



# LA VOZ

Newsletter of the National Organization of Professional Hispanic  
Natural Resources Conservation Service Employees

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## June 2007 Newsletter

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### President's Message

*By Carlos Suarez*



NOPHNRCSE President

Dear NOPHNRCSE Family!

We are just 60 days away from the beginning of our training conference!

It was just 11 months ago when I took the helm as NOPHNRCSE President that we began this journey in preparation to our training conference. Many of you are contributing to the planning success of this training conference and I sincerely THANK YOU!

I want to remind you of a few things. If you have not done so, go ahead and make your hotel and airline reservations. We expect the hotel to be a full capacity during the week of the meeting, so time is of the essence to make your reservations. The Marriott-Bloomington Airport is already accepting reservations for the training conference. Please go to the NOPHNRCSE website for more information.

The registration due date has been moved to July 15 to allow the registration committee enough time to process all the payments that will be coming through. Please don't wait until the last minute to submit your payment. The registration form is posted on our

website. Feel free to contact Damarys Mortenson, chairperson of the registration committee for more information.

There are still spaces available for the NEDC courses. As I mentioned in my last letter, you need to go into AgLearn and register for the courses. Feel free to contact Astrid Martinez for more information about the process.

I am very excited about the shape this training conference is taking. I have spoken with other employee organizations presidents about our training conference and they are very interested in adopting some of the things we will be presenting.

Due to some details that we needed to finalize, I expect to launch the NOPHNRCSE grants program for our membership by early to mid-July. I believe you will like the changes we have incorporated.

I want to thank you for the great response we received to our nominations' process and invite you to participate in the election by submitting your vote for vice-president, treasurer and regional representative. This year our nomination and voting process is being conducted via internet! I have received very positive feedback about this process and continue to use it in the future.

Last but not least, I want to encourage each of you to submit at ANY TIME your feedback and comments about how the organization is working for you. I want to hear your comments on what is working, and suggestions on what needs improvement, etc. One of my goals as president is to make the organization stronger by providing growth opportunities to our members. I want to make sure that we are moving into this direction. Feel free to provide your feedback to your regional representative or any member of your National Council.

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## **Registration Committee Update**

*Damarys Mortenson, Registration Committee Chairperson*

I want to thank my committee for their hard work in preparing for this year's conference registration. To my co-chair, Angel Figueroa, who has found good volunteers to assist in the registration desk. Then to Deni Hazell, author of the registration form, she did an outstanding job making the form fillable and molding the format to make things clear and easy to find. Thanks to both of you.

The registration form has two parts the first part is the one you complete for yourself. If you have guests I need for you to complete the second page. There is also explanation of tours, etc.

Some points I want to make:

- The registration form is available at the NOPHNRCSE website.
- Make sure that you are using purchased/personal credit cards and not a travel cards.
- Credit Cards will not be process until after July 10, 2007.
- Once I get your registration, I will email you an acknowledgment that I received it.
- Tours designations will be given at the registration desk the day of the conference. It is important that you make your preference known on the registration form.
- Early registration ends July 15, 2007.

If you have questions, call Damarys at (989) 348-9523 Ext. 23 or email her at [regnopsy@gmail.com](mailto:regnopsy@gmail.com).

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### **Program Committee Update**

*Luis Hernandez, Program Committee Chairperson*

As of June 1, our NEDC trainings were opened to all NRCS employees. You still have time to register but you better do so as soon as possible as they are filling fast. The training course Managing for Excellence is full, but if you want to register for it, do so and you will be placed on the waiting list. There is still room for Civil Rights in Program Delivery and Trainer Skills Workshop. There will not be more due dates. Once the classes are full you will be placed on a waiting list and if someone drops from the class, you might be able to fill the slot depending where you are in the waiting list. If you register for these courses, don't forget to send your conference registration also. We have a draft of the program posted in our website. So please take a look at it at the link below when you have an opportunity.

