



United States Department of Agriculture

Louisiana Conservation Update

March 2016

Restoring Critical Wildlife Habitat

Story from the Field
New USDA Customer
Installs High Tunnel

A cooperative partnership with local
Soil and Water Conservation Districts and
Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&D)

Projects • Successes • Partnerships



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On the Cover



Bryant Hammett is maintaining critical Louisiana black bear habitat in Concordia Parish through a Wetland Reserve Easement. To find out more about how NRCS and private landowners have aided in the recovery of this species, see pages 4 and 5.

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/.



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Notes from the State Conservationist

March certainly came in like a lion this year with record amounts of rainfall in certain areas of our state, along with widespread flooding. Very little of Louisiana was spared during this severe weather event, with the northern parishes taking the brunt of the storms. Homes were flooded in places that have never required flood insurance before, only adding to the devastation of this severe weather event. Sadly, you, your family and friends may have felt direct impact of the storm through lost property, crops, and livestock. Our collective thoughts and prayers are with you and all Louisianans' experiencing loses during this time.



While the water still continues to rise in some areas. The impacts and damages continue to grow. Our commitment is to work closely with our state and local governments to assess damage, complete reports and utilize the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) authority to assist in protecting public infrastructure. As in the past, we will band together and share resources with our partners to overcome the challenges that will come our way.

In the midst of all the rain and disaster response, there was a celebration of our collective conservation success. On Thursday, March 10, at the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge, USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and the Environment, Ann Mills, joined Department of Interior Secretary, Sally Jewell, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) Secretary, Charlie Melancon, to announce the delisting of the Louisiana black bear from the endangered species list. Throughout the program, NRCS's Wetland Reserve Program was championed as the linchpin to this success. The re-established bottomland hardwoods protected through perpetual easements provides insurance that habitat gains will endure. Our partnerships, technical integrity and program delivery were heralded by our colleagues.

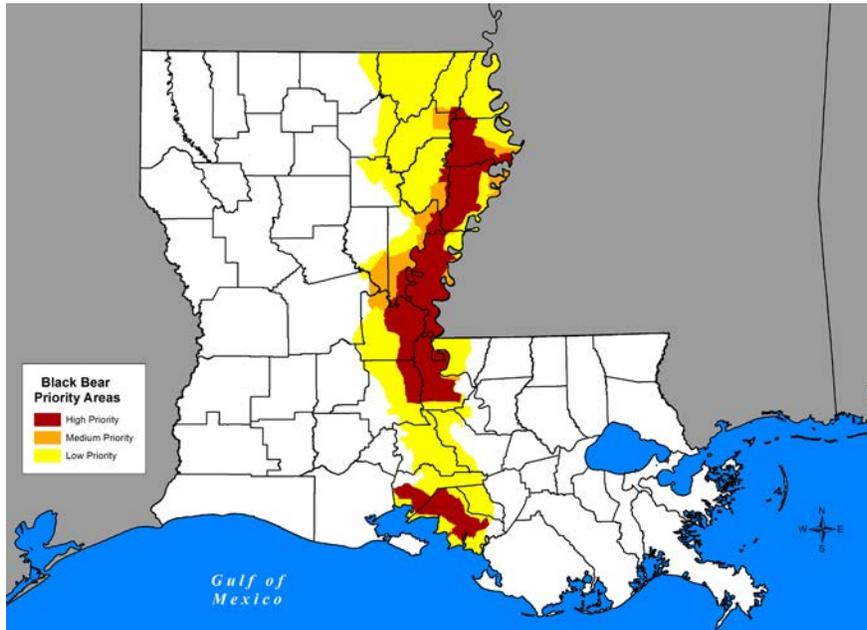
I am most proud of the 205 NRCS and over 95 Soil and Water Conservation District employees across the state, who are passionate about conservation, and working with Louisiana landowners. Working side-by-side with our partners on private lands there are no conservation goals we cannot accomplish. The de-listing of the Louisiana black bear is the ultimate example!

Kevin D. Norton
State Conservationist

Louisiana Black Bear Facts

The Louisiana black bear is one of 16 species of the American black bear. Between 500 and 750 Louisiana black bears currently roam the U.S. Most Louisiana black bears live in the following parishes in Louisiana: St. Mary, Iberia, Pointe Coupee, Concordia, Avoyelles, Tensas, Madison and West Carroll.

