

Walthall County Farmers Do Their Part to Help Coastal Ecosystems

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Tylertown, Miss. — Many miles from the Gulf of Mexico, farmers and ranchers are cognizant of what water washes from their lands because they know it all heads to one place: the Gulf. And in Walthall County, Miss., landowners have taken aggressive strides to ensure nutrients and sediments never leave their lands.

“In this county, in the last 20-25 years, it’s been a tremendous change,” said Larry Martin, chairman of the Walthall County Soil and Water Conservation District. “The people of our county have gotten more conservation minded, and NRCS is a big part of that.”

In mid-May, members of the [Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force](#) traveled to Mississippi to explore how agriculture has helped reduce its input of fertilizers and other nutrients into water sources, which eventually flow to the Gulf.

High levels of nutrients cause hypoxic, or oxygen-less, areas. Hypoxic waters kill and scatter marine life, and the largest hypoxic zone is located below the Mississippi River delta. It typically grows to 7,000 square miles or more each year.

The task force’s executive director, John Hankinson, and a few other members visited two farms in the county to see how NRCS has helped farmers and ranchers implement best management practices that are providing environmental benefits downstream.

Danny Andrews, who raises 93 cattle, has used cross-fencing and buffers to keep cows – and their waste – from washing into streams. “I appreciate NRCS and its programs,” Andrews told the task force. “I would not have been able to do this without the help of these USDA agencies.”

The task force also toured Martin’s farm, where he grazes dairy cows and raises soybeans and other row crops. Martin has used no-till for years. “No soil will wash off of this,” Martin said of his field of soybeans, boasting its fledgling plants. “The late ‘50s was the last time a disc has ever been on this field.”

Several NRCS programs offer cost-share incentives for practices that limit sediment and nutrient runoff to the Gulf. These include the [Mississippi River Basin Healthy Waters Initiative](#) (MRBI) and [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP). Practices prescribed by these programs prevent or minimize sediment and nutrient runoff.

“The Gulf of Mexico is one of this nation’s most valuable treasures,” Acting State Conservationist Al Garner said. “The NRCS uses its programs to implement best management practices along the 2,350-mile basin. Data from the U.S. Geological Survey has shown improvements in water quality because of our best management practices, and we want to continue using our programs to leverage environmental and ecological benefits downstream.”

About Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force

President Obama signed an [executive order](#) in October 2010 forming the [Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force](#). The task force is composed of senior officials from state and federal agencies, and it housed in the offices of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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NRCS conservationists and farmers tell John Hankinson (center), executive director of the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force, about the different practices used on Mississippi farms to help prevent nutrient runoff.

Photo by Justin Fritscher, NRCS Mississippi