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### **Don't Forget Your Auction Items**

*Omar Vega, Scholarship and Endowment Committee Chairperson*

The Scholarship and Endowment Fund Committee and the National Council are asking for your generous item donations to be auctioned at the scholarship night. If you would like to contribute items but are unable to go to the conference or have any questions, please contact Omar Vega 608-662-4422 ext 224 or at [omar.vega@wi.usda.gov](mailto:omar.vega@wi.usda.gov). Let's have fun with this event and let's be as creative as we can with what we are bringing!

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### **More on Minnesota**

*Julie MacSwain, Conference Planning Chairperson*

Soon, very soon, NRCS employees will be coming to Minnesota for the 14th annual NOPHNRCSE conference at the Minneapolis Airport Marriott in Bloomington. Over the last several months, NRCS employees who are members of NOPHNRCSE have been working to piece together a program and a conference that will meet the needs of those who attend the meeting in Minnesota. Our 2007 planning team is confident that we have accomplished our goal.

The following list contains NRCS employees who have played a significant role in the planning of the conference. Astrid Martinez, Tamara Buitenwerf, Julie MacSwain, Lori Valadez, Kristie Wiley, Russell Castro, Luis Hernandez, Gilbert Guerrero, Arturo Carvajal, Roney Guterrez, Carmella Apodaca Irwin, Amanda Hasemeir, Crecensio Perez, Ruben Perez, Telesfor Lucero, Julie Jacobs, Tessa Garcia, Stella Santos, Eileen Vale, Mario Morales, Rick Rodriguez, Mike Squires, Marina Barajas, Carlos Velasquez, Luis Gamboa, Manuel Matos, Damarys Mortenson, and Angel Figueroa.

Before your trip to Minnesota, please take sometime to check out the Explore Minnesota website!

### **Other Minnesota Facts**

The name "Minnesota" comes from Dakota Indian words meaning "sky-blue waters." The large number of lakes and rivers throughout the state is an important part of Minnesota's unique identity. One of Minnesota's nicknames is "Land of 10,000 Lakes," but it really has closer to 11,842 lakes. The state is on the shore of Lake Superior, which is the biggest of the Great Lakes. Minnesota is also the starting point of the world's third largest river, the Mississippi.

Minnesota became a state in 1858; the 32nd state in the union. People first came to Minnesota during the last ice age. They probably followed herds of large game into this area.

Some of those early Minnesota people carved pictures of humans, animals, and weapons into rocks. Some of these carvings, called "petroglyphs," may be 5,000 years old – and many are still visible today in Minnesota's state parks, such as Jeffers Petroglyphs near Comfrey and Windom. Ancient burial mounds and unearthened objects like spear points are evidence that people lived here ages ago.

The Dakota and Ojibwe (called Chippewa or Anishinabe) Indians lived in Minnesota when the first Europeans arrived. Many Dakota, Ojibwe, and other American Indians live in Minnesota today.

In the late 1600s, French explorers led an expedition into Minnesota, and were soon followed by fur traders for French, and then British companies, who come for beaver pelts to make hats in Europe.

In 1825, Fort Snelling became the first permanent European-American settlement. This site is now a state historic site. The early settlers in the territory were primarily Americans from the East Coast. By the 1860s large numbers of immigrants, especially Germans and Scandinavians, came to Minnesota.

## **Minnesota in August**

- Minnesota summers can be very humid. The average high temperatures are in the 80s.
- Pack lightweight summer clothes for the tours and for evening free time. Don't forget something warm for the hotel central air conditioning.
- Look for the complimentary hotel shuttle at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International airport in the baggage claim area, follow the ground transportation signs.
- On-site rental cars available at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport.
- Are you an avid golfer? Minnesota has some of the best golf courses around, be sure to pack those clubs!
- In the mood for adventure? During your free time, take a ride to Valleyfair Amusement Park or stop over at Bunker Hills Wave Pool and Cascade Bay water park.
- Feeling lucky? Give your luck a try at Mystic Lake or Treasure Island Casino. Stop over at Canterbury Park for a little horse racing!
- Looking for souvenirs? Walk over to the Mall of America or IKEA, across from the conference hotel.
- A little hungry? Pick the direction and you will find a variety of restaurants and fast food eateries to suit all tastes.
- Are you a night owl? Take in downtown Minneapolis for a bit of the night life.
- Looking for a summer game of baseball? Take in a Minnesota Twins or St. Paul Saints game.
- Don't forget to utilize the light rail and metro transit system to EXPLORE MINNESOTA.

