Minority Landowner

Gil Alexander

Fourth Generation Kansas Farmer

Special Edition
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

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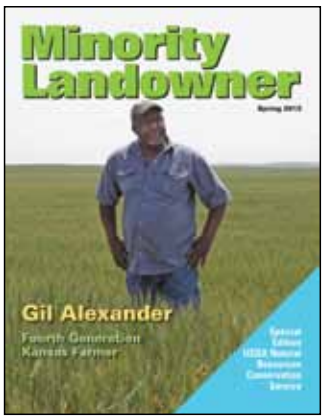

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Editor's Page

Minority Landowner and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service have enjoyed a long relationship.

From feature stories from Alabama, to cover stories from California, to organizing outreach workshops and field days in South Carolina, to hosting a "Meet the Publisher" session in Washington, DC, our partnership has been long and solid.

Victor L. Harris
Registered Forester

This NRCS Special Edition is a continuation of that relationship, in which we are both working to inform and strengthen minority and limited resource farmers, ranchers and forest landowners across the country.

Larry Holmes, retired director of outreach with NRCS in Washington, DC, was the catalyst for this Special Edition. He and I had numerous conversations about producing an issue of *Minority Landowner* that introduced NRCS programs and services through the eyes of farmers across the country who are implementing them.

After Larry retired, Sylvia Rainford carried the mantle coordinating the work of field offices across the country to produce the features you find in this issue.

It's fitting that within this issue we introduce the newest member of our *Minority Landowner* Editorial Board, Drenda Williams. Drenda is the assistant state conservationist for operations with Texas NRCS and is also the immediate past president of the National Organization of Professional Black NRCS Employees. You'll find Drenda's introduction on page 5.

NRCS Chief Jason Weller shares a message on page 6, as he introduces some of the farmers in this issue and the NRCS programs and services that benefit them.

We've always believed that one of the best ways to connect farmers with the right program is to introduce them to other farmers who share their same experiences, and who are participating in those programs themselves. You'll meet farmers who could be you. Participating in programs that you could be participating in. And improving their farm operation, in the same manner you could be improving yours.

If you're a farmer or landowner and you haven't contacted NRCS you need to do so now. If you've worked with them in the past, but haven't been in touch lately, you need to reconnect with your district conservationist to learn what new programs and services are available to help improve your land management operation.

Visit your local NRCS office or find the phone number in your local directory. You can also find the number of every NRCS state office in our annual Minority Landowner Resource Guide within the Winter 2013 issue of *Minority Landowner*.

I know you will appreciate the value within this NRCS Special Edition. We're proud of our long, solid partnership with NRCS, "Helping People Help the Land."

All the best,

Victor L. Harris
ccpublishing@earthlink.net

From the desk of Sylvia Rainford

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I would like to thank the following individuals for their invaluable assistance in helping NRCS compile this Special Edition

Larry Holmes, Retired, NRCS, Washington, DC. This special section was Larry's vision and I shepherded it to completion.

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Drenda Williams Joins *Minority Landowner* Editorial Board

Minority Landowner Magazine is excited that Drenda Williams has joined our Editorial Board. As one of our volunteer board members, Drenda will provide ideas and input on feature articles and editorial content that can help minority and limited resource farmers, ranchers and forest landowners improve productivity of their land management operation.

Drenda serves as the Assistant State Conservationist (ASTC) for Operations at the NRCS State Office in Temple, Texas. She began her 19-year career with USDA NRCS as one of the first USDA/1890 National Scholars.

Born in Vandalia, Missouri, Williams attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, and graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in agriculture and natural resources. She began her work with NRCS as a computer specialist in the USDA Audrain County Service Center. Throughout her career, Williams worked in various NRCS field offices, at Lincoln University's Center for Excellence and later, the Missouri State Office. Williams advanced within the agency from soil conservationist, geographic information systems specialist, resource conservationist, ag economist, EQIP and CSP program manager, ASTC for Operations in Missouri, and to her current leadership position as the ASTC for Operations for Texas NRCS.

She serves as a member of the National Workforce Planning Team, National Recruitment Strategy Team, Activity Based Costing Forum Group, National Video Teleconferencing Advisory Group, and the Conservation Delivery and Streamlining Initiative Readiness Team – Central Region. Drenda has served on various details within NRCS which include Deputy Chief for Programs' Business Tools Team, Missouri State Administrative Officer (SAO), Kansas SAO, Missouri State Conservationist, the Office of the Regional Conservationists' State Improvement Team in Washington, DC, and most recently Oregon State Conservationist.

In 2012, Williams directed the National Organization of Professional Black NRCS Employees' (NOPBNRCSE) Outreach and Agriculture Education Expo partnering with universities, community based organizations, and landowners to provide training and increase services to minority landowners. She served as president of the NOPBNRCSE from 2011-2013 and is currently the Immediate Past President.

Williams has consistently excelled in the performance of her duties within NRCS. In addition to her challenging NRCS responsibilities in the state office, Williams continues to lead by example. She received honorable mention honors for the 2010 USDA Organization of Professional Employees of the Department of Ag's Unsung Hero award for her work in promoting civil rights, in 2012 recognized by Lincoln University-Missouri, for increasing USDA programs on campus, and as one of the NRCS "First" Black females to hold the positions of ASTC Operations in Missouri and Texas.

Her successful and distinguished career in agriculture will be of tremendous value to *Minority Landowner* and to the farmers and landowners we serve.

Chief's Message

Dear Landowners:

Jason A. Weller

At USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), it's our responsibility and our commitment to ensure all American producers – from all communities, backgrounds, and regions of the country – have access to conservation programs that can help them succeed.

This issue of *Minority Landowner* is an exciting one for me – chock-full of stories about farmers and ranchers across the country who are making conservation investments in their operations in partnership with NRCS. These producers are delivering results for their farms and ranches and for conservation.

