



Women of NRCS
Sharing Their Stories

Growing Careers

The NRCS Family Tree

Since the aftermath of the Dust Bowl, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been the USDA agency charged with helping people help the land.

We help landowners identify natural resource concerns and write a plan for repairing and protecting the resources on their property.

This voluntary conservation plan addresses when and how farmers should till their soil, apply nutrients and pesticides, how and when cattle should graze pastures, how crops should be planted, what crops should be planted and in what rotation.

NRCS also helps customers install conservation practices like terraces, buffer strips and grassed waterways, to help stop erosion and protect water quality.

To do this work, NRCS employs a wide variety of professionals from conservationists to administrative assistants to accountants. We employ people in every county working face-to-face with landowners and other customers.

In partnership with our customers, we improve lives, communities and the environment through natural resources conservation.

NRCS provides opportunities for many types of careers, whether you are just entering the workforce or are looking to advance your career and begin a leadership role.

This brochure highlights just a few women working for Iowa NRCS. They agreed to share their NRCS stories so you may learn more about their career paths and how NRCS has impacted their professional lives.

The NRCS family tree is the career home for people from all types of backgrounds and life experiences.

Perhaps you'll find NRCS is the place where you can set your roots and grow your career.

To find out more about working for NRCS go to www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov or call 515-284-4587.

Julie Falcon

*Soil Conservationist,
Waterloo Field Office*

Julie grew up on an Iowa cow-calf farm and received a bachelors in agronomy in 1986. She's served in 9 counties as a soil conservation tech, district conservationist, and soil conservationist. She joined the Waterloo Field office in '98.

Julie says she finds helping people very rewarding. "I get to 'go play' on other people's land when I make farm visits. I get to meet different people from a wide array of backgrounds. Helping landowners is especially satisfying when someone understands the 'why' of what we do."

Julie's career advice includes working in various locations to gather a wide variety of experiences with different soil types, climates, regional social cultures and conservation practices. "Don't forget what you have learned in the field office, it will take you everywhere!"

Lori Schnoor

District Conservationist, Maquoketa Field Office

When deciding on a career, Lori wanted to be connected to the land. This is why she chose a conservation career after earning her bachelor's from Iowa State University, instead of pursuing a law degree. She first joined NRCS in 2002 after working for a Soil and Water Conservation District for five years. She's also worked as a soil conservationist and district conservationist in two other NRCS offices before coming to Maquoketa.

"I grew up on a farm and was always outside helping on the farm or exploring the timber, pasture and creeks," she said. In her job as a district conservationist she gets to stay close to the land and the people who work it to grow food and fiber. "I enjoy being able to see the things we do making an actual difference in people's lives and the environment."

Her number one piece of advice: "Make an effort to provide exceptional customer service because, overall, that is what people remember."





Teresa Steffens

Area Administrative Assistant, West Union Area Office

In her administrative roles with NRCS, Teresa has continued to grow and develop new skills throughout her career which began in 1987. In her job she provides administrative support for an 18-county area in Northeast Iowa.

“I’ve had the opportunity to work with so many different types of people. I am able to continually gain new knowledge and skills which has helped me to become more organized, a better multi-tasker, better communicator and more passionate about assisting

those who request my help.”

Her best advice for new employees is to be passionate about what you want and work hard to get there. “Learn as much as possible in everything you do and make what you do count.” She’s gained a lot from following the best advice she’s received, “You should never have to apologize for your work...be proud of it.”

Aquanda Jones

Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations, Fort Dodge Area Office

Aquanda first worked for NRCS as a college student trainee in biological sciences while attending college in Mississippi. After graduation worked in several field offices in Mississippi and Kentucky. She’s previously worked as a soil conservationist and district conservationist. She joined Iowa NRCS in 2009 and manages a 23-county area in the central region of the state.

“The people I have met through this agency, both our workforce and client base, share a common appreciation for the land and possess a strong work ethic,” she said. “I find this the most rewarding thing about working for NRCS.”