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## **Membership Committee Update**

*Irma Hernandez*, Membership Committee Chairperson

The Membership Committee would like to welcome all new and past members that recently have re-joined our organization. We are half way into calendar year 2007 and our goal is close to being reached. I have encouraged members to reach out and recruit new members during the year. We are making good progress but we haven't met our goal of increasing last year's membership yet. The following graph shows where we are as of 6/4/2007.

Keep in mind that the top recruiter will be presented with a gift of appreciation for the extra effort during the Annual Training Conference. Remind members that you recruit to indicate on the membership form who invited them to become a member.

The following information can help you with your efforts of recruiting new members.

Some of the benefits of becoming a member:

- Offer employees opportunity to build relationships with leaders in the agency.
- Offer employees the ability to develop mentoring opportunities.
- Offer employees the opportunity to learn career paths from other experienced members.
- Develops a sense of unity and pride in who we are.
- Gives Hispanic Leadership a sense of purpose: Help others help themselves.
- The conference provides us with the opportunity to learn and develop good skills as moderators and presenters.
- Opportunity to develop skills to effectively work as a team member.
- Learn and develop supervisory skills by leading and coordinating the work of different committees or by leading a committee.
- Develop skills to negotiate when trying to recruit speakers for the annual conference. Negotiate work required, cost, and payment process.
- Develop a network of technical peers and friends across the nation.
- Learn more about the Hispanic culture by interacting with different cultural backgrounds such as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and more. The Hispanic culture is very diverse.
- Learn the country by attending the annual conference that is held in a different state every year.
- Meet the leaders of the agency. This provides us with an avenue to introduce ourselves and let them know our career goals.
- Showcase our members for the benefit of the leaders looking for good qualified employees.
- The members can help the agency in the recruitment effort of qualified Hispanics.
- The organization can help the leadership identify and remove possible barriers in the Hispanic communities to ensure the equal delivery of programs.
- Gives us the opportunity to network.
- Annual training conferences give us the opportunity for training.
- Through the organization, you can express your viewpoints.
- Help to educate NRCS on the Hispanic culture.
- Learn about other positions within NRCS.
- Add to career profile.
- Opportunities for scholarships, details, and/ or classroom training. (Ad Hoc Scholarship Committee is in the process of finalizing the application procedure for members in good standing only).

Welcome to the following new members:

Heydsha Cordero- Caribbean  
Timothy Garrahan- East  
Magdalena B. Whitaker-East  
James Whitaker-East  
Jason McAfee- East  
Minerva Margo- South Central

Congratulations to Rafael Vega, promoted from a SCEP student to a full time Soil Conservationist position in Indiana.

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### **Help Us Help Other Members Attend the Conference**

*Irma Hernandez*, Membership Committee Chairperson

The Membership Committee and the Ad Hoc Scholarship Committee are working in conjunction with our president to assist those members that would like to attend the Annual Training Conference and were approved to attend at their own expense. I am keeping a list of members that are willing to share their room or to share frequent flyer miles. Please email me at [Irma.Hernandez@de.usda.gov](mailto:Irma.Hernandez@de.usda.gov) if you are willing to share your room with another member or if you are in need of any assistance.

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### **Vote for Officers by June 21**

*Carlos Hernandez*, Nominations Committee Chairperson

The election ballot has been posted on the NOPHNRCSE website. You can submit your vote on-line or you can print the form mail it or fax it.