In this issue you'll read about farmers like Carl Handy in Mississippi's northern Delta who's using the Conservation Stewardship Program to lower operation costs on his farm – all while improving water quality and providing habitat for wildlife.

You'll read about Clarence Foster in southeastern Virginia who used the Wetlands Reserve Program to fend off encroaching development on his family's farm. He was able to turn a portion of his land into a permanent easement with NRCS support.

You'll read about Loretta Sandoval, a USDA-certified organic producer in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico, who used the Organic and High Tunnel Initiatives, funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, to jumpstart her operations. Working with NRCS, Loretta made improvements to her farm's irrigation system, helping her use water more efficiently. Now she shares the knowledge she gained with others in the community.

These are true conservation success stories and we're eager to see even more producers reap the same results. Right now we're accelerating outreach to historically underserved farmers and ranchers through targeted programs and initiatives.

Two years ago, USDA piloted the USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity initiative, which is partnering with community-based organizations and other NGOs to show historically underserved farmers and ranchers what USDA can do for them – and guiding them through the process of applying for our programs and services. Since then, we've seen a 200 percent increase in participation among historically underserved communities in some StrikeForce counties.

By helping to improve a producer's operations we're not only helping that one producer increase his or her bottom line, we're helping families and supporting strong communities while also protecting our natural resources for future generations.

For more information on how you can participate in our programs, visit your local NRCS office or go to www.nrcs.usda.gov for more information.

Jason A. Weller, Chief
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

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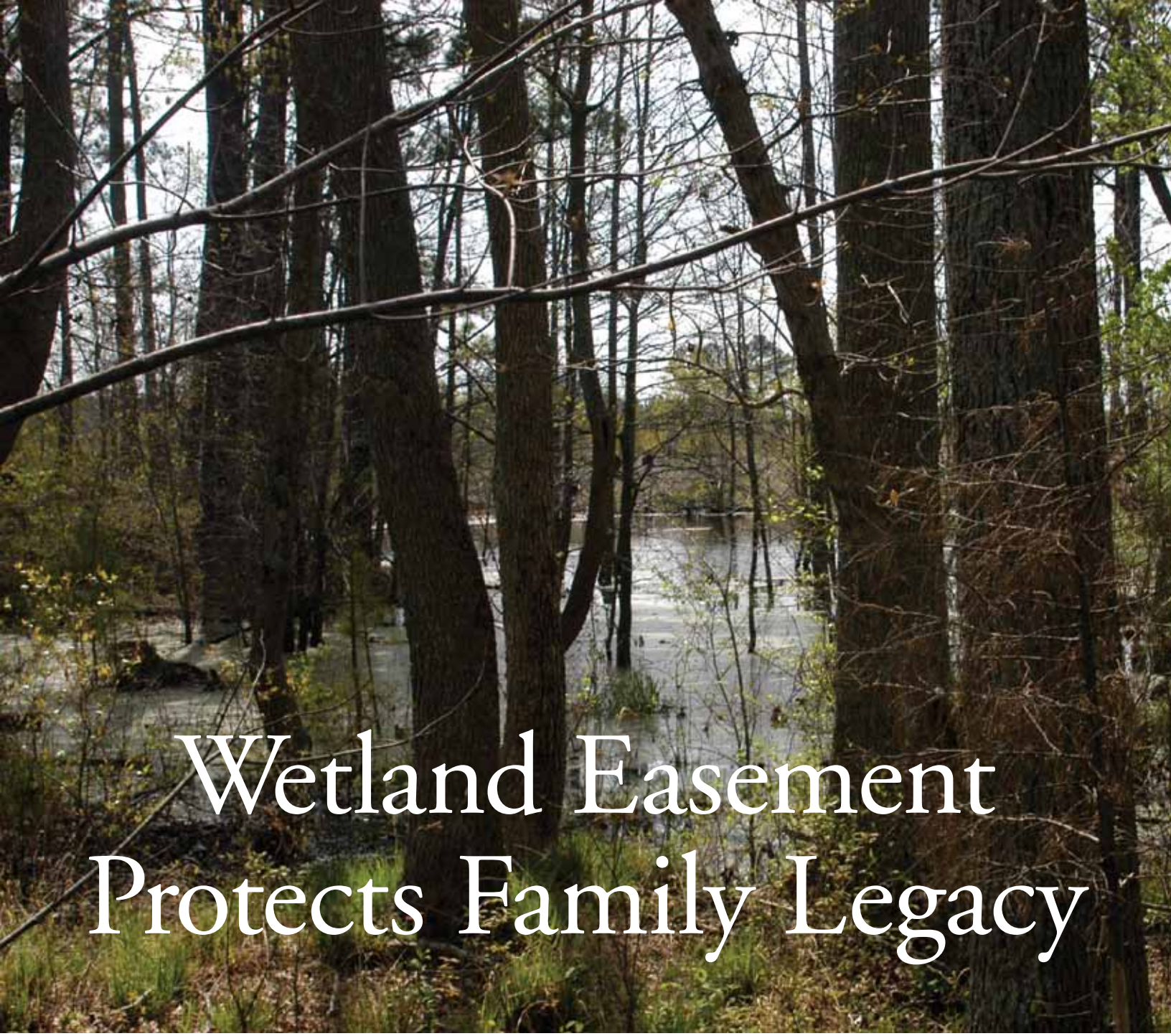


Wetland Easement Protects Family Legacy

Landowner Clarence Foster's WRP easement area includes an old hog pond.

By Pat Paul
Public Affairs Specialist, Virginia

They say "home is where the heart is." For Clarence Foster that means Zuni, a rural community in southeastern Virginia. Foster's love for the land began in 1949 when he went to live with his aunt and uncle, two local school teachers.

