



Helping People Help the Land

USDA Grant Helps Local Food Bank Improve Lives through their Community Garden...page 11



President's Message

Happy New Year NPHNRCSE Members!

I hope you had a great holiday season with your family. Now it's time for a new year. Your NPHNRCSE leaders are dedicated to working for you and with you — and we have set new goals for this year.

I want to thank Luis Hernandez for his leadership getting the NPHNRCSE Membership Awards

reinstated. His committee selected five outstanding NPHNRCSE members to receive the 2014 NPHNRCSE awards. CONGRATULATIONS to:

- ▶ Carmen Ortiz, NPHNRCSE Outstanding Member
- ▶ Maria Collazo, NPHNRCSE Hispanic Community Award
- ▶ Irma Hernandez, NPHNRCSE Visionary Award
- ▶ Kristie Wiley, NPHNRCSE Leadership Award
- ▶ Noel Soto, NPHNRCSE Natural Resources Award

Your contributions to the NPHNRCSE mission have led to the success of our organization. On behalf of the NPHNRCSE membership, I congratulate you on your award. You earned it!

There are a few new developments with the National Council. As you know, our Vice President, Herman Garcia, retired and resigned from his NPHNRCSE position after an excellent career with NRCS. Our new Vice President is Edwin Martinez, Assistant State Conservationist-Field Operations in Michigan. Edwin kindly accepted my request and will be taking over this role until we elect a new Vice President this summer. Please help me welcome Edwin to the National Council.

New goals for this year:

We are planning to host quarterly webinars/VTCs. Our first webinar/VTC will be on March 11, 2015, from 10:00 am -12:00 pm CST. Please save the date. During this VTC we will deliver awards to our members and provide training on writing resumes and performance appraisals. Chief Weller and other national leaders have been invited.

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President's Message continued...

We are looking into ways to meet as an organization. For this reason, I have been visiting with the National Council, Hispanic leadership, and Agency leadership to see how we can have a NOPHNRCSE meeting and host training sessions as part of our meeting. Bertha Venegas, Rick Tafoya, Rafael Guerrero, and I visited with National Employee Development Center (NEDC) Director Jeff Dziedzic to look at our options on how we can make this happen. Right now, we are looking to host a NEDC training later this year and as part of the training, we could meet as an organization the days before or after the meeting. Stay tuned — we will keep you up to date on developments.

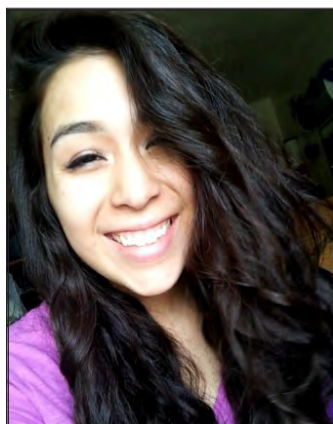
Don't forget to check our Facebook page for updates from members. Talk to you in March!

Astrid Martinez
NOPHNRCSE President

NOPHNRCSE Scholarship Winners

by Lindsay Martínez-Whalen, Soil Conservationist, Indiana

Meet the three winners of the 2014 NOPHNRCSE Scholarship. We only had four students apply this year but they were all great candidates, all deserving of this scholarship. Caring for the environment and the love for being outdoors is a common trait between all three winners.



Solimar A García

Birth Place: Wisconsin

Expected Graduation Date: 2017

Solimar is an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point, College of Natural Resources. Her goal is to obtain a bachelor's degree in Forest Management. Solimar is part of the Latino Student Alliance where she served as Vice President a few years ago. She is also a member of the Society of American Foresters.

Solimar has had some laboratory experience through a youth apprenticeship program, and three years' field research in carrot genetics at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.



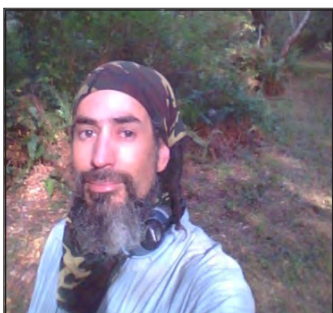
Julio Martínez

Birth Place: Mexico

Expected Graduation Date: 2015

Julio is studying Biology at California State University of Monterey Bay. This past summer he had the opportunity to work on a research project assessing microbial remediation in a woodchip bioreactor for pollutant removal in Monterey County. The ultimate goal of this research was to establish enough data to promote the construction of woodchip bioreactors adjacent to agricultural

fields as a way to protect coastal habitats, as well as reduce the environmental damage to marine waters that receive agricultural runoff.