She said finding the right mentor is key to your NRCS career. “When looking for a mentor choose someone whose career path is similar to what you aspire to do with the agency and actively apply for vacancies.”



Nelva Huitink

Soil Conservationist, Orange City Field Office

Nelva first joined NRCS in 1987 as a soil conservation technician. She’s been in her current position for more than 20 years and has a bachelor’s in ag business.

She first thought she wanted to be a teacher because her mother was a teacher. But as a soil conservationist, Nelva serves as a conservation teacher helping NRCS customers solve problems while protecting the environment. In fact, she says working with customers and helping them learn is the most rewarding part of her job.

Learning to be flexible is important to new NRCS employees, she said. “ Things can change so quickly.”

Nelva had some good advice for people looking for a leadership position. “Leadership includes people management; learn how to manage people,” she said.



Christine Chafa

Area Easement Specialist, Sioux City Area Office

Since joining Iowa NRCS in 2003, Christine says she’s found the agency a “great place to grow and learn about Iowa, its agriculture, the landscape and the people that help shape the state.”

She said she found working with people most rewarding. “I enjoy assisting landowners find conservation solutions to protect their environmentally sensitive farmland and implement them,” she said.

Christine, who loved being outside as a child, received a bachelors in wildlife and fisheries management. She now works with private land-owners in the western third of Iowa, helping them to restore or convert land into wetlands.

She’s also worked as a soil conservationist in three other offices and recommends working in many different offices before moving onto a leadership position. “This way you will get experience working with different types of people in different office situations while gaining valuable field experience,” she said.





Julie McMichael

Area Resource Soil Scientist,
Chariton Field Office

Julie helps Iowa NRCS staff and our customers better understand soils and how land management decisions impact soil health.

As a kid she loved math and liked to draw so she thought she might be an architect. But several college degrees later including a masters in soil science, she began her career as a soil scientist in 2004. Her best advice for students considering a job with NRCS is to take basic plant and soil identification classes. "This will really help in your day-to-day work," she said.

In addition to helping NRCS customers, she enjoys her opportunities to help students and employees improve their understanding of soils. And having the ability to help people understand issues is a trait of a strong leader, she said. "Try to understand those around you and have a heart of a teacher. Be willing to listen and give answers that are simple and to the point."

Jennifer Anderson-Cruz

Biologist, Des Moines State Office

Jennifer is living her childhood dream to become a biologist. Before joining NRCS in 2002, she worked as naturalist, watershed coordinator, biology instructor and wildlife technician. She received her masters degree in biology after joining NRCS and is now pursuing a doctoral degree after an NRCS mentor encouraged her to continue her education.



She advises new employees to not get stuck in a rut. "Diversify your knowledge in many subject areas and always look for the connections, patterns and processes that result in successful outcomes."

Jennifer said leaders should develop excellent listening skills, be open minded and willing to learn new things.



Lya Williams

Civil Engineer,
Ottumwa Field Office

Lya followed in her family's footsteps when she decided to become an engineer. Growing up she admired two uncles who were both electrical engineers. She went on to receive a bachelor's in agricultural and biosystems engineering and first joined NRCS as an agricultural engineer in Maryland in 1999.

According to Lya, NRCS offers a great opportunity to build a network of people with diverse backgrounds. "Keep an open mind. Recognize the opportunities to build and maintain relationships. When someone doesn't understand, be willing to teach them so you can be on the same page. Common understanding goes a long way in a team environment."

Carolyn Christian

Contract Specialist,
Des Moines State Office

Carolyn first joined NRCS in 1992 shortly after graduating with a bachelors in business management. She's held two previous administrative positions before becoming a contract specialist in 2010.

She has found NRCS a very family-friendly employer, while providing many opportunities for different types of careers in different locations.

"I enjoy helping both external and internal customers in my role of helping purchasing products and services and implementing contracts or agreements with partner groups to help landowners take care of the land."

She said it's good to be willing to take risks and look for new opportunities whether within your current position or in a new one. "Do all the tasks of your job well, even the ones you don't like. It shows your willingness to work. Doing all things well will be noticed and it will pay off."





www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.