

South Carolina Farm Family Works Together to Raise Organic Livestock

by Amy Overstreet Maxwell, Public Affairs Specialist, NRCS, South Carolina

On a spring day in Chesterfield, South Carolina, a family works in unison to manage cattle, sheep and goats. This is a daily routine and a way of life for Paxton Pegues, his wife Olivia, and their four children Rachel, Marcellus, Spencer, and Lanier. Today, like every day, the family moves temporary fencing to rotate their cattle as part of a grazing system. A tenth generation farm family that has deep roots in the county, the Pegues' are proud of the 319-acre area they call the Carolina Nature Conservancy. Dedicated to improving wildlife habitat, controlling invasive species and establishing native grasses, they manage their land without the use commercial fertilizers, chemicals, or parasite control agents. Their goal is to return this land to the state it was in prior to European settlement, when open grasslands and sparsely wooded areas were grazed by animals.

This is a farm family that illustrates how hard work, a strong family bond, and an unwavering conservation ethic can result in a sustainable and enduring farming operation. Working closely with their local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office to manage their natural resources, their exemplary stewardship efforts were recognized when they were named the *2010 Farmers of the Year* by the Chesterfield Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

They are protecting and improving natural resources with cost-share assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Organic Initiative. They implemented organic nutrient and pest management plans, installed a well and water tanks, and developed a grazing plan. In addition, over 3,000 feet of permanent fence was installed to exclude livestock from a stream and wetland area adjacent to their pasture. Their unique rotational grazing system utilizes temporary fencing and roughly 4,000 feet of permanent water line with quick-valve connections that allow the use of three portable water tanks. Future goals involve installing a solar pumping station to harness the sun's energy to provide water for the livestock on another portion of the property.

They also have two Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts—one on pasture and the other on forestland. CSP helps them monitor key grazing areas and adjust management based on the data collected. They also limit the amount of fertilizer and feed brought onto the farm which reduces the concentration of nutrients, and they rotate supplemental mineral and feeding areas and limit livestock access to surface water sources. Silvopasture is another

practice that the family hopes to integrate into their operation through CSP, and this will allow them to manage timber and pasture as a single integrated system.

Paxton believes that organic methods can help sustain the land, and when he talks about farming, his love for the land, and why he strives to mimic nature's processes, he exhibits a sincere and contagious spirit. "We want to be green because it's the right thing to do, and our goal is to use the least amount of fossil fuel as we can, both on the farm and at home." His approach to land use is holistic, and he is intrigued by a philosophy to land management called permaculture which promotes working with, rather than against, nature. By studying and following nature's patterns, permaculture encourages designing farming systems based on natural ecosystems.

Besides the daily chores on the farm, two of their children, Rachel and Spencer, work with select animals to prepare them for the show ring. The duo took several animals to the 2010 South Carolina State Fair and won ribbons in all 14 classes entered.

NRCS District Conservationist Charles Babb and Soil Conservation Technician Sue Griggs work with the family and have developed a professional relationship as well as a friendship. "This family truly loves what they do, and they have taught us a lot about organic methods and techniques," said Babb.

Paxton speaks eloquently about the rewards of farming, and has a long list of reasons of why he loves it. "I enjoy seeing the progression of our work, and the before and after effects."

Paxton says team work is vital to their family run business. Together they have created an operation that will leave a legacy of rich natural resources. Paxton credits his mother for inspiring him to be a steward of the environment. "She wanted this land to be here for future generations, and I am going to do all that I can to make that happen."

"This is a family that is working hard and caring for the land for all the right reasons," concluded Babb.