Jeffrey Xavier Ortiz

Birth Place: California

Expected Graduation Date: 2015

Jeffrey is studying Forest Hydrology, with a minor in Wildland Soils and Wetland Management at Humboldt State University in California. He also plans on becoming a Certified Professional in erosion and sediment control as well as a Certified Professional in storm water quality as part of his

professional goals. Jeffrey has completed an internship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and volunteered with different government agencies including NRCS Earth Team and NRCS in Indio, Calif. ☀️

Awards Committee

Edwin Almodovar
Caribbean Area

Cory Calvert
California

Cheryl Walters
Louisiana

Luis Hernandez
Massachusetts

2014 NOPHNRCSE Awards

by Luis Hernandez, NOPHNRCSE Awards Committee Chair

The Awards Committee is pleased to announce the recipients of 2014 NOPHNRCSE Awards. These members made contributions far beyond the call of duty during calendar year 2014. The NOPHNRCSE award categories are: **Visionary, Leadership, Outstanding Member, Natural Resources, and Hispanic Community**. Members are encouraged to review the 2014 spring edition of the NOPHNRCSE newsletter for a description of each award category.

Each award recipient will be recognized during a NOPHNRCSE national event (to be announced). Each recipient received a “congratulations” telephone call from NOPHNRCSE President, Astrid Martinez. In addition, each recipient was formally notified with a “congratulations letter” from Astrid. A courtesy copy of the

letter was sent to each recipient’s supervisor (members currently employed by NRCS), State Conservationist, Regional Conservationist, and Chief Weller.



Visionary

Irma Hernandez, CSP Specialist, Washington, D.C.

Irma is the recipient of the 2014 NOPHNRCSE Visionary Award. She had a creative vision that led to the development of the *Working Effectively with Hispanic Producers* training course through the National Employee Development Center, a course that is critical in helping NRCS reach our historically underserved Hispanic communities.

She has been instrumental in helping NOPHNRCSE overcome numerous challenges in the way the organization conducts business. Since the NOPHNRCSE annual training conferences are no longer taking place, she has presented several ways to improve communication, outreach, and training efforts. She presented a proposal to establish a NOPHNRCSE Facebook group to maintain membership communication. This proposal was implemented in calendar year 2014 and currently has a large number of members connected through Facebook. In addition, she wrote another proposal for establishing financial resources directed to promoting regional activities. Thanks to this effort, NOPHNRCSE was able to sponsor the New York City Minority Youth Environmental Institute in partnership with NRCS and the National Hispanic Environmental Council. Irma never lost sight of NOPHNRCSE’s mission and objectives. She is truly a visionary and tremendous asset to our organization.



Leadership

Kristina Wiley, Editor, Soil Survey Region 12, Massachusetts

Kristina is the recipient of the 2014 NOPHNRCSE Leadership Award. She is always willing to put NOPHNRCSE before herself. She has developed the newsletter for many years, which is not an easy task (especially with no conference), and she still manages to keep it going and interesting. She inspired NOPHNRCSE members in the East Region to organize a mini-conference. Because of her leadership, NOPHNRCSE held an outreach event in New York City and organized a professional development workshop in New Jersey. NRCS employees from across the country were invited to participate in the professional development workshop via VTC.

Kristina always stays connected with the membership in the East Region — and as a council person, she looked for innovative ways to get more members involved nationwide.

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Outstanding Member

Carmen Ortiz (Retired), California

Carmen is the recipient of the 2014 NOPHNCSE Outstanding Member Award. She developed the career profile database on the NOPHNCSE website so members could share information about their NRCS experience and career goals. She developed a training manual, *Instructions for Entering Member Profiles to the Website*, and organized several training sessions via teleconference. She devoted much of her personal time and technical expertise to NOPHNCSE. She was instrumental in the creation of the NOPHNCSE website.

Carmen has been a dedicated, committed, and active member of NOPHNCSE since the organization's inception. She served on numerous committees and has served on the National Council. Her efforts have substantially contributed towards the improvement of NOPHNCSE, in regards to visibility, information dissemination, and program accessibility.



Natural Resources

Noel Soto, Soil Conservationist, Pennsylvania

Noel is the recipient of the 2014 NOPHNCSE Natural Resources Award. He has been an active, dependable member of NOPHNCSE for many years. He was instrumental in organizing the technical subject matter for our field tour with the NYC Minority Youth Environmental Institute. In addition, he led the conservation station at the NYC Institute on Staten Island, New York this summer.

