#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

#5 Florida

Building the Legacy of a True Family Farm

It's day five of our #OurFarmers Roadtrip, and today's pit stop is in Hawthorne, Florida, where we meet the Lussier family.

Matt and Linda Lussier, along with their young daughter, Samantha, made the move from Vermont down to the Sunshine State in the early 1990s to join Florida's dairy industry – establishing Lussier Dairy shortly after. Their son, Kevin, was born and raised on the farm.

"This is a family farm in both spirit and definition," Matt said.

While Matt worked as an accountant prior to the move, he's been in the industry his whole life.

"In many ways, agriculture chose me," he said. "I knew I wanted to run my own business and the opportunity to purchase the farm presented itself. With my dairy background, I decided to give it a shot."

The Lussiers started with a herd of 178 cows. Being in business for over 27 years, they have grown their herd to over 700 cows that are milked twice a day.

Working with USDA

Lussier Dairy was one of many agriculture operations that sustained damages when Hurricane Irma made landfall in September of 2017.

The Emergency Conservation Program from USDA's Farm Service Agency helped the family recover after the storm, replacing fencing and cleaning up debris.

"USDA has helped keep me in business," said Matt. "We started as young farmers with FSA. Now Kevin is starting his career the same way."

FSA supports America's next generation of farmers and ranchers, like Kevin, through direct and guaranteed loan programs.

Now a fulltime dairyman, Kevin has fully integrated himself into the family business. As a young farmer, loans from FSA helped him buy more cattle and purchase land for growing forage.

“Growing up here, I have a passion for dairy farming,” said Kevin. “I got to work with my parents and grandparents. What better way to grow up than getting to drive tractors and work cows?”

Make sure you continue to follow #OurFarmers Roadtrip. Grab your sunscreen, next stop is to a unique location.

Story & Photo Credit: Lauren Moore, USDA

#6 Puerto Rico

A Roof Over Their Heads

On September 19, 2017, just 12 days after Category 5 Hurricane Irma blew through the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) and Puerto Rico, Hurricane María devastated the two islands again. Over 80 percent of Puerto Rico’s agricultural production was destroyed, including a near universal loss of the island’s 2.5 million-bird poultry industry.

To help farmers in Puerto Rico and the USVI repair damage and rebuild following hurricanes Irma and María, the Natural Resources Conservation Service initiated an emergency Environmental Quality Incentives Program signup for farmers to implement key conservation practices, including replacement of roofs and covers on agricultural buildings, debris removal, and dead livestock disposal.

Larry Bonilla’s poultry facility in Aibonito, Puerto Rico, was severely damaged by Hurricane María, destroying two of his five poultry houses and leaving mangled debris and roofless buildings. Larry lost almost 100,000 birds to Hurricane María’s high winds and torrential rains. With NRCS’ help, he was able to replace the roof and covers on one of his barns, and remove 15,000 cubic feet of debris.

“Everything I worked for the past 30 years, losing all that in a single day - it was a big shock,” Larry said.

Larry is a large poultry producer in Puerto Rico, and his loss accounted for nearly one twentieth of the island’s total poultry loss. In January 2018, a staff delegation of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Agriculture Appropriations Committee visited Larry’s property, while assessing agricultural losses and the needs of impacted farmers.

“It was a rough first four weeks, but because of NRCS’ incredible help I was able to get back to work quickly,” added Larry. “I couldn’t have rebuilt as fast and to as good of a quality without the emergency assistance NRCS provided to me.”

The Farm Service Agency came to Larry's aid with their 2018 Livestock Indemnity Program to provide immediate reimbursement for Larry's lost birds. The emergency funding allowed Larry to source replacement chicks and get back to regular production within a few months.

Optional: Overall in Fiscal Year 2018, NRCS in the Caribbean obligated 828 EQIP contracts for over $23.7 million, nearly four times their annual average. Local NRCS and FSA offices hosted dozens of farmer workshops across the islands to provide technical and financial assistance. USDA agencies continue to work with Puerto Rico and USVI farmers to help them recover from 2017's devastating storms.