At about the same time, a neighboring aunt and uncle bought a 200-acre farm. Though Foster would move to New York City years later, his thoughts were never far from Zuni. He bought the farm's remaining 193-acres from his cousin more than 20 years ago.

Foster retired from his New York job in 2002 and returned to Virginia in 2004. He first sought and received guidance from USDA in 2004 when he planted a small buffer of warm season grasses to protect the stream from runoff. "It wasn't a lot of money, but it brought stability to the small parcel, and a bonanza to various small animals," Foster said.

However, his greatest concern was encroaching development. Foster said that "the general area, including an old community of Freetown, used to have many black landowners. Their

NRCS District Conservationist Yamika Bennett and landowner Clarence Foster discuss his conservation plan on Foster's farm.

numbers are less today, but a few have dug in their heels."

After talking with Barry Harris, an NRCS easement specialist who had grown up in the area, he inquired about easement opportunities on the property. In 2006, he signed up for a permanent easement on 20.4 acres through the Wetlands Reserve Program.

Foster said he found the financial arrangements of the permanent easement more suitable than the 30-year deal. With the permanent easement, NRCS would pay 100 percent of the costs to restore the wetland as compared with 75 percent of the restoration cost for a 30-year easement.

"Under this program, the government would pay me a lump sum for the easement, but I couldn't cut anything down or build anything on it. I had a minor concern over the loss of control, but it hardly mattered. The parcel would have been left to the wondrous whims of nature anyway," he said.

The original restoration plan required major excavation and called for installing vernal pools (small water holes for amphibian habitat). Foster wanted a simpler solution, so NRCS District Conservationist Yamika Bennett worked with him to develop a suitable compromise.

Under the revised plan, Foster planted three acres of trees to create a buffer between the crop fields and the wetland. "I never had to pay any money and the payment I received was adequate, and certainly welcome," he said.

"Today, a little over 10 percent of the farm is protected under an easement. I hope this will be a deterrent to any potential sale in the future," he said. "There is a basic principle here. Once you sell, you no longer have it."

Foster said that "knowing about these programs is important. If you find something you really like, it can make all the difference. For me, there was little down side and positive aspects for the future."

Standing on his back porch, Foster proudly points across the field to the tubes marking trees planted in February 2012.

"Nothing could make me happier than owning this spot of land. If I hit the lotto, I'd buy more land in Southampton County," he said.

Wetland Easement Helps Restore Tribal Landscapes

This wetland is part of the Cradle Valley WRP Project.

By David Sanden
Public Affairs Specialist, California

The Susanville Indian Rancheria (SIR or Rancheria) of northeastern California acquired 160 acres of forested property in Plumas County in 2003 with two long-term goals—return the land to pre-settlement conditions and use it to preserve their traditional culture.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is helping the Rancheria to achieve their natural resource goal on their Cradle Valley Ranch through conservation programs such as the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) on part of that land and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. SIR, a federally recognized tribe composed of the Paiute, Maidu, Washoe, and Pit River people, is located near Susanville in Lassen County.

"Our objective in owning and restoring these lands is to ensure that present generations of all peoples can enjoy them and interact with a living past while stewarding the lands and resources as a means of ensuring the opportunity for future generations to do the same," SIR Cultural Resources Specialist Melany Johnson said.

SIR plans to establish a cultural center and envisions the Cradle Valley property, and similar land acquisitions in their traditional homeland, as part of a vast park dedicated to education, healing, protection and traditional land management techniques. They also see these lands as an opportunity for promoting social harmony, celebrating cultural diversity, and empowering their people.

"Our plan is to provide land bases, islands of a sort, where people can learn about the land and its history. Traditional ecology can be learned and lived through implementation of an ecosystem such as our ancestors benefitted from and enjoyed," Johnson said.

Johnson emphasized that the land restoration is closely intertwined with restoration of the traditional culture. "For the Tribal culture to be complete again, the land must also be complete again," she said. "The practice of traditional land management techniques is a way of life. The traditions and culture of the indigenous people are rooted in the everyday management of the landscape."

The Cradle Valley property is surrounded by the Plumas National Forest, and is composed of eastside pine forest, with a riparian corridor and aspen stands. Clarks Creek bisects the property and is surrounded by 28 acres of wet meadow with

willows and native grasses. Over the years, uncontrolled grazing had degraded riparian and upland habitats, affecting the hydrology of the entire Clark Creek Watershed. An important first step in restoring the property was to install fencing to exclude livestock.

"The property was also heavily overgrown, choked with brush, noxious weeds, and too many trees, thus affecting forest health and creating a fire hazard," SIR Natural Resources Director Crista Stewart said.

SIR initiated an effort called the Cradle Valley Indigenous Landscape Enhancement Project in 2005. As part of this effort, they applied for WRP and received funding from NRCS and other sources (including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and North Cal-Neva Resource Conservation and Development) to fence the area using wildlife friendly fencing materials.

"The Rancheria put 64 acres of the Cradle Valley property into a 30-year WRP conservation easement, with NRCS as the easement holder," NRCS District Conservationist Dan Martynn said. "This land will be maintained primarily as habitat for wetland birds and other riparian species. Some upland habitat adjacent to the wetland area is allowed in the easement."

The Rancheria completed the WRP wetland enhancement and upland habitat management work by 2007. This work has resulted in improved conditions for native fish and wildlife species, including at-risk species, associated with the restored wetland, riparian, and forested habitats.

The easement revenue enabled the Rancheria to reclaim one-fourth of the purchase price of the land. They used these funds, in combination with funds from the Plumas County Resource Advisory Committee, for forest thinning and pruning to increase fire safety and improve forest health.

