



USDA Strike Force helps in several Community Gardens in Puerto Rico.....Page 13



President's Message

Dear NOPHNRCSE Members,

Happy New Year/Feliz Año Nuevo! I hope everyone had a blessed holiday season with family and friends. Our National Council worked really hard to invigorate our membership this past year. We were able to partner with NEDC and provide three NEDC trainings to NRCS employees and NOPHNRCSE members and host our NOPHNRCSE training conference. We

reinstituted Hispanic Farmer of the Year award under Luis Hernandez's leadership. Mr. Miguel Otero from Alabama was recognized at our conference as the 2015 Hispanic Farmer of the Year.

We are currently closing the 2015 election period. Results will be published for the next Spring 2016 Issue. These are the nominations for 2015 elections:

- Vice President - Bianca M. Diaz Deliz
- Treasurer - Edgar Cantu & Brunilda Velez
- South Central-Regional Representative - Flavio Garza
- Southeast-Regional Representative – Write-In Candidate
- West-Regional Representative - Write-In Candidate

Later this summer we will be running 2016 elections. We all need to start looking for nominations for President, Executive VP, Secretary, and Regional Representative for the NP, NE and Caribbean. Please start looking and asking members now.



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FLAVIO GARZA RECOGNIZED BY LAREDO COMMUNITY COLLEGE...PAGE 12



SCHOLARSHIP AND AUCTION NIGHT...PAGE 5

A couple of changes on committee chairs: Milton Cortés will take over awards committee; Misha Vargas is the new communications chair. If you want to serve on any of these two committees please contact Milton at Milton.cortes@nc.usda.gov and Misha at misha.vargas@me.usda.gov.

Last but not least, we are looking for feedback on NEDC training that we can provide to our members and training topics for our NOPHNRCE training conference. Please send your request to your regional representative no later than February 29, 2016.

I would like to thank our National Council, committee chairs and those who directly and indirectly contributed to the success of NOPHNRCE this year.

May the New Year bring you and your family health, wealth and all the happiness you deserve!

Sincerely,

Astrid Martinez
President

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Conference Committee Chairs

Conference Planning Co-Chairs: Michael Margo and Noel Soto

Registration: Luis Cruz-Arroyo

Agenda: Erika Justiniano-Velez

Moderators: Bianca Diaz-Deliz

Awards Luncheon: Luis Hernandez

Scholarship/Auction Night: Lindsay Martinez

Communications: Misha Vargas

Media/Technology: Raul Hinojosa

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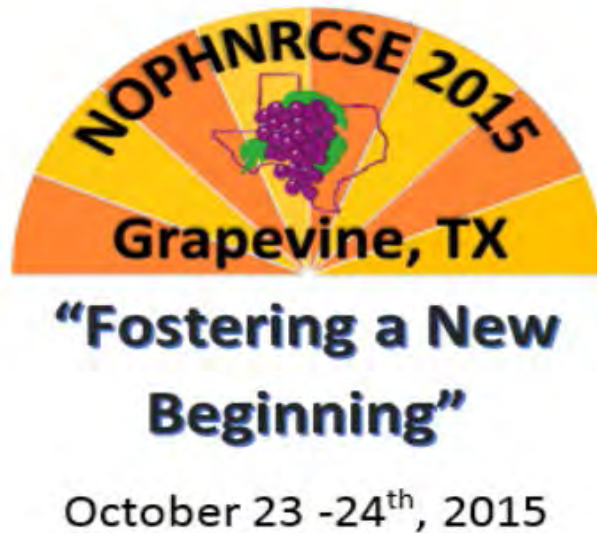
Southeast Region Representative

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NOPHNRCSE 17th Annual Leadership Training Conference Program

La Voz

By: Bianca Diaz-Deliz, Soil Conservationist, NJ
Misha Vargas, Soil Conservationist, ME



NOPHNRCSE holds National Training Conference on October 23-24 in Texas

This past October the National Organization of Professional Hispanic NRCS Employees (NOPHNRCSE) joined with NRCS and NEDC to perform trainings for employee development such as: Managing and Supervising for Excellence; and Extending Outreach to all Customers and Special Emphasis Program Manager's Training (SEPM). After these conferences, NOPHNRCSE and its members performed their 17th Annual Leadership Training Conference Program Oct. 23-24 at the Courtyard and Townplace Suites by Marriott in Grapevine, Texas, in which more than 60 employees attended.

During the opening Ceremony on Oct. 23 we were honored to have the participation of: the Grapevine High School Choir's Julia Sewing who performed the Anthem; the Grapevine Police and Fire Departments who executed the Presentation of Colors; and NRCS employee Mary Sanchez who conducted the invocation. As a special guest during this event we had the opportunity to have with us: the NRCS Associate Chief for Conservation Programs Leonard Jordan; the NEDC Director Jeffrey Dziedzic; Texas State Conservationist Salvador Salinas; and NOPHNRCSE President Astrid Martinez.

