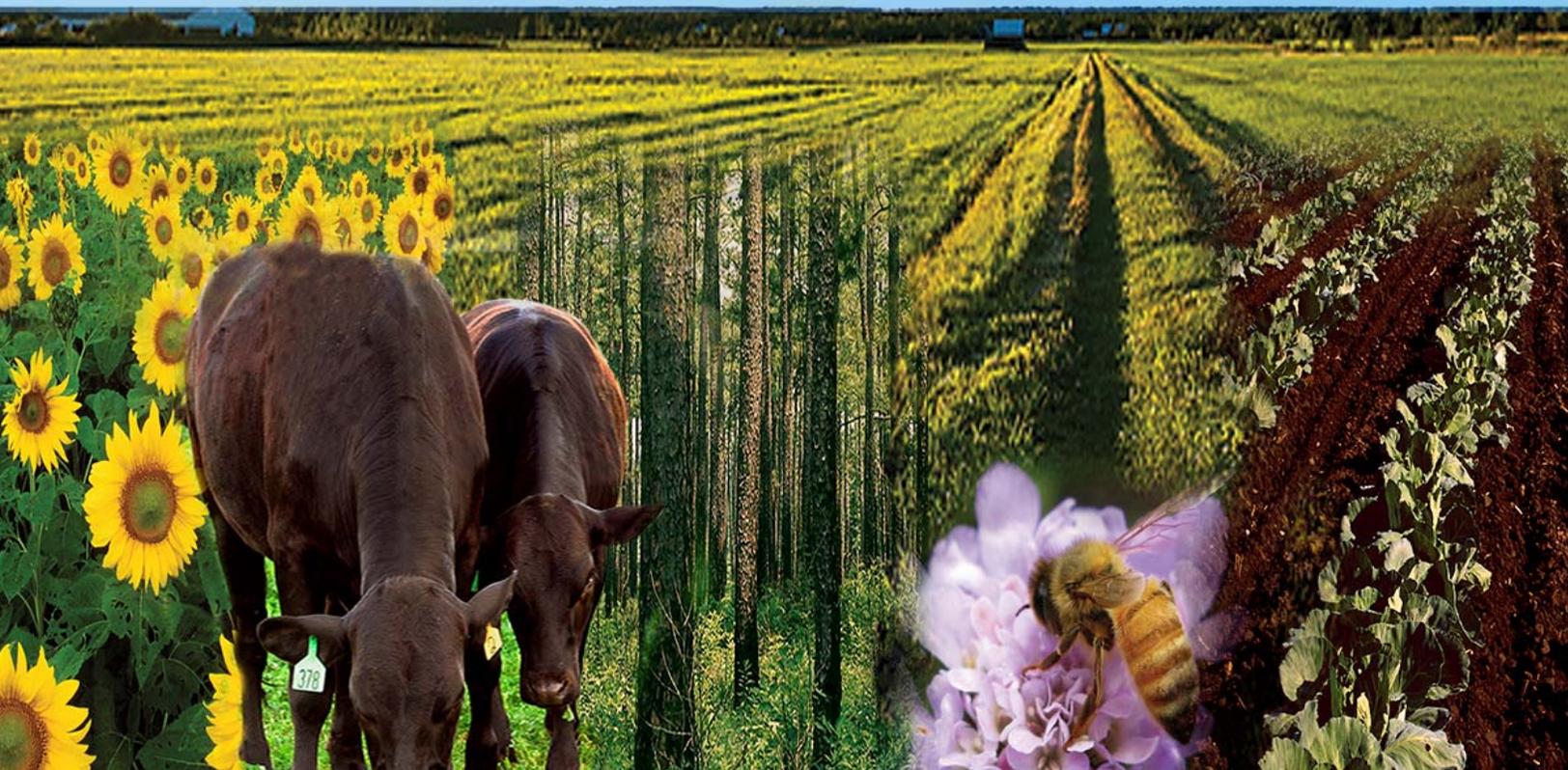




United States Department of Agriculture

# MISSISSIPPI

## FY 18 Annual Report



**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

Kurt Readus, State Conservationist

[www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov)



## ABOUT NRCS

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) draws on a long history of helping people help the land. NRCS has worked in close partnerships with farmers and ranchers, local and state governments, and other federal agencies to maintain healthy and productive working landscapes.

On April 27, 1935, Congress passed Public Law 74-46, in which it recognized that "the wastage of soil and moisture resources on farm, grazing, and forest lands... is a menace to the national welfare" and established the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) as a permanent agency in the USDA. In 1994, SCS's name was changed to the Natural Resources Conservation Service to better reflect the broadened scope of the agency's concerns. In doing so, Congress reaffirmed the federal commitment to the conservation of the nation's soil and water resources that was first made more than 80 years ago and continues to this day.

Mississippi NRCS services all 82 counties across the state.

## THIS IS WHAT WE DO

- ⇒ NRCS provides one-on-one, personal advice on the best solutions to meet the unique conservation and business goals of those who grow our nation's food and fiber.
- ⇒ NRCS helps people make investments in their operations and local communities to keep working lands working, boost rural economies, increase the competitiveness of American agriculture, and improve the health of our air, water, soil, and habitat.
- ⇒ NRCS generates, manages, and shares the data, technology and standards that enable partners and policymakers to make decisions informed by objective reliable science.



## FY18 Annual Report

# EDUCATION Partnership

Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi is now providing online agricultural courses through a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This program provides many opportunities for career advancement for agricultural professionals.