Martynn said that NRCS worked with SIR to develop a conservation plan, helping SIR to acquire more funding through EQIP, the Plumas National Forest, and the California Fire Safe Council. SIR used the extra funds to improve forest health on 100 acres of the property through thinning, pruning, piling, and burning. In 2012, SIR signed up for an additional EQIP contract through the California Statewide Tribal Initiative. This contract, aimed at improving and managing forest health, will enable SIR to do even more thinning, pruning, upland wildlife habitat management, and plantings on 40 acres during the next two years.

"This is truly a win-win project," Martynn said. It is improving wildlife and fisheries habitat enjoyed by various recreational communities while reducing the opportunity for a severe wildfire to develop in this area. It will benefit communities in Plumas and Lassen counties by providing a unique area to learn about conservation and traditional Native American ways and will also provide an area for Native Americans to host cultural gatherings and practice traditional ceremonies."

Several programs and funding sources from various partners are helping SIR to achieve their objectives for the Cradle Valley project. For instance, the NRCS WRP easement has proven to be an effective, flexible tool that fits well with the Rancheria's vision and traditional land management techniques. For SIR it has been a catalyst and a centerpiece for further restoration efforts.

Oneida Nation Graze Buffalo for Natural Resource, Economic Benefits

Grazing buffalo provide a healthy source of meat while protecting the soil and improving water quality.

By Renae Anderson
Public Affairs Specialist, Wisconsin

Tribal tradition, respect for nature and health of the people are highly valued by the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin. That's why grazing, especially for buffalo, fits perfectly with the goals of the Oneida Nation Farms.

With help from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Oneida have expanded their herd to over 140 buffalo in a prescribed rotational grazing system on 210 acres. In addition to a detailed grazing plan written with help from NRCS field staff, the Oneida have installed fencing, a pipeline, watering facilities and a well for their grazing operation.

"Using NRCS assistance, we have been able to expand our buffalo grazing operation," said Dennis VanVreede, Oneida Nation Farm supervisor. "This allowed us to supply more healthy meat to the Oneida people, and at the same time, improve forage quality on the farm."

Like the Oneida Nation, other minority and women farmers can use grazing effectively in their farming or ranching operation.

Many beginning farmers and ranchers choose grazing because it requires only animals and land. Successful grazing requires good management of the grass pastures. Graziers rotate the animals from paddock to paddock often enough so the grass is not over-grazed and grows back quickly. This ensures the animals are well fed.

Bison often requires less management than cattle, because they need to roam. Their pastures are larger with sturdier seven-strand electric fencing. Seeding mixes for bison offer more fibrous plants, like warm-season grasses, and less of the high sugar, high protein plants used in dairy quality seeding mixes.

Fencing — Fencing is used to control movement of animals for handling, rotational grazing, watering and feeding facilities.

Prescribed Grazing — Prescribed grazing is part of a conservation system to improve the health of livestock and pastures. It reduces erosion and builds up healthy soil.

Stream Crossing — A stream crossing may be a structure or just a stabilized area to allow people, livestock or equipment to cross a stream without causing erosion of the streambank.

Pipeline — Pipelines deliver water to livestock as part of a prescribed grazing plan.

Access Road — An access road is a travel-way for equipment and vehicles for management of livestock or cropland.

Brush Management — Brush management helps remove, reduce or control noxious or invasive woody plants, and allow growth of good vegetation. It improves forage for livestock, and reduces the risk of wildfire.

Heavy Use Area Protection — Areas that are frequently used by livestock may need heavy use area protection. This may include a roofed livestock winter feeding station, concrete pads, or special vegetation to reduce soil erosion, improve air and water quality and livestock health.

Watering Facility — A tank, trough or other watertight container provides clean water for livestock in the best location for safe and easy access.

Although cows are the most popular animals used to begin grazing, other animals fit well into this low-cost, highly popular method of raising good quality livestock. Chickens, sheep, goats, and even exotic species like deer and elk thrive on a good rotational grazing system. To establish a good healthy pasture, a producer needs to balance the right mix of plants for your soil, your climate and your animal's nutritional needs. Poultry, steers, and dairy animals thrive on different types of pasture and need different seeding mixes. For instance, meat and dairy goats can graze on both forages and brush. Some producers even rent out their goats for brush control.

Grazed chickens are becoming more popular for specialty food markets and restaurants. They are cheap and easy to raise with grass, insects, and some supplemental grains in their diet.

Alpaca and other exotics are easy to graze and provide high value wool, meat, milk or other specialty products.

"We highly recommend that anyone considering grazing begin by going to pasture walks," says Brian Pillsbury, NRCS state grazing specialist in Wisconsin. And then continue with a "grazing school" – a 1 to 2 day hands-on training session usually coordinated by NRCS or Extension. Participants learn how to size pastures, assess forage and other skills needed for a successful, profitable grazing operation.

For more information on grazing and conservation practices, contact the NRCS office at your local USDA Service Center.

Why Succession Planning is Important to Easements

By Glenda Glover, Ph.D.
President, Tennessee State University

Land ownership is the first step in succession planning! While this appears to be a simple statement, the misinterpretation of who owns land is one of the most vexing issues in the easement program. It goes without saying that in order to effect an easement on property, only the rightful owner can make this happen.

Therein lies the overwhelming concern. In countless cases, family members either misinterpret the ownership of land by not understanding the deed to the property, or they never establish who will own the land after the death of the relative. In other instances, the land has accumulated enormous tax debt or loan debt, and surviving family members are forced to sell it.

The following steps may be useful in succession planning:

- Each family should perform an inventory of all the land that is owned by the immediate family.
- The deed to each parcel of property should be obtained, copied, and the original must be filed in a safe place.
- Determine if the property is included in the will of the family member who owns the property.
- If there is no will, and the family member who owns the land is still alive, encourage him or her to prepare a will as soon as possible.
- If there is no will, and the family member is deceased, determine how many family members are legally entitled to inherit the property.
- Obtain the addresses of all family members who may be heirs, and distribute this contact information to all relatives.
- Develop an understanding of heirs and their responsibilities.