Story by Julie Wright, NRCS Caribbean Public Affairs.
Photos by NRCS Caribbean

#7 Louisiana

A Legacy of Conservation, Cajun Style!

Have you ever wanted to know where to find Cajun culture? You don't have to look any further than Evangeline Parish and more specifically… Mamou. Mamou, Louisiana, is home to graceful live oaks, delicious food, Cajun music, and Bieber Farms. Owned by Kody and Shelly Bieber, this rice and crawfish operation has deep roots in conservation.

The Biebers have a rich history in this region, in fact, Kody's grandfather started the farm, and it has grown since then. The Biebers love this land that has been a part of their family for generations. The farm has deep roots in the community and they also have a deep respect for conservation.

With over 4,500 acres of rice and crawfish, conserving water is an important part of their operation. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Biebers have installed 9.1 miles of underground irrigation pipeline. The Natural Resources Conservation Service has assisted the Biebers with installing 61 grade-stabilization structures, also known as pipe drops, to help drain their fields, as well as more than 2,600 acres of irrigation land leveling.

This family places a high value on water conservation and energy savings on their farm. In fact, every interior levee on his farm has pipes through those levees. Usually when designing irrigation land levelling for flooded basin rice production, interior levees (levees between the cuts) are often reduced. This eliminates the number of structures that must be managed by farm employees and the potential for water management issues.

Kody agrees that EQIP has made an incredible impact on their farm. "The EQIP program is extremely helpful to us. We have laser leveled our ponds, put in pipe drops and underground

pipes," said Kody. "In fact, we would not be able to farm as many acres as we do right now without EQIP."

This past year, the Biebers water planted all their rice, and everything that was planted was in water held from the rains through the winter. "We hold the water as deep as we can in our crawfish ponds. That way, toward the end of the season, when water starts evaporating, we can hold it longer before we start pumping," added Kody. The conservation benefit is a huge savings in water and energy.

Two other NRCS programs - the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) - also have proven successful for the Biebers. Kody has more than 3,600 acres enrolled in MBHI where he holds water through the winter providing essential habitat for migratory birds.

With 3,000 acres in CSP, the Biebers have accomplished a sizeable amount of conservation work. NRCS has been working with the Bieber family for 25 years and they have improved their operation and their bottom line through the conservation efforts they have made.

The Biebers don't merely grow rice and raise crawfish on their farm, they also have a crawfish processing facility, where crawfish are gathered from the pond, processed and are in the grocery store in the hands of the consumers, sometimes within one day.

Their operation kicks into high gear every January. Kody explains, "We sell live crawfish beginning in January and then the processing of the crawfish tails begins in February." Shelly explains, "The process includes washing, boiling, cooling, peeling, and packaging then refrigeration." Freshly packaged crawfish tails are delivered north of Jackson, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, and on to Arkansas, Texas, and throughout Louisiana, where they become critical ingredients in the flavor of the Cajun culture.

#8 Arkansas

Girls Can Do It Too!

Whitney Lord always knew what she wanted to do while growing up on 40 acres near Little Rock, Arkansas. But, figuring out how to do it proved a little challenging.

Whitney, who owns 165-acres with 20 registered Angus with her husband, Bo, started raising cattle five years ago on Lord Farms. She said she didn't know what she was getting into on her first visit to the NRCS field office.

“I never owned cattle until I moved to Izard County. My family had a couple of horses when I was growing up, but I’ve never raised cows,” Whitney said. She credits the Natural Resources Conservation Service with helping her fulfill her dream.

“It’s been awesome and easy working with NRCS,” added Whitney. “You figure out what you want to do on your farm, sit down with the NRCS staff and they help design a plan for you. They’ve come out several times to walk the fields and ensure the plan is what is best for my operation and property.”

