinator



David Belcher, left, and Delaney Smith operate community gardens in the city limits of Greenwood.

There is a movement going on in Greenwood, SC. A movement that is stirring many residents to pull together in the spirit of kinship, partnership and community. At the center of this is Elyse Benson, Earth Team volunteer and retired NRCS employee, who has helped empower her neighbors to give back to the community through the planting of community gardens and the building of a greenhouse.

Benson has encouraged community gardens for years in Greenwood, even during her time as both a RC&D Coordinator, and later as an Outreach Coordinator for NRCS. Now, as an active Earth Team volunteer, her conservation expertise and community outreach has led to the creation of a total of twenty-three community gardens in Greenwood County, including a beautiful flower garden at the Greenwood Veterans Center, which Benson oversees herself.

Several community gardens are located within the city limits, such as the Pearl Street Community Garden, operated by local resident, David Belcher. When a rundown house was torn down and the lot was cleared, he received permission from the owner to plant a garden on the vacant lot. "I saw there was a great need here for fresh vegetables, and I was committed to finding a way to help," explained Belcher. He is currently in his second year of planting, and is looking forward to harvesting corn, tomato, watermelon, sweet potato, peppers, and much more. Belcher's fellow gardener, Delaney Smith, lives nearby in the Grendel Village Community, where he also operates a community garden. Both gentlemen share their produce with neighbors, the elderly, and the local soup kitchen and veteran's home. "Mr. Belcher and Mr. Smith both have played a pivotal role in organizing and maintaining the community gardens in their neighborhoods," said Benson. "I admire their dedication and the passion they have for their communities."

As the county stretches out into the rural areas, community gardens are thriving just as they are in the city. In the small community of Hodges is the Little River Multicultural Complex, run by the Little River Missionary Baptist Association. Many members, who are also Earth Team volunteers, wanted to utilize the land for the good of the community, and are currently in their sixth season of planting a community garden. The Complex also hosts a summer camp for local children, in which they use the garden to teach lessons about conservation and farming.

Benson also coordinated the building of a greenhouse at Greenwood's Genesis Academy. The project was a multi-partnership effort led by local business contributors, as well as Brian Stoddard, NRCS District Conservationist in Greenwood, who helped the school receive cost-share for the greenhouse's irrigation. Connections to the community were a major element of the plan for the greenhouse. Not only will students learn about horticulture and basic business skills, but they will grow seedlings for the 23 community gardens in the county. "Our gardens are all unique and this gives each garden the chance to customize their seedling order at no charge with a single pick-up location," says Benson.

Benson is confident community gardens will continue to grow in Greenwood, as the residents support each other and realize the benefits of having fresh, local food. "I'm so proud to be a part of this effort that heightens our awareness of health and well-being, and brings us closer together as a community."

Soil Health Profile: Jason Carter, Eastover, SC

Sabrenna Bryant, Public Affairs Specialist, and Gordon Mikell, SC NRCS State Agronomist

As the word spreads about the benefits of cover crops across South Carolina, more and more farmers are ready to make a change to improve their soil health and make their farming operations more sustainable. Jason Carter, of Eastover, SC, which is on the outskirts of Columbia, is one such farmer. He's been farming for over 18 years, and is currently using cover crops on 400 acres of soybeans and corn.

NRCS assisted Carter through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) which encourages producers to implement enhancements on their farm such as cover crops. He is also working with the Richland County SWCD on a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG). The CIG demonstration started in 2013, and is illustrating the benefits of cover crops and how they can improve soil health. The project is also demonstrating biological soil testing methods, such as the Solvita and the Haney-Briton soil tests, which can improve decision making in regard to nutrient management. Carter is no stranger to using conservation practices as he has used conservation tillage (strip till) prior to planting cover crops. He does admit that he is entering a new way of farming that has a learning curve. "While I feel this is a better way to farm than most farmers did in the past, I urge others new to using cover crops to practice patience, as this way of farming is a learning process", stated Carter.

Carter expects cover crops to increase the nutrients in his soil, leading to lower use of commercial fertilizer.

Throughout his transition to cover crops, Carter has worked closely with Gordon Mikell, SC NRCS State Agronomist. "Jason has been a pleasure to work with. He is a progressive producer who wants to make his farming operation profitable and thinks of it in terms of dollars per bushel rather than having the highest yield. Soil health is as much about economics as healing the soil. If we can help our farmers be more profitable while improving the resource, it is a win-win for everyone," stated Mikell. As Carter enters into his second year of cover crops, he is experimenting with single species legumes, such as vetch and Crimson clover, as well as a multispecies mix of rye, clover, vetch, and radish. Since using cover crops, he cut the highest yielding of beans full season he's ever had, averaging 70 bushels per acre. "Ultimately, I would like to cut my herbicide usage in half and commercial fertilizer by 75 percent," Carter added.

Mikell discovers life thriving in Carter's soil.

This year, he installed a yield monitor on his combine to evaluate the yields under various cover crops, and plans to experiment with utilizing manure and legumes to make most of the nitrogen he will need for his corn crop. He has already seen a drastic reduction in annual weed pressure and feels that he can take steps to reduce herbicide applications in some fields. As soon as one year after cover cropping, Carter's soil is noticeably richer and healthier, and teeming with life underground. These elements create biodiversity in the soil, increasing soil health and sustainability. "The many benefits of cover crops are evident if you dig deep into Carter's soil and see all the life there," stated Mikell. "That is what soil health is about—the living part of the soil."

Carter is committed to continuing cover crops on his land and considers it a new and improved way to farm, rather than a trend. "I'll be farming for the long haul, and I can't think of a better way to preserve the health of my land and my soil than using cover crops." Stay up-to-date on Carter's cover crops, and others who are following his lead, at *Carolina Cover Crop Connection* on Facebook.