This effort allows individuals to acquire a Master's of Science degree in the areas of Agriculture and Agronomy. The program is designed for professionals working in agricultural industries, but professionals in other career fields are able to benefit from the coursework. Online learning provides the flexibility and freedom to attend classes and continue to gain work experience. The online courses may be taken toward the degree attainment, but also for professional development.

Students will be responsible for enrolling in courses along with paying for the costs of tuition and fees.

Three courses will be offered in the 2019 Spring semester:

For questions, contact Delaney Johnson, NRCS State Soil Scientist, at 601.863.3910 or email him at [Delaney.johnson@ms.usda.gov](mailto:Delaney.johnson@ms.usda.gov).

Below is a list of courses available.

PS 537	Soil Conservation and Land Use	3 Hrs
PS 541	Agricultural Plant Pathology	3 Hrs
PS 603	Integrated Pest Management	3 Hrs

Registration is available at [www.alcorn.edu](http://www.alcorn.edu)



*Allen Curry, Soil Scientist, NRCS, provides hands on training to Alcorn State University students on soil classification.*

## A MESSAGE FROM THE STATE CONSERVATIONIST

As we close out the Fiscal Year 2018 (FY-18), I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the NRCS employees for the outstanding job you did with putting conservation on the ground.

This report highlights some of the many accomplishments for FY-18.

NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is the largest conservation program in the US with 80 million acres of productive agricultural and forest land enrolled. Mississippi set a precedent with putting more than **749,100** CSP acres on the ground in FY18.

Our Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is NRCS's flagship financial assistance program for working lands, helping producers make improvements to benefit agriculture and conservation. Mississippi set an all-time record high with **393,640.5 acres** of conservation on the ground.

We would also like to thank our partners who work side by side with NRCS to help us accomplish our conservation mission, which is *"Helping People Help the Land."*

As we look to the future, NRCS has always been customer focused. As I so often say, "Service may be our last name, but it is our main focus." Under the new NRCS Initiative "NRCS of the Future (NoF), our focus will remain customer driven. Through this initiative, five key focus areas have been identified:

1. **PEOPLE:** Supporting our employees' needs and having the people we need in place to fulfill our mission.
2. **PROGRAMS:** Improving our program delivery.
3. **POLICY AND PROCESS:** Simplifying how we do things and making sure our services are science-based, data-driven and tap into the latest tools and technology.
4. **PARTNERS:** Harnessing the power of partnership to meet our mutual goals.
5. **PHILOSOPHY:** Aligning our mission with our vision for the future.

This is your NRCS of the Future and as I communicated in a previous memo, I urge every employee and partner to look for ways to improve Mississippi NRCS for the benefit of the customers we serve, and also for the benefit of our employees and those who assist us through the Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Districts or one of our partners.

Sincerely,



Kurt Readus, State Conservationist



# Mississippi State Office Leadership Team



## Management and Strategy - Michael Carr, ASTC

The Management and Strategy staff submits the following synopsis of accomplishments for Fiscal year 2018:

- 24 Cooperative agreements were completed totaling \$3,847,041.
- Five watershed agreements were completed for a total of \$25,281,000. These were for dam assessments, dam repairs, design, operations and construction.
- The State of Mississippi successfully reached its assigned goals for FY-18 as it relates to 6.9 Conservation Applied to improve Environmental Quality (AC) for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).
- 342,515 Acres of Conservation Applied to Improve Environmental Quality (CTA).
- 365,000 Acres of Conservation Applied to Improve Environmental Quality (EQIP).
- 23 Accessible Review Team (ART) reviews have been completed throughout the state.
- 23 State Civil Rights Reviews, ensuring that our Field Offices had accurate records and current posters posted for public viewing according to our national policy.



Make a Difference! Join the Earth Team! The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is looking for motivated volunteers, ages 14 and up, to help in county field offices.

The Earth Team provides a variety of opportunities: full- or part-time; outdoor or indoor activities; and as an individual or part of a group. There is something for everyone.

Gain valuable work experience while helping protect America's natural resources!

For more information contact your Area Coordinator.

Laura Anderson - State Coordinator	601.863.3922
Vacant	Area 1
Julie Darden-Kent	Area 2 601.437.8121
Ondine Rudolph	Area 3 601.296.1173
Nancy Melancon	Area 4 601.636.7679

*Discover why some of the richest people in the world are not millionaires, they are volunteers!* (Jobail Brcelona)

### FY18 Report

- ◆ 100% Office Participation
- ◆ Total Volunteers: 610
- ◆ Total Hours: 6,884.30

### STATE AWARD WINNERS

- ◆ Individual Award - **Sybil Burns**, Raleigh Field Office
- ◆ Group Award - **Raleigh Women's Club**
- ◆ Employee Award - **Nathan Tadlock**, Raleigh Field Office
- ◆ Office Award - **Smith County SWCD Field Office**



*Brandon High School's FFA Club  
Earth Team Volunteers*



## Programs - Clarence Finley, ASTC

### **ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP)**

EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to farmers and landowners to address their natural resource concerns. Funds are distributed at the county level and towards statewide resource concerns. In 2018, Mississippi had six statewide resource concerns.

Mississippi received approximately \$60.3 million in EQIP funds in 2018. The statewide and county level application sign-up resulted in 10,318 applications with requests of more than \$152 million.

These applications resulted in 3,737 contracts being obligated on 393,640.5 acres.