- The education for employees was developed by the participation of several important figures within the NRCS Agency such as: Astrid Martinez (President of NOPHNRCSE and State Conservationist of Wyoming); Carlos Suárez (State Conservationist of California); Edwin Almodovar (Director of Caribbean Area); Juan Hernández (State Conservationist of Maine); Greg Zwicke (NRCS Air Quality Engineer & Atmospheric Change Team); Michael Margo (NRCS-CT ES Specialist); Wanda Dansby (NRCS-NEDC Fort Worth); Humberto Hernandez (Retired NRCS); JR Flores (State Conservationist of Missouri); Rafael Guerrero (NRCS Director); Luis Hernandez (CNTSC); Luis Cruz Arroyo (Alabama

Area Resource Conservationist); Rafael Vega (Indiana Area Easement Program Specialist); and Homer Sanchez (Retired NRCS CNTSC).

- Seminars offered by NOPHNRCS were: Understanding & Conquering Performance; Interviewing for Success; Resume Writing; National Air Quality Site Assessment Tool and Ecological Site Descriptions; Planning a Path for Career Advancement; Effective Local Workgroups; Individual Development Plan & Competency Assessment; Climate Change and Conservation Planning.

Awards

The Award Luncheon dedicated to Ray T. Margo went on with the Master of Ceremony Salvador Salinas (Texas State Conservationist). As part of the awards given to the recipients by Astrid Martinez (NOPHNRCS President) and Luis A. Hernandez (NOPHNRCS Awards Committee Chair) there were the: NOPHNRCS Farmer of the Year Conservation Award given to Miguel Angel Otero-AL; Leadership Award- Edwin Martinez-MI; Visionary Award Edwin Almodovar-PR; Outstanding Member- Manuel Matos- PR; Hispanic Community Outreach- Linda Ortiz- MI; and Amigo Award- Milton Cortes- NC.

In Memoriam: Ray T. Margo (June 4, 1934 - Jan. 14, 2005)

Ray devoted his entire professional career as a public servant to the people of the United States. He received a Bachelor of Science in Animal Science from Texas A&M in 1956. His career began with the USDA-Soil Conservation Service (SCS) in 1956 as a Soil Conservationist. Ray is a distinguished veteran, having served in the U.S. Army. During his time with the Army, Ray completed a 16-month tour in Korea.

When Ray returned, he continued to work with SCS all over South Texas before transferring to Albuquerque, N.M., where he ultimately retired in 1993 as the State Conservationist.

Ray was recognized for his work with several achievement awards, including USDA's Superior Service Award. He represented the USDA on several foreign assignments—including assignments in Portugal, Peru, Columbia, Chile and Mexico. While in Mexico, he presented three papers at the first national Soil and Water Conservation congress in Texcoco, Mexico.

He was active with the National Committee of Boy Scouts of America by serving on the Philmont Scout Ranch Committee. In 1993, he helped establish the National Organization of Professional Hispanic Natural Resource Conservation Service Employees (NOPHNRCS), and became the first interim president of the organization.

So with that, we honored Mr. Ray Margo with an annual luncheon to acknowledge Hispanic NRCS employees that represent the ideals and vision Ray believed in; thus making him, and his protégés, leaders in Agriculture.



Miguel Angel Otero was born in Santiago de Cuba. When he was eight years old, Miguel moved to the United States after his family's 1,000-acre farm was confiscated by the Castro regime. Miguel promised himself he would one day own some land he could cultivate, plant, and raise livestock. He managed to keep that promise, and today he and his wife own and operate Otero Farms in Dothan, Ala. Miguel says consistency, patience, and his great relationship with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service have made a difference.

Miguel took a farm that had numerous water quality and erosion problems and has turned this farm into a productive, conservation-oriented operation. Working with NRCS, he has implemented several conservation practices and management systems on his farm.

He has implemented several Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts, developed a Conservation Stewardship Plan, and has become a proponent of agricultural production with emphasis on protection of our natural resources. Miguel appreciates NRCS's assistance. He said: "We at Otero Farms appreciate everything NRCS has done. Anytime we needed them, they have been here for us."

Miguel Otero is an excellent conservationist and actively participates in the county. He has been involved in conservation tours, school visits to his farm, and serves as an advisor on the Houston County Soil and Water Conservation District Board.

Miguel's commitment to conservation, and success in spite of adversity, made him an ideal recipient of the 2015 NOPHNCSE Hispanic Farmer of the Year award.



*Chamonix Mejia and Elizabeth Ortiz
in company of the auctioneer*

Scholarship and Auction Night

The NOPHNCSE Scholarship and Endowment Committee hosted an auction and scholarship night at the NOPHNCSE Training Conference where students Chamonix Mejia and Elizabeth Ortiz helped out showing off the items to be auctioned. *"We are so happy and grateful, I can't believe we raised \$3,750!"* Chamonix Mejia said.

This year (2015) 20 candidates applied for the scholarships; three were selected as the recipients of the \$1,000 NOPHNCSE and Martha Guerra-Arteaga Scholarships. This students were: Elizabeth Ortiz from Salinas, Calif., and Claudia Carrillo from Alice, Texas (NOPHNCSE Scholarship Winners); and Chamonix Mejia from Laredo, Texas (Martha Guerra- Arteaga Scholarship Winner). Both Chamonix and Elizabeth were able to attend the NOPHNCSE training conference where they were recognized for their achievements.