NRCS District Conservationist Monica Paskewitz describes that when Whitney first visited the office, Whitney had one open field, one good pond and a marginal pond with low water levels. “We helped design a rotational grazing system for her and turned the available field into five paddocks with fencing and installed watering facilities,” explained Monica. Whitney received conservation funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

“As soon as I walked into the office, I felt at home, they’re just everyday people,” Whitney added. Moving to a rotational grazing system allowed her to graze her cattle for a couple of extra months, saving money on hay costs.

“I have a lot of fescue and it will grow as long as it gets rain and the temperature is decent,” Whitney said. “After October, I stop rotational grazing and move the cattle to a ‘sacrifice’ field to graze through the fall. By waiting until February to start feeding hay, I can put back quite a bit for years when we have a drought or shortage.”

Whitney also has done controlled burns and firebreaks on her timberland to reduce the wildfire hazard and improve wildlife habitat. Since the burns, she says they’ve seen a lot more wildlife activity and an increase in browse.

Whitney, Bo and their three children recently were named the 2019 Izard County Farm Family of the Year.

“As a female district conservationist, it makes me very proud that there are other female farmers out there willing to jump in feet first and get their hands dirty to provide a better environment for our children,” said Monica.

“Whitney is a positive role model, not only among her peers, but also for future generations of female farmers by setting a great example for her children and the community,” Monica added.

Whitney added, “Girls can do it too. It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. Women can be right along with the best.”

By Creston Shrum, NRCS Arkansas Public Affairs

#9 Missouri

Dairyman Links Family Legacy

Alfred Brandt is no stranger to farming, or the dairy business. Born and raised on his family's farm, in Osage-county, Missouri, which was homesteaded in 1840, he is the sixth generation to continue the operation.

"I worked several other dairy-related jobs after college and returned to the farm in 1997," said Alfred. "While I have many different interests, none of them hold the same passion that I have for farming. I never seriously thought of doing anything else."

Today, Alfred milks 140 registered Holstein cows and raises all of the forage required for the operation. His herd is housed in free-stalls and milked in a double-seven parallel parlor. Recently, Alfred upgraded his milking facilities to include a cow management system and activity monitors for his herd.

His current operation is a product of careful planning and transitioning from the previous generation – his father.

"The succession planning that I had with my dad began with me buying all of the dairy cattle and equipment from him," Alfred said. "The next part was to purchase the original farm."

Alfred worked with his local Farm Service Agency during this process to utilize loans specifically designed to assist beginning farmers and ranchers.

"The beginning farmer loan program was a great fit," Alfred explained. "It kept interest rates low which allowed me to keep my farm payments affordable while starting out."

During this transition phase, Alfred also saw the need to upgrade manure storage for his operation. He turned to his local Natural Resources Conservation Service for technical and financial assistance available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

"EQIP fit perfectly with what I needed to do, and it made it affordable to do it at a time when I was just getting started farming on my own," Alfred added.

Other USDA programs that have fit into Alfred's operation include the Margin Protection Program for Dairy, now known as the Dairy Margin Coverage Program, as well as the Farm Storage Facility Loan program, both offered through FSA.

Alfred encourages fellow producers to take a look at the various program offerings through USDA to see how they may benefit.

"I have nothing but good things to say about the programs that I have been involved in or about the people that work at the county office," Alfred said. "It is a very painless process."

Story and Photos by Jessica Claypole, FSA Missouri Public Affairs

#10 Iowa

The Strength of Four Generations

Four generations of the Vansice Family call their farm home. Norman Vansice, the great-grandfather, followed by Douglas Vansice, Jordan Vansice, and then ten-year-old Stadan Vansice, the great-grandson, are all active in keeping the farm productive and successful.

Norman purchased portions of the land in 1993, 1995, and 1998. He said it was a lot in a short period of time but you "buy 'em when they become available."

