

Earth Team National Winners to be Announced

The U. S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of Kansas recently received three national volunteer awards: Earth Team Employee, Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator, and the Earth Team Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD)/National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD).

The Earth Team is a program that partners volunteers with NRCS employees to help conserve, maintain, and improve natural resources and the environment. In essence, they help meet the agency's mission—Helping People Help the Land.

Kansas received the Earth Team Employee Award—Bernadette Luncsford, District Conservationist, St. Francis, Kansas, received the Earth Team Employee Award for her commitment and contributions to the Earth Team Program. Bernadette's area was able to utilize 134 volunteers and capture an amazing 999 hours! The key to Bernadette's successful program is she volunteers herself, not only taking advantage of the opportunities through NRCS and USDA but in her own community—donating blood, sorting donations at church, and speaking at civic organizations. One of Bernadette's most notable endeavor's is the Community Garden Group she founded in St. Francis, Kansas. Through this, she has recruited volunteers in non-traditional ways and will meet the people where they are if need be—if someone is homebound and wants to help, she delivers produce to them to be washed or recipe cards to be cut out for the food pantry packages. This gives everyone—the disabled, homebound, etc.—a chance to be Earth Team volunteers. Bernadette and her volunteers believe in the old adage

“ . . . if there is a will, there is a way. . . ” and they ensure that the will is met with a way!

Kansas also received the Volunteer Coordinator Award—Toni Flax, Rangeland Management Specialist, Hill City, Kansas, is an Area Earth Team (ET) Volunteer Coordinator for nine Management Units in Kansas and for 27 offices. Like Bernadette, Toni also leads by example. She volunteers as a 4-H Leader for the Graham County Rangeland and Soils project and feels that volunteering in her community is very important and that her contributions may give her 4-H club members the confidence they need to succeed. After all, Toni started out as an Earth Team volunteer during high school and has now come full circle not only as a full-time NRCS employee, but as a state and national award-winning Earth Team Volunteer Coordinator!

The Earth Team KACD and NACD were also awarded to Kansas—The Jackson County Conservation District (JCCD), Holton, Kansas, was recognized for its use of volunteers and its varied projects, not only in its local area, but surrounding communities as well. This past year, just a few of the projects the JCCD were involved in were:

Assisted with the vegetation plantings on a streambank stabilization project; lined up the volunteer assistance of the Jackson Heights High School stream team in planting the willows and seedlings

JCDD board spouses judge the annual poster contest—over 350 posters submitted

Assisted with the Delaware River Watershed Tour in Jackson County

Hosted a no-till field day; assisted with the cover crop plantings on two different dates in preparation of field day

Hosted the annual Ag/Water Festival for 3rd and 4th grade students in 3 schools at Banner Creek Reservoir with over 400 students, teachers, and volunteers attending

Hosted a Livestock-Drought Workshop to address winter cattle feeding, drought recovery in pastures, sericea lespedeza, and blue green algae in stock water ponds

The JCCD was also involved in many other projects throughout the year to include sponsoring an essay contest, hosting Women In Ag (WIA) meetings, assisting in an Area Soil Judging Contest, and many other items. With such active participation from JCCD and the Earth Team volunteers involved, positive differences can and are being made in our conserving our natural resources in Kansas!

Kansas NRCS State Conservationist Eric B. Banks gives credit to his state's Earth Team success to staff members simply taking a personal interest in each volunteer and encouraging them to explore new interests. "Staff interviews each volunteer in order to find where they can best be used, and then we find appropriate jobs to fit their abilities and interest," said Banks. "I am very proud of the many dedicated Earth Team volunteers who have committed their time and talents in conserving and protecting the soil, water, and wildlife in Kansas."

Banks said he was also pleased that seven current Kansas NRCS employees first started their conservation work as Earth Team volunteers. "This program offers many benefits to the environment and to taxpayers and our clients. The Earth Team also allows our volunteers a chance to see if our conservation work is a career path they would like to follow," Banks said. "These dedicated employees are another reminder of the value of this program."

In fiscal year 2012, every Kansas field office used Earth Team volunteers to help its staff. Over 2,648 Kansas volunteers donated 20,188 hours assisting NRCS employees with conservation mission.

National Volunteer Week is April 21-27, 2013. "The NRCS theme for this year puts it best," said Banks. "Celebrate Volunteers' allows us to stretch available resources and helps us put additional conservation practices on the ground. The efforts of our volunteers help us to improve our land and wildlife habitat, clean our water and air, and also helps us improve the environment for everyone." Banks hopes National Volunteer Week will motivate others to volunteer to help NRCS with our conservation mission.

For more information about being an Earth Team volunteer in Kansas, contact Jan Klaus, Volunteer Coordinator, 785-625-2588, or go to the Kansas NRCS homepage at www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov, and click on Earth Team Volunteers. Additional information on the Earth Team Volunteer Program is available online at www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/volunteers or by calling (toll-free) 888-526-3227. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.