SC Civil Rights Advisory Committee Update

Reginald Hall, SC NRCS Civil Rights Committee Chair

I would like to thank all of you for participating in the FEVS listening sessions and for your insightful feedback and suggestions for improvement. We heard what you said and hopefully addressed your concerns in the 2-2-2 Action Plan. I feel that this action plan will help make South Carolina a better place to work.

This year marks the **50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.** President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. In recognition of this anniversary and to address actions in our 2-2-2 Plan, we will be re-establishing our Cultural Awareness Day program. On August 14, 2014, we will host the event at the South Carolina Farmer's Market, where we will hear presentations from *Historic Columbia Foundation*, discuss our 2-2-2 Plan, and participate in team building and communication training.

Recent Civil Rights materials distributed to all NRCS Employees:

- South Carolina's 2-2-2 Action Plan and comments from listening sessions
- Updated Civil Rights poster which reflects new SEPM and Civil Rights Committee Members

SAVE THE DATE!

Cultural Awareness Training

"Yesterdays' Dream, Today's Reality, Tomorrow's Hope"

Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Thursday, August 14, 2014

South Carolina Farmers Market

SC NRCS Personnel Update

Submitted by SC NRCS Human Resources/State Administrative Officer. Please direct questions to Margie Onstad in the state office.

Positions Filled

Catherine Magee was selected as the Soil Conservation Technician for the Hampton Field office effective November 17, 2014. Catherine was previously a Forester for the Department of Conservation and Recreation in Boston-Worcester, Massachusetts.

Steve Anderson was selected and entered on duty as the District Conservationist for the Sumter Field office effective March 23, 2014, in the Wateree Watershed. Steve was previously a Soil Conservationist in the Dillon Field Office.

Myra Jones was selected and entered on duty as the District Conservationist for the Edgefield Field office effective April 20, 2014, in the Saluda Watershed. Myra was previously a Soil Conservationist in the Newberry Field Office.

Lori Bataller was selected and entered on duty as the District Conservationist for the Charleston Field Office effective June 1, 2014, in the Lower Pee Dee Watershed. Lori was previously a Supervisory District Conservationist in the Wateree Watershed.

Marques Hunter was selected and entered on duty as the Civil Engineer for the Anderson Field office effective May 18, 2014. Marques was previously an Agriculture Engineer for Natural Resources Conservation Services in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma.

Volunteers

Bobby McKibben entered on duty as a volunteer on April 8, 2014, at the State Office in Columbia on the State Engineer's Staff. He will be working with NRCS for 12 weeks through a SC Department of Vocational Rehabilitation internship program.

Daniel Compton entered on duty as a volunteer on June 16, 2014, in the Spartanburg Field Office, Tyger Watershed. He will be working with NRCS for 12 weeks through a SC Department of Vocational Rehabilitation internship program.

Retirements

Ronald Morton retired effective December 31, 2013. Ronald worked as a Soil Scientist in the Florence Field Office. He worked for Natural Resources Conservation Services for over 36 years.

Eugene (Ross) Stewart retired effective March 31, 2014. Ross was a District Conservationist in the Anderson Field Office, Savannah Watershed. He worked for Natural Resources Conservation Services for over 36 years.

Departures

Pamela Thomas was selected as the Associate Director of Soil Survey Programs, Soil Science Division, NRCS National Headquarters, Washington, DC.

Marty Bright-Rivera was selected and entered on duty as the State Administrative Officer with Rural Development in their State Office in Columbia, SC effective June 15, 2014.

Details

Ann English, SC NRCS State Conservationist, was selected to serve a 120-day detail to National Headquarters, Washington, DC, as the acting Regional Conservationist for the Northeast, effective, July 14, 2014.

Amy Overstreet, SC NRCS Public Affairs Specialist and Outreach Coordinator, was selected to serve a 90-day detail to the National Soil Science Division, NRCS National Headquarters. She will serve in this role from the SC NRCS State Office, with travel to D.C. one week a month during the 90-day period.

South Carolina Welcomes Jack Lewis, Acting State Conservationist

Born in Mississippi (but growing up Arkansas) Jack Lewis has spent most of his life in the South. He joined in on the family business at an early age and spent 15+ years in the commercial construction business. During the last part of those years, he attended Arkansas State University (ASU) where he received a B.S. in Marketing and a M.S. in Agriculture. Working his way through college and immediately afterwards, he conducted research for ASU until beginning his career in 2002 with USDA-NRCS in Missouri. He ascended the ranks in Missouri after serving as a Soil Conservationist, Resource Conservationist and later as a District Conservationist. During his seven years in Missouri, the offices he worked in were routinely recognized as high performing offices which garnered the respect of his peers. So much that he was promoted in 2009 to Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, stationed in Athens, Georgia.

During Jack's five years as a member of the Georgia NRCS Leadership Team, he has acted as State Conservationist, ASTC-Operations, and on multiple occasions (and latest acting assignment) ASTC-Programs.

When not at the office, Jack loves to hunt and fish, and has spent many years working with sporting dogs.

Jack brings a blend of private sector management skills and training, with approximately 12 years of experience at all levels of NRCS to better serve the land and its resources, which he loves.

Welcome Mr. Lewis! We look forward to showing you around the Palmetto State!

If you have questions about the newsletter, or have an outstanding conservation success story in your county, please contact Amy Overstreet at amy.overstreet@sc.usda.gov, or Sabrenna Bryant at sabrenna.bryant@sc.usda.gov.

USDA-NRCS
1835 Assembly Street, Room 950
Columbia, SC 29201

www.sc.nrcs.usda.gov