STEWARDSHIP AND LOCAL FOODS

All farms and ranches, regardless of their size or the market they sell to, play a role in protecting our natural resources. For producers of local foods, that role has some special features. Many of the farms best positioned to sell locally are situated near metropolitan areas, where they share natural resources with large populations and serve as the front line in protecting open space from development. Local food production also encompasses forests and rangelands that families, Tribes, communities and businesses are actively using to gather food, maintain cultural traditions and earn revenue.

Equally important is the educational role that these local food producers play in teaching their customers about resource stewardship. Farmers and ranchers who sell at farmers' markets, farm stands and other direct-marketing outlets are often the only food producers a consumer will meet in person. These producers are crucial as "agricultural ambassadors" who can illustrate the stewardship efforts of the sector.

The Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative has publicized USDA efforts to help local food producers better protect our shared natural resources. Here are just a few examples of USDA efforts in this vein:

FAST FACTS

- In 2010 and 2011, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service helped finance the construction of nearly 4,500 high tunnels—greenhouse-like structures that extend the growing season—around the country.
- Since 2009, when Secretary Tom Vilsack launched the People's Garden Initiative, over 700 local and national groups have established community and school gardens around the country.

Developing locally-adapted seed varieties: Successful farming starts with a seed. By utilizing seed varieties that are resistant to common diseases and that stand up well to pests, farmers can reduce the need for chemical applications. But since pests and diseases vary widely depending on the climate, soil type and other factors, the development of resistant seed varieties benefits from a local approach. USDA supports research into locally-adapted seed

Rex Gardner, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, works with Frank and Liz Abruzzino of Hawthore Valley Farms in Rockford, West Virginia, to improve their pasture for locally-sold grassfed beef.

Ben Godfrey, an organic farmer and owner of Sand Creek Farm in Cameron, TX, shows NRCS district conservationist Todnechia Mitchell a Purple Majesty potato that is one of many varieties grown on the farm. Godfrey sells his organically grown vegetables through a local Community Supported Agriculture program.

varieties as part of its commitment to stewardship on agricultural lands. For example, in 2011, Nevada farmer Rick Lattin secured a grant from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program of USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture to conduct a research trial to select organic fresh market tomato seeds resistant to Beet Curly Top Virus. Seeds susceptible to the virus will be planted next to a locally-developed variety thought to be resistant to the virus. Lattin and a partner farm will also compare plantings in open fields to plantings grown under high tunnels, a practice supported by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service that is thought to reduce the incidence of certain diseases (see below).

Helping local producers implement sustainable practices on their farms and ranches. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service offers cost-share assistance to farmers and ranchers interested in implementing conservation practices on their land. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), shares the cost of implementing dozens of specific practices, including installing more efficient irrigation systems, building a composting pad, installing vegetated buffers to reduce soil erosion and protect wildlife, and much more. Conferences such as this one in Oklahoma help local food producers learn more about EQIP and other programs to support conservation efforts on working farms.

Local and regional food producers are using EQIP to help them steward natural resources. For example, in southern New Mexico, chile producers near town of Hatch have used EQIP funding to replace flood irrigation with subsurface drip irrigation on their farms. Collectively, the producers have seen 25 percent higher yields on average and have increased water use efficiency by at least one-third. Hatch chiles are a source of local pride for New Mexicans and many are sold and consumed locally, but they are also being marketed regionally and nationally as an identity-preserved product. Read about local food producers in Mississippi, Texas, Washington and other states who are using EQIP here.

Missouri farmer Jim Prouhet received support from NRCS to build a high tunnel, which will help him extend the growing season for his community.

Real Food Farm, an urban farm in Baltimore's Clifton Park, built a high tunnel with support from NRCS and can now grow and market produce year-round from a mobile market that serves the city's low-income neighborhoods.

EQIP also helps farmers and ranchers with transitioning to organic agriculture. Not all local food producers are certified organic. However, organic production can help add value to many local products by providing transparent evidence of adherence to rigorous standards and educating consumers on farming practices. In turn, organic system requirements for conservation of natural resources and biodiversity create added value for the EQIP program.

