

Conservation Corner for November 8, 2016

Opportunities for Veterans through the USDA-NRCS

Serving those who have served

By Jim Williams
Wexford Conservation District

The U.S. Government has a long history of assisting veterans in becoming successful agricultural producers - from the first GI Bill passed in 1944 to the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs of today.

My father, Harold Williams, grew up on a farm near Rockford, Michigan. In the 1940's he left the farm to serve in WWII as an aircraft mechanic stationed in England. When he returned, he received technical training in agriculture. As a teenager, I can remember my father speaking of attending USDA sponsored programs through the MSU Extension Service. Many other veterans from WWII attended Michigan State College (University) after the war to receive technical training in agriculture as part of the GI Bill. My father went on to take over the family farm with his younger brother Jerry, and had many successful years farming and raising a family.

Today, the NRCS provides veterans of the U.S. Armed Services who have less than ten years of farming experience the opportunity to receive preference when applying for conservation programs. These voluntary conservation programs benefit agricultural producers as well as the environment and provide both technical and financial assistance. Some of the benefits available include one-on-one assistance to learn more about the soil and water resources on a farm, and how to ensure that these resources remain healthy over the long term. There are also cost-share programs for implementing conservation practices such as nutrient management systems, tree planting, and soil health improvement.

Veterans Programs in Our Area

Contained within the 2014 Farm Bill is a provision that essentially puts veterans' applications at the top of the pile when applying for assistance from the USDA-NRCS if that veteran is also a beginning farmer. Kevin Brown, a veteran from McBain, has recently begun working with the NRCS.

Conservation practices that he has planned with NRCS include planting a windbreak and installing a hoophouse (unheated greenhouse). The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) offered by NRCS will reimburse him for a portion of his costs. Kevin states that the windbreak will help protect the hoophouse from wind, manage the snow around the hoophouse, and provide wildlife habitat. The high tunnel will enable him to extend the growing season and provide protection for delicate crops.

One of the family's goals for the farm is to involve other veterans in the farming operation as a therapeutic alternative for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As a veteran, Kevin finds that the working of the soil is a great way to relieve the stress of the day. He encourages other veterans to consider doing the same.

Two Programs Available

The Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers in order to address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits. These include improved water and air quality, conserved surface and ground water, reduced soil erosion and sedimentation, and improved or created wildlife habitat.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) helps agricultural producers maintain and improve their existing conservation systems and adopt additional conservation activities to address priority resources concerns. Participants earn CSP payments for conservation performance — the higher the performance, the higher the payment.

The application process for NRCS’s conservation programs is continuous, but funding selections are made at specific times. Veterans who are interested in NRCS programs are encouraged to contact us in November to make sure that they are eligible for programs being offered in 2017. If you are a veteran who is a beginning farmer and are also a member of a minority group, you may qualify for higher cost share rates.

Although giving preferential consideration to veteran farmers is a requirement of the 2014 Farm Bill, in NRCS we believe it is our *privilege* to work with veterans and are honored to be able to do so. Giving veterans a higher priority for EQIP and CSP is a small way to say “thank you” for their service.

To learn about EQIP CSP, this initiative, and other technical and financial assistance available through NRCS conservation programs, contact Jim Williams at (231) 775-7681, ext. 3, or stop by the office located at 7192 East 34 Road in Cadillac. You can also visit the USDA-NRCS website at www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted. The USDA-NRCS is an equal opportunity employer, provider, and lender.

Local veterans may also be interested to learn that the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan is hosting the national organization’s annual stakeholder conference from Nov. 30 to Dec. 2 in East Lansing. USDA-NRCS staff will be presenting sessions on soil health, securing USDA funding for your agriculture project, and conservation planning. In addition, the conference will include information on livestock, cropping, bees, business and finance, marketing, employment. Farm visits and opportunities for networking will also be included. For more information on the conference, visit their website at www.farmvetco.org/fvsc/



Kevin and Jeanette Brown of McBain are in the center of this photo taken at a soil health workshop held in July at the USDA-NRCS Plant Materials center in East Lansing. The workshop was designed specifically for veterans and gave them the opportunity to learn about the science and management behind good soil health. The USDA-NRCS is looking forward to continuing their partnership with the Farmer Veteran Coalition of Michigan.



Conservation programs for veterans have been important for many decades. Harold Williams (at right) was a World War II veteran and father of Jim Williams. He is shown with his brother Jerry standing next to their potato truck in 1960. After his service, Harold took advantage of agriculture programs for veterans offered at that time, eventually becoming a local leader in conservation by both implementing conservation practices on his farm, and by serving as a director for the Kent County Soil Conservation District.



Soldiers returning from WWII had access to funding from the G.I. Bill, and MSU welcomed the returning soldiers to campus. Many of these students chose to study agriculture. In 1946, the population of campus doubled in size, and 600 male veterans bunked in Jenison Fieldhouse until dormitories could be built. Female veterans had bunks on the top floor of the Union. Photo curtesy of MSU Archives A000351