In 2019, the family has approximately 600 acres in a corn and soybean rotation, with an additional 300 acres in just corn. They use 'vertical' tillage, which works the ground to about one and one quarter inches deep. The farm has utilized no till in the past but now prefer to use minimum tillage.

The Vansices benefit from several Farm Service Agency programs. They participate in the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage Program. In 1998, they enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, and this past fall they applied for the Market Facilitation Program. The also purchase crop insurance coverage as a protection plan.

When asked how the MFP benefited the farm, Jordan replied, "It helped us with cash flow and came when we needed it the most."

The family are very conservation minded farmers. They use the CRP for the benefit of wildlife and water quality. In particular, they noticed an increase in the population of pheasants and turkeys. The farm also employs filter strips to cut down on erosion. The filter strips also help with water quality.

Looking to the future, the Vansices contacted Iowa Select in 2018 to build a hog facility and recently completed construction this winter. Choosing to be a ween to finish operation, they produce and keep all the manure for use on the farm.

Iowa Select delivers 10,000 baby pigs when they are 15 days old. Approximately half of the pigs remain at their facility to finish, the rest are transferred to other options. They have a certified company inject the manure into their cropland and they follow all local regulations. To

be good neighbors, Iowa Select has planted trees on three sides of the buildings and have put up an electro-static fence for dust control.

The Vansices say farming is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year business. They take turns going on vacations or having time off. When asked why Jordan enjoys the hard work so much, he answered, “It’s in my blood.”

Norman pointed out that his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were also farmers, therefore making Stadan the seventh generation of this farming family. Stadan is learning how to become a future farmer through the 4-H program so he can carry on the family legacy.

Story and Photos by Rosemary Chapman, NRCS Iowa program technician

#11 Minnesota

Grazing Cover Crops in Minnesota

Andy Linder and his dad enjoy considerable success after going to no-till/strip-till and introducing cover crops on their 800-acre farm in Faribault County, Minnesota.

They have seen for themselves the improvements to their soil and their profits. One major benefit is reducing the need for tillage equipment.

“With the way things are between my dad and I, he owns most of the equipment and I've rented it or used it,” Andy explained. “I'm looking at someday not wanting to have that huge overhead of all that equipment. We have now sold all of our tillage equipment.”

Since planting cover crops, the Linders have experienced many improvements on their farm. There is less soil erosion, less compaction, increased water drainage, better soil structure, and increased weed suppression, all without reducing profits.

“With cover crops, I see the benefits outweighing the cost,” said Andy. “When people tell me that they can't afford them, I tell them that it costs you something to pull your tillage equipment across your farm as well. We are generally as good or better yield-wise, especially with the soybeans. I don't think we're giving up any yield with the strip-till corn. I always like to tell people that it's not the yield, it's the bottom line that we're all after.”

One method that Andy uses to plant cover crops is with a high-clearance seeder.

“We just wanted to add another way of putting seed out there,” said Andy. “It's a Hagie machine. It was a sprayer; I took the spray equipment off and had it sent to a company that put

the cover crop seed equipment on. What I like about it is it gives us a more-even application than with airplanes."

Working with USDA

The Linders credit the Natural Resources Conservation Service with helping them along the way.
They are receiving five-year funding from NRCS through the Conservation Stewardship Program for cover crops, reduced tillage, and nutrient management on their farm. They have also participated in the Environment Quality Incentives Program.

"Our experience with NRCS has been really good" added Andy. "The person in the office makes a big difference. The one that we have in our office has been great to work with, very understanding of what we're trying to do, and helped us get done what we want to do."

Last year, the Linders decided to take their conservation efforts a step further. They began experimenting with grazing cattle on their cover corps. They bought 15 head of steers and are evaluating the weight gain they can achieve by having them graze on the cover crops in their fields.

"People have told us different numbers and we want to see for ourselves what we can actually do," concluded Andy. "So, we bought enough steers to make an impact, and yet not too many so that the risk isn't too large for us."