### **REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (RCP)**

The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and program contracts or easement agreements.

During FY 2018, Mississippi funded two (2) RCP projects . The agency approved the following projects:

- ◆ Mississippi Urban Forest Council - This pollinator habitat project will address multiple issues around pollinator habitat and cover crops. We will guide diverse audiences on how to improve the health of pollinators and impact pollinator health. All best management practices will be demonstrated in model pollinator sites in 12 urban and rural communities as well as 12 specialty crop farmers around and/or in these communities. Through the diversity of site locations (city and farms), we will be able to track the success of certain practices and the impacts of these practices.
- ◆ Skuna River Watershed Project with the Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission (MSWCC) continues to place conservation within the watershed.

### **CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)**

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resource concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance — the higher the performance, the higher the payment. CSP provides two types of payments through five-year contracts: annual payments for installing new conservation activities and maintaining existing practices and supplemental payments for adopting a resource-conserving crop rotation. Producers may be able to renew a contract if they have successfully fulfilled the initial contract and agree to achieve additional conservation objectives. Payments are applied following practice implementation after October 1 of each fiscal year for contract activities installed and maintained in the previous year. Producers must have effective control of the land for the term of the proposed contract. Contracts include all eligible land in the agricultural operation.

In FY 2018, Mississippi received over 957 applications, which resulted in 898 regular and renewed CSP contracts for 749,188.2 enrolled acres of over 20 million dollars in obligations for the state.

### **THE GULF OF MEXICO INITIATIVE (GoMI)**

The Gulf of Mexico Initiative (GoMI) works hand-in-hand with other NRCS landscape-level conservation efforts. Through the GoMI, NRCS uses conservation programs and practices to provide technical and financial support to help producers, government agencies and other groups put conservation on the ground in the Gulf region.

NRCS leverages public-private conservation investments through an extensive network of existing partnerships by coordinating with soil and water conservation districts, state and federal agencies, and nonprofit groups; many NRCS investments are matched two- or three-fold. Partners include federal and state agencies on the Natural Resources Damage Assessment Trustee Council and the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council, as well as the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which play pivotal roles in aiding Gulf recovery as well as broadening opportunities for voluntary private lands conservation.

In FY 2018 Mississippi the state enrolled 50,708 acres totaling over 7 million dollars in the six targeted coastal counties.



## Easements - Jason Keenan, ASTC

Easements in Mississippi, namely wetland easements programs, continue to grow in popularity and interest. Mississippi currently has almost 300 applications for our Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetlands Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE). This would require more than \$130 million to fund all of these offers requests by the landowners. This past year, 16 new offers were enrolled in the ACEP-WRE program, and over 2,500 acres received restoration including the establishment of bottomland hardwoods and shallow water structures. Mississippi looks forward to the next Farm Bill to be passed in the near future, continuing more easement enrollment. Although each landowner's purpose to apply for this voluntary program varies from land retirement to wildlife habitat creation, the need and the desire are there to continue conservation of cropped and degraded wetlands on private property.

Mississippi has partnered with the Trust for Tomorrow, providing NRCS with two new affiliate employees to assist with landowner applications and easement management. We also partnered with various restoration organizations to repair and maintain our older easements across the state, and we look forward to the increased quality in habitat that work provides!

The Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) component of ACEP is growing in Mississippi to conserve grasslands with special significance. Currently under contract are easements on working grasslands to provide endangered species habitat on the coast and native prairie conservation in the northern part of the state. Hoping to finalize these ALE easements in FY2019 with the Mississippi Land Trust, Mississippi NRCS will gain our first easements of this kind and hope to enroll more in the future!

In addition to ACEP programs, some properties are targeted to be enrolled through a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). In the buffer zone of Camp Shelby in southern Mississippi, some properties will be accepted to conserve longleaf pine ecosystems and threatened and endangered species that thrive there.

We look forward to enrolling more easements and making permanent conservation a fixture in Mississippi!

FY18 ACEP applications – 247

Application acres – 48,000+

Funds expended – \$9.5M

Funded Projects – (16) 2,570 acres.

ACEP-WREP obligations for feral swine and waterfowl habitat - \$3M

FY18 ALE agreements – 1 with 3 parcels.

FY18 Total funds expended - \$605,000

FY18 ALE acres enrolled - 162



## Ecological Sciences - Rogerick Thompson, State Resources Conservationist



NRCS created opportunities for the Minton Mitigation Banking Service area boundary to be extended into the state of Mississippi, giving producers and landowners opportunities to purchase wetland credits when needed. This boundary encompasses the Mississippi Alluvial Floodplain which extends from Tunica to Wilkerson County, including Common Resource Area 131A. Wetland mitigation credits are allowed for purchase when wetlands are converted. Credits eliminate the need for landowners to facilitate mitigation.

Ecological Sciences (ECS) in partnership with the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Team launched the Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) - Upper Pascagoula Water Quality Enhancement project (UPWE). The project includes the Chunky-Oktibbeha watersheds in encompassing eligible lands within a 20,000-acre area. The overall intent is to minimize nutrient loading through education, planning, and implementation of conservation practices. The UPWE project is projected to provide \$3 million of financial assistance to landowners in the eligible watersheds of Clarke, Kemper, Lauderdale, Neshoba, and Newton counties.

