



#OurFarmersRoadtrip

Summer is here! Ready to get back on the road?

We're kicking off the 2019 #OurFarmers Roadtrip! Put down the windows, turn up the radio, and join us in meeting just a few of the farmers and ranchers growing food, fuel, and fiber across the United States.

Just like last year's Natural Resources Conservation Service #ConservationRoadtrip, we're going to visit some exceptional farmers and ranchers who are working with USDA to strengthen and grow their operations. As a bonus, the Farm Service Agency and Risk Management Agency are joining the fun for 2019.

#OurFarmers are using USDA programs and services – such as farm loans, conservation programs, and crop insurance – to be and stay successful. These producers are going to show us how it's done. Let's get rolling!

Day 1: Delaware – Building a Soil Health Legacy for the Land

After spending more than 40 years farming, Delaware corn and soybean grower Chip Baker recently decided to retire. Not wanting to have to worry about day-to-day responsibilities, but wanting to make sure his land and soil stayed healthy and productive, he looked for a tenant farmer to continue his legacy for soil health. Fortunately for Chip, that search concluded successfully, handing over the reins to family friend Blaine Hitchens.

Chip's journey to becoming a soil health champion progressed over the years through his reading, research, and simply learning from his mistakes. When Chip started farming in 1971, he practiced conventional tillage—unaware that his heavy disking and moldboard plowing was disrupting the soil structure, leaving it susceptible to erosion.

"We didn't realize what he had in the ground," reflected Chip. "We didn't have the science then to know what we were doing; if we had we wouldn't have done it."

Chip transitioned his operation to no-till in 1992 to reduce costs and build soil. "No-till was great, but we recognized that no-till will only get you so far."

A decade ago, Chip heard a presentation by a soil health specialist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service about how cover crops could take his soils to the next level. Always conscious of his bottom line, Chip knew he did not have control over the price of corn or soybeans, so he started with what he could control—his input costs. "I learned that to save money, you had to build the soil."



He worked with NRCS soil conservationist Bobby Gorski for technical and financial assistance for his cover crop mixes through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. “Chip changed his mixes yearly, depending on his rotation for that growing season, in order to minimize his inputs using naturally available nutrients instead,” said Bobby.

Chip loves his partnership with his new farm operator, Blaine. After spending so many years committed to building his soil and taking it to the next level, he is confident it is in good hands.

Like Chip, Blaine has seen the benefits of healthier soil, stating, “I benefit because there is less soil erosion, the soil holds more moisture, and I’m saving money.” Blaine was looking for land to lease and found the perfect landowner-tenant relationship with Chip.

“And now I’m going to take this foundation, keep stacking my blocks, and keep building it as long as God lets me do it,” concluded Blaine.

Story and Photos by Dastina Wallace, NRCS Delaware

Day 2: Maryland – Talbot County Waterman Succeeds at Oyster Restoration Projects

As efforts to help restore the Chesapeake Bay Watershed continue to be a Maryland priority, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service works with farmers on water and on land to improve the Bay’s health. Creating and restoring habitat for filter-feeding oysters is just one way watermen on the eastern shore are improving water quality.

Bobby Leonard, Jr. owns about 140 acres of land on his Friendship Farm in Talbot County. The farm sits on about one mile of waterfront in the Deep Neck area, historic oyster grounds where Leonard holds leases on the fertile bottom.

“The area is ideal for what we’re doing with the oysters because it goes along with farming, we have the room to do it, and we have good clean water, great for growing oysters,” Bobby said.

Bobby learned about NRCS’ assistance for oyster restoration after working with NRCS to improve his cropland with practices like cover crops and no-till. “I went into the local field office and some of them told me NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program would be perfect for me,” Leonard said.

Today, Bobby farms nearly 50 acres of thriving oyster beds, restored with the help of NRCS.



Maryland NRCS has partnered with watermen to restore about 380 acres of oyster habitat since first offering the program in 2012. Jack King, district conservationist for Talbot County, believes the EQIP oyster program has room to grow. “Working with watermen on habitat restoration is a little out of the ordinary, but these projects fit EQIP’s goals to improve water quality and agricultural operations,” Jack stated.

The program provided Bobby funding to help with his projects, which includes buying shell, buying spat on shell, working the ground, and harvesting the oysters. Spat are the oyster larvae that are attached to the shell. Bobby describes the oyster restoration process as a cycle. The process starts with shucked oyster shells; he uses large tanks to allow the spat to grow.