The direct link to the election ballot is:

[http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/hispanic/2007\\_election\\_ballot.html](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/hispanic/2007_election_ballot.html)

Election ballot must be submitted by June 21, 2007. Voting legibility and procedures are on the website.

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### **Camacho Runs for Treasurer**

*Jorge Camacho*, Candidate

"SALUDOS" to all of you. I am Jorge R. Camacho, member of NOPHNRCSE since 1995. This is to officially notify you that I am running as a candidate for the 2007

NOPHNRCSE Treasurer's position. I have a vast experience of 23 years in the areas of administration, finance, budget and accounting, and banking.

I graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1991 with a bachelor's degree in business administration with a major in management. In Puerto Rico, before joining NRCS, I worked in banking from 1983 to 1991. In 1991, I started my career with NRCS as an administrative assistant at the state office in New Mexico. In 1994, I was appointed as the budget officer for NRCS in Virginia. From 1996 to 1999, I served as accountant at the financial management division in national headquarters. In 1999, I became the budget officer for the NRCS National Business Management Center in Fort Worth, Texas. From 2001 thru 2004, I served as a financial specialist at the financial management division, NHQ. At present, I am the budget officer and team leader of the financial management staff at the NRCS Kentucky state office.

Within NOPHNRCSE, I have held different positions, such as chairperson of budget committee and chairperson of audit committee.

It would be an honor to serve as the treasurer for the next two years. I am confident that with my experience I can contribute a lot with new and positive ideas. I will be counting on all of you.

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## **Tafoya Seeks Treasurer Position**

*Rick Tafoya, Candidate*

Greetings fellow NOPHNRCSE members! My name is Rick Tafoya and I would like to announce my candidacy for the treasurer's position. I've been a NOPHNRCSE member since 1995 and have had the privilege of serving our organization in several capacities including chair and/or member of the Partnerships, Recruitment & Career Development, Conference Planning, Scholarship & Endowment, Natural Resources, and Membership committees.

I graduated with honors from New Mexico State University with a Bachelor's of Science degree in range science and ecology. I started my NRCS career more than 16 years ago as a student trainee in New Mexico. Since then, I've held many challenging positions in New Mexico, Washington, Arizona, California, Washington D.C., and Iowa. These positions include soil conservationist, range management specialist, district conservationist, watershed project coordinator, USDA HSI Liaison to Colleges & Universities in California & Washington, and acting national Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager. I'm currently an RC&D Coordinator in the state of Iowa and am also completing a three-year collateral appointment to the National Civil Rights Committee.

The experience and knowledge that I gained over the years, as a result of these opportunities, has been invaluable and very rewarding. As it relates to the treasurer's



position, I have extensive experience in budget planning and management, grant and finance administration, non-profit management, and program and policy development. Presently, I work directly with my RC&D Council to oversee and administer a total operating budget of more than \$1.2 million.

I've worked diligently throughout my career to establish a reputation of being a technically sound and dedicated employee as well as a respected leader within the agency. Likewise, I'm a very active member of the community and involved in numerous local and national civic organizations.

I believe NOPHNRCSE is an organization with an exceptional mission and is also an incredibly valuable resource for many individuals. I'm running for treasurer to serve on the national council because I want to continue building on our organization's accomplishments. But I also believe in the potential NOPHNRCSE has to grow and expand its opportunities as an organization through our traditional partnership with NRCS as well as the promise of exploring other possibilities. I'm a strong advocate for our organization—always have been.

Your confidence and support is greatly appreciated! Please feel free to contact me at (712) 792-2214 or [ricktafoya@gmail.com](mailto:ricktafoya@gmail.com).

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## **Detail Opportunities**

*Irma Hernandez, Membership Committee Chairperson*

After the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, detailed NRCS personnel began helping local units of government by conducting surveys of the damage in affected areas, and by providing assistance through the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program. This natural disaster led to employees from all over the country taking short work details to assist during a national emergency. There are other instances when the NRCS asks employees to go on details; to assist other countries with special projects, to help during emergency situation, to assist other states during budget issues, and to temporarily fill vacancies during personnel transitions. Most recently we are hearing more and more about employees that are taking details for career development.

