



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Building a Healthy Community

Each Friday, visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Meet farmers, producers, and landowners who are working to improve their operations with

This Friday visit [Groundwork Elizabeth](#), a 501c3 non-profit located in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Elizabeth is the fourth largest city in New Jersey and is one of the most urbanized communities in the state. Founded in 2003, the organization's mission is to build healthy, sustainable and equitable communities.

Priority Areas

Groundwork Elizabeth works hand-in-hand with the private sector, government partners and community residents to provide resources, education, and training to the environmentally underserved. Their efforts in Elizabeth and surrounding Union County communities have led to the development of programs and projects that educate, improve and enhance local urban-challenged environments and address quality of life issues of environmental and food injustice.

The organization has four priority areas: healthy communities, youth development, urban waters and trails, and green infrastructure. One of their strongest efforts to date has been directed toward urban agriculture, which includes assisting with the construction of over 175 community gardens in the Elizabeth Area. These gardens not only educate about healthy, local foods, but also foster connection, awareness, and appreciation of agriculture from city residents.

Groundwork Elizabeth's partnership with USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) began at an outreach event. Since then NRCS staff from the local field office in Frenchtown have built a relationship providing outreach and education to Groundwork Elizabeth and their numerous partner community gardens.

Extending the Growing Season

In addition to outreach, NRCS's relationship grew through technical soils assistance. Since 2012, NRCS Soil Scientists Richard Shaw, Edwin Muniz, and Fred Schoenagel have provided soil technical assistance to over 100 urban farms and community gardens throughout the state. Most of their assistance has included soil testing using X-Ray Fluorescence analysis to test for unsafe levels of heavy metals in the soil. In 2017, Groundwork Elizabeth worked with Shaw and Muniz to have several sites tested for heavy metals contamination using the XRF technology.



In June 2019, Groundwork Elizabeth signed an [Environmental Quality Incentive Program](#) contract with NRCS to install two high tunnels and cover crop at the Elmora MicroFarm. This EQIP contract was the first urban agriculture financial assistance contract for NRCS in Union County.

EQIP is NRCS' most popular and most frequently utilized conservation program. Thousands of producers voluntarily enroll in the program every year to address priority resource concerns benefiting both their agricultural operation and environmental quality.

"We are thrilled to be able to extend our growing season," said Urban Agriculture Director Jackie Park Albaum. "This is especially useful in engaging the over 26,000 students in Elizabeth Public Schools".

The Groundwork Elizabeth MicroFarm was created as an educational resource providing service-based learning opportunities for the surrounding community. They educate students of all ages to play, discover and interact in a safe outdoor farm environment while learning how to garden, harvest and prepare foods they have grown.

Showcasing Urban Agriculture

In July 2019, Groundwork Elizabeth was also awarded a [Conservation Innovation Grant](#) through NRCS to use the Elmora MicroFarm as a showcase farm for urban agriculture and NRCS conservation best management practices. These competitive grants drive public and private sector innovation in resource conservation.

A major focus of the project is to evaluate several conservation practices, including high tunnels, cover crops, rain gardens, and micro-irrigation and pollinator habitat, to better inform NRCS on how these practices can be properly utilized in the urban environment.

"We are so excited and honored to be awarded this [grant] and to expand our partnership with NRCS," said Jonathan Philips, executive director for [Groundwork Elizabeth](#). "This is a great opportunity for us to help make substantive changes in agricultural restoration and conservation practices that can eventually be perfected here in Elizabeth and shared throughout similar urban communities."

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and recover from natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

For more information about USDA programs and services, [contact your local USDA service center.](#)



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Photo Credit: Groundwork Elizabeth and NRCS