An Understanding of Heirs

- Heir property is property that is owned by many different relatives who are legally entitled to inherit the property. Please check your state laws regarding succession of heirs.
- The children of someone who dies without a will, own the property of their parent(s) equally.
- All persons in the household cannot be heirs. Heirs are: (1) all natural born children, (2) all legally adopted children, (3) grandchildren and (4) the person's spouse at the time of death.
- If the person does not have any living children or a living spouse, then the person's living parents or siblings would be their heirs.
- Heirs are not: (1) stepchildren, (2) children raised by the deceased but not formally adopted, or (3) a divorced spouse.

Finally, all family members are encouraged to become interested in what happens to the land that rightfully belongs to them. Contact family members and follow up on any issues that may cause concern. If one family member has moved away or does not want the burden of upkeep and maintenance of the property, another relative must take on this responsibility. Or if some of the heirs are not interested in the land, please consider buying them out by having them deed their share to you.

Land ownership requires family members to work together and engage in succession planning. Only family members can keep the property in the family. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a family to "raise" and protect your land.

Note: Dr. Glover wrote this article when she served as the Dean, College of Business, Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Connecting Farmers and Ranchers with Conservation Planning Benefits

By Dastina Wallace
Public Affairs Specialist, Delaware

District Conservationist Marianne Hardesty and Delaware farmer Jahtenny Leda review his conservation plan.

Are you interested in improving your farm's productivity and protecting your natural resources? If you are, conservation planning can be an effective tool in your conservation toolbox.

Delaware farmer Jahtenny Leda is doing just that on his specialty crop operation.

Leda's passion for agriculture grew out of his family's farming background in their native land of Jamaica. Even when he moved to the U.S. in 1974, his passion for agriculture didn't waver.

After gardening in Delaware for many years, Leda started his own farm by growing vegetables with ties to his Island culture. One may say he added some spice to Delaware agriculture—literally. Leda's primary focus consisted of growing Scotch bonnet peppers, an extremely hot pepper found mainly in the Caribbean Islands. To compare, a Jalapeno pepper has a heat rating of 2,500-8,000 while a Scotch bonnet pepper has a heat rating of 100,000-350,000.

Leda knew there would be growing challenges based on the differences in climate between the tropical Caribbean and temperate mid-Atlantic. Leda rented a five-acre plot from Delaware Greenways on the Trustees of New Castle Common's Penn Farm. He sought advice in growing his peppers from the nearby Extension of Delaware State University (DSU), a historically Black university.

Leda learned about the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through his conversations with Andy Wetherill, a Small Farms educator from DSU Extension. He learned NRCS helps producers balance their economic and operational goals with the needs of the environment. It all begins with a basic concept—conservation planning.

"Andy told me to give Marianne with NRCS a call for help with some financial assistance to get some of the practices he suggested installed," Leda said.

Leda also learned about the diverse programs and services NRCS offers, including conservation planning, from Marianne Hardesty, NRCS district conservationist in New Castle County.

First, Leda and Hardesty walked the operation together. Hardesty assessed his farm's soil, water, air, plant and animal resources and jointly identified his resource concerns, while he explained his goals for his operation.

Leda's conservation plan outlined a clear course of action using proven conservation practices such as cover crops, a micro-irrigation system and high tunnels. Leda began working with NRCS in October 2011. That November, he had implemented cover crops on his operation to improve soil health and had a better understanding of how to reduce and filter runoff water.

A conservation plan provides a roadmap that helps the landowner drive in the right direction. Implementing the conservation plan can result in more viable and productive land, improved water quality, increased farm profits, and enhanced wildlife habitat. It can help you decide which NRCS financial assistance program would be suitable for your operation. The NRCS conservationist can show you many good alternatives and make economic comparisons. Ultimately, you decide what you want to do, when to do it and how to do it.

Leda's future plans include a micro-irrigation management system and a USDA-approved high tunnel in which he plans to grow milder vegetables, such as collard greens.

"Marianne has provided a lot of good advice and helped out in areas where I'm not an expert," Leda said.

Through Leda's commitment to conservation, he can infuse his Caribbean roots into the ground regardless of his location.

Regardless of the farm or ranch's size, conservation planning helps producers focus on specific business and natural resource goals and provides solutions and recommendations for improvement. Conservation planning is free, voluntary and flexible. NRCS staff will help producers develop the plan one step at a time at their own pace.

If you have specific goals for your operation, please contact your local NRCS office.

Kansas Farmer Uses Federal, State Programs to Protect Soil, Enhance Wildlife Habitat

Kansas farmer Gil Alexander stands in a field he farms in north central Kansas. He grows wheat and milo and uses minimum tillage to conserve moisture and reduce soil erosion.

By Mary Shaffer
Retired Public Affairs Specialist, Kansas

Kansas farmer Gil Alexander is the fourth generation to farm the land homesteaded in the late 1880s by his great-grandfather Samuel Garland. He and his late father farmed the land, located near the history-rich Nicodemus, the only remaining western town established by African Americans during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War.

Alexander believes it is important to protect the natural resources—soil, water, air, plants, and animals—by using conservation practices such as terraces, cover crops and minimum tillage on his land. These conservation practices ensure that his soil and other natural resources will be protected for future generations. Many years ago, Alexander's father built terraces to help stop soil erosion. He farms in Graham County, an area in north central Kansas that receives less than 25 inches of moisture annually. To conserve moisture and reduce soil erosion, he adopted minimum tillage to grow wheat and milo.

