

## Conservation Matters

### in the Palmetto State

Information for employees and friends of SC NRCS



#### From the Office of the State Conservationist

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Dear NRCS Family and Conservation Partners,

As 2012 draws to a close, it is time to reflect on the accomplishments and successes that SC NRCS, along with our conservation partners and SC's private landowners, achieved this year.

From the *Field Office of the Future* effort to the *Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative* (CDSI), the agency is looking at ways to enable field office staff to spend more time working with landowners. And we remained committed to outreach by hosting a series of workshops around the state in partnership with Districts, the Penn Center, *Minority Landowner Magazine*, and the Center for Heirs Property Preservation. While the future of the Farm Bill is unknown, we recognize the need to raise awareness about new program offerings and helping landowners understand the benefits of conservation. We also focused our outreach efforts and communication strategies on new and beginning and underserved farmers. The I-95 Corridor EQIP Initiative concentrated financial assistance to seventeen counties in an effort to

*continued...*



South Carolina NRCS released a new documentary—St. Helena Island, A Better Place, which was produced in partnership with the Earth Sciences and Resources Institute at the University of SC. The production highlights this beautiful island and the conservation work that is helping to protect and improve it. You can now view it online! See more on page 6.

SC NRCS worked with the Richland County Conservation Department to sponsor the Midlands Local Food Summit in Columbia which had a great turnout and excellent discussion!



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Natural Resources Conservation Service  
South Carolina

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letter from Ms. English, continued...

improve the economic viability and improve the 2.2 million acres of farmland located in that region. This initiative was successful due in part to our partnership with Representative James Clyburn's office that assisted us in getting the word out about the sign-up.

We also worked with partners to address the issue of food deserts, which are areas where grocery stores and access to fresh, wholesome food is absent or inadequate, particularly for low-income residents. And we continued our involvement with the SC New and Beginning Farmer Program, which is in its third and final year, and is successfully educating and inspiring the next generation of land stewards in the Palmetto State. We will continue working with other entities this fiscal year to help us spread the word about the importance of conservation.

As we look forward to 2013, I encourage you to support your coworkers and remember that we are a team as we strive to put conservation on the ground, provide excellent customer service, and work diligently to keep up with the incredible demands of our workload.

I pray that you and your families enjoy a peaceful holiday season and a Happy New Year. I look forward to working with you in the coming year to continue and improve upon the great work that we are accomplishing here in South Carolina.



ANN ENGLISH

## SC NRCS Teams Up for Outreach Success

**S**C NRCS coordinated with a number of different entities this year to conduct outreach workshops and meetings across the state in an effort to ensure that private landowners are aware of NRCS programs and services.

Through an agreement with *Minority Landowner Magazine*, NRCS hosted a series of two-day workshops in areas of the state where census data indicated that there were program-eligible private landowners, particularly underserved customers. Topics included Farm Bill programs, eligibility issues associated with applying for federal assistance, heirs property, wills and estates, and other subjects pertinent to farming and conservation. In November, a one-day workshop was hosted at the Penn Center during their annual Heritage Days celebration. Landowners came to learn more about USDA programs and services and celebrate the shared 150th anniversary of both USDA and the Penn Center.

SC NRCS is also working with the *Center for Heirs Property Preservation*, based out of Charleston, to host similar outreach workshops, in the six county area of Beaufort, Berkeley, Charleston, Colleton, Dorchester and Georgetown. The first of these workshops was hosted Saturday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, in Georgetown County. NRCS District Conservationists Trinetta Vereen and Debbie Mann helped the Center coordinate the meeting and made presentations. Future outreach meetings will be announced in this focus area.

The Midlands Local Food Summit was a huge success, and was organized by the Richland Soil and Water Conservation District as part of an outreach agreement with NRCS that seeks to educate organic and transitioning-to-organic farmers in the Midlands. The event brought together 35 farmers, conservationists, distributors, chefs, as well as representatives from *Whole Foods*. The group then evaluated the status and envisioned the future of the Midlands local food system. In an introductory visioning process, participants ex-

pressed a need for a sustainable, equitable, accessible, and healthful local food system. During the keynote, Tony Kleese, Food System Design Consultant and former Executive Director of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, presented the ideal of a sustainable, environmentally sound, economically viable, socially just food system. He described seven components of such a system (land, water, farmers/labor, inputs, infrastructure, consumers/markets, and waste), then facilitated a locally-focused discussion of each. During the discussion, participants identified challenges and opportunities related to each component.