The ECS staff facilitated utility terrain vehicle (UTV) and all terrain vehicle (ATV) training to 26 NRCS employees to ensure the safety of NRCS employees during operation of off-highway vehicles, while providing services to landowners and producers. Training resulted in a lower risk operator in both work and personal operation of both UTV's and ATV's.

Allotted funds for Cultural Resources Archeological Services within the MS Delta via Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity design services contract. The scope of work will require the completion of cultural resources services including identification, evaluation, mitigation and archaeological monitoring on farms receiving financial assistance on 1000 acres. Services will ensure adverse effects will be eliminated on MS historic and cultural places located on operations where conservation practices are implemented.

ECS staff provided training to 378 NRCS field staff and conservation partners for planning vegetative conservation practices such as pollinator habitat, cover crops, native plant establishment, and others.

The completion of two comprehensive three-year studies to evaluate the adaptation of varieties of eight cool-season and eight warm-season cover crop species at the Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center. These studies were used as a training center for NRCS staff, partner organizations, and farmers to become familiar with innovative new cover crop varieties and uses for addressing resource concerns. Information about best varieties for landowner goals in this area will improve technical knowledge of NRCS staff and quality of technical assistance to NRCS customers.

The ECS staff hosted plant recognition training at the PMC to better equip 30 new conservationists and cooperative extension specialists with a solid understanding of common plants in pasture and wildlife areas.

The ECS staff developed and used the Southeastern Cover Crop Selection Tool to help NRCS staff plan cover crops for customers in the Soil Health EQIP signup. This tool was adopted by program staff to effectively deliver concise planning assistance to program participants.



Bailey Farm radish and rye grass



**WATERSHED REHABILITATION PROGRAM**

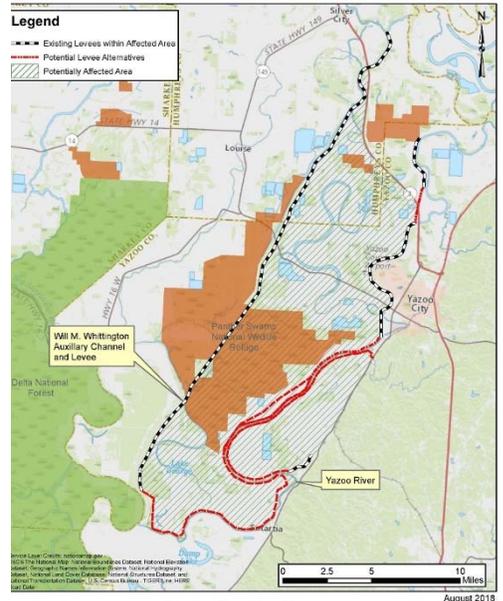
The Watershed Rehabilitation Program provides technical and financial assistance to watershed district sponsors for the purposes of planning, designing and constructing the rehabilitation and upgrades of dams originally constructed with the assistance of USDA Watershed Programs. Funds are distributed in partnership and through the Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation

Commission (MSWCC).

Dam assessments provide local sponsors with data regarding the condition of dams, risks to the public in the event of dam failure, and estimated rehabilitation alternatives and costs. In 2018, Mississippi received funding for 27 dam assessments totaling \$540,000.

In 2018, Supplemental Watershed Work Plans have been developed for preferred alternatives for three dams: Greasy Creek LT-1A-11 in Lafayette County and Big Sand Creek Y-32-9A and Y-32-11 in Carroll County totaling \$580,000 in funds to complete planning with design and construction approved to follow for two of these dams totaling \$4,700,000.

Richland Creek Dam 2A in Rankin County completed the design for rehabilitation in 2018 and is ready to begin construction totaling \$1,000,000.

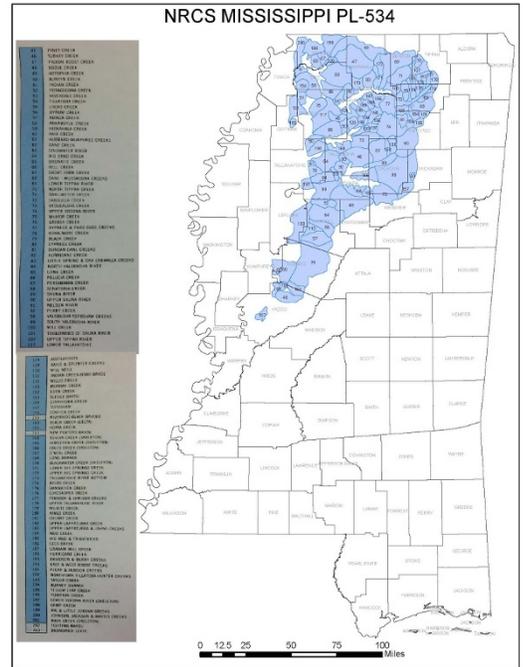


**Project Location Map**  
Watershed Plan and Environmental Assessment  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Carter/Rocky Bayou Watershed Protection Project

**CONSERVATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (CTA)**

In 2016, NRCS was directed to provide \$5,000,000 of CTA funds to address specific activities related to original PL-534 funded work. The objective was to provide conservation technical assistance for watershed protection via stabilizing of stream channels, tributaries, and banks to reduce erosion and sediment transport. Several of these sites completed construction in 2018.

- A peak stone dike project was constructed on Piney Creek in Yazoo County to reestablish a streambank in an oxbow and prevent further sloughing of the streambank and loss of cropland. The estimated construction cost was \$432,000.