NOPHNCSE wants to thank all the personnel that formed part of this wonderful event and helped to make this successfully achieved. Great job everyone! It would not have been a success without such great team work. Hope to see you all at the next conference. Stay tuned for more information.



Please join the NOPHNRCE Scholarship and Endowment Fund Committee!

I would like to invite you to join the Scholarship and Endowment Fund Committee. We are always looking for new people to join and help us reach out to outstanding students who need help and are pursuing studies in natural resources and related fields. Through generosity of NOPHNRCE and its members, winning students receive \$1,000 scholarship for one year.

Our goal is to familiarize the students with our Agency and have them consider the NRCS as a future employer.

Being part of this committee is also a great opportunity for networking and developing leadership skills.

For more information, please consider attending our next teleconference on Monday, Feb. 22, 2016, at 3 p.m. EST. **If**

you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. We hope you can join us!

Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Martínez

2015 Committee Chair

South Central Region

Federal grant helps IDEA Monterrey Park College Preparatory build school garden to educate students

By Melissa Blair, Zone 3 Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-NRCS

The four raised garden beds filled with assorted plants may seem small on the expanding campus of the IDEA Monterrey Park College Preparatory in San Antonio, but their mission is big and goes well beyond the school's gates. Students will be gaining knowledge and skills that will benefit them the rest of their lives by participating in the school garden, which is being used to educate them about where their food comes from, how to grow and prepare their food, as well as learning about opportunities for future careers.

The USDA Office of the Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights (OASCR) provided a \$3,000 grant to IDEA Monterrey Park College Preparatory to purchase supplies and build the school garden, as part of their educational outreach

across the U.S., to help students learn about agriculture and the USDA. The garden's groundbreaking ceremony included: students and faculty from IDEA Monterrey Park; Winona Scott, associate secretary for civil rights; staff from the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and Texas AgriLife Extension and other partners.



The gardening club for students, which started in October, is coordinated by teacher and Master Gardener Dale Smith, and Principals Martha Short and Curtis Lawrence, with assistance from Justin Tuley, farm development manager at IDEA. Thirty students participated in the first meeting, with more wanting to join as word gets out about the club and what they are doing.

"The Cree Native Americans once said: 'When the last tree is cut down, the last fish eaten, and the last stream poisoned, you will realize you cannot eat money,'" said Lawrence. "I want my scholars to value this one Earth we have that gives us the water and sustenance we need, and be part of a sustainable future."

The goal is to grow plants that can be used in recipes for the school cafeteria as well in earth science classes so students can see plant growth, biology and the soil food web cycle.

"How we educate our students in terms of their food knowledge and experiences is a crucial component of cultivating a healthier society," said Tuley. "Garden education can literally help add years to the lives of those who are touched by it, and the partnership between the USDA and IDEA Monterrey Park will help our students lead healthier and more productive lives."

Tuley said Monterrey Park was the first step for the IDEA farm program to expand outside of the Rio Grande Valley. A garden was installed at IDEA in Austin and plans are to expand to a full scale farm program in Austin by Fall 2016 and San Antonio by 2017, with at least a half to full acre farm in each region.

“This is an unique opportunity for USDA and its partners to work together to enhance these students and teachers lives through the school garden so they know why soil health is important to raising vegetables and other crops that produce the food they eat,” said NRCS State Conservationist, Salvador Salinas. “In today’s world, the average student is several generations removed from the farm or ranch life of our ancestors who produced their own food and fiber. So this school garden will open their eyes to new learning experiences, opportunities and even possibly ignite their interest and find them majoring one day in some type of agricultural-related field in college or even growing their own gardens at home.” IDEA Public Schools are a growing network of tuition-free K-12 public schools serving more than 20,000 students in 36 schools across Texas in San Antonio, Austin and the Rio Grande Valley.

According to IDEA Public Schools, they have 100 percent college acceptance rate and a college graduation rate five times the national average for low-income students, IDEA families, students, and staff are proving that college is possible for all children.

Partners help educate South Texas farmers about Seasonal High Tunnels

By Melissa Blair

It was a modern-day barn raising, but in this case the barn was a Seasonal High Tunnel also known as a “hoop house” which was constructed during a two-day workshop at the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley.

More than 25 local community members and agricultural producers attended the workshop at the food bank to learn about the benefits of using high tunnels to expand their crop production and growing season and how to install a hoop house. They also learned information about the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) technical and financial assistance programs to help them with their agricultural operation.



Through NRCS, the Food Bank acquired a \$2,500 grant in 2014 through the Strikeforce for Rural Growth and Opportunity Initiative that helped expand their Valley Community Garden. The funds were also used to purchase garden tools and supplies to add a 50 x 35 foot garden plot to the existing garden.