<http://www.fws.gov/southeast/wildlife/mammal/louisiana-black-bear/>



Restoring

200 when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined protections were needed under the Endangered Species Act, for the iconic “Teddy Bear.”

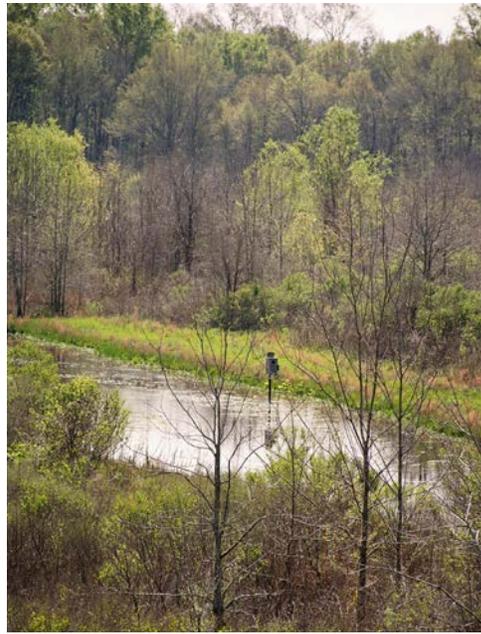
Bryant Hammett, Concordia Parish landowner and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) customer, remembers the day, in the late 1960’s when he and a family friend were getting ready for hunting season. On the way to the hunting camp they stumbled upon a field freshly clear cut in preparation for soybeans. Just one year prior the same tract of land was wooded. “This vast open space seemed to go on forever. The older gentleman with me said, one day when you are grown you will see this land with trees on it again,” recalls Hammett. And thanks to the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) through NRCS that is exactly what has happened.

Hammett is a civil engineer and owns businesses in Ferriday and Baton Rouge. But his favorite place in the state is the 160 acres he owns in Concordia Parish. “This is a little piece of heaven, my family and I love it here,” said Hammett. Hammett has three daughters and recalls the first time he brought his children to see the

This success story begins like many others, you have to take a step back in history to get a full picture of how the story comes full circle. So cast your mind back to the Louisiana landscape in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Row crops ruled and soybeans, in particular, with prices soaring, seemed to be the answer for every farmer in sight. Land was cleared and habitat that was once home to the Louisiana black bear began to dwindle and fade into rows of crops.

Soybean prices reached historic highs during that time, and hundreds of thousands of acres of bottomland hardwood forests in the lower Mississippi River alluvial valley were cleared for soybean production. It didn’t take too long for prices to drop, the land to lose its rich organic matter, and rainfall and backwater to cause frequent floods, making it difficult to farm in some places.

The loss of these bottomland hardwood forests greatly wounded Louisiana black bear populations, which dipped to about



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land he enrolled in WRP. "I told them we are like pioneers in reverse. We are not going into the woods and clearing out an area, we are taking a cleared area and turning it back into woods," he explained. Today, he has grandchildren and takes pride in teaching them to have a love of the outdoors and to learn what it takes to strike a balance between managing the land and enjoying it as well. Hammett goes on to say, "Hopefully one day my grandchildren will be advocates for this land."

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) was created in the 1990 Farm Bill and was piloted in 1992 in 9 states, including Louisiana. The program helped Hammett along with many other farmers across the state restore the habitat crucial to the Louisiana black bear. WRP (now known as Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Wetland Reserve Easement ACEP-WRE) became a permanent conservation program in the 1996 Farm Bill providing technical and financial assistance to farmers to voluntarily restore and protect wetlands with long-term conservation easements, enabling

them to restore difficult-to-farm cropland back into wetlands.