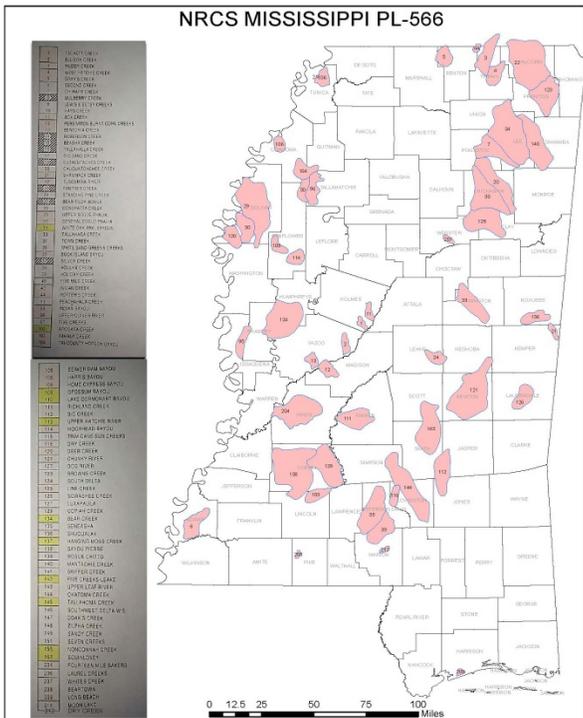


- Several streambank sites were armored with rock riprap along Sherman Creek in critical areas where erosion threatened cropland levees on both sides of the stream. The estimated construction cost was \$442,500.

- Three streambank sites were armored with rock riprap, and one other site was installed with a drop pipe along Hubbard Murphree Creek in critical areas where erosion was causing loss of cropland. Estimated construction cost was \$136,000.

- In the South Delta watershed, Ditch E was constructed between Silver Creek and another MS Delta stream to alleviate flooding of up-stream cropland. The estimated construction cost was \$487,500.

- In the North Tillatoba-Hunter Creek watershed, a broken riser on Y-17C-14 was repaired to restore flood and sediment control for the drainage area. The estimated construction cost was \$64,700.





## Soils– Delaney Johnson, State Soil Scientist

Mississippi NRCS Soils Staff completed the **Annual Refresh for the Soils database** consisting of all 82 counties. This database serves to populate all datasets in the agency field and

state offices for conservation assessment, eligibility, planning, and installation of conservation practices.

Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) **grazing land data collection**- completed 20 segments for 2018

Contracted to fly 5,960 square miles of the state in FY2018 year to acquire Quality level 2 (QL2) **LiDAR data** with an estimated cost of \$1,200,000 (See map coverage)

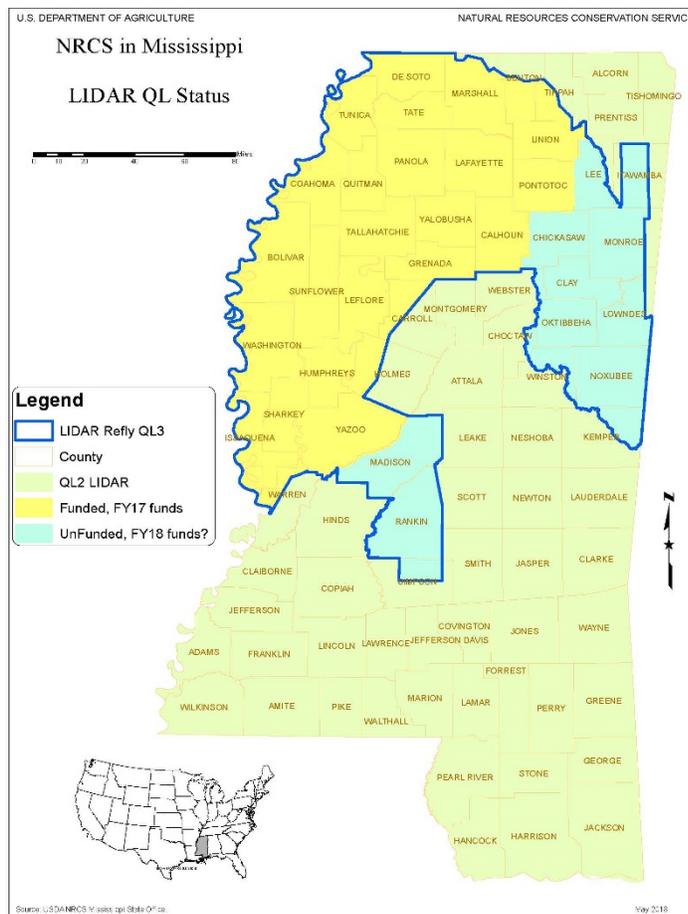
Conducted 18 instances of demonstrations using the **Rainfall Simulator** of which more than 3,000 youth and adults were trained on the importance of protecting our soil and water resources and the effects by water erosion

Completed NB 290-18-1 INV – National Resources Inventory (NRI) – NRCS Supplemental Survey for the Second National Assessment of the **Conservation Effects Assessment Project** (NRI-CEAP-2)

Provided Technical Soil Services Support by servicing 460 site investigation requests in support of conservation practices for Farm Bill Program activities

- Trained field office staff on the uses and application of LiDAR data
- Provided training to all state Field Offices in the use and transition to transition to new technologies and tools

Currently working on the Ecological Site Description and data collection for modeling the entire state in five years under a Cooperative Agreement with the Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission (MSWCC).



