

Earth Team Volunteers Cleaning Mississippi Lake

By Justin Fritscher, NRCS Mississippi

A special Earth Team volunteer group was recently formed to benefit Ross Barnett Reservoir, in central Mississippi. Keep the Rez Beautiful was created by an NRCS employee in late 2010 to promote conservation and water quality in the reservoir.

Earth Team is the volunteer workforce for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Earth Team volunteers help get conservation on the ground on private lands across the nation, and the Ross Barnett Reservoir group will help further NRCS' work in this critical waterway.



LEFT: Keep the Rez Beautiful volunteers clean up trash along Pelahatchie Creek near the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

The reservoir, in the suburbs of Jackson, is one of Mississippi's most vulnerable watersheds. It provides water to more than 150,000 people and recreation for 2 million people each year. Over the years, NRCS has helped prevent erosion and improve the water of the

reservoir and its streams through programs like the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, which has stabilized the banks of streams in urbanized areas, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which has helped farmers reduce their impact on these waterways.

To build upon this investment, Mississippi NRCS Public Affairs Specialist Jeannine May worked with reservoir-area residents to found Keep the Rez Beautiful (KRB). KRB is a local affiliate of Keep America Beautiful and Keep Mississippi Beautiful, and all volunteers are enrolled as Earth Team members. As of September 2012, they have logged more than 1,800 hours of service.

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KRB's largest project in 2011 and 2012 was reducing litter on the reservoir's upper sandbars, a hotspot for summer recreation—and trash. Working with local partners like the Pearl River Valley Water Supply District and Keep Mississippi Beautiful, KRB volunteers launched a "boat 'n tote" campaign to encourage those using the sandbars to carry their trash off the islands. The results were almost immediate. Rather than five pontoon boatloads of trash off the islands, the water supply district only removed five bags of trash.

Volunteers are also developing a park and providing local teachers with environmental education resources.

This project has won several awards, including the Innovation Award from Keep America Beautiful, RC&D/NRCS Earth Team Partnership Award, and Water, Soil and Air Conservationist of the Year from Mississippi Wildlife Federation.

May says KRB promises more projects in the future that will improve the reservoir and its shorelines.

In fiscal year 2011, more than 22,000 Earth Team volunteers donated 435,653 hours of service to NRCS estimated to be worth \$9.3 million. Since Earth Team was formed in 1985, over half a million volunteers have helped NRCS with its conservation mission.

For more information on Earth Team Volunteers, visit www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov.

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