Supporting infrastructure to protect resources and extend the growing season. Under the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service launched an EQIP pilot practice in 2010 that they expected to be popular with producers growing for local markets—but they had no idea just how popular it would become. Under the seasonal high tunnel pilot, USDA shares producers' costs to build simple greenhouse-like structures that protect crops from extreme weather and pests. High tunnels (also known as hoop houses) reduce water use and the incidence of disease, diminish the need for costly inputs, protect soil, and extend the growing season—a critical element for producers selling to local markets. While NRCS initially planned to offer the pilot in 32 States, the response was so overwhelming that availability was expanded to 47 States. In 2010 and 2011, the pilot's

USDA HOOP HOUSES AT THE WHITE HOUSE

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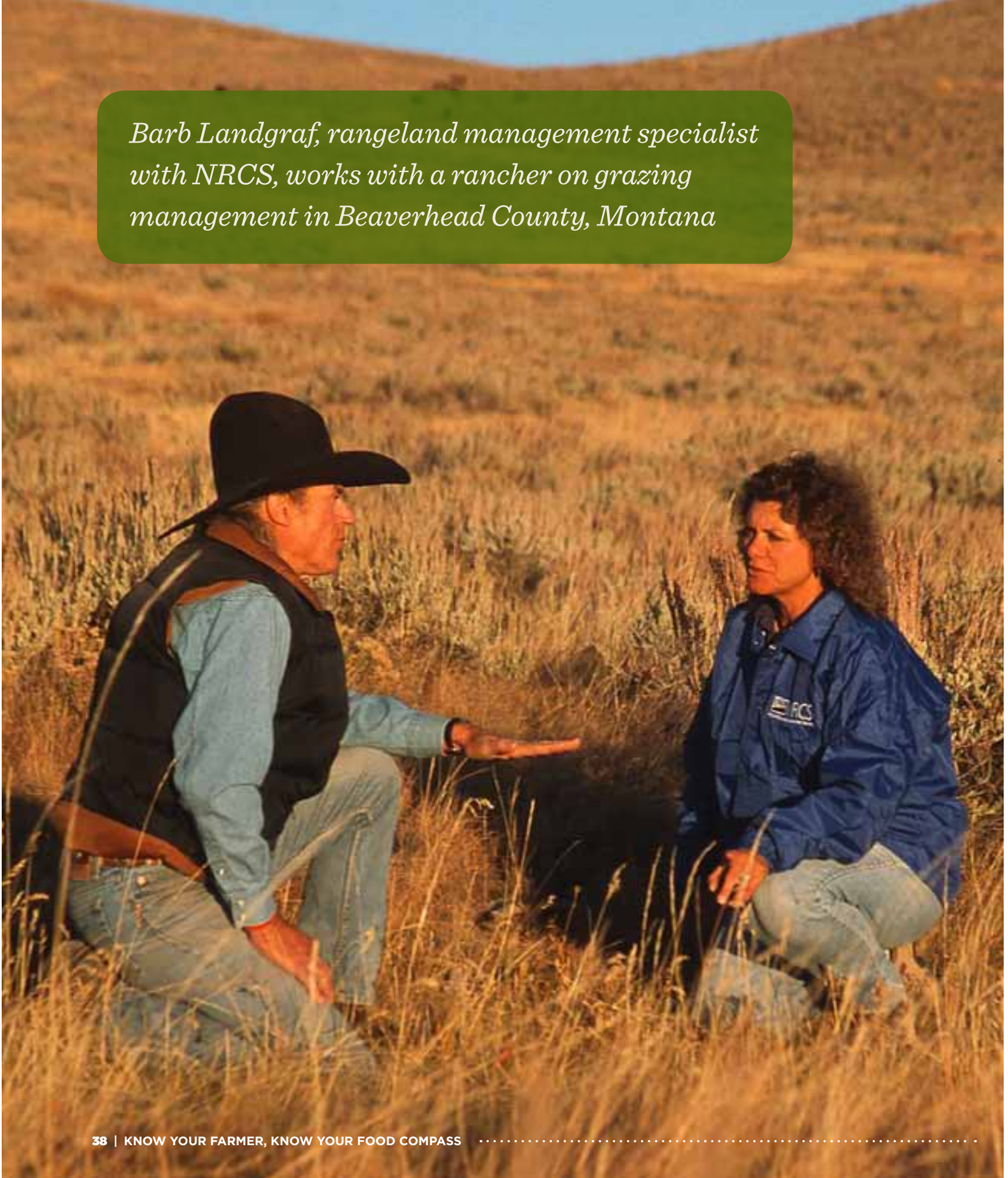
first two years, EQIP helped finance the construction of over 4,500 high tunnels around the country. In late 2011, NRCS announced that the pilot would become a permanent practice under EQIP, available to producers in all 50 states. See examples of high tunnels in Alabama, Virginia, Utah, and even at the White House in this video; then learn how many high tunnels in your state were supported through NRCS by visiting the KYF Map.