The Linders are excited to see what the result is.

Story and Photos Credit: Dan Balluff, NRCS Minnesota Public Affairs

#12 South Dakota

Ranching on the High Plains

Stuart and Lisa Schmidt are fourth-generation ranchers on the South Dakota high plains. Stuart's great-grandfather came from Hampton, Iowa, in 1910 and settled in the house where Stuart and Lisa raised their family and live today.

Growing up in the ranching business, Lisa always knew she wanted to be a rancher. Her stepfather helped her purchase cows and lease a range unit from the Standing Rock Tribe. When Stuart and Lisa married in 1985, they both wanted to continue raising livestock.

Sustainable Ranching

Located on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, the ranch manages their working lands with both natural resources and production in mind. “We try to mimic our operation to be in sync with nature, and I think that my family probably did that for many generations out of necessity,” said Stuart. “That was just a part of who they were. They had to adapt and live with the land rather than try and farm it or go against it.”

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program through the Natural Resources Conservation Service have helped the Schmidts ranch sustainably. Stuart worked with NRCS to add cross-fencing to subdivide pastures and put to work a rotational grazing system. By moving the cattle more frequently, she could avoid overgrazing and improve the health of the grassland.

“My husband and I have been conservationists for most of our adult lives,” said Lisa. “We see it as a necessity for the future of this ranch. We have been working to build a healthy soil base and raise livestock that will thrive in a rough environment. I think it takes a lifetime to work at sustainability for any ranch operation and to ultimately be able to pass it on to the next generation.”

While NRCS programs helped the couple with their conservation goals, Farm Service Agency programs, like the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program, provided assistance when times were tough.

“It helped us during some very difficult times,” said Lisa.

Carrying on the Tradition

Lisa and Stuart’s children are carrying on the tradition of ranching sustainably.

Their daughter, Tottie, ranches with her husband just south of Mud Butte, South Dakota. Their son, Chuck, and his wife run the ranch with Lisa and Stuart, while leasing a neighboring ranch for his own cattle operation.

“We mostly keep rotating as much as we can utilizing grass as much as we can,” says Chuck.

“We are grazers; we are grass managers; we are used-solar salesmen,” concluded Stuart. “We use sunlight and rain and grass. That’s what makes our living.”

Story Credit: Gina Kerzman, USDA
Photo Credit: NRCS

#13 Texas

Passion for Farming and Teaching

A passion for nutrition turned into a side job as a farmer for Kay Bell of Waco, Texas. A teacher by trade, Kay received a devastating cancer diagnosis in 2001. While relying on her faith and doctors, she did her own research to make sure she was getting the best possible treatment. It was during her chemotherapy treatments that she decided to eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and to drink plenty of herbal tea.

She began her healing journey and she has not looked back since. What started as a personal project grew into a hobby, and eventually farming became a part-time career. She was so passionate about healthy food, she decided to start Passion Farms.

Eighteen years in remission, Kay is now a certified herbalist and teaches others about her journey through tours of her urban garden, which she opens to the public for conservation workshops, gardening lessons, and harvesting.

“I grew up on a farm, but never intended on being a farmer,” Kay says laughing. “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher and that’s what I became. But now, with my urban garden, I can have workshops where I can teach people about farming. Teaching and farming give me the best of both worlds.”

She frequently works with the Natural Resources Conservation Service for information about soil health and conservation practices to utilize on her three-acre urban farm. Throughout the year, Kay and her husband Virgil stay busy growing radishes, beets, onions, red potatoes, herbs, and flowers. Especially popular right now in the summer are her green peas, purple hull peas, and black-eyed peas.

Growing organic produce is an important part of Kay’s management plan. She takes soil samples and visits with the local NRCS staff to determine the best cover crops to add nutrients to her soil. Kay is also well-known for her herbal teas and lotions. She markets her products at two farmers markets she helped establish in Waco, and her tea is offered for sale in a local health food store.

