



#FridaysOnTheFarm: From Cranberries to Critters

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, the USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, we travel to Egg Harbor City, Atlantic County in New Jersey where we meet the Fox Family.

Looking out over the Foxes' land, you see a natural forested wetland teeming with birds, frogs and other wildlife, but that wasn't always the case.

For three generations, the Fox family farmed cranberries on 100 acres. With rising costs and an increasingly competitive market, current landowners William and Ann Fox decided it was time to retire from the cranberry operation. In 2012, the Foxes enrolled 30 acres of their property into the [Wetlands Reserve Program \(WRP\)](#) to receive technical and financial assistance to protect, restore and enhance wetlands on their property.

"We had lost our market to Canada, and to be honest, the financial incentive is that attracted us to the easement option initially. However, we have always strived to be stewards of the land," Ann says.

"Even when the bog was in production, we did our best to minimize the use of chemicals and pesticides. When we realized that we had to stop production, we thought about what we really wanted for the future of the land – we wanted to leave the land better than we found it," added Ann. "We think that is what being a steward of the land means."

Avid nature lovers, William and Ann wanted to see their land preserved, and returned to what it used to be, an Atlantic white cedar wetlands forest. They were pleased to work with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to establish a permanent wetland easement to keep these resources available for them and their children to enjoy.

Restoration Process

The first step to returning the cranberry bog to an Atlantic white cedar wetland forest was to restore the stream bed that historically ran through the property. Cranberry bogs were often

created by land-leveling and grading, moving sandy soils from higher areas to fill in lower natural bogs and drainage ways.

Since the topography had been drastically altered when the bog was prepared for cranberries, determining the location of the old channel was challenging. NRCS Engineer Hilary Trotman and contractor Steve Emmons based the layout for excavation on historic maps and aerial photos.

They were thrilled during the actual excavation when the operator pulled up nothing but turf and decomposing trees and there appeared to be no bottom to the bog in some locations. Unearthing all these organic deposits indicated that they were successful in re-establishing the flow path of the historic channel.

Next, they created several shallow pools and mounds to mimic the historic ground conditions. The design would improve water quality and provide critical flood storage. This irregular landscape would also help enhance the development of a more diverse vegetative community and create a thriving habitat for wildlife. Sure enough, the day after the first pools were created on the Fox property, several ducks and a Great Blue Heron showed up to check out the improved habitat.

After the surrounding dikes were breached at five strategic locations and several timber water control structures removed, the contractor stabilized the exposed slopes of the dikes with native vegetation, completing the restoration process. Within a few weeks of completion, the site was already showing signs of a healthy wetland.

Benefits

While the Foxes are enjoying the beautiful vistas and abundant wildlife, the wetlands they have restored are also delivering conservation benefits to their friends and neighbors downstream. Wetlands help filter and store water, improving water quality and minimizing the risk of flooding, and their rich soils store carbon reducing greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) provided input during the planning stages of the project. NJDEP wanted to be sure that the Pine Barrens Tree Frog, a species of concern in the state, would not be adversely impacted.

NRCS and USFWS biologists felt confident that this project would in fact expand available habitat for the tree frog. To study the impact, NJDEP will monitor the site to evaluate the effect the restoration is having on the Pine Barrens Tree Frogs.

Future Plans

The Foxes are so enthusiastic about this project that they submitted an application to include an additional 36 acres of the adjacent cranberry bog in the [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program \(ACEP\)](#). The Wetlands Reserve Program, Grassland Reserve Program and Farm and Ranch Land Protection program were combined into one program, ACEP, by the 2014 Farm Bill.

“Every day we see Great Blue Heron and the White Egret out in the bog, and we want to expand that natural habitat,” Ann said.

While they once tried to keep wildlife away from their operation, the Foxes are now welcoming it to their wetland.

Ann laughed as she explained, “The beavers work to flood certain areas which creates more habitat. It’s funny actually, we used to be fighting with Mr. Beaver, constantly having to pull out his dams to make sure our farm didn’t suffer. It was a lot of work, and we always felt like we were fighting with him. Now instead with him, we get to work with him – to work with nature. We actually love the dams he puts up now.”

She continued, “The money certainly helps, but it has become so much more than that! We see the value restoring these wetlands is having for native wildlife.”

This year, NRCS is celebrating 25 years of conservation easements. Thousands of landowners across the nation, like the Foxes, are working to restore and protect these vital landscapes. If you are interested in protecting, restoring or enhancing wetlands on your property through an easement, visit your [local USDA service center](#) to submit an application at any time.

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