Details are excellent opportunities to explore new things and to share your skills and knowledge with others. It is also an opportunity to grow professionally, personally, and offers the chance to network. A detail provides employees with a change of atmosphere - exposure to different job settings. However, we tend to resist change because we do not always feel comfortable stepping out of our comfort zone, but when we do - it is amazing the things that you can learn and how much you can expand your horizons. In many instances leaving one's comfort zone is what is needed to discover hidden talents; capabilities and can to spark a desire to accomplish greater things.

There are many of our NOPHNRCSE members that have taken details during their careers. After talking with some of these members and reflecting on own my experiences, the consensus is that there is nothing to lose when you take a detail. There is only much to gain when you accept these opportunities. Exposure to the NRCS in other states and regions, and working with fellow employees in different areas of our country gives you an exposure that will help make you a well-rounded employee. The exposure will expand your understanding of the agency and the needs of our customers. This will help you to make a greater contribution and helps to increase your confidence professionally. What you learn will follow you throughout your career and help you define career paths.

A detail for a Hispanic employee is an enormous chance not only to learn from other cultures, but to share our own culture with pride. I would like to share three short stories from NOPHNRCSE members who left their comfort zone to accept the opportunity of being a detailee. I hope these examples encourage all of you to consider being a detailee, to develop yourself, to accept bigger challenges, and to expand your vision toward making a greater contribution to NRCS. Keep in mind that you can make a difference in your professional life.

**Detailee: Astrid Martinez/ Nebraska**

Current Position: Soil Scientist

Detailed to Washington, D.C.

Length of the detail: 2 ½ months

Astrid was detailed to the Civil Rights Division in Headquarters. She was able to recruit 13 Hispanic students to work across the nation during the summer as SCEP or STEP students. She also assisted with the hiring of two students as full-time engineers.

"All of these new hires gave me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction of giving back to an agency that has given me so much," Astrid said.

She describes the experience full of excitement; she had happy and sad moments.

"I can now say it was all worth the experience. I have a better understanding of how NRCS works to run the Farm Bill programs, and the energy, time and dedication that keeps everything working," she said. "This experience allowed me to grow professionally and will help me to better achieve my career goals."

**Detailee: Ruben Perez**

Current Position: Irrigation Specialist/ New Jersey

Detailed to Hollister, California

Length of the detail: 2 months

"After an eight-hour delay at the airport, I was wondering if it was a good idea to be in California on a 60-day detail (with the possibilities of getting extended to 90 days). Driving through the farm fields the first day, I saw the similarities between 'El Valle de Lajas' in Puerto Rico (where I first start to working with irrigation systems) and Hollister,

California. What is the detail all about? The Hollister office has a backlog of watering facilities for cattle (I know what that has to do with irrigation, well, a lot, trust me), irrigation water management plans, and overhead irrigation designs. What do they grow here? Well, garlic, cherry, strawberries, carrots, walnuts (and all kinds of nuts), avocado, row crops, and a lot of grapes (now I know why is called the Wine Country). Every time that I talk to the farmers here they always ask the same question - what do they grow in New Jersey? I guess when I get back to New Jersey I will get the same question - what do they grow in California."