Kay has also been instrumental in teaching the public how to transform vacant lots into productive spaces for agriculture by establishing edible gardens around Waco.

Kay recently worked with NRCS through a grant from Minority Landowners Magazine to install a 20-by-24-foot high tunnel according to NRCS specifications. This structure now gives Kay the ability to grow peppers, tomatoes, and some herbs during the off-season and sell them at her various sale locations.

"NRCS has helped me so much to learn how to rotate my crops and grow delicious food on a small amount of land," concluded Kay. "The high tunnel has been a game changer. I used to only plant things I knew I could grow in the winter. Now I can grow summer produce, or just about anything I want."

Story and Photos Credit: DeeAnn Littlefield, USDA Public Affairs

#14 Arizona

A Successful Dairy with Humble Beginnings

Danzeisen Dairy has a rich history of farming and humble beginnings. The operation is situated in Laveen, Arizona, an urban village in the City of Phoenix, and has been part of the local dairy business since it first opened in 1959.

The dairy is currently operated by Kevin Danzeisen and his father, Clayton. In 2008, the Danzeisens reached out to their local Farm Service Agency office to obtain a beginning farmer loan to help with their funding needs. The beginning loans help farmers become more competitive and successful, open new markets, and provide needed assistance for the beginning years.

"The loan helped us with access to capital – to keep the lights on during a difficult time," said Kevin. "It helped us get credit during a hard time in the dairy industry."

More recently, the farm also participated in FSA's Margin Protection Program, a voluntary risk management program which provided a safety-net for dairy producers. They are currently looking into signing up for the Dairy Market Coverage Program for protection when the difference between the all milk price and the average feed price falls below a certain dollar threshold selected by the producer.

When it comes to the dairy, the Danzeisens strive to provide a great-tasting and quality product to their customers. They invest in their Holstein and Swiss cows by making sure they are in the best of health, get regular vet checkups, and eat an alfalfa-based diet. The cows are milked three times daily and the calves also are raised on the farm. The dairy is unique because they bottle their milk in glass jars to preserve the freshness and flavor without adding hormones.

"We started bottling our milk directly from our farm in order to provide great-tasting dairy products for the market," added Kevin.

In addition to bottling traditional milk, the dairy has six additional milk flavors including chocolate, strawberry, cold brew coffee, orange, root beer, and eggnog, which is offered seasonally. The dairy added a general store, where customers can buy milk products, tour the dairy, or take a butter making class.

When asked what life is like as a farmer, Kevin replied, “Nothing is better than raising a family in farming.” He adds that a new farmer looking to get into the dairy business should have plenty of capital to maintain the business, and to take the absolute best care of the cows.

Lastly, he credits the support from the Arizona community for helping his dairy remain successful.

Story Credit: Santa Murillo, FSA Arizona.
Photo Credit: Claudia Kunkel on behalf of Danzeisen Dairy

#15 Wyoming

The Heart of Conservation

For the Tarvers of Gillette, Wyoming, living and working on the land is a family affair that has spanned generations. Starting with 18,000 acres in 1956, when Lynn and Bernice Tarver first leased land, the Tarver Heart X Ranch now consists of about 60,000 acres, including owned and leased private, federal, and state land.

Presently, Lynn’s son Bob, along with wife Nancy, and their two sons, and their wives, and grandchildren all take part in operating the ranch. They raise beef cattle and grow wheat, barley, oats, and hay.

The Tarver family has a great respect for the land that has sustained them for more than 60 years. This is evident through their rich history of conservation stewardship.

Weathering Disasters

Through the years, the Tarvers have weathered droughts, wildfires, and blizzards. The Emergency Conservation Program – offered by the Farm Service Agency – helped the Travers replace burned out fences and pipelines. The Livestock Indemnity Program helped them recover some costs from livestock losses, while the Non-Insured Disaster Assistance Program provided relief from crops and forage losses.