For the past two years, he coordinated and led an Annual Field Day with W.B. Saul High School of Agriculture Sciences in Philadelphia, Pa. This inner-city public high school specializes in teaching students some of the agriculture-related fields. In addition, they have their own farm so the students are able to apply what they learned from Noel. He has mentored many new Hispanic employees that have come into the agency. Noel is on a constant mission to promote Natural Resources Conservation, not only within the agency, but also to outside organizations.



Hispanic Community

Maria Collazo, Assistant State Conservationist, New Jersey

Maria is the recipient of the 2014 NOPHNCSE Hispanic Community Award. In the past several years she volunteered a lot of time and technical skills mentoring students at the New York City Minority Youth Environmental Institute. Using classroom and outdoor settings, the Institute is designed to help build the environmental leaders and professionals of tomorrow by educating, engaging, and inspiring youth, especially Latinos and other minorities, on a range of environmental and natural resource issues.

She developed a proposal for a field tour on Gericke Farm and presented the proposal to the farm's director. The director at Gericke Farm loved the proposal. Because of her efforts, NOPHNCSE East Region was able to hold an outreach and educational field tour at Gericke Farm on Staten Island, New York and mentor 24 inner-city students from New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. In addition, Maria was instrumental in developing a training topic for the NOPHNCSE Professional Development training session.

The Awards Committee would like to thank those members who took time to write nominations for the NOPHNCSE awards. An announcement for the 2015 NOPHNCSE Awards will go out in the future. Members are encouraged to review NOPHNCSE newsletters, website, and Facebook for noticing which members are making contributions far beyond the call of duty. ☀️

NRCS Enters into Cooperative Partnership Agreements with Seven Hispanic Serving Institutions

by Rick Tafoya, National Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager, Talent Management Division, Washington, D.C.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) entered into a cooperative partnership agreement with seven Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) to host a NRCS Career Development event at the seven respective college campuses. The HSIs included New Mexico State University; California State University, Fresno; Texas A&M, Kingsville; Laredo College; Phoenix College; Miami Dade College; and University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez. These cooperative partnership agreements were initially discussed in July 2014 with the official agreement executed on September 2014. The agreements called for a 100 percent match by the HSIs of federal funds provided.

Implementation of these events was led by Rick Tafoya, National Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager (HEPM), Talent Management Division; Bertha Venegas, Texas State Outreach Coordinator; and Rafael Guerrero, Director, Central National Technology Support Center. The National HEPM coordinated with NRCS, USDA, and campus staff at each HSI to establish the program structure and content, develop a marketing strategy, and identify the NRCS staff to help conduct the educational workshops. Five of the seven HSIs successfully implemented the NRCS Career Development Workshops. In some cases, the HSIs hosted up to three workshops, expanding the information and opportunities to a broad group of students. The other two HSIs were not able to meet the project timeline and have requested an extension to the agreement.

The NRCS Career Development Workshops took place in November 2014 in advance of the initial NRCS Pathways Internship announcement. The workshop format was structured into four components and consisted of the following topics:

- ▶ NRCS Overview and Career Fields
- ▶ Pathways Internship Program
- ▶ Resume Building
- ▶ How to Apply through USAJobs

“The career development workshops proved to be a successful follow up recruitment visit that demonstrates NRCS’s genuine interest in recruiting talented NMSU students.”

— Tony Marin, Career Service Director at New Mexico State University

Each venue was appropriately equipped with audio-visual and computer equipment for the presenter, as well as an appropriate number of internet-ready laptop computers to be utilized by students for the *Resume Building* and *How to Apply through USAJobs* session. The venue required working with Conference Services Department to secure the event’s location and on-site IT support. In some cases, the HSIs expended non-federal funds to coordinate with Campus Dining Services to provide refreshments to students attending the sessions.



Araceli Hernandez, former Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities intern and current Texas A&M University, Kingsville (TAMUK) student, assisting NRCS staff with the Career Development Program at TAMUK.

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The marketing plan identified and targeted specific departments on campus which align with the majors sought by NRCS for both career and internship opportunities. The targeted colleges included the College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. The targeted departments and student organizations included: Plant and Environmental Sciences; Agriculture Economics and Business; Animal and Range Sciences; Entomology, Plant Pathology, Weed Science; Geological Sciences; Engineering Technology; Civil Engineering; American Indian Programs; Black Programs; Chicano Programs; Asian American Programs, Military and Veteran Programs; Sexual and Gender Diversity Center; Student Accessibility Services; and the TRiO Student Support Services Program.