This year through Strikeforce, NRCS provided financial assistance through the Texas/Mexico Border Coalition (TMBC), a community-based organization, to the food bank to acquire the seasonal high tunnel for this workshop training. Texas is one of 21 states within this national initiative. The community garden and high tunnel are excellent examples of how the initiative provides assistance to communities in persistent poverty areas in an effort to improve their quality of life and create conservation opportunities in rural communities and tribes across the nation.

“This event is a great example of how a local partner, a community-based organization, a university program, and a federal agency can collaborate to benefit not just one location, but also the producers who got hands-on training,” said Aisha Cruz, project director with TMBC.

NRCS Agronomist Bruce Henderson shared with attendees about soil health, and Program Manager Sonny Vela, shared about NRCS’ pollinator initiative geared toward pollinators and Monarchs in Texas. Hidalgo County District Conservationist Ray Hinojosa, shared about the technical and financial assistance available through NRCS to help agricultural producers with conservation planning, which can include installation of a high tunnel. Hinojosa said once local growers begin to incorporate soil health, irrigation management and cover crops, they will begin to fully recognize the environmental and health benefits of the Seasonal High Tunnel.

The Texas Rural Cooperative Center at the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley (UT-RGV, formerly The University of Texas-Pan American) has been an educational partner with the Food Bank since the garden started last year. Colin Cain, director of the South Texas Rural Producer Assistance Project, shared about their assistance in helping agricultural producers and staff from the Center helped in putting up the hoop house.

Richard Carrera, director of the Texas Rural Cooperative Center at the UT-RGV, said: “Expanded crops and longer and alternate growing seasons made possible by hoop houses can help South Texas producers and cooperatives better address market needs that can ultimately help their farms’ profitability.” Rio Grande Valley farmers, Cruz Salinas, and Juan Raygoza, both spoke at the workshop about installing their own hoop houses and how NRCS helped them. They also shared about crop production using a hoop house, and things to keep in mind when building a hoop house, such as placement, and benefits. They also showed participants step-by-step how to put up the hoop house at the food bank, and answered questions along the way.

Jessica Benavides-Paredes, soil conservationist with NRCS, who assisted with the training said one of the farmers told her that by helping build the seasonal high tunnel, and hearing other people’s experiences, she wasn’t afraid to do it alone anymore. She told Jessica this experience brought it all into perspective for her.

“She really sees herself prospering with yearlong season crops and participating in the NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which helps the farmers with the technical and financial assistance to incorporate a seasonal high tunnel into their conservation planning,” said Benavides-Paredes. “She feels very confident in her beginning small farming future.”

Chris Bueno, manager of the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley’s Community Garden and the Pharrmer’s Market said, “The new addition of the hoop house will allow us to plant strawberries as well as plant tomatoes/bell peppers at an earlier time. “One of the great benefits is having these fruits and vegetables for an extended period of time. Families can now also learn how to make their own strawberry jam and also learn how to market what they grow and produce such as the jam at the Pharrmer’s Market.”

Bueno said he appreciated the local farmers who attended and participated, as well as the crew from IDEA Public Schools Farm Program, Brownsville Wellness Coalition, and Hidalgo County Master Gardeners.

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 Strikeforce opportunities, contact Bertha Venegas at (830) 249-3508. For information on how the NRCS can assist in conservation planning, installing a seasonal high tunnel or natural resource concerns, contact Ray Hinojosa at the Edinburg NRCS office at (956) 383-3002, ext. 3.

Program gives students hands-on training with USDA-NRCS

By Melissa Blair

Corpus Christi, Texas, (Sept. 24, 2015) – Texas A&M University Kingsville (TAMUK) agriculture students “stepped up” to the challenge of working during their summer vacation to gain hands-on training with the U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

USDA-NRCS in Texas has been a partner with TAMUK since 2012 on the “STEP UP to USDA Career Success.” STEP UP is an acronym for **S**cience, **T**echnology and **E**nvironmental **P**rograms for **U**ndergraduate **P**reparation. STEP UP provides Hispanic students working experience with USDA and other agencies prior to graduation.

The STEP UP to USDA Career Success: Science, Technology and Environmental Programs for Undergraduate Preparation to USDA Career Success began in 2011 as a south Texas educational institution collaboration involving five Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and multiple USDA research or service centers and state agencies. This unique program provides experiential learning to students in agricultural- or natural resources- based areas of study. Having access and opportunity to engage in research and career training experiences allow HSI students, mostly first-generation college attendees, to enhance their acquisition of needed skills that will be required to replace a retiring USDA workforce while increasing USDA employee diversity.

This unique model is not typical of most academic programs and is designed to increase student recruitment and retention within the participating institutions through a seamless bridging of regional community colleges and four-year degree universities. Students attending two year community colleges (Del Mar College, South Texas College, and Texas State Technical College) can easily transition into either Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK, lead institution) or University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley (formerly UT-Pan American). The ‘STEP UP to USDA Career Success’ program is increasing the success of Hispanic students in higher education and preparing them for careers in USDA, agricultural research, or the agriculture industry.