Bringing gardens to the people. When President Lincoln established the USDA 150 years ago, he referred to it as the "People's Department." In this spirit, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack launched the People's Garden initiative in 2009 as an effort to challenge USDA employees to create gardens at USDA facilities. It has since grown into a collaborative effort of over 700 local and national groups establishing community and school gardens across the country. To see where People's Gardens are located, see this map. In 2010, Secretary Vilsack established a People's Garden School Pilot, coordinated by the Food and Nutrition Service, to develop gardens at high-poverty schools. And in 2011, grants were announced to support the development of People's Gardens in additional communities, including this food desert neighborhood in Baltimore. The Forest Service contributed to this pilot in 2011 to support the planting of fruit, nut and shade trees that enhance community gardens and urban agriculture activities. Part of a broad USDA and Obama Administration effort to provide children with access to a nutritious and safe diet, People's Gardens are a strong complement to First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Initiative.

Protecting farmland from development. Across the country, farmland is disappearing. The problem is particularly severe near cities, where development pressure and high land values make it hard to secure



Barb Landgraf, rangeland management specialist with NRCS, works with a rancher on grazing management in Beaverhead County, Montana

access to farmland. But these areas are some of the best for local food production due to their proximity to large population centers. NRCS's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program works with States, local groups, and volunteer landowners to purchase conservation easements and make sure that farms threatened by development pressure can afford to keep farming. Learn about how a family farm in the Connecticut suburbs protected its land for local food production with the help of this program here.

Harnessing the food-producing power of our trees and forests. Agroforestry is nature's diversity at work: it blends forestry and crop production to improve yields while protecting soil and water. Trees might serve as a windbreak that shelters row crops; the trees themselves may provide fruits or nuts; or trees can be managed to create optimal conditions for growing food. The National Agroforestry Center, jointly sponsored by USDA's Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, helps landowners and professionals use agroforestry principles to manage their forests and crops. For example, in Illinois, staff of the National Agroforestry Center advised a family that they could harvest ramps, a type of wild onions, from their forest. Harvesting the herb made room for other native woodland plants, but it also became an important source of revenue. Ramps now provide 70% of their farm income and the harvest employs local workers as well. Agroforestry got a boost at USDA with the release in 2011 of the Agroforestry Strategic Framework, developed by an interagency working group, which will guide the Department's efforts through 2016.

Two men smoke fish at the Stikine River in Southeast Alaska, near Wrangell.

SEE HOW THE FUSILIERS OF MANCHESTER, MICHIGAN BUILT AND UTILIZED A HOOP HOUSE TO DEVELOP A LOCAL MARKET FOR THEIR PRODUCTS.

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Helping Native and rural communities retain their cultural tradition of agriculture. Harvesting wild plants, animals and fish is a way of life for many Native American tribes and other rural residents. Local harvesting for household or community use, termed subsistence, is a particularly strong tradition in Alaska. Through the Federal Subsistence Management Board, USDA's Forest Service and other Federal agencies share responsibility for managing subsistence fishing and hunting on Federal lands and waters throughout Alaska, helping to protect these resources for Alaska Natives and other rural populations.

In a related project, the Center for Alaska Native Health Research and the University of Alaska Fairbanks are designing and evaluating a program to locally and sustainably harvest fish in remote Alaskan communities. This project, which will further a tradition of local self-sufficiency by developing a local fisheries-to-schools program, is supported by a 2010 grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture's Agriculture and Food Research Initiative.

All of America's farmers and ranchers are stewards of the land. Local food producers play a unique role as agricultural ambassadors through their direct interactions with consumers, and by helping non-farming Americans understand and appreciate the role that all farmers and ranchers play in protecting natural resources. Even non-local producers are finding ways to educate consumers about their stewardship efforts through identity-preserved branding, organic certification, and other efforts to increase transparency through the supply chain.