After Alexander completed major conservation work specified in his conservation plan with NRCS, the Graham County Conservation District encouraged him to enroll three small parcels of land into the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP). The conservation district identified some acres that could be used to control soil erosion as well as to enhance wildlife habitat through CCRP. CCRP is a small-scale version of CRP, explained Brian Schulze, district conservationist, NRCS Hill City Field Office.

"The landowner receives incentive payments and a payment for the acres enrolled into CCRP. In addition to the CCRP payment, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism offers the Walk-in Hunting Access (WIHA) program to land-

Kansas Farmer Gil Alexander watches NRCS District Conservationist Brian Schulze as he checks soil moisture in his field.

owners. They receive a small payment in exchange for allowing public hunting access."

Alexander signed up for both programs and worked with Schulze to design a conservation plan that included the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) practice. CCRP allows producers, at any time, to enroll eligible acreage into priority conservation practices that are highly beneficial in protecting water quality, preventing soil erosion, and improving wildlife habitat.

The SAFE practice targets habitat restoration for bobwhite quail, ringneck pheasant, greater prairie-chicken and other grassland-associated wildlife by creating nesting/brood-rearing habitat on portions of crop fields. The SAFE fits into Alexander's avid interest in wildlife.

"I have friends from Colorado and other places that come to Kansas specifically to hunt pheasants, and these acres will add to the areas they can hunt," Alexander said.

Alexander planted one enrolled area with a cover crop in the spring of 2011, and the following spring, he planted a native grass/forb mix into the cover crop. These forbs provide insects and feed for the upland wildlife young birds. Since the other two parcels were planted to wheat, he will drill the native grass and forb mix into the wheat stubble this winter.

Alexander also is interested in promoting the Kansas minority farmer. He is a member of the Kansas Black Farmers Association (KBFA) with a mission to preserve the Kansas minority farmer legacy through education, promotion of the agricultural lifestyle, and collective niche product development. In 2007, the KBFA received an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant to study the growing of teff, an Ethiopian cereal grain, in north central Kansas. Alexander volunteered to plant, grow, and harvest teff on his land. Some area farmers now grow teff for high-quality livestock hay, a product that cattle and horses enjoy and is often sought after by their owners. Also, the teff grain is used by gluten intolerant individuals. For more information about KBFA, please visit www.kbfa.org.

Alexander said he had no intentions of becoming a farmer. After graduating from college with a degree in accounting, he accepted a job outside of the area. He returned home for wheat harvest and never left. He now operates over 2,000 acres of cropland and rangeland. He owns some of his land and rents some from minority landowners with ties to Nicodemus.

Alexander advises landowners to "stop by the NRCS office and invite them out to walk your land." NRCS employees can provide information to private landowners on how to protect their natural resources, learn more about how to obtain financial and technical assistance from available conservation programs or answer questions. Please visit your local NRCS office in your local county USDA Service Center or find your local office on the Internet by clicking on http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator.

Alexander also says he searches the Internet for information about Farm Bill programs. He is looking forward to the day when he can submit an application for those programs over the Internet. He encourages producers to sign up for email updates on usda.gov. This allows a producer to target the informational updates they receive from USDA.

USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity

Mack Nosie of the White Mountain Apache Tribe's forestry department in Arizona digs a hole to plant a ponderosa pine seedling in the shade of a burned tree stump. The Tribe is using funding from the USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity to plant 168 acres of ponderosa pine seedlings on the reservation's Limestone Ridge.

By Yahaira Lopez
Confidential Assistant to Chief Jason Weller
Washington, D.C.

Rural Americans face many unique challenges – and every day USDA provides assistance to help grow American agriculture and increase opportunity for rural communities. Unfortunately, 90 percent of America's persistent poverty counties are located in rural America. Often these communities have either been left out or left behind.

To address this issue, USDA launched the StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity in 2010 to ensure underserved communities in rural America gain equal access to all USDA programs and services.

The following 16 states are participating in the StrikeForce initiative: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.

NRCS has been working with Farm Service Agency, Rural Development, Food and Nutrition Service, and many other USDA agencies and offices to reach historically underserved producers and communities to increase awareness of and enrollment in USDA's programs.

NRCS has achieved much success with its StrikeForce initiative so far. The agency has forged strong partnerships with more than 100 local nonprofit organizations and worked with them to host outreach meetings with historically underserved populations. In addition, NRCS has allocated an additional $35 million above normal program funds from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) from fiscal years 2009 – 2012. The number of historically underserved producers from the Strikeforce states increased significantly during that same period. NRCS allocated EQIP funds for more than 4,000 contracts in fiscal year 2012, nearly double the amount funded in 2009.

To learn more about USDA's StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity, please visit www.usda.gov/strikeforce.

Mississippi Farmer Uses Conservation Program to Improve Agricultural, Environmental Benefits

By Justin Fritscher
Former Public Affairs Specialist, Mississippi

Carl Handy learned to farm on a cluster of fields on his father's farm in Quitman County, Mississippi. When he was a boy, his father taught him how to work the land – and care for it.

Although Handy sought big city life after finishing college, he has found himself back where he began. An insurance agent by trade, he still maintains a 140-acre farm, where he grows mostly soybeans, wheat and sorghum.

"I knew I would always come back," said Handy, who lived in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Atlanta and Chicago. He sold insurance for large companies. He now operates his own insurance office in Marks and his northern Delta farm. "I already knew the basic stuff, but I was able to come back and fine-tune those skills."

The decision to farm was easy for him. The assistance he received from NRCS made it even easier.

Soil conservationists in Handy's local USDA Service Center showed him how the use of conservation practices will help him to improve his operation and the environment.

Most recently, Handy signed up for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), allowing him to choose the conservation practices that best suited his needs. "It's very personalized," Soil Conservationist Kathy Respess said. "It allows a landowner to choose what they want to invest in."