Ben Taunton is the District Conservationist for the NRCS field office in Concordia Parish. Hammett and Taunton have worked together for many years and share similar stories remembering the days before WRP. Now both men beam as they discuss the tremendous benefits of the program and the impacts it has had on the land. There is no visible trace of row crops on Hammett's land, gazing out over the easement it all looks natural as if the land had never been farmed. Taunton explains, "A WRP easement is like a will, it's a living document. It has saved a whole lot of habitat in this area and it has aided a whole lot of farmers through some bad years." In fact, over the last 24 years, NRCS producers have restored and protected more than 250,000 acres of bottomland hardwoods in key areas for the Louisiana black bear. In fact, Louisiana leads the nation in conservation easement enrollments, with over 300,000 acres statewide.

One of the greatest achievements of WRP,

both men agree, is the de-listing of the Louisiana black bear. On March 10th the Department of the Interior announced the de-listing of the Louisiana black bear. Several conservation partners including the US Fish and Wildlife Service credit WRP as key to restoring the habitat, creating corridors of private land that connect to public lands. Taking marginal agricultural lands that tend to flood, out of rotation, and restoring them brings a balance to the land that is essential. "We have seen the black bear denning in these easements, having their young in the weeds, we see them quite a bit now," explained Taunton.

Hammett describes his relationship with Taunton as vital, "As a landowner to work with Ben, my local District Conservationist, is invaluable, I can ask questions and have him come out to my property to discuss ideas," said Hammett. And Taunton agrees, "That is our job at NRCS, especially at the local level, is to help the landowners meet their objectives. I pride myself in that every customer that walks through our door, we treat just like a neighbor that is way we do things in Ferriday."

Story from the Field

New USDA Customer Installs Seasonal High Tunnel

Submitted by: Brian Baiamonte, District Conservationist, Shreveport FO

After learning about the technical and financial assistance available from NRCS from a neighboring producer, first-time USDA customer, Marilyn McKissick, visited the Shreveport NRCS office to find more about high tunnels and how NRCS could help her.



McKissick is a small-scale producer in Caddo Parish with a small garden and less than two acres of pasture. After visiting her farm, a conservation plan was created and she applied for assistance to build a high tunnel through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.



The application was approved and she was able to construct a high tunnel structure that will enable her

to extend the growing season of the vegetables that she grows to sell.

Also noted in the conservation plan, was the inadequate, poor quality pond that her horses are drinking from in her pasture. Although not interested in pasture management at the time of the initial visit, McKissick has since applied for financial assistance to refurbish the pond.

Because of the relationship formed with the local office, the district conservationist now has the opportunity to help her address a much more challenging resource concern on her farm.

StrikeForce Initiative



Louisiana Update

Louisiana StrikeForce Update

Submitted by: Dexter Sapp, NRCS StrikeForce Coordinator

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Rural Development through Rural Business-Cooperative Service (RBS), and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) are committed to maximize and support the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative (StrikeForce) and increase participation in Department of Agriculture (USDA) energy-based programs in the tier states of Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina, eventually to all StrikeForce States, and then to the entire country.

On Monday, March 14, 2016, Louisiana hosted the first of three one-day joint (NRCS/RBS/FSA) Kickoff

& Cross Training sessions. Other such sessions will take place in Auburn, Alabama, and Columbia, South Carolina.

The purpose of the training is to cross-promote programmatic services and expand energy outreach efforts for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), the Farm Storage Facility Loan Program, and the Microloan Program.

During breakout sessions, three joint agency teams brainstormed on outreach activities and goals for the state.

Upcoming StrikeForce Events

April 22, 2016

Joint state forestry/pipelines BMP workshop
El Dorado, Arkansas

May 12, 2016

StrikeForce Meeting
Winnfield, Louisiana

May 19, 2016

StrikeForce Meeting
Haughton, Louisiana

June 23, 2016

Undivided Property Workshop
Ruston, Louisiana

June 30, 2016

Proposed StrikeForce Meeting
Homer, Louisiana

Around the State

February 26, 2016

Raintree Elementary Tree Planting

On February 26, 2016, Raintree Elementary School in St. Mary Parish received a donation of young Live Oak trees to be planted in and around the playground area. This donation was made by Bryan "Buck" LeJeune who has played an important role in saving the historic oaks along Highway 182 in St. Mary Parish. Representing the local agencies involved and Raintree Elementary were, Juanita Clements, Program Technician, FSA, Kayla Hebert, District Conservationist, NRCS, Marie Cole, Curriculum Coordinator, Raintree Elementary and Andrea Dumesnil, District Administrative Coordinator, St. Mary SWCD.