**Detailee: Irma Hernandez**

Current Position: Program Specialist/ Delaware

Detailed to Arizona

Length of the detail: 1 month

"I was detailed to the Arizona State office under the supervision of the assistant state conservationist for operations. During my detail, I had an opportunity to experience the state office environment; as well as learn how the areas and field offices operate within the state. During my detail, I had an opportunity to work on Arizona's progress report. I identified some problem areas by analyzing PRS reports. I was able to present to the Arizona leadership a report of my findings and recommendations on how to correct the problems and avoid future errors. Some of the things that interested me the most were how to manage a bigger state, how NRCS does business with the tribes, the different resource concerns, conservation practices, landscape and last, but not least, the great friends I made there. This experience has enhanced my career by helping me better understand how the agency operates in different regions of the country. The customers' needs and conservation practices implemented in Arizona are very different from ours on the East Coast. This noticeable difference has made me think on a larger scale when I think about Farm Bill programs and services that we offer as an agency. I feel more confident and have a better understanding that will be reflected in my performance in Delaware and/or any other state that I may work in the future. I feel even more passionate about my job and the services that we offer. I feel confident that when the situation arises I'll be able to bring my experiences together to make greater contributions to the agency."

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**A Story from New Member Natalie Irizarry**

The Membership Committee is glad to share a story of one of our new members.

**Natalie Irizarry – Soil Scientist, Greensburg, Pennsylvania**

I was born and raised in Yauco, Puerto Rico, located in the southern area of the island. After finishing high school at age 19, I moved to the western part where I attended the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus.

I don't have any relatives associated with farming or agronomy, but for some reason, I was always interested in anything related to plants and the process of their growth. I decided to study agronomy, but decided to major in soils because it was the most interesting department and the fewest students in that major.

In my third year of school, I heard about an internship in Pennsylvania for a soil scientist position with NRCS. I decided to apply and was accepted. I was very excited, but also very nervous.

In 1999, I flew to Pennsylvania--a place without family and friends and with a totally different language, food, and weather, not to mention, starting a new job and never having outdoor work experience.

On my very first day on the job, the party leader at Greensburg was on vacation and another soil scientist was there. When I met him, he started to talk so fast that I could barely understand half of what he said. I thought about going back home, but after one week, I met my boss, started working outside and got more comfortable.

This job really started my understanding of the soils world. Everything was new, interesting and exciting for me. Working in Westmoreland County, within the MLRA 126 and 127, I discovered and experienced landscapes, landforms, terraces, floodplains, clay films, and redox. Things that before were just words on a page were beginning to take on new meanings.

After going back to Puerto Rico and finishing my bachelor's degree, I had the opportunity to come back and work with NRCS in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Right now, my goal is to keep learning and to be a better soil scientist. I hope sometime in the future to complete a master's degree. My husband, Javier, and I enjoy exploring different places in Pennsylvania and surrounding states.

Our Pennsylvania HEPM invited me to be part of NOPHRCSE. He told me about the organization and his experiences being a member. I looked into joining and realized that belonging to this organization not only will give me the opportunity to meet other members around the nation, but also it will get me more involved with Hispanic communities with NRCS addressing natural resource management issues and sharing our heritage and culture with other people. My direct involvement with the Pennsylvania Hispanic Employee Committee has me working with outreach, trying to reach underserved producers and operators growing in number in my state. In August I plan to attend the training conference in Minnesota and I look forward to meeting other NRCS members from other parts of the country.

I said before that I was nervous about coming to a different place without family and friends, but now I say that I'm very lucky and blessed to be here where I found not just one, but two families I really appreciate and love--my Pennsylvania home family and my work family. About the weather, food and language--I am still working with that...

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## **NOPHNRCSE Member Presented USDA GLEAC Award**

Every year USDA's Gay and Lesbian Employee Advisory Council to the Secretary (GLEAC) recognizes one or more individuals who have made a significant contribution to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees at USDA. The individuals recognized demonstrated an outstanding commitment to the Department's civil rights policy statement, specifically the inclusion of sexual orientation as a diversity factor in the workplace. Sharyn Alvarez, National Federal Women's Program Manager in the NRCS Civil Rights Division, is one of the recipients of the 2007 GLEAC Award.

The awards were presented at the Department's Gay & Lesbian Pride Ceremony, June 7, 2007. The theme of the 2007 USDA Gay & Lesbian Pride Ceremony is "Diversity & Inclusion: Together We Can, Together We Will."