Through CSP, Handy is able to improve water quality, provide habitat for wildlife and lower his operational costs. He holds water on his ponds during winter, creating an ideal habitat for migratory birds.

"Mr. Handy allows his ponds to collect water during the winter, making it perfect for ducks," Respess said. "I visited with him before he began to prepare for planting and many ducks were enjoying the flooded fields."

Handy uses CSP to test plant tissues to gauge the amount of fertilizer he needs. He also completes an annual survey for pests to determine the appropriate amount of pesticide. Reducing fertilizers and pesticides benefits the David Bayou, a small waterway that runs through his farm and feeds the Coldwater River, which ultimately flows into the Mississippi River. Not only do these actions reduce the amount of fertilizers and pesticides that could harm the environment, they also reduce his costs.

Handy learned about CSP through networking with other farmers and frequent visits to his local USDA Service Center. Eight years ago, Handy enrolled in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and he is actually working on another EQIP application for next year.

Quitman County farmer Carl Handy and NRCS Soil Conservationist Kathy Respess discuss improvements to Handy's property that will be good for his operation. Handy uses conservation practices to help him hold water on his field longer. The standing water provides good habitat for field migratory birds, including waterfowl.

Handy said he plans to continue his relationship with NRCS. He has expanded his farm to about 150 acres – about half of which he leases from country legend Charley Pride. The other land is where he was raised. When he is working the farm, he can still see his childhood home.

Handy advises producers to set aside adequate time to apply for financial assistance through NRCS's conservation programs. He said the time he spent applying for the programs has been well worth it.

Note: Justin Fritscher is now a media specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Washington, D.C.

Secret of the Vine

By Jaime Tankersley
NRCS-Public Affairs Specialist, San Angelo, Texas

"Dig deep!"

That's the mantra many coaches shout at their players when it is clutch performance time.

One football player took it literally – on and off the field.

Alphonse Dotson was the 1964 Grambling State Football All American. He then went on to the National Football League where he retired from the Oakland Raiders as a successful defensive tackle in 1970.

From the bright lights of the football field to the Pacific bay lights of Acapulco, Alphonse found himself retiring in the middle of his life. However, during this time of relaxation and daily chess matches, he often thought of a childhood experience that put a secret desire in his heart…grapes.

Alphonse and Martha Dotson have created a bottled masterpiece, Gotas de Oro, meaning drops of gold.

A young Alphonse had taken his first trip to his grandfather's Houston home. An afternoon exploration of the two acres led him to two boats parked under an arbor wrapped in grapevines and dangling grapes. The vision of grapes was a moment in time forever etched in his memory.

"I told myself, if you can grow grapes in Houston, you can grow them anywhere." Alphonse said.

He wanted to grow grapes and he wanted to do it right. As he had exercised on the playing field, he educated himself and executed his plan in a way that would make him successful. He dug deep, consulted with experts in the grape growing field, reviewed real estate prices and educated himself on all aspects of the business.

After spending a year-and-a-half talking to producers, educators and studying soil compositions, Alphonse obtained a document on soil types issued in 1974 by the USDA-Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This tool would help him locate the prime grape growing areas.

Before he made an offer on the property to grow his grapes in McCullough County, he walked into the local NRCS office and shook hands with District Conservationist John Newman.

"We spent the rest of the afternoon discussing soil types, conservation partner agencies and the community in general," Newman said.

When he agreed to purchase the land, Alphonse relied on a consultant to map out the vineyard design. Having learned of NRCS services on his first visit, he returned in need of some professional advice and tools to manage his natural resources. Topography maps were created that showed the land's contour and field elevations, and soil samples were taken around the acreage. With the help of NRCS, he learned about every soil in the region.

Using the topography maps obtained from NRCS as blue prints, Alphonse worked with NRCS to install an overhead sprinkler system as well as a drip irrigation system that would protect his young plants from drought. In 2002, harvest production spiked at 110 tons on what was now a 22 acre vineyard.

Alphonse worked with the NRCS and McCulloch Soil and Water Conservation District to develop a conservation plan for his operation. He participated in the NRCS-Environmental Quality Incentives Program to mechanically remove mesquite on rangeland adjacent to the vineyard. This practice improved the area for livestock grazing and reduced water use by the undesirable mesquite.

The result of Alphonse's hard work and dedication: an award winning wine, Gotas De Oro, meaning drops of gold. It is the product of Martha and Alphonse's careful calculation and formulation. They recently took home the 2013 Rodeo Austin Grand Champion White with their bottled masterpiece.

The contents of that bottle are not just premium grapes. They represent the education and outreach to professionals that Alphonse did to make this phase of his life possible.

"I have never met anyone more like a sponge." Newman said. "He is an advocate for our agency. He has been exceedingly eager for ideas and they fall on receptive ears. He didn't just sign a piece of paper and become a conservation partner, he called directors, asked questions and would try just about anything to see if it worked."

What started as a secret in the heart of a 9-year-old boy has turned into a shared passion and a flourishing business for the Dotsons. Their award winning wine is the result of a well kept secret shared with the right person, at the right time.

USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

County Committee ELECTIONS 2013

June 17, 2013 The nomination period begins. Request nomination forms from the local USDA Service Center or obtain online at **http://www.fsa.usda.gov/elections**

Aug. 1, 2013 Last day to file nomination forms at the local USDA Service Center

Nov. 4, 2013 Ballots mailed to eligible voters

Dec. 2, 2013 Last day to return voted ballots to the USDA Service Center

Jan. 1, 2014 Newly elected county committee members take office

VOTE VOTE VOTE VOTE

FSA COUNTS ON YOU:

NOMINATE AND VOTE!

Know Your "Roots"

By Kristen Lemoine
Former Public Affairs Specialist, New Mexico


Loretta Sandoval

Former chemist Loretta Sandoval returned to Rio Arriba County, New Mexico to reconnect with the farming life her family lived years ago. They say family roots run deep and for Loretta that means dedicating her life to natural resource conservation.