### Dillon County Celebrates Farm City Week and Honors Outstanding Conservation Farmer

**T**he Dillon County Conservation Partnership celebrated Farm City Week by hosting a bus tour on November 19, 2012, which highlighted a land plantation, a family farm, and concluded with a visit to the McLeod Hospital’s Emergency Room to showcase the city aspect. National Farm City Week is celebrated each year the week prior to Thanksgiving. The Dillon Farm City Committee worked hard to plan an educational tour and a Farm City Awards Luncheon where they recognized outstanding farmers, conservation-minded businesses, and winners of the student conservation essay contest.

The tour began with a stop at Beulah Land Plantation in Latta, SC, where participants toured the horse stable and a deer processing facility. Next, they visited Betty Allen Farms where they heard a moving speech by farm owner Carroll Allen, Sr. He also displayed his collection of old farm implements and told the story of his upbringing on the family farm, and how he is proud that his son is carrying on the farming tradition. The tour concluded with a visit to the town hospital and a Farm City Awards Luncheon.

The Dillon Soil and Water Conservation District also hosted an Awards Banquet on December 4th, where they recognized the Outstanding Conservation Farmer of the Year. Gerald Rogers, of Oak Grove, was congratulated for his conservation ethic. He has implemented conservation practices that are preventing soil erosion, protecting water quality, and improving the health of his farming operation. He has worked with the SWCD and USDA-NRCS to develop a conservation plan which includes cross fencing and watering tanks with heavy use areas. SC NRCS State Soil Scientist Pam Thomas spoke at the banquet and emphasized the importance of soil health and told the audience that it takes 1,000 years to form one inch of topsoil.



*Mr. Gerald Rogers (right) was recognized as Dillon County’s Outstanding Conservation Farmer of the Year during an awards banquet on December 4th. SC NRCS District Conservationist Roger Cooper presented him with the plaque.*

## SC NRCS Spreads the Word About Conservation at State Fair

**T**housands of people passed through the Cantey Building at the SC State Fair this October, and now many of them know about NRCS, the importance of soil conservation, pollinators, the Farm Bill, and why soil and water conservation matter. SC NRCS teamed up with USDA partners FSA, RD, and NASS to host a display at this year's State Fair in Columbia. Employees enthusiastically volunteered to take shifts manning the booth where they spoke to fair goers about conservation and what they could do in their own backyards to protect and improve natural resources. Go Team USDA!



Public Affairs Specialist Sabrenna Bryant, left, and Soil Scientist Jackie Reed, worked a shift at the state fair. Jackie was also a good sport and wore the Sammy Soil costume to entertain the kids!

Special thanks to the Newberry SWCD for letting us borrow Sammy! He was a hit!

## Farewell to NRCS Chief Dave White

**D**ave White, Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), retired effective Dec. 3, 2012. He served with the agency in Missouri, as the public affairs specialist in South Carolina, and as the State Conservationist in Montana. He also served in the Senate Agriculture Committee where he helped write the Conservation Title for the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills.

Jason Weller has been named the Acting NRCS Chief. The 40-year old served on former Chief White's staff since 2009, and also has experience working on a cattle ranch in Montana.

*Jason Weller is the Acting Chief of NRCS since the retirement of Chief Dave White on December 3rd.*



"When I became chief, I actively recruited Jason to be the NRCS chief of staff because of his knowledge, commitment and strategic thinking skills," White wrote. "He has not disappointed. Jason has been involved in every major decision NRCS has made since 2009. His knowledge of NRCS programs, budget, structure and operations is unsurpassed."

*-former Chief Dave White*

## Greenwood County Healing Garden Wins National Grant

By Elyse Benson, SC NRCS Outreach Coordinator

Last spring, the National YMCA Foundation offered \$5,000 through its Fresh Page Project. The project encouraged community revitalization projects, and voting was conducted on the YMCA of the USA's Facebook page.

**Healthy Greenwood Neighborhoods** entered the Veteran's Affairs Healing Garden project, which was then selected as a top five finalist. The project then garnered the most "likes" on Facebook and learned that they were the national winners! They were ready to get to work using the award money to create a healing garden in the courtyard of the Veteran's Affairs Building.