USDA’s earlier programs focused on disaster assistance. But as programs evolved, and other types of programs were introduced through farm bills, including conservation programs offered by Natural Resources Conservation Service, they put them to work on their family farm.

“Disaster assistance programs from FSA have made a difference in those toughest times,” said Nancy. “The partnership with FSA and NRCS has been an integral part of our ranching and sustainability.”

Conservation Through the Years

The Tarvers have enhanced over 30,000 acres and expanded their operation with help from conservation programs and technical assistance provided by NRCS.

Programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program helped the Tarvers install miles of water pipelines, spring developments, and water storage tanks to provide water to their cattle, even during the driest times.

USDA conservation programs not only help the Tarvers operation, but they also benefit wildlife and the overall environment. Through the Conservation Stewardship Program, they established pollinator habitat, practice integrated pest management to reduce environmental effects, and harvest hay in a manner that allows for wildlife escape. This is especially important for threatened, endangered, or at-risk species like the sage grouse that frequently inhabit the Tarvers’ hay fields.

“Conservation programs have made it possible to be better stewards of the land,” Nancy said. “We’ve experienced increased productivity of land and livestock. Water development has enhanced and improved soil health. There’s been less erosion; animal conditions have improved; and wildlife has benefited.”

Story by Molly Rose, USDA

#16 Washington

Sage Grouse and Bitterroot

In the semi-arid rangeland above the community of Okanogan, Washington, Jean and Buzz Berney have run cattle on the Confederated Tribes of Colville Reservation (CTCR) for the past 51 years.

Jean, a Colville Tribal member, worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve the rangeland ground near Little Goose Lake. Jean has since leased this land to a local cattle rancher as part of the tribal range unit. Jean is actively involved in the management of this land because of her deep connection with the wildlife species and the culturally significant plants that call this landscape home.

A Partnership for Wildlife

Bluebunch, Great Basin wildrye, and Wyoming sagebrush make the range unit an ideal habitat for the greater sage-grouse, an iconic ground-dwelling bird of the West that has experienced significant population declines.

With the help of NRCS, Jean was able to implement several conservation practices that benefited both the rangelands and the wildlife. The effort has been a collaboration among NRCS, the range permitee, and the reservation's range department to identify conservation practices that address resource concerns.

"We've always been interested in the wildlife and maintaining the wildlife no matter where we are, whether at our home or on my range unit out on the reservation," said Jean. "All wildlife is important to us."

The conservation work on this land is part of the Sage Grouse Initiative. The initiative started in 2010 as a highly-targeted and science-based landscape approach to proactively conserve sage-grouse and to sustain the working rangelands that support western ranching economies. Nearly 40 percent of all sage grouse habitat is on privately-owned lands

Traditional Ties

Will Keller, NRCS rangeland management specialist, has worked with Jean and Buzz to identify resource concerns through a Coordinated Resource Management plan.

"For the Little Goose Lake Range Unit, the Sage Grouse Initiative work reduced the amount of fence by over five miles, which was a collision hazard for low-flying sage grouse birds," says Will.

The lack of dependable water for livestock hampered their ability to implement a prescribed grazing system, but a new well and solar-powered pump allowed a grazing rest rotation to be implemented. This rest benefits sage grouse nesting habitat. All of these practices were funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

NRCS helped Jean improve the production of the native perennial vegetation that is beneficial for sage grouse and plant biodiversity. Grazing infrastructure improvements coupled with management from willing participants helps improve the rangeland for culturally significant plants like bitterroot that provide subsistence for the Colville Tribe's root feasts and ceremonies.

Colville Tribal member Elaine Timentwa remembers collecting plants with her relatives in this area as a child.

“She has come out to the rangeland pastures and says the plants are now as abundant and healthy as she remembers when she was young,” say Will. Through conservation efforts like Jean’s, we can help protect and restore indigenous food systems while maintaining a sustainable working landscape.

Story by Gina Kerzman, NRCS