The goal of the career development program event was to provide students with guidance on goal setting, career planning, and building self-confidence while learning about the NRCS mission and how to apply for Pathways internships and permanent positions with NRCS.

The program events accomplished its intended goals and was hugely successful in providing beneficial information and guidance to a targeted group of diversity students. These workshop also highlighted opportunities for alternative recruitment strategies by NRCS, and the importance of building strong relationships with key colleges and universities, particularly now with all the changes brought about by the Pathways Program. Similarly, maintaining these relationships through these type of agreements, on-campus educational workshops, structured information sessions, classroom presentations, and participation at club and organization meetings and events were also identified as a critical initiative for NRCS.



Flavio Garza (Resource Team Leader in Laredo, Texas) and Eileen Vale (District Conservationist in Iowa Park, Texas) present a career development program to students at Texas A&M, Kingsville.

Student attendance at the sessions averaged 18 students per session and collectively at all five HSIs, just under 200 students participated in the NRCS Career Development Workshops.

These events also served as a professional development/cross-training opportunity for Career Services staff who learned about how to better prepare students for NRCS career and internship opportunities through resume development and the USAJobs application process. Additionally, the content presented to students proved to be very helpful for students and will be used as an ongoing resource for Career Services staff.

Tony Marin, Career Service Director at New Mexico State University stated, "This event compliments the recruitment visits by NRCS and USDA in general, at NMSU Career Fairs and Expos. The career development workshops proved to be a successful follow up recruitment visit that demonstrates NRCS's genuine interest in recruiting talented NMSU students." 🌞

USDA Awards NRCS the “Cultural Transformer Award”

by Sharyn C. Alvarez, National Federal Women’s Program Manager, Talent Management Division, Washington, D.C.

The NRCS Lactation Support Team received USDA’s Cultural Transformer Award on December 15, 2014. The goal of Cultural Transformation is to get everyone at USDA — from the Under Secretaries to employees at every grade level, in every location — to work to ensure that USDA is a place where there’s equity of opportunity for all employees and everyone who works here is empowered to reach their full potential. Only then can USDA provide its customers with exceptional service in an equitable manner.

Successful transformation includes:

- A commitment by USDA employees to improve USDA’s past and future record on Civil Rights, including expanded outreach efforts to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers;
- Systems of accountability that encourage all employees to achieve high standards of performance and customer service;
- A renewed commitment to create diversity in the workforce and succession planning;
- Striving to make USDA a premier organization and model employer. We will be open, responsive, collaborative, transparent, and highly-effective in implementing our many missions; and
- Employees being respectful of the diversity of our workforce and constituencies, and the workforce

will be engaged and motivated, empowered to succeed, and trained to meet future challenges.

The NRCS Lactation Support Team strives to provide excellent customer service to NRCS employees through its monthly support group meetings; establishing a policy that works for field employees, supervisors, and managers; and developing a user-friendly handbook that is a practical source of useful information. The team, acting in accordance with the law, has been responsive to the need for women to continue to succeed in their careers, as we do all we can to assist them in meeting the challenges of managing a career and a successful personal life.

In 2013, a group of experienced nursing mothers, who are also NRCS employees, worked with me to create a policy that would make sense to

field employees. The group developed a handbook to use as a reference and established a nursing mothers’ support group that meets monthly (first Tuesday and Thursday) and is open to all employees, including Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and District employees that are co-located with NRCS field employees.

As the National Federal Women Program Manager, I led the team but could not have completed the goals without the help of the field employees. When the Secretary announced the first Cultural Transformer award, with the recommendation from Gayle Barry, Deputy Chief for Management, I submitted a nomination in the hopes that they would receive the recognition they deserve. ☀



The NRCS Lactation Support Team received recognition from Secretary Vilsack when they were awarded the “Cultural Transformer Award” on December 15, 2014. NOPHNRCSE members Sharyn Alvarez and Heydsha R. Cordero are members of the award-winning team.

Pictured L to R: Dr. Gregory Parham (USDA Assistant Secretary for Administration), Sharyn Alvarez, Heydsha Cordero, Carla Holt, Chief Weller, and Malcom Shorter (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration).