A USDA-certified, part-time organic farmer, Sandoval relies on ecologically-based conservation practices to grow more nutritionally-dense foods such as fresh carrots, tomatoes, garlic, onions, peppers, squash and peas. She sells her produce at the local farmers' markets and restaurants.

She also practices what she preaches in her own home. Instead of driving to the market for her produce, Sandoval walks to her garden and digs up fresh vegetables for her own cooking.

The Espanola NRCS Field Office helped Sandoval launch her small farm. She used technical and financial assistance offered through NRCS's Organic and High Tunnel initiatives.

"Parts of the farm were very dry," Sandoval said. "It looked like a desert back here because water wasn't accessible or in this field for 20 years. With the NRCS irrigation improvements, I now know how to use (my water) more efficiently without over watering. I also plant cover crops to protect the soil."

In addition to improving her irrigation delivery system, Sandoval continually improves pollinator habitat, rotates her crops, and uses high tunnels to extend the growing season.

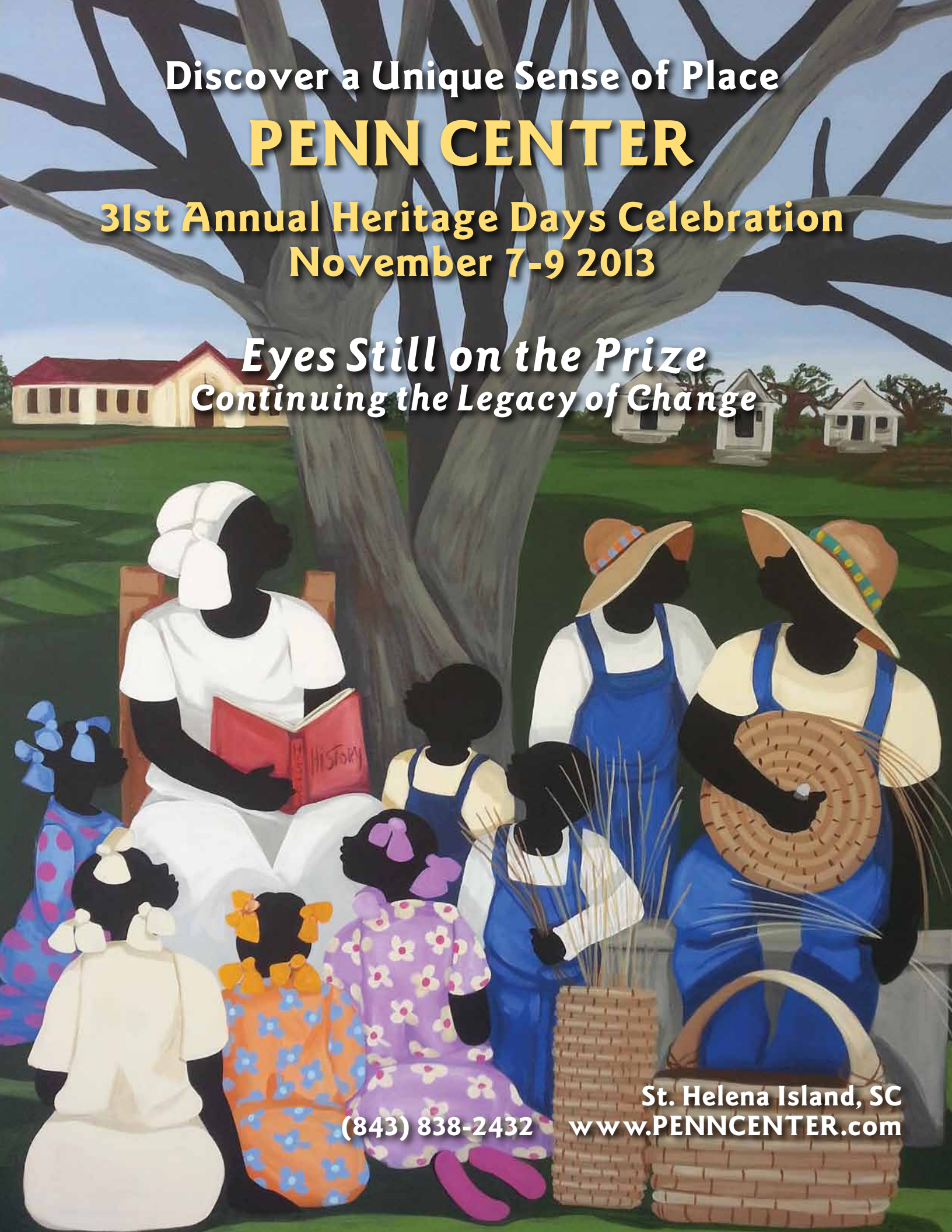
"Loretta is and has been the voice of local conservation. She practices what she preaches and is always willing to share her knowledge and time with others," said NRCS District Conservationist Thomas Gonzales.

As a part-time farmer, Sandoval still finds time in her busy life to teach others about good conservation practices. She works with individuals in her community who are interested in becoming organic farmers, but don't know where to start. She also helps others to grow food organically.

She grows local heirloom seeds such as the landrace peppers that she distributes back to the local community of Cañoncito. She assists friends and neighbors with applying for grants and demonstrates different planting techniques that revitalize older techniques. Loretta conducts presentations on various aspects of organic farming at conferences and meetings. She blended two schools of thought when she obtained a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE) grant to conserve the local landrace pepper. The grant was designed to explore and revitalize traditional pepper planting techniques which include advice from community elders.

She shares her knowledge with the people who live in her community so that they too can unlock the secrets in the soil.

To learn more about how NRCS can help you help *your* land, visit www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov.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