Before the veteran's occupied the building last spring, the facility was suffering from many years of neglect. But thanks to the outpouring of community support, the facility is now making a transformation. NRCS Outreach Specialist Elyse Benson coordinated the revitalization project, designed the planting, and conducted a Volunteer Day, appropriately enough, on Veterans Day, November 12th! She invited the Lakelands Master Gardeners to design and plant a perennial garden along the perimeter of the Healing Garden, as well as native plants in both gardens. "I wanted to keep it simple, quiet and low maintenance," she explained. "The centerpiece of the Healing Garden is the largest Japanese maple I've ever seen, which makes this area perfect spot for conversation, reading or the occasional game of checkers."

Volunteers arrived armed with gloves, garden tools, and wheelbarrows and they trimmed shrubbery, hauled off debris, laid out gravel, installed a birdhouse, planted, mulched and watered. As they were cleaning up, a generous woman came forward to donate a stone bench, and a local tree service donated stump grinding to clear the area for the renovation. The Veterans of Foreign Wars/Disabled American Vets sanded and painted an art-deco style railing around the garden, and the ROTC assembled the wheel chair-accessible picnic table and a bench.

A small amount of cash and a huge amount of volunteer support and dedication resulted in a beautiful oasis. Elyse smiles when she says, "We are not done yet. We received another grant from Lowe's, so we will tackle a patio garden in front next Spring. With so much support, who knows what else we can do!"

*Volunteers worked hard to make the Veteran's Affairs Healing Garden a reality in Greenwood, SC, and were rewarded by the National YMCA Foundation with \$5,000.*



## SC NRCS Educates and Inspires Kids and Families at EdVenture's Farmville

EdVenture is a unique children's museum in Columbia, South Carolina, and NRCS has partnered with them for the past three years to help teach children and their parents about the importance of natural resources conservation. On November 3, 2012, SC NRCS manned an exhibit and distributed materials on soil health, backyard conservation, watershed education, and pollinators.



*Amy Overstreet, SC NRCS Public Affairs and Outreach Coordinator, and her niece Tess, enjoyed spending the day at EdVenture Children's Museum telling people about NRCS!*

## SC NRCS Unveils Award Winning Documentary about Conservation on St. Helena Island

**S**hrimp boats, cast nets, and beautiful sunsets abound in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, and St. Helena Island is one of these rare gems off the coast of the Palmetto State. It's a place where small farmers are clinging to the agrarian way of life which they treasure. But the island is just five miles east of one of the most rapidly developing counties in the nation, and farmers and landowners are feeling the pressure of encroaching development which threatens their way of life. It is this dynamic relationship between people and the land that is chronicled in a newly released video documentary produced by SC NRCS in partnership with the University of South Carolina-Earth Sciences and Resources Institute. (USC-ESRI).

NRCS Public Affairs Specialist and Outreach Coordinator Amy Overstreet worked with USC Professor Dr. Buz Kloot and Journalism Professor Denise McGill to produce ***St. Helena Island—A Better Place***. The production showcases the people who are passionate about their homeland, about farming sustainably, and about maintaining the deep roots to their heritage. What is so remarkable is that the landscape is virtually unchanged since the island was occupied in 1861.

The USDA-NRCS has worked with private landowners that own small acreages on St. Helena. The island consists of 64 square miles and is a pristine oasis for the nearly 9,000 residents that call it home. It is also the location of the historic Penn Center, one of the first schools for the children of freed slaves, and the site where Martin Luther King, Jr. drafted his famous "I have a dream," speech.

Most importantly, the residents have retained and are proud of their African American Gullah culture and language. They have a deep tie and loyalty to the land and are concerned about soil and water quality, especially since much of their food is harvested from the sea.

Many of the island's farmers have worked closely with NRCS to install conservation practices that will help them sustain their way of life and protect the resources upon which they depend. Jasper District Conservationist Diane Leone was very instrumental in the production, and her relationship with the small farmers of St. Helena was essential to telling the story. "Diane has really forged a friendship with these farmers, and earned their trust and respect, and as a result they value and honor her conservation assistance and advice," explained Overstreet.

In addition to protecting and improving nearly 400 acres of farmland with conservation practices on privately owned farms, the island is home to a Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) easement which permanently protects 1,327 acres at the historic Penn Center.

