

Cindy Ayers Elliott of Foot Print Farms, Hinds County Landowner Success Story—

Story by Judi Craddock

Photos Courtesy of Don Lackey and Justin Fritscher

On a beautiful, early Mississippi spring day in May, I had the exciting honor and privilege of getting to know one of the nicest and most enthusiastic conservationists I've ever met—Cindy Ayers Elliott, owner of Foot Print Farms located in West Jackson just inside the city limits. She calls herself just a farmer and a rancher, but she is so much more!



Don Lackey, Soil Conservation Technician in Hinds County, and Ms. Elliott are going over conservation plans for "Foot Print Farms."



One of the 30 goats Ms. Elliott is raising, this one being a twin.

A graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with a masters degree in Economic Development, she worked as an investment banker in New York City (her office was in the Twin Towers) involved mostly in Trust Management; and was the Administrator to Marshall Bennett, former State Treasurer of Mississippi for 10 years. She later founded the First American Bank—the first African American owned bank, since reconstruction in Mississippi, now known as Liberty Bank, the largest in the nation. During the past five years, she worked in the Mississippi Delta in economic development projects helping to create businesses and creating jobs with small loans.

Now back home in Hinds County with a recent PhD in Urban Higher Education from Jackson State University (but no farm experience), she smiles and speaks enthusiastically as she describes her plans for her 68-acre farm—approximately 28 acres is in pasture where she is raising goats for meat, and the rest in farmland and hardwood timber.

Starting this farming venture, she attended an economic meeting in the Delta with Congressman Bennie Thompson and learned a lot about Farm Bill programs. She did her homework and researched just what she needed to do to begin her farming business—go visit the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)! She had owned her property for around 16 years, first as an investment while raising her two sons, LaGrand and Eric. There's a great fishing pond (4-1/2 pound bass caught recently) that they have all enjoyed too. But when starting her new venture into farming, she needed a complete conservation plan. She attended a few more workshops, then in October 2010, she made her first visit to the Hinds County NRCS Field Office where she met Don Lackey, Soil Conservation Technician. Don soon found out just how serious this lady was, and thus began a great farming camaraderie between the two of them.



Always enthusiastic, Ms. Elliot shows Don Lackey some of the new things she has been doing on the farm.

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Since March 2011, the following practices were cost shared on EQIP 2011:

1. Two Watering Facilities (Code 614) with Heavy Use Protection Areas (Code 561).
2. Prescribed Grazing (Code 528) on 10 acres.
3. Crossfencing (Code 382) creating three grazing cells for goat production—2,600 feet cost-shared, actually built 3,600 feet. Ms. Elliott explained that crossfencing is essential to keep baby goats separated and also for a medical area in case they get sick. Quality and health are so important when raising goats.
4. Critical Area Stabilization on 0.25 acres of sheet and rill erosion, consisting of light grading, shaping and planting.
5. Presently has about 30 goats on her farm.

Driven with short and long term goals, her current plans include raising meat goats and organic vegetable production with her recently approved high tunnel house (after applying under the EQIP Organic Initiative). She is also currently working with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce and the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service to transition to a Certified Organic Grower. She has attended several workshops and classes both locally and nationally to prepare herself for what's ahead.



Checking the goats daily and seeing that they are healthy is very important.



The greatly improved pasture and watering facilities have aided in getting goat production off to a good start.



She continuously shows appreciation of her great partnership with NRCS, Don Lackey and others in the Hinds County Field Office who she feels will help her fulfill her mission in life!



When she talks about the future of her farm, her face lights up as she lists an array of vegetables she is planting—tomatoes, peas, lima beans, okra, squash, onions, and cucumbers just to name a few.

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Pictured above are raised beds constructed from recycled lumber.

grow vegetables for themselves, but they need to learn skills for future career opportunities in producing enough vegetables to sell at farmer's markets. Markets look for quality and quantity. It's very hard to grow enough on your own to satisfy the markets' needs, so forming co-ops with several growers together can meet volume demands. They also need to get certified as an organic farmer. Using the Best Management Practices in growing the vegetables, but the key is working together as a co-op. "It's a new world, you just can't market the same old way anymore!"

Ms. Elliott's advice to others in this business includes keeping great financial records and looking at your production like a business (the only names she had for her goats were "**Cash**" and "**Flow!**"). Knowing she was the new "kid on the block," she sought advice and association with the Mid-Delta Cooperative, mostly made up of vegetable farmers, and Doug Foote, a goat rancher who gave her the first "Cash" and "Flow."



So which one are you, Cash or Flow?



Mama and the twins!

Finally, she visualizes her long term plan as including agri-tourism to bring children out to see how to take care of the beauty of nature, the soil and the land. No doubt, this remarkable lady will achieve all of her goals! And on another note: she mentioned she eventually wants to write a biography and children's books. What else will this incredible lady come up with?

When asked how she came up with the name, "Foot Print Farms," she gave a little story about it. When she came home after her contract ended in the Delta, she sat outside alone, having a relaxing moment, and listening to the wind. She asked out loud, "What am I going to do now?" Strangely, she

heard in the sounds of nature, the trees blowing and swaying in the wind, a message being said to her, "Do you see me?" Somehow, she actually did! And at that moment she realized that Someone was carrying her, leaving one footprint. She knew she was given a special mission, and the farm would therefore be called, "Foot Print Farms."

"This is my future—to live off the land and the land will take care of me." Cindy Ayers Elliott.