News from Around the Regions

CARIBBEAN AREA

Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands

Sharing Soils Information with the Community on World Soil Day

by Manuel Matos, Soil Scientist, Caribbean Area

USDA-NRCS Agronomist and Soil Scientist, Manuel Matos Rodríguez, spoke to the Ponce Rotary Club on December 5 about Soil Surveys in Puerto Rico. His presentation, skillfully conducted in both Spanish and English, revolved around the services offered by NRCS in the Caribbean Area, and general information on resource conservation. But since it was World Soil Day, the majority of his presentation focused on soil surveys. Matos explained what information soil

surveys contain, how they are developed, and the variety of ways that residents can use the data found in soil surveys to help conserve soils, grow crops and other plants, and aid in engineering and construction. A soil survey is an inventory of the types of soils found in a given area. The soils are classified based on their physical and chemical characteristics and properties. There are 12 different Soil Orders found worldwide, of which 10 orders are found in Puerto Rico. The first soil survey in Puerto Rico was conducted in 1902, and the surveys have been continuously updated since to keep the information current. Caribbean Area soils information and surveys can be accessed online at www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov. ☀

Conservation Innovation with Cover Crops in the Caribbean Area

by Edwin Más, Conservation Innovation Grants Coordinator, Caribbean Area

Last month, Gurabo plantain farmer, Duamed Colón, purchased a new planter and seed harvesting equipment through two Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) provided by NRCS. The planter is specifically designed to seed cover crops on a plantain plantation, while the seed harvester breaks apart the cover crop seedpods and segregates the seeds. Since the equipment was purchased through the CIG program, it will be used as part of a research project that will eventually become a source of seeds for farmers applying conservation cover crops in the Caribbean Area. Local farmers are beginning to use cover crops, but not many local suppliers have the needed seed available.

Mr. Colón is working with Canavalia, Mucuna, Sorghum, and Crotalaria cover crops. In October, he provided an overview of the project to a group of NRCS student trainees from Memphis, Tennessee, who were touring his and other farms in Puerto Rico. For more information, contact CIG Coordinator Edwin Más at 787-831-3416 x106, or Caguas District Conservationist José Santiago at 787-743-2743 x111. ☀



New equipment purchased through the Conservation Innovation Grant.



EAST REGION

Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Virginia



A view of the portable X-ray fluorescence technology mounted in a workstation.

Quality Soil and Healthy Food — Soil Screening at the 2015 Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) Conference

by Edwin Muñiz, Assistant Soil Scientist, New Jersey

On January 24, 2015, NRCS-NJ was a participant at the NOFA New Jersey 25th Anniversary Winter Conference at Brookdale Community College. NRCS' participation included presentations at conference sessions, an exhibit table with program literature, customer service answering specific questions on program delivery and financial assistance, as well as something new — providing on-site soil screening to the participants of the conference.

The New Jersey soils staff, with the assistance of state office and field office staff, conducted a soil screening utilizing X-ray fluorescence technology. To participate in the soil screening the customers were required to provide a small soil sample (air-dried and free of coarse fragments) in a small thin plastic zip bag. In return, the participants were provided (in about 5 or 10 minutes time) with a printout of the screening results that included total concentrations of trace metals and macro elements with recommendations for use and management.

In the course of the conference, we analyzed about 20 samples from community gardens, farms, and backyard gardens from different locations across the state. The activity was well received, generating several invitations to other activities and conferences.

This kind of activity emphasizes our commitment to provide unique quality service to our local communities and reach our goal of **Helping People Help the Land**.

Please address any questions or inquiries related to this service or any other service provided by the NJ soils staff to:

Edwin Muñiz
Assistant State Soil Scientist
edwin.muniz@nj.usda.gov

Richard K. Shaw
State Soil Scientist
richard.shaw@nj.usda.gov ☀️



Edwin Muñiz works the NRCS booth promoting Technical Soil Services at the Northeast Organic Farming Association Conference.

MIDWEST REGION

Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin



The Midwest Region Welcomes a New Member — Diana Avellanet

by Rocemi Morales, Resource Conservationist, Ohio

Diana Avellanet was born and raised in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. She was recruited as a summer trainee in 2011 with the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP) in Huron, Ohio. After earning a degree in Agronomy and Soils with a minor in Biology from the University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez Campus, Diana was offered a full-time position as a Soil Conservationist in Huron, Ohio in 2012.