The video tells the story of islanders like Ben Johnson, who left the island as a young man to work in New York City but returned to farm. "I've lived all over the world, but I have never found a place that I love as much as I love St. Helena," he remarks.

You can view the production at <http://vimeo.com/channels/abetterplace/46084848> or request a copy of the DVD by contacting [amy.overstreet@sc.usda.gov](mailto:amy.overstreet@sc.usda.gov).

*The production took nearly one year to produce. Buz Kloot and Denise McGill spent a good deal of time on St. Helena getting to know the farmers.*



## The National Soil Health Campaign's South Carolina Connection

Hopefully you have seen NRCS' new soil health campaign, *Unlock the Secrets in the Soil*. Did you know that the campaign's video productions have a South Carolina connection?

They were filmed by Dr. Buz Kloot, of USC, who has worked closely with SC NRCS over the years to produce conservation videos. He does a fabulous job, and the communications staff at headquarters secured him for this campaign. You can see the result by going to [www.airquality.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/soils/health](http://www.airquality.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/soils/health) and then select the *Soil Health Theater* link along the left side of the webpage.

The campaign seeks to focus more attention on soil health by educating customers and the public about the positive impact healthy soils can have on productivity and conservation.

The theme of the 2013 NRCS planners (also known as calendars) focuses on the campaign.

A new documentary production is currently in the works for 2013 which will highlight South Carolina's Farm to Fork revolution. Stay tuned for more great video productions!



## Why Young People Should Care About the Farm Bill

*By Rachael Dubinsky and Rebecca Frank, USDA Office of Communications*

As young people that grew up in urban areas, it's easy to wonder why we, or our peers, should care about the Farm Bill. The truth of the matter is, the Farm Bill affects more than just farmers.

As Congress works to pass a new Farm Bill before the end of the year, it's crucial to make our voices heard on this important topic. From the rural youth looking to take over the family farm to the urban gardener looking to grow fresh produce on the rooftop of their apartment building; from aspiring beginning farmers to outdoorsmen; from farmers market lovers to grocery store regulars, the Farm Bill is everywhere.

Without a new Farm Bill, universities will lose funding for research on important topics like nutrition, food safety, resource conservation and pest management, to name a few. The next generation of farmers and ranchers will lose access to critical programs, putting the future of rural America and our booming exports at serious risk. Funding to programs ensuring greater food security in both the United States and abroad are in danger of drying up.

Did you know that Farm Bill programs help those affected by natural disasters? The Farm Bill enables all Americans, from producers to consumers, to enjoy stable food prices at the grocery store, even after disasters like the 2012 drought and Superstorm Sandy.

Do you like to explore the great outdoors? Without a new farm bill, USDA agencies will be unable to enroll new acres in critical conservation and wildlife habitat programs. This will stunt the ability of local communities to support recreation and sporting, hindering the growth of local economies.

These are just a few of the many reasons why Farm Bill is important.

## Barnwell SWCD Helps Schools Plant Gardens

**F**ifth grade students at Blackville Macedonia School in Barnwell prepared a raised flower bed among their vegetable garden plots. They planted bird & butterfly blend wildflower seeds, which were donated by the Bamert Seed Company, to attract pollinators to the school's vegetable gardens in the spring.

The pollinator garden will help students learn about different pollinator species, study wildflower plant growth, and witness the benefits of wildflowers and pollinators.

Third graders at Barnwell Primary School planted a Litter Buster's Wildlife Garden where they will test the effectiveness of wildflowers in reducing litter.

Thanks to Barnwell SWCD Education Coordinator Linda Pickering for sharing the photos of the gardens!



Fifth grade students at Blackville Macedonia Elementary School created a pollinator garden which was sponsored by Barnwell SWCD and Bamert Seed Company.

## Elyse Benson's Unique Style Highlighted in Greenwood Magazine

**O**ur own Elyse Benson, Outreach Coordinator in Greenwood County, was recently the focus of a feature length article in *Greenwood Magazine*. The article, *The Artsy Evolution of a Home*, begins with the sentence, "Who owns this house, I'd like to know...the door and art intrigue me so." Writer Amy Alley interviewed Benson for the piece which describes her "funky chic" style. The article includes some amazing photos of the beautifully decorated house.

NRCS employee Elyse Benson's uniquely artsy home was the centerpiece of an article in Greenwood Magazine.



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