## Bienvenido a Mississippi

Mississippi's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) was one of three states chosen to host students from Puerto Rico. These students worked in Mississippi for six weeks with NRCS.

The students worked through an agreement between NRCS and Hispanic Talent Development and Recruitment (Nolo Consulting, LLC). This agreement established working and long-lasting opportunities for the Hispanic communities and recruitment priorities to attract talented individuals from Hispanic-serving institutions and other secondary education programs. The agreement will also support efforts and activities that build a robust and reliable pool of talented bilingual professionals that could help satisfy the agency's strategic goals to reach a growing number of U.S. Hispanic/Latino farmers.



Pictured (L-R front) - J'Nay Domineck, René Bradley Rivera-Cruz, Sylvia S. Noriega-Luciano, Josecarlo Rivera-Villalobos, Victor M. Laguer, Mario A. Velázquez, Kevin Kennedy, Clarence Finley, and (back) Nolo Martinez.



### Conservation Client Gateway

Conservation Client Gateway is a secure web portal that lets you work with NRCS online. Landowners and land managers, whether operating as individuals or authorized representatives of business entities, can track their payments, report completed practices, request conservation assistance, and electronically sign documents. Conservation Client Gateway provides users the flexibility to determine when they want to engage with NRCS online and when they prefer in-person conservation planning assistance.

Through Conservation Client Gateway, you will be able to:

- ⇒ Request a conservation plan
- ⇒ Request conservation assistance for your property
- ⇒ Apply for financial assistance
- ⇒ Review and digitally sign your conservation plan and other key documents
- ⇒ Report completed conservation practices and contract items
- ⇒ Request and track payments
- ⇒ Request updates (e.g. address, e-mail, phone number) to your customer profile information.

Conservation Client Gateway is not a substitute for the time you spend with your local conservation planner. Conservation Client Gateway gives you more time to focus on your resource concerns and opportunities and conservation practices.

what's new?  
@ USDA

**USDA** Farmers.gov  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



In February 2018, the U.S. Department of Agriculture unveiled [farmers.gov](http://farmers.gov) - a dynamic, online customer-driven website that, as it grows, will deliver information, tools and first-hand advice built around the needs of America's farmers, ranchers, private foresters, and other producers.

**The Vision:** Farmers.gov provides farmers, ranchers, and agricultural producers with online self-service applications, educational materials, engagement opportunities, and business tools to increase efficiency and productivity while preserving and fostering long-held traditional relations between local USDA offices and producers.

**The Playbook:** The farmers.gov playbook aligns with the farmers.gov vision with the site features (available and upcoming) and provides transparency about our progress on those features.

As customers and employees engage with farmers.gov and provide feedback, the site will continually be enhanced and features added to improve both the online and local in-person experience.





Christy Robinson, Area Conservationist (Area 1)  
 Alcorn, Benton, Calhoun, Carroll, Chickasaw, Clay, Desoto, Grenada, Itawamba, Lafayette, Lee,  
 Marshall, Monroe, Montgomery, Panola, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tallahatchie, Tate, Tippah, Tishomingo  
 Union, Webster, Yalobusha

*"I am grateful for the endurance each employee has shown in FY18 by working additional hours, working in other districts to make sure the work was completed, or assignments above and beyond their normal territory."*

*~ Christy Robinson*

## The Sand Spur Farm

Story by Laura T. Anderson, Public Affairs Specialist



The Sand Spur Farm located in Pontotoc Mississippi is one of the largest producers of Katahdin sheep in north Mississippi. Rodney and Natalie Akers have operated the farm for 28 years. The farm also consists of 100 head of Longhorn and Watusi cattle with the sheep on a rotation to multiple pastures.

"I grew up farming and have raised sheep for 35 years," Akers said. "I enjoy livestock." Rodney runs approximately 250 ewes along with cattle and horses. Sheep, who are natural browsers, love to eat the weeds first. Another valuable trait is the sheep provide natural fertilizer back to the soil and distribute as they graze across the pastures.

With dogs and coyotes being the greatest threat to his herd, Akers uses Great Pyrenees dogs to guard his sheep. He also uses Border Collies to herd the sheep to the barn and working pens for vaccinations, feeding, changing pastures and closer inspection.

Rodney, a retired county Executive Director with the USDA Farm Service Agency, is no stranger to USDA programs and assistance that the agency offers. Even though he never participated in any USDA programs while employed, he is now receiving technical and financial assistance through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).



"Mr. Akers is a very conservation minded person," said Kevin Corder, Supervisory District Conservationist, NRCS. "He does an excellent job taking care of his farm and livestock. We have held two Conservation Field Days on his farm in recent years."

Ackers has received assistance through the EQIP program for critical area stabilization, grade stabilization structure, livestock pipeline, heavy use area, fence, watering facility, and mulch. He has also used the Pontotoc County Soil and Water District's No-Till Drill to plant clover and ryegrass.



Critical Area Stabilization



Grade Stabilization



Watering Facility



Fencing



David Brunson, Area Conservationist (Area 2)  
Attala, Choctaw, Claiborne, Clarke, Copiah, Hinds, Jasper, Kemper, Lauderdale, Leake, Lowndes, Madison, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Smith, Winston

"Area 2 employees have done an outstanding job this year in obligating contracts—over \$12.2 million in 852 contracts on 59,839.8 acres during FY18 in EQIP alone. This is a 65 percent increase over the \$7.4 million obligated in FY17—an astonishing record amount for us!" -- David Brunson

## James Gregory's Old-Style Family Farming

*Story and photos by Judi Craddock, Farm Bill Specialist (ACES)*



Rankin County farmer James Gregory believes in having the whole family involved in producing high quality specialty crops on the family farm. Coming from a huge family of farmers (five sisters

and five brothers), everyone had a hoe in their hand early every morning before school even started. His father was a great example of the traditional farmer, and he firmly believed that the whole family should be involved as helpers starting at a young age.