March 2016

Seed Propagation for Coastal Restoration at the PMC

In March 2016, a group from the USDA NRCS Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center (PMC), LDAF-OSWC Crescent, Plaquemines, and Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCDs finalized containerized propagation of yaupon, bald cypress and buttonbush seeds at the PMC. All trees and shrubs produced are intended for use in future restoration plantings within the Crescent, Plaquemines and Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCDs. More than 5,000 trees and shrubs will be grown through this partnership effort.



March 3 - 5, 2016
Commodity Classic

The Commodity Classic was held in New Orleans, Louisiana, on March 3 - 5, 2016. This year's conference had a total of 9,770 people in attendance, of which 4,596 were agricultural producers. Secretary Vilsack addressed conference attendees and made a brief appearance in the trade show area to visit the Farm Services Agency exhibit.



March 10, 2016
De-Listing of the Louisiana black bear

On March 10, 2016, Secretary of Interior, Sally Jewell announced the de-listing of the Louisiana black bear from the Threatened and Endangered Species List during a ceremony at the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. Also in attendance were USDA's Deputy Undersecretary of Natural Resources and the Environment, Ann Mills and the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Charlie Melancon.



March 11, 2016
Central Louisiana Foodapalooza

The 4th Annual Central Louisiana Foodapalooza was held on Friday, March 11, 2016, at the Hearn Stage at the Kress

Theatre in downtown Alexandria. There was a special keynote presentation by Mary Berry, Director of the Berry Center. Following the presentation, participants attended workshops including one held by NRCS on healthy soil.



March 15, 2016
Trial Vegetative Planting on CWPPRA Project

NRCS Water Resources and Golden Meadow PMC teamed up with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to install a trial vegetative planting on the lake rim component of the CWPPRA BS-16 South Lake Lery Shoreline and Marsh Restoration Project in Plaquemines Parish.

Over 200 Bayou Lafourche Germplasm California bulrush (*Schoenoplectus californicus*) and 'Vermilion' Smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) were provided by the Golden Meadow PMC. The plants were installed in parallel rows set at varied elevations at 3 different sites along the newly constructed BS-16 lake rim embankment. Plant survival and initial performance will be monitored and the results will be used to inform the final design details of the full-scale vegetative planting contract which will begin installation in May 2016.



Programs Reminders

USDA Announces \$260 Million Available for Regional Conservation Partnership Program

The USDA NRCS recently announced the availability of up to \$260 million for partner proposals to address specific natural resource objectives in a proposed area or region of Louisiana. Through RCPP, NRCS seeks to co-invest with partners in workable and cost effective approaches to benefit farming, ranching and forest operations.

Pre-proposals for fiscal year 2017 funding are due May 10th. Visit the NRCS RCPP webpage for more information.

USDA Announces Availability of Conservation Innovation Grants

The USDA NRCS recently announced the availability of Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and technologies. NRCS anticipates that the amount available for support of this program in FY 2016 will be up to \$20 million.

Proposals must be received before 4:00 pm (EST) on May 10, 2016. Proposals must be sent electronically through www.grants.gov with a PDF to nrcscig@wdc.gov. Visit the NRCS CIG webpage for more information.

Conservation Reflections



New terracing unit purchased by the Dorcheat Soil Conservation District. Operator W.T. Grigsby is making a second round of a terrace in Webster Parish. Photo taken in 1948.

For a current list of our offices visit

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

Upcoming Events

LACD Scholarship Application Deadline March 25, 2016

The Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts is currently taking applications for the Louisiana Association of Conservation Districts Scholarship fund.

This scholarship is offered to those graduating high school seniors who are planning to study full-time in college

in the field of agriculture, natural resources or environmental sciences. The deadline to submit the forms is March 25th. Please contact your local soil and water conservation district for more information.

Louisiana Earth Day April 17, 2016

NRCS will be exhibiting at this year's Louisiana Earth Day in Baton Rouge on April 17, 2016.

Alexandria River Fete May 7, 2017

Visit the NRCS exhibit in downtown Alexandria, Louisiana, on Saturday, May 7, 2017.

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

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