



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Conservation Gumbo

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 meet Eric Unkel in Kinder, Louisiana. Eric and his family leveraged the power of partnerships for a recipe of conservation success.

The Best Gumbo

What makes the best gumbo? Some say the Cajun trinity of ingredients - onions, bell pepper and celery. Many argue the roux is the basic building block for creating the ultimate gumbo. But everyone agrees that the best gumbo is one that utilizes a combination of ingredients that, with time and careful attention, achieves the quintessential cool weather staple of the South. In the world of natural resources, partnerships are the roux in the recipe for a successful conservation gumbo.

In the rice fields of southwest Louisiana, the Unkel family farm is cooking up some of the best conservation gumbo around. Eric Unkel, third generation farmer, is one third of a big family farm which has been farming the land since the early 1920s.

Eric's portion of the farm consists of 3,600 acres of rice and crawfish, with some cattle on the side.

The base of this conservation gumbo began in the early 2000's when the price of fuel sky rocketed.

"That was one of the biggest motivators, we were looking for ways to become more energy efficient and more conservation-minded," Eric explained.

Conserving Water

By using the process of precision land leveling, producers are able to reduce the amount of water it takes to flood rice fields.

"Our relationship with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Allen Soil and Water Conservation District began with laser leveling a few rice fields at a time," Eric said. "We could see the difference it was making by lowering energy costs and reducing soil erosion, so we kept adding field after field. Right now, about 90 percent of our fields are precision leveled."

Eric worked with USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) for technical expertise and financial assistance through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#).

"We are so much more efficient now, through land leveling we have gotten rid of over 100 levees, not to mention the grade stabilization structures and irrigation pipeline installed."



Barrett Lyons, NRCS district conservationist, agrees with Eric about the improvements that have been made.

“We started working together originally to increase efficiency and over the years we have addressed more resources concerns including nutrient and pest management,” Barrett said. “In addition to improved land conservation, the Unkels have better farm management and ultimately increased financial stability.”

Improvement through Partnership

One of the most significant contributions to the Unkel farm is being made through a partnership between Ducks Unlimited, USA Rice, SWCDs and NRCS in the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#). RCPP promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address natural resource concerns.

“RCPP is providing us the technical expertise and financial assistance to install several ditch pumps, which will create a tail water system,” Eric said. “We will be able to recycle the water coming off the fields back into the fields. We are getting a lot more use out of the water we are using.”

Kyle Soileau, Ducks Unlimited rice stewardship coordinator for Louisiana, is pleased with the work he sees happening on the Unkel’s land.

“What Eric is doing with his land is exactly what we are trying to achieve with RCPP,” Kyle said. “There are two parts to RCPP, the first is through EQIP when farmers like Eric make the switch from using ground water to surface water to decrease pressure on aquifers. Here on the Unkel farm we were able to cost-share on bayou pumps and pipeline.”

The second part of RCPP is the [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) component that includes providing habitat for migrating waterfowl by extending the time water is held on agricultural lands.

Becoming More Efficient

The partnership between Ducks Unlimited, USA Rice, NRCS and the Allen SWCD through RCPP has assisted the Unkel farm in becoming more energy and water efficient. In 2017, Ducks Unlimited completed a pumping plant test on all of Eric’s wells. They found what previously cost \$62.00 an acre to flood his fields now cost about \$30.00 an acre after converting to surface water.

With RCPP, not only does the Unkels bottom line and water quality improve but natural resources were also conserved.

“The partnership that DU has with NRCS, USA Rice, local SWCDs and grower organizations allows us to examine resource concerns from many different angles and then come up with the best solutions. Every organization brings a different perspective to the table,” Kyle said, “Partnerships. That’s how you get great conservation work accomplished.”



Kane Webb, director of field services for USA Rice is encouraged by the great conservation work being done by Unkel and other Louisiana producers.

“These growers really do care about the land and the stewardship aspect of agriculture while producing a high-quality product that consumers can trust and want to use,” Kane said. “These producers are also making their operations more efficient and leaving a legacy for the next generation of farmers.”

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

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

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