Diana enjoys assisting customers and doing whatever she can to further the NRCS mission in Ohio. In addition, Diana serves as the Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager for Ohio — a position she has held since July 2014. ☀️

NORTHERN PLAINS REGION

Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming

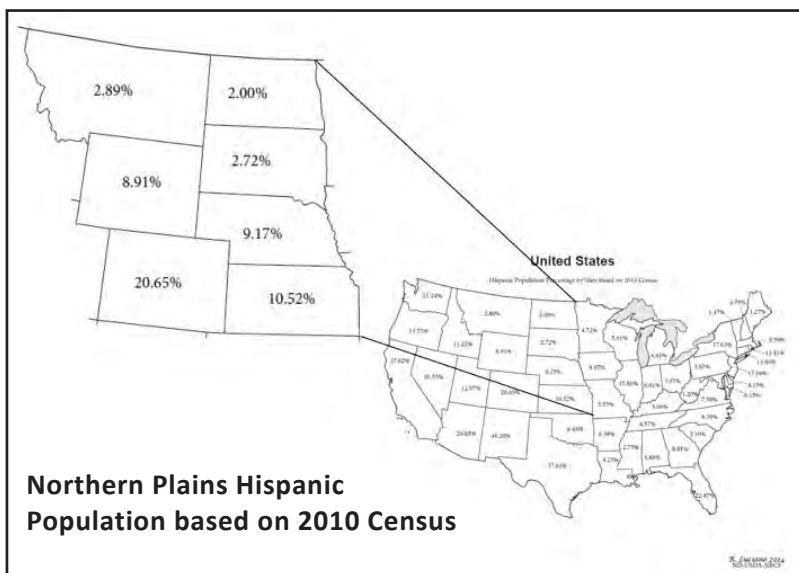
Hispanics in the Great Plains — Sacrifice and Perseverance

by Roberto Luciano, District Conservationist, North Dakota

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Hispanics maintained a significant presence in the Southern Plains. In a broad belt of counties reaching along the western Great Plains from the Mexican border to southern Colorado, the 2000 designated census category encompassing Hispanics and Latin Americans comprised more than 25 percent of the total population. In Texas, Hispanics comprised one-third of the total state population. In Colorado, Hispanics made up 13 percent of the total population. The only other Plains state to have a sizable Hispanic population is Wyoming. Along the sugar beet belt of southern Wyoming, Hispanics comprise between 5 and 25 percent of the population in

each county. These large populations have had an extensive impact on the social, economic, and political makeup of Plains communities.

Numbers and percentages of Hispanics decrease northward up the Plains and eastward away from the linear concentration running from the Rio Grande to Colorado. Northern Plains experiences a cool-summer humid continental climate, with four distinct seasons and moderate annual precipitation. Summers range from warm to moderately hot, with frequent thunderstorm activity. Winters are typically bitterly cold and snowy, with high winds and below-freezing temperatures for weeks at a time. For that reason and others, here in the Northern Plains states, there are relatively few Hispanics, but the numbers keep increasing. ☀️



SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas

Helping People Help the Land

USDA Grant Helps Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley Improve Lives through their Community Garden

by Melissa Blair, Public Affairs Specialist, Texas

The Chinese proverb says, “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life.” Although the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley isn’t giving fishing lessons, what they are teaching will help feed and improve the lives of Valley residents for a long time to come.

Through the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Food Bank was able to acquire a \$2,500 grant that has helped them expand their Valley Community Garden. The funds were used to purchase tools and the supplies needed to add a 50 x 35 foot garden plot to the existing garden. Now, more individuals and families can have their own area to tend while participating in the community garden program.

“The Food Bank RGV’s Community Garden is all about collaborating with public and private partners,” says Terri Drefke, chief executive officer of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley. “The collaborating is key in accessing the resources and knowledge necessary to move low income families into a sustainable lifestyle — a healthy lifestyle filled with fresh fruits and vegetables and the possibility of sharing or selling their excess to others in the community.”

“We have found families excited to learn that food is actually grown in the soil, not just purchased at the grocery store. We are thankful for the \$2,500 grant to help us expand our garden and add more families to the program.”

“We want to create a self-sustainable circle by educating the families in classes, as well as hands-on in the garden on how they can grow their own food, and how they can eat healthier by teaching them how to prepare the produce they grow,” says Christopher Bueno, manager of the Community Garden and the Pharrmer’s Market. “Plans are for the families to ultimately be able to grow surplus here or at their own home which then can be sold at the Pharrmer’s Market.”

The Pharrmer’s Market is located at the Food Bank, 724 N Cage Blvd in Pharr and is held every Thursday 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Working in the garden shows the volunteers of all ages how a variety of plants are grown such as kale, Chinese cabbage, and collards, as well as providing an opportunity to share the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. Gardening also provides the volunteers physical activity which can help improve their health.

The results of a 2011 Gallup and Heathway’s study of 190 metropolitan statistical areas in the United States revealed that nationwide, 26.1% of American adults were obese in 2011. The population obesity rate for the McAllen, Edinburg, and Mission, Texas area was 38.8 percent, making it the heaviest in the reported areas.