Gregory has surely followed in his father's footsteps. Before dawn, he and his wife Latecia; mother-in-law Yolanda Thompson; sister-in-law Lashanda Jones; and children Rashard and Joseph, all assist in the field planting and picking which is all done by hand. They grow a large variety of vegetables and fruits—yellow squash, tomatoes, zucchini squash, cucumbers, bell peppers, hot peppers, okra, purple hull peas, cabbage, cantaloupes, and watermelon in the summer; turnip and collard greens in the fall. Something is growing all year round on this family farm.

Mr. Gregory is a beekeeper too (great for pollinating all the vegetables) and sells honey!

Mr. Gregory thoroughly loves what he does and has been farming since he was six-years-old. Right out of high school he served two and a half tours of duty in Vietnam; and then he returned to farm again on his family farm near Florence, Mississippi.

"The lessons I learned in military service as well as from my parents have helped me strive to be the best farmer possible," stated Mr. Gregory. "My mother always said that no matter what I chose to be in this life, strive to be the best I can be. Choose something you like to do, and do your best! And I love farming!"

Mr. Gregory's farm consists of eight acres in specialty crops and another eight acres that remain in idle woodlands for now. Originally his father had bought the land for his grandparents who were sharecroppers.

After some research and discussions with other farmers, he contacted the Rankin County USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Brandon.

Supervisory District Conservationist Malcolm Lowe, and Soil Conservation Technician Julie Bradford stepped in to help Mr. Gregory with signing up for several conservation practices that would help him with his farm under the "Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

The following conservation practices were carried out on the farm beginning in 2017:

- 1 acre of cover crops
- 500 feet of irrigation pipe (from well)
- 1 acre of Micro-Irrigation Tape (to plants)
- 1 acre of synthetic mulch
- Well
- Pumping Plant

Mr. Gregory believes that knowledge is vital for success in growing his specialty crops. He keeps up with nutrient research and knows just what his soil needs for each planting season. He uses his own tried and true formula of special nutrients that always brings about great results!





Dennis Jones Area Conservationist (Area 3)  
 Adams, Amite, Covington, Forrest, Franklin, George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson,  
 Jefferson Davis, Jones, Lamar, Lawrence, Lincoln, Marion, Pearl River, Perry, Pike, Stone, Walthall,  
 Wayne, Wilkinson

"The South Area works to provide quality service to our customers from the Mississippi Gulf Coast to the Bluff Hills of Natchez and all points in between. 2018 was a great year for Conservation in MS and we are looking forward to continuing to progress in 2019." ~Dennis Jones

## From the Battle Field to the Farm

Story by Laura Anderson, Public Affairs Specialist, Photos by Elliot Anderson Earth Team Volunteer



Having served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 22 years, Curtis Lofton knows about hard work, perseverance, and overcoming challenges. However, after trading his combat boots for cowboy boots, Lofton faced one of

the biggest challenges of his life.

Upon leaving the military, Lofton decided to start a cattle operation on the very land where he grew up. For years, he helped his father raise cattle and assisted his grandfather, a row crop farmer.

"As a child, there was never a time that I did not have a cow," Lofton said. "I loved to take care of cattle, and I can even remember bottle feeding calves until they were weaned."

With land he inherited from his grandfather in addition to the land he purchased from an uncle, Lofton was well on his way to establishing his farm. With his years of experience, Lofton thought it would be a breeze to operate a cattle farm.

However, the former Marine was not prepared for the many challenges he faced in keeping his 160 head of cattle and his land healthy. As a Marine, Lofton often relied on his knowledge, intuition, and stamina to solve problems, but in this case, he decided to seek assistance.

Lofton heard about the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and some of the programs NRCS has for beginning and veteran farmers. He visited his local USDA Service Center in Brookhaven, Miss. and discussed the challenges he was facing on his farm.

"I had never heard of NRCS until 10 years ago," Lofton said. "Visiting with the staff at the Brookhaven office and sitting down with them to develop a conservation plan was the best thing I could have ever done."

"Mr. Lofton had several conservation concerns that needed addressing on his property," said Benjamin Allen, NRCS, Soil Conservationist. "He had a ditch running in the middle of his pasture. This ditch made it impossible to

cross from one side of the property to the other side. We came in and put a stream crossing, which allowed him to have easy accessibility for his equipment and cattle."

Through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Lofton currently has utilized the following conservation practices which have helped him achieve success on his 308-acre farm:

- Herbaceous Weed Control
- Cross Fencing
- Pasture Planting Pipeline
- Prescribed Grazing
- Stream Crossing
- Heavy Use Area
- Watering Facility

"Lofton has become a model producer," Allen said. "Every practice for which he was approved was completed on time, and the practices have benefited his farm tremendously."

Lofton said he is proud that NRCS is helping him succeed in farming.

"I love farming and raising my own meat," he said. "If I could leave my family and friends with one piece of advice, it would be to work hard and take care of the land. If you take care of the land, it will take care of you."



