

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Caribbean Area



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Outreach Effort Brings Hope Along With Conservation Opportunities

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Steven Bohm fills out USDA application forms with FSA Program Technician Ana Felix and NRCS Soil Conservationist Vivian Vera at the MDI campus on Culebra Aug. 14, 2019.

Photo credit: José Sánchez, NOLO Consulting.

For Steven Bohm, a farmer in the small island municipality Culebra, Puerto Rico, outreach from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has brought more than just program information and conservation opportunities—it's also brought hope.

"I feel I've got a bit of direction now, more goals, and more hope," he said. "I'm looking forward to seeing what we can do with conservation."

It's all the result of a recent effort to reach out to isolated communities in Puerto Rico.

Culebra is a small island municipality of approximately 1,800 residents located 17 miles east of Puerto Rico and is served by the Caguas Field Office, located on the main island of Puerto Rico.

In the past, NRCS travel budget and staffing level constraints have hindered staff's ability to reach out to Culebra farmers. Travel between the servicing office in Caguas and Culebra involves driving to either the ferry in Ceiba and sailing to Culebra or to San Juan airport to fly to Culebra—an expensive and time-consuming proposition. For this reason, NRCS has not had an active conservation contract in Culebra (or Vieques, another small island east of Puerto Rico) for more than two decades. Culebra was also impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017 and many farms have still to recover.

NRCS in the Caribbean Area conducted an historic evaluation of both Culebra and Vieques islands and determined that it was imperative to work with local organizations to promote conservation and resilience for both Islands.

The effort began with an MOU between NRCS, NOLO Consulting and Mujeres de Islas (a local Culebra NGO), to promote participation in NRCS programs for this isolated and underserved community.

To kick off this initiative, NRCS sponsored an Earth Day outreach event in Culebra on April 22, 2019, along with many partners, including the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, UPR Cooperative Extension, EnviroSurvey Inc., AmeriCorps, Mujeres de Islas, Fundacion de Culebra, Green Culebra, Protectores de Cuencas, Coralatons, Reserva Canal Luis Peña, and Iniciativa Herpetológica.

In June, NRCS entered into an agreement with Mujeres de Islas Inc. (MDI) to increase the agency's presence in Culebra. This cooperative agreement established a partnership with MDI to help NRCS identify potential program participants on Culebra to conserve natural resources and to increase awareness of best management practices by installing demonstration sites and holding workshops at MDI's campus.

MDI was identified as a resourceful partner for the Culebra effort due to their heritage and local knowledge about the natural resources and risks in the region. Culebra has particular agricultural needs, and their location makes their resources more vulnerable to impacts from inadequate agricultural practices. Project partners will implement five demonstrative sites on the MDI campus to showcase conservation practices that address resource concerns in Culebra ecosystems. Partners will also identify undeserved participants that can apply for USDA Farm Bill Programs. The agreement supports an MOU signed on April 22, 2019 between Nolo Consulting, MDI and NRCS to provide guidance to student interns spearheading program outreach on Culebra.

This August, NRCS Caguas Field Office staff travelled to Culebra each Wednesday to visit with farmers and provide NRCS program information. What started as a collaboration between NRCS , NOLO Consulting and MDI expanded to include FSA, resulting in six new participants registering with FSA and five additional residents receiving NRCS program information. The new USDA program participants are receiving technical assistance for conservation plans and have completed EQIP applications for FY 2020.

"Currently, Caguas Field Office staff are working on pre-ranking screening for EQIP applications," said Caguas District Conservationist, José Santiago. "So far, we have three applications from Culebra pre-ranked as high with an excellent opportunity to become contracts under the EQIP FY 2020 initiative."

Culebra farmer Steven Bohm is one of the new clients. Bohm has a small but diverse operation, growing herbs and vegetables in small enclosures to protect them from deer as well as raising fruit trees and chickens. He is also composting and has some basic irrigation.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what we can do with conservation. I think it's wonderful the outreach that you did," he said. "Most people here did not know about USDA or NRCS and what they have to offer. I'm getting a better understating with what I need to do, thinking of options I never considered before."



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