“Low enrollment of underrepresented students in agricultural and natural resource sciences, as compared to other disciplines, has resulted in few students prepared to obtain USDA careers,” said Dr. Shad Nelson - STEP UP Project Director at TAMUK. “Furthermore to have a successful USDA career, it is required that individuals have science, technology and environmental skills. Thus, the program STEP UP to USDA Career Success was developed.”

STEP UP is funded through grants from the USDA-National Institute of Food and Agriculture’s Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) Funds and **B**uilding **R**egional **E**nergy and **E**ducational **N**etwork (BGREEN). These funds help the University provide undergraduate students with a stipend while they are interning.



“One of the goals of the USDA-NRCS is to recruit and hire a culturally diverse workforce,” said Salvador Salinas, NRCS state conservationist in Texas. “Natural resources and agriculture are not areas that many minority students pursue as careers, making it difficult to recruit qualified minorities.”

The following partners have worked with USDA-NRCS in Texas over the past three years to place students as Earth Team volunteers as part of their educational working experience: Dr. Shad Nelson - STEP UP Project Director; Professor, Chair, Dept. Agriculture, Agribusiness and Environmental Sciences at TAMUK; Dr. Randy Stanko - Professor, Department of Animal and Wildlife Sciences. STEP UP Co-Director; Dr. Tanner Machado - Assistant Professor, Department of Animal and Wildlife Sciences; Dr. Greta Schuster - Professor, Department of Agriculture, Agribusiness and Environmental Sciences and Mrs. Consuelo Donato - PhD student, STEP UP Project Manager.

“The 'STEP UP to USDA Career Success' program has provided a fundamental change for increasing the competitiveness of our students, many of which are Hispanic, to obtain careers with the USDA,” said Nelson. “It is rare for our students to truly know what NRCS employees do in their careers, and the summer interns have returned with a new vision and can see themselves as future employees of the USDA, and the good they can do helping others during their careers.”

Nelson also said, students return with renewed purpose to graduate, increased self-confidence, and excited to join the workforce in the agricultural and natural resource sciences. Through STEP UP, 237 undergraduates have received training at USDA agencies, or in scientific research, or other career training within agriculture.

The students who volunteered during this summer at NRCS field offices as Earth Team volunteers were Alexandra Bazan in Uvalde, Jose “Joey” Cortez in Rio Grande City, David Coy and Alfonso Sandoval in San Benito, Laura Leigh Steele in Victoria, Iliana Rodriguez in Houston, and Sam Young in Lockhart. Sandoval and Coy were also student transfers from Texas State Technical College to TAMUK through the STEP-UP program.

Two students in the STEP-UP program worked with NRCS through the USDA Pathways program, Hunter Hamilton in Bryan, Texas, and Xavier Alfaro-Lopez in Thibodaux, La.

There were 30 more students in the program who worked with a variety of other agencies and partner institutions including: USDA-Animal Plant and Health Inspection (APHIS), USDA-Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Forestry Service (FS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS), Purdue University and others.

Over the 10-weeks the students working with the NRCS offices learned who NRCS is and how the agency “Helps People Help the Land,” from conducting field assessments to the nine step process of developing a conservation plan, and how to work with landowners to implement the conservation practices recommended in their plan. Students also helped with completing conservation plans with agency software, coordinated special events, as well as learned field techniques and tools used in the conservation planning process.

“It’s an honor to be able to work with the TAMUK students to give them the chance to broaden their knowledge about the opportunities with USDA-NRCS and the careers available through our agency,” said Melissa Blair, State Earth Team Volunteer coordinator for NRCS in Texas. “Even if a student doesn’t pursue a career with NRCS, they have learned skills that will benefit them in a variety of agricultural careers. Plus, they know how NRCS and its staff can provide technical and financial assistance without a fee, to help landowners, and can share that with others they encounter throughout their career.”

Students are required to present a power point or a poster presentation about their STEP UP internship. This year’s presentations was a part of the TAMUK’s “Hispanic Heritage Celebration” on Sept. 22, 2015 at the University. Blair was the keynote speaker at the event sharing about opportunities with USDA-NRCS.

“Iliana was a tremendous asset to me this summer, especially with my office being a one employee office,” said Delwin Cannon, district conservationist with Harris County NRCS office. “She assisted me in the field with a few practice check-outs and helped quite a bit around the office with incoming calls and organizing new conservation folders. Also, she had a unique opportunity at our Team Leader’s office in Liberty, to put her bi-lingual skills to work. She assisted with translation

between a farmer who only spoke only Spanish and the District Conservationist, who was very pleased with how professional she handled herself.”

Since the partnership started, 18 STEP UP students have volunteered 6,400 hours to NRCS which is valued at \$147,648 of savings to the U.S. taxpayers. Their work has not only benefitted USDA-NRCS and landowners, it has helped protect and improve the natural resources on agricultural land as well as the environment, and helped these students gain a new outlook on a career with the USDA-NRCS.