Prescribed Grazing



Stream Crossing



Cross Fencing



Watering Well



Kevin Kennedy Area Conservationist (Area 4)  
Bolivar, Coahoma, Holmes, Humphreys, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tunica, Warren,  
Washington, Yazoo

"During the 2014 Farm Bill, Area 4 applied over 31,000 acres of cover crops thanks to the EQIP and CSP programs. These cover crops have increased organic matter, increased nutrient storage and cycling, reduced soil erosion while increasing production and profitability. Soil health will be the key to the future of our soils in the Delta." ~ Kevin Kennedy

## Cover Crops in the MS Delta

Story by Ashley Kellum, Area 4 Soil Conservationist



As we approach the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dust bowl, I can't help but wonder what would Hugh Hammond Bennett, the Father of Soil Conservation, have to say about the strides taken toward advances in Soil Conservation and Improving Soil Health. In the MS Delta, row crop producers are finally beginning to understand and reap the benefits of using cover crops. Education has been at the forefront of many agencies to increase awareness and promote the use of cover crops.

In July 2018, the Mississippi State University Extension Service partnered with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and other businesses to hold a Cover Crop Field Day so that producers would have an opportunity to meet with professionals as well as fellow local farmers who are utilizing cover crop techniques and discussing their experiences and challenges of using cover crops. The field day was held at Big River Farms in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In the picture to the left Andy Schmidt, owner of Big River Farms can be seen discussing his operation with Alayna Jacobs, USDA Plant Material Center Manager.

Throughout the field day, there were many presentations on the agenda. The participants were able to get their hands dirty alongside USDA NRCS Soil Scientist Rachel Stout-Evans by digging down and viewing the physical benefits to the soil and the cash crops of using a heavy cover. As seen in the picture to the right, this picture compares a soybean plant that was grown in a field that had utilized a cover crop to one that was grown in a field where a cover crop was not used. The increased root mass allows for more nutrient cycling and water uptake.

Additionally, the field day participants were presented with research from Dr. Beth Baker, MSU-ES, that discussed the nutrient and sediment losses from fields after only one year of cover crop use. Local seed companies discussed things to consider when selecting cover crop species and varieties. Depending on your management goals, many different types of cover crops can be grown. For example, if you intended to address and improve soil compaction or lack of water infiltration, you would choose a cover crop that is going to have a strong and deep root system to penetrate the compacted soil layers. Local equipment companies also discussed the equipment needed for planting depending on species and variety selection.



In the end, the participants were able to all come together with the presenters for a roundtable discussion. They were able to discuss challenges and problems they have faced in establishing a cover as well as any other issues or successes they wished to share.

Throughout the 2014 Farm Bill, the NRCS Delta Area has applied 31,126.9 acres of PC 340 Cover Crop, through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) on 255 contracts. There have been an additional 12,257.6 acres planned to be applied in the upcoming year through EQIP on 177 additional contracts. Throughout the last two years of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the NRCS Delta Area has applied 9,747.5 acres of cover crop on 106 contracts. There have been an additional 434.1 acres planned to be applied in the upcoming year.

Through events such as field days, we not only educate producers and landowners about issues facing the detriment of our natural resources, but we encourage them to do their part and show them the physical effects of incorporating many different soil conservation techniques. Soil Conservation techniques not only improve soil health but also in the end increase yields and profitability. It's a win, win! Ultimately, it is all about "Helping People Help the Land" and producers want to be able to see the benefits and not just hear about them...

## USDA NRCS STATE OF MISSISSIPPI FISCAL YEAR 2018 SUMMARY DATA

### Working Lands Program Enrollment

Source: ProTracts as of September 30, 2018

Program	Contracts	Acres	FA Obligated
CSP New	770	589,414	\$16,264,829
CSP Renewal	128	159,774	\$3,998,631
EQIP	3,737	393,640	\$60,306,491
RCP-PP-CSP	5	5,651	\$180,018
RCP-PP-EQIP	15	4,453	\$512,982
<b>Total Working Lands</b>	<b>4,655</b>	<b>1,152,933</b>	<b>\$81,262,951</b>

### Easement Program Enrollment

Source: National Easement Staging Tool (NEST) as of September 30, 2018

Program	Agreements	Acres
ACEP-ALE-GSS	3	162
ACEP-WRE	16	2,570
<b>Total Easement</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2,732</b>

### Obligations in Dollars by Select Program

Source: FMMI Status of Funds as of September 30, 2018

*Note: FMMI obligations are estimates for internal use until release of the President's Budget*

Program	FA
ACEP <sup>1/</sup>	\$18,325,331
CRPG	
CSTP	\$61,177,078
EQIP	\$61,249,693
PMCS	
RCP-PP	\$4,249
SOIL	
SWRP	\$620,000
WRPG	\$7,339,765
WSOP	\$24,171,000
<b>Total for Selected</b>	<b>\$172,887,116</b>

### ACEP Detail <sup>1/</sup>

Program Component	FA
ACEP-ALE	\$2,250
ACEP-ALE-GSS	\$605,850
ACEP-RCP-PP	\$333,494
ACEP-WRE	\$17,383,737
<b>Total ACEP</b>	<b>\$18,325,331</b>





Helping People Help the Land

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service  
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Jackson, Mississippi 39269



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A close-up of a grey baseball cap with the NRCS logo and text. The cap is positioned in the lower-left foreground, partially obscured by large green leaves and pink flowers.

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