Felicita Lugo from San Juan, who participates in the Community Garden program, checks radishes to see if they are ready to harvest.

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Jessica Benavides-Paredes, NRCS soil conservationist, visits with Chris Bueno, manager of the Food Bank's Community Garden and the Pharrmer's Market, among the rows of vegetables in the community garden.



Myriam Gonzalez and Naissa Lopez, who work with the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley, sell fresh veggies at the Pharrmer's Market.



Chris Bueno, manager of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley's Community Garden and the Pharrmer's Market shows Jessica Benavides-Paredes, NRCS soil conservationist, the layout for the community garden.

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Bertha Venegas, State Outreach Coordinator for NRCS, who assisted the Food Bank with the grant opportunity says, "By engaging these families in learning how to grow their own food and showing them where their food comes from, plus showing them how to take care of the land, we are accomplishing USDA's vision."

Venegas works with communities and organizations through the USDA's StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative, of which Texas is one of 20 states within the initiative. This community garden exemplifies the initiative's mission of providing assistance to communities in persistent poverty areas for improving their quality of life and creating conservation opportunities in rural communities and tribes across the nation.

Bueno is also checking into installing a seasonal high tunnel or "hoop house" as part of the community garden. He read about how "The Garden" at the High Plains Food Bank in Amarillo received technical and financial assistance through NRCS to install one.

Bueno is receiving requests from families who are "food-secure," but want to teach their children how to garden. He says many of these families come from farming or ranching background in the Valley, and they want their children to know how these relatives raise their own food, and not buy it from the grocery store.

"I have found that working in the garden at the Food Bank has made me become aware of what I eat," says community gardener, Nancy Trevino, of Pharr. "I have learned a lot of new things that I took for granted about vegetables. It's fun and very interesting."

Bueno and the Food Bank staff are also working with local churches, apartment complexes and public housing complexes and other partners to develop on-site community gardens so families who cannot come to the food bank to participate in the program, can still learn about growing their own food and healthy eating.

"Knowledge is power. We hope that the families will continue growing and sharing their knowledge with family and friends and that community gardens will expand all over the Rio Grande Valley in neighborhoods and communities," says Drefke.

For more information on the Food Bank's community garden or to participate in the Community Garden program, contact Chris Bueno at (956) 904-4525.

For information on Strikeforce opportunities, contact Bertha Venegas at (830) 249-3508. ☀️

SOUTHEAST REGION

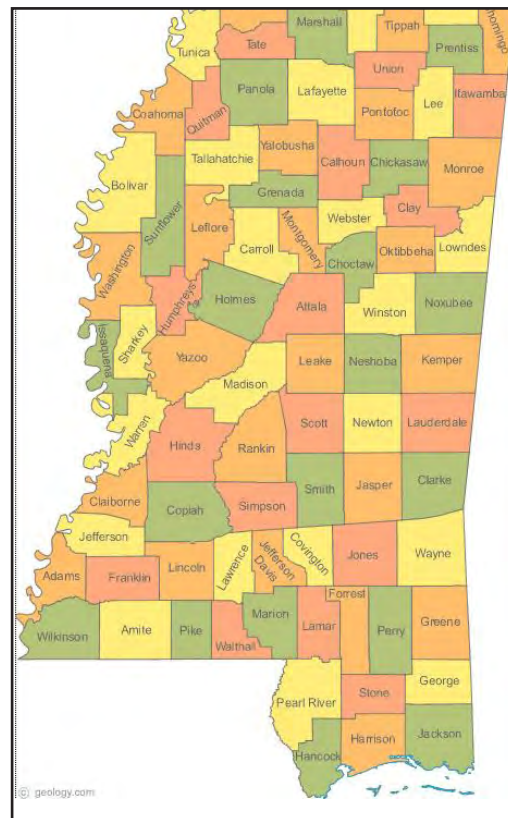
Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia

State Profile: Mississippi

by Luis A. Cruz-Arroyo, Resource Conservationist, Alabama

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and Pew Hispanic Center

- The Mississippi Hispanic population is approximately 86,745 accounting for approximately 2.9% of the population.
- Fifty-seven percent of the Hispanic population in Mississippi is native-born.
- The national origins of Hispanics in Mississippi are mainly of Mexican descent with 76 percent.
- The median annual earning of Hispanics in Mississippi is \$18,000, compared to \$30,000 for non-Hispanic whites.
- Forty-three percent of the Hispanics in Mississippi do not have health insurance.
- Forty-eight percent of the Hispanics in Mississippi 17 years old and younger live in poverty. ☀️



WEST REGION

Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington

Why I Joined NOPHNRCS...

by Mary Sanchez, Soil Conservationist, New Mexico

Why did I join NOPHNRCS so many moons ago? Here are a few reasons:

- I liked the idea of belonging to an organization that has the concerns of Hispanic NRCS employees.
- To stand up and voice concern for discrimination and under-representation of Hispanics in the workforce.
- To meet and greet others from other states.
- To see the different jobs NRCS does in other states.
- To support and assist our own to better ourselves through training and mentorship.
- I like what NOPHNRCS stands for and I like getting involve to get information and to share information.