Flavio Garza and Webb SWCD recognized by Laredo Community College

By Melissa Blair, Zone 3 Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-NRCS

Flavio Garza, district conservationist in Laredo with the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), along with the Webb Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) were honored for their work and contribution to the Laredo Community College’s (LCC) STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) Scholars Program.

The annual STEM Articulation Recognition Ceremony awarded scholarships to LCC students enrolled in the STEM Program, and some who have moved onto four year universities. The ceremony also honored individuals and organizations that have, through partnerships with the STEM program, contributed to the success of the students.

Garza has served on the LCC’s STEM Scholars Program Advisory Board for the past three years. He has worked with Dr. Nora Garza, LCC vice president for resource development, to recruit students interested in working with NRCS as Earth Team volunteers so they can gain valuable work experience with the conservation agency.

“I do what I can for students who want to pursue a degree in agriculture,” said Garza. “I believe life has come full circle for me. Very early in my career, I was afforded the opportunity to work for this agency as a student trainee and now I find myself opening the door to students who are seeking the same opportunities.”

The plaque Garza received reads: “In appreciation for your outstanding contribution and dedication to the Laredo Community College’s STEM Scholars Program.”

“I’m humbled by this award,” said Garza. “I don’t do it for recognition but simply to give back to my community. As a former student, I was in their shoes once!”

The Webb SWCD awards two \$1,000 scholarships each year to students enrolled in the STEM program who are pursuing a degree in agriculture. The SWCD Board of Directors personally contribute financially to the district’s scholarship fund. They have awarded \$6,000 in scholarships over the last three years.



FIGURE 1 FLAVIO GRAZA (DC-LAREDO, TX), DR. NORA GARZA (VP FOR RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT) & CAROL SUMMERS (WEBB SWCD BOARD DIRECTOR)

Caribbean Area

USDA StrikeForce helps in several Community Gardens in Puerto Rico



By Ismael Matos

We met with several entities, such as Extension Service (UPR-CES), Rural Development (RD), Food and Nutrition (FNS), Farm Service Agency (FSA). A list of Multi-family projects with spare land for garden was provided by RD. UPR-CES provided designs for each garden and a curriculum on nutrition and gardening presented during the garden construction (5 days). FNS arranged the logistics to supply snacks and lunch during garden establishment. Some municipalities were engaged in the logistic, materials, tools and the attending the workshops. NRCS supervised and certified the installed garden and cost-shared them with funds administered by conservation districts (SWCD).

USDA-NRCS and UPR-CES staff continued their project to install community gardens across Puerto Rico. The project is a partnership between USDA agencies and UPR-CES as part of the StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity that helps economic growth by investing in rural communities. The project partners are sharing the vision of the People's Garden with Puerto Rico housing communities to enable them to develop, take over and maintain their community gardens.



NRCS and SEA staff conducted a 5-day Home Garden and Nutrition workshops (“Huertos Caseros y Nutrición”) in the last few months in different cities of the island in housing communities. This effort impacted 25 residential homes and more than 700 people. The tenants were all Hispanics of very low-to moderate-income families; elderly persons; and persons with handicaps and disabilities that are eligible to live in Section 515-financed housing.

There were installed and assisted in 25 communities gardens in multi-family Rural Developments Projects. In all were established community gardens with irrigation systems, owned and administered by the same local community. The latest one was established in Loiza PR. Several ones are schedule for

2016, because we currently know the way to get this successfully installed in more than 100 more, enlisted for the current year.

NRCS Christmas Get Together in Puerto Rico 2015

By Janella Cruz, Soil Scientist

Another year and another opportunity for NRCS employees from both the mainland and Puerto Rico to get together and rejoice in good company and celebrate the holidays. This is what makes these reunions particularly special.

Marking the fourth year of the reunion was to meet where it all first started in Guavate, Puerto Rico home of one of the best if not the best “lechones” also known as pigs in Puerto Rico. Packed with locals and tourists from all over the World the Guavate region is characterized by its beautiful hills and endless kiosks located on either side of the road providing anything from street food to traditional puerto rican cuisine. Guavate is one of many places to be during the Christmas holidays, preferably not in the weekend has we soon realized with roads jammed with cars and long lines; nonetheless a must visit place for great food, music and company with not just NRCS employees but also with the company of their loved ones.



From left to right: Manuel Matos, Soil Scientist MLRA Leader, Puerto Rico; Joxelle Velázquez, Soil Scientist, Mississippi; Luis Alvarez, Soil Scientist, Wyoming; Janella Cruz, Soil Scientist, New York; Jacqueline Vega, MLRA Soil Scientist, Hawaii; Milton Cortes, Assistant State Soil Scientist, North Carolina; Jennifer Cardona, Student Trainee (Soil Conservationist), Puerto Rico; Ramon Ortiz, State Planning Specialist, Maryland.

Once most of us made it to “El Rancho Original” which was our original 2012 meeting place conversations of family and worklife began to flow on par with delicious food mainly yellow and white rice, beans, sweet potatoe, pastel, yucca and ofcourse lechon a lot of lechon. Perhaps this year was a smaller crowd but undeniably a great time in solidarity with the agency that has brought us together. Special thanks to Joxelle Velazquez for providing photos and Jacqueline Vega and Milton Cortes in helping out with this years get together. Heres to more reunions in the future with friends and fellow colleagues.