The process of growing oysters to prime age takes about four to five years, depending on the oyster type. Over those years, Bobby dredges his lease bottom to bring existing oyster shells from the bottom to the top.

Bobby likens the oyster restoration process to farming on land. “We farm the land and we farm the water and we farm the bottom of the water. It all runs together, and each benefits the other.”

Story and Photos by Cara Newcomer, NRCS Maryland

#3 West Virginia

Living the Sweet Life

Britney Hervey-Farris, and her husband Charlie, have an infectious passion for agriculture Wellsburg, West Virginia. Following her graduation from Waynesburg University, Britney moved back to the 200-acre family farm that has been in the Hervey Family since 1775.

Family Roots Farm is an eighth-generation diversified crop, poultry, and maple syrup operation located in the rolling hills of West Virginia’s northern panhandle. The farm is home to 1,000 taps for maple production, eight acres of various fruits and vegetables, two high tunnels, beehives, a pick-your-own strawberry patch, plus pasture poultry and pigs.

With the help of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Hervey Family participate in various cost-share programs implementing conservation practices. Some of these practices

include high tunnels, fencing, heavy use area protection, irrigation pipelines, irrigation water management, nutrient management, and spring development. Their most recent project is an irrigation system for a five-acre produce field through the Agricultural Management Assistance Program.

“We are fortunate in West Virginia to have Family Roots Farm implementing their conservation plan and taking such care of the land,” said Assistant State Conservationist Field Operations Suzy Funka-Petery.

“We take great pride in protecting the land that has been graciously passed down to us by our ancestors and feel blessed to be multigenerational farmers,” said Britney. “Our farm’s success is all about networking and collaborating with other local farmers. We partner up and support each other. We couldn’t do this without the support of our family and community.”

Agritourism has become a big part of the farming operation. Britney presents educational demonstrations for farm visitors, so they not only see the end results, but also learn about the meat and potatoes of their operation.

“We feel it is important as a family to share the farm experience with others,” said Charlie, Britney’s husband. “When people visit the farm, we love to share our story so they can take a little part of Family Roots Farm with them.”

Family Roots Farm currently sells products through direct sales at the farm, farmer’s markets, fairs and festivals, and their online store. Their vision is to expand into retail markets, whether it be locally, statewide, nationally, or internationally.

“We started small, but we’ve grown each year,” concluded Britney. “You learn as you go. I just have a love for farming; I take a lot of pride in it.”

#4 Virginia

When the Landscape Becomes an Art Form

In the world of hand-carved waterfowl decoys, Grayson Chesser needs no introduction. He and his art have been recognized by both the Virginia Humanities and the Smithsonian Institution. He’s been featured in most every hunting and wildlife magazine and estimates he’s carved more than 5,000 birds, beginning with his first at age 12 in 1959.

Grayson’s passion for wildlife is not only visible in his carvings but also on his own land. He is a familiar face at the USDA service center just down the road in Accomac, Virginia, where



representatives of the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service have helped him fulfill a lifetime dream for his family farm.

Approximately 10 years ago, Grayson began working to conserve the character of the farm while enhancing its value to eastern shore wildlife. His Conservation Reserve Program contracts with FSA have enabled him to rest and preserve his acreage, which has been farmed almost continuously since the 1600s.

The voluntary program offered through FSA allows agricultural producers to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species to improve environmental health and quality. NRCS guides these efforts, providing technical assistance in re-establishing valuable land cover.

Grayson's first step was planting conservation buffers with trees and native grasses around the farm's streams and ditches. He continued by creating two new shallow-water impoundments that serve as handy rest stops for ducks, geese and other migratory birds. In 2017, Grayson signed a 10-year contract to enroll another 46 acres into the program to establish pollinator habitat.

Through this contract, NRCS Private Lands Biologist Bob Glennon worked with Grayson to develop custom seed mixes of several wildflower species for Grayson's property and guided the seeding operation, which required a special planter and \$10,000 worth of seeds.

"It's so unusual to do this on large, private acreage," Bob said. "This was a rare opportunity."

The pollinator planting is already a buzzing success. On a sunny Thursday afternoon in May, Grayson's fields with thousands of yellow coreopsis flowers in bloom were hosting bees and butterflies.

In addition to providing wildlife habitat, Grayson is improving downstream water quality and building soil health on his fields through his CRP contracts. Grayson is also protecting his farm from development under a perpetual agricultural easement and anticipates a portion of his CRP acreage, once rested and recharged, will be productively farmed once again.

"The ducks were here before we were," he said. "I always try to remember that."

Story and Photos by John Markon, Virginia NRCS