Share the friendship of NOPHNRCS — join us and share the camaraderie! ☀️

NOPHNRCSE Members Organize Winter Social Events



Puerto Rico Gathering

by Janella Cruz, Soil Scientist, New York

For many years, NRCS employees of Puerto Rican descent who live in the continental United States come home around Christmas to spend time with family and friends. For many members, a growing winter tradition is getting together with fellow NRCS employees to socialize with colleagues and friends and connect with new people. From east to west across the island and whether they come from the Dakotas or the

southern states, employees take time from their vacation to gather annually in celebration of the holidays. When people ask the main reason for the annual event, which is funded by the employees themselves, the answer is always to maintain relationships through social gatherings that create a strong bond both professionally and personally. The main goal is to maintain a sense of solidarity among employees that become friends and to know that no matter the distance, we share many similar experiences whether you are in conservation or the soil survey side of the agency.

Every year there are more people coming together in celebration — and this year was no exception. On January 3, 2015, many NRCS employees and their loved ones enjoyed a banquet feast, an assortment of classic and modern Christmas music, karaoke for the brave, and a lot of laughs. Michelle Catoni (soil conservationist) and Lydia Collazo (civil engineer) from the office in Puerto Rico, Jacqueline Vega (MLRA soil scientist in Kealahou, HI) and other NRCS employees, helped put together this year's event in Hatillo, Puerto Rico. We hope to continue the NRCS Christmas event and have a bigger crowd between friends and colleagues for years to come.



Midwest Region Gathering

by Rocemi Morales, Resource Conservationist, Ohio

On February 14 and 15, 2015, NOPHNRCSE members and their families survived the travel during the frigid snowy weather for a Midwest Region social gathering at the Maui Sands hotel in Sandusky, Ohio.

During the two-day event, we enjoyed pizza and cake while celebrating two birthdays, two career promotions, and the 2014 NOPHNRCSE Visionary Award recipient. Our families had fun in the hotel's indoor waterpark and the next day we got to bowl the morning away.

Through email and Facebook we noticed some members making plans for the long Presidents' Day weekend and we wanted to celebrate the career promotions of two of our members. Before we knew it, our get together of six became an event with 18 members planning to attend.

Hotels were called and prices were set. The meeting room and agenda were put in place. It was a great team effort from our NOPHNRCSE members who are always willing to assist. It was such a fun time, and a blessing to share good experience and career advice. ☀️



Rick Tafoya

National HEPM

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Coordinator, USDA-Hispanic Serving Institution Liaison, National Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager, and Resource Conservation & Development Coordinator.

Rick left the NRCS for the past six years and served as the Southwestern Regional Outreach Coordinator for the Forest Service. His primary responsibilities included providing leadership and outreach assistance on matters that pertain to the Forest Service, Region 3 Civil Rights and Outreach programs.

Rick has an extensive background in conservation management, outreach & recruitment, Civil Rights programs, federal and non-profit grant programs, and building strong and effective partnerships.

Education and Background:

Rick is a native to New Mexico. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Science, majoring in Range Science and Ecology, from New Mexico State University. He is a past recipient of the USDA Secretary's Honor Award for Superior Service and Significant Contribution to Program Delivery. He also received an Honorable Discharge after serving eight years in the Air Force National Guard. ☀️

Rick Tafoya is Named NRCS National Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager (HEPM)

Rick began his 24-year career with the Natural Resources Conservation Service as a student trainee while attending New Mexico State University. Over his career, he has held various positions, including Soil Conservationist, Range Conservationist, District Conservationist, Watershed Project

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Editor's Note

La Voz is the official newsletter for the National Organization of Professional Hispanic NRCS Employees. Your ideas, suggestions, comments, and articles are welcome.

Articles may be sent via email as either an MS Word attachment saved as text only, or pasted directly into your email message.

Photographs should be emailed as a separate jpg attachment. Please include a caption for each photo submitted.

Send items to: kristie.wiley@charter.net

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