Southeast Region

NEON Project—Lenoir Landing, Choctaw County, Alabama

By Joxelle Velázquez-García, Soil Scientist, Meridian Soil Survey Office

On Tuesday, March 17, 2015, Meridian MLRA Soil Survey Office staff through coordination of the Alabama State Soil Scientist, Alabama Resource Soil Scientist, and the National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON), conducted a soil profile description and revision of the Lenoir Landing site located in Choctaw County, Alabama.

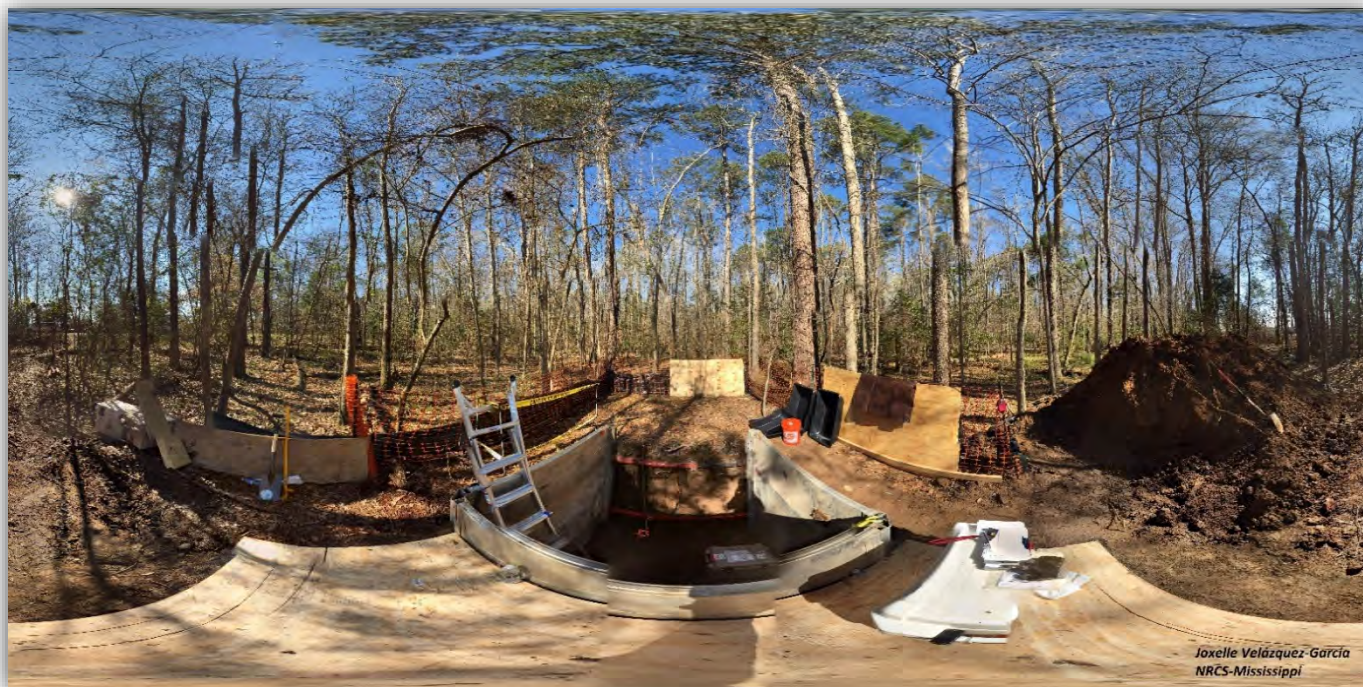


Figure 1. Panoramic view of the Pedon site location of the NEON's Lenoir Landing site (Ozarks Complex). This site is located just north of the Choctaw National Wildlife Refuge, Choctaw County, Alabama. On the following web link you can see a 360 degrees

The National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON) is a large facility project managed by NEON, Inc. and funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). NEON is a continental-scale research platform for discovering and understanding the impacts of climate change, land use change, and invasive species on ecology. NEON sites are strategically located across the

U.S. within 20 eco-climatic domains that cover the contiguous 48 U.S. states, Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. Each domain represents a distinct region of distinct landforms, vegetation, climate, and ecosystem dynamics. NEON works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service, Kellogg Soil Survey Laboratory to perform a suite of chemical and physical analyses on each soil sample.

NEON Lenoir Landing site will be a center for monitoring climate change. This site is situated just north of the Choctaw National Wildlife Refuge on an alluvial plain on the Tombigbee River floodplains in Choctaw County, Alabama. The NEON landing site is in the Urbo component of an Urbo-Mooreville-Una complex, gently undulating, frequently flooded mapping unit. These soils develop from fluvial sediments in Southern Coastal Plain Major Land Resource Area (MLRA 133A). One objective of the soil pit is to generate soil

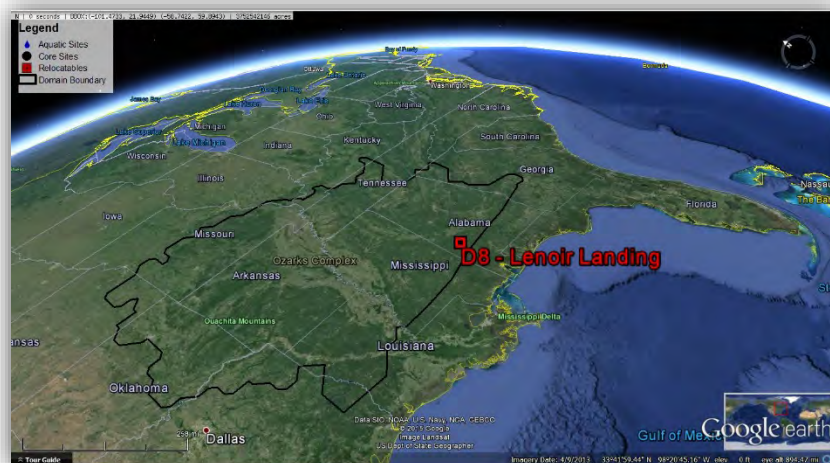


FIGURE 2. THIS IMAGE SHOWS THE EXTENSION OF THE OZARKS COMPLEX (DOMAIN BOUNDARY) WHERE THE NEON'S LENOIR LANDING SITE IS LOCATED.



FIGURE 3. LAWRENCE E. MCGHEE (ALABAMA STATE SOIL SCIENTIST), CHRIS HATCHER (MLRA PROJECT LEADER), AND JOXELLE VELÁZQUEZ (SOIL SCIENTIST), CONDUCTING A SOIL PROFILE DESCRIPTION AT THE INTERIOR OF THE SOIL PIT.

information that will help NEON scientists calibrate soil sensors as well as determine the appropriate depths to place them. The location of the soil pit is relatively close to the instrumented NEON tower and chosen to be representative of the five sensor-based soil plots near the tower. The instrumented NEON tower infrastructure and based plot sensor will contain a variety of measurement sensors; CO₂ concentration sensor—these will be buried at different depths of the soil on which will be used to determine a gradient of CO₂ and measure soil respiration (measurement of biological activity and decomposition); throughfall sensors to measure precipitation through the forest canopy; sensors to measure the soil moisture and temperature; and radiation sensors, among others. Once installed and calibrated, sensors will continue to measure and collect a wide range of scientific data. The information collected will be standardized and calibrated using rigorous quality measures in order to deliver a professional data product that will be free and available via a web portal (NEON Data Portal) to anyone that wants to access it including scientists, educators, natural resource managers, and the general community.

Following rigorous OSHA safety rules, NEON and NRCS staff proceeded to evaluate the soil pit and complete a full soil profile description. After the

task was completed, the soil profile description was populated into the soil database known as the National Soil Information System (NASIS) by Meridian MLRA Soil Survey Office.

Northeast Region

Updates from Green 2.0

By Michael Martinez, NRCS Special Assistant to the Chief

Green 2.0 is an initiative dedicated to increasing racial diversity across mainstream environmental NGOs, foundations and government agencies. The Green 2.0 working group advocates for data transparency, accountability and increased resources to ensure that these organizations increase their diversity.

Diversity Reports

Green 2.0 commissioned a report, The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies, the most comprehensive report on diversity in the environmental movement. It surveyed 191 environmental non-profits, 74 government environmental agencies, and 28 leading environmental grant making foundations to investigate their gender and racial diversity composition, the majority of which state diversification as a “value.” The study included confidential interviews of 21 environmental leaders from diverse backgrounds and experience. To learn which environmental funders and NGOs responded to the call to share their diversity data, a sign of commitment towards improving diversity at all levels at their institutions, you may review the report at: <http://www.diversegreen.org/download-form/>. Since the October 2014 launch of this first-of-its-kind effort, over 2,000 nonprofits have submitted diversity data across all sectors. For a summary, see: <http://www.diversegreen.org/diversity-among-environmental-advocacy-ngos/>.

Over the last year, Green 2.0 called on the leaders of the largest environmental funders* to demonstrate support for a more diverse environmental movement by sharing their diversity data on GuideStar. To see which of the Top 40 environmental funders responded and those who have declined so far to participate, please visit: <http://www.diversegreen.org/data/>

Promoting Diverse Environmental Leaders

Green 2.0 is pleased to highlight the wealth of leaders of color, spanning different generations and sectors, in the environmental arena. Intended as an illustrative, not exhaustive list, this page is updated with a different list of accomplished leaders every couple of weeks: <http://www.diversegreen.org/leadership/>. Green 2.0 acknowledges the need for growing a bench of talented environmental professionals of color, as well as ladders for advancement in the mainstream environmental movement.

Connecting with Green 2.0

To include Green 2.0 in your network, sign up at: <http://www.diversegreen.org/contact-us/>

Ranking of Largest Environmental Funders Per Latest Available Foundation Center data (2012).