



New Mexico

Insider

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NRCS SELECTS STC FOR NEW MEXICO

J. Xavier Montoya now at the Helm

"It took my breath away to see this building. It was literally being built when I first started as a co-op student," said J. Xavier Montoya, new State Conservationist for Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) New Mexico.

Montoya was born and raised in Las Cruces, New Mexico. "While I was attending New Mexico State University I met John Montoya (no relation) who was working for the Soil Conservation Service (now known as the NRCS). He told me 'I'm going to give you a shot'... and I ran with it. Twenty years later, here I am as the state conservationist in New Mexico," said the newly named NRCS New Mexico's top conservationist.

His NRCS career began when he accepted a position as a Range Conservationist on the Navajo Nation in Arizona where he provided support to five NRCS offices. He then went to Lordsburg, New Mexico as a Range Conservationist. "Lordsburg is a beautiful place," he noted.



NRCS employees look on as the new STC shares his vision for NRCS NM

After three years in the Lordsburg office the District Conservationist slot in Douglas, Arizona became available.

While in Arizona, he became the Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager (HEPM) for Arizona and later for the Western NRCS Region. His HEPM work didn't go unnoticed -- getting the attention of the NRCS National Headquarters (NHQ) where he was selected to serve as the national Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager in Washington, D.C. "I was an oddity there -- a District Conservationist working in the National Headquarters," Montoya added.

He was working in the nation's capitol as the 2002 Farm Bill was being developed. It was at this stage in his career that he was tapped to join the national Technical Service Provider (TSP) staff. "My role was to travel throughout the country and promote the TSP program. I quickly learned that many folks didn't like the program and I got hammered with comments from the field.



New STC, J. Xavier Montoya speaking to NRCS employees

Continued on page 4

What's Inside:

2 State Conservationists Notes

3 Blue Hole Wetland Protection..
SuperTracker– USDA nutrition tool

4 STC Continued..
Safety Guide-Coming Soon

5 NRCS in the News..
Los Lunas PMC Report..
Mescalero Apache Benefits from CSP Contracts

6 Los Lunas PMC Participates in National Pilot Project

7 Civil Rights

8 IRS Announcement on TSP..
Retirement Planning

9 Retirement continued..
Earth Team Volunteer Recognized

10 Personnel News

NRCS New Mexico

State Conservationist's Notes

I am happy and humbled to be at this point in my life. I am happy to be returning to my home – the Land of Enchantment – and humbled to have received my selection as your State Conservationist.

I am a firm believer that we need to view challenges as opportunities in order to affect a positive outcome. While we can't overcome every challenge that we face in our lives, having the right perspective going into it improves your chance of reaching a positive result.

I want to take this time to discuss some of my beliefs:

- I believe in the Line Staff; I believe in structure
- I believe in honesty
- I believe in a strong Area structure
- I believe in putting the right people in the right places
- I believe in Training and how it's conducted; From now on, this will be the last budget item cut
- I believe the State Office supports the Field Office

I want to also share my Vision for NRCS New Mexico. It consists of three major points: (1) Conservation Planning and Training; (2) the expectation that we will be Open, Honest, Transparent and Accountable; (3) and for us to be prepared to meet all of our challenges. Now I want to elaborate on each of these points:

1a.) Conservation Planning

When talking Conservation Planning, we must be certain that we are using sound scientific data to base our



**Xavier Montoya, NRCS NM
State Conservationist**

decisions and the guidance that we provide to our customers.

1b.) Training

- Provide the tools for our folks to do their jobs safely, efficiently, effectively and correctly
- Review our training process to determine if we're meeting our agency and employees' needs
- Make the best use of available training resources and opportunities
- Encourage employees and supervisors to openly communicate and map out Individual Development Plans



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Continued on page 4

NRCS Protects Rare, Blue Hole - Red Hawk

NRCS New Mexico is making great strides in improving water and air quality and wildlife habitat at two of the state's extremely rare "Blue Holes," through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

There are 275 acres which encompasses two small surface lakes and wetlands that are being restored. The area is adjacent to the State of New Mexico's Blue Hole fish hatchery and provides long term protection for the wetland. The wetland is a diverse and unique landscape offering a variety of wildlife and water quality benefits.

Some of the benefits include restoring the federally listed Pecos Sunflower and the Wright's Marsh Thistle, as well as increasing and maintaining the Hatchery's water supply. The Red Hawk project is a perpetual easement that provides wetland protection and development control into the foreseeable



future. WRP includes a variety of enrollment options, including permanent easements and 30-year contracts and 10-year restoration only contracts. All WRP easements, including this one include a restoration component.

The removal of exotic trees including Salt Cedar and Russian Olive

are part of this restoration effort. The completed project will greatly enhance the wetland and provide wildlife benefits to the property and to our environment. Similar wetland complexes are held by various public entities in the vicinity offering recreational benefits to the public as well.

USDA Launches New Online Tool to Track Nutrition

If you are among the many Americans whose New Year's resolution is to eat healthy and exercise more, USDA has a tool for you.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack released USDA's new nutrition *SuperTracker*, a resource designed to help individu-

als as they make changes to maintain a healthy weight and lower their risk of chronic disease.

"Overcoming the health and nutrition challenges we face as a nation is critical and the *SuperTracker* provides customers with an assortment of tools to do just that," said Vilsack. "This easy-to-use website will help Americans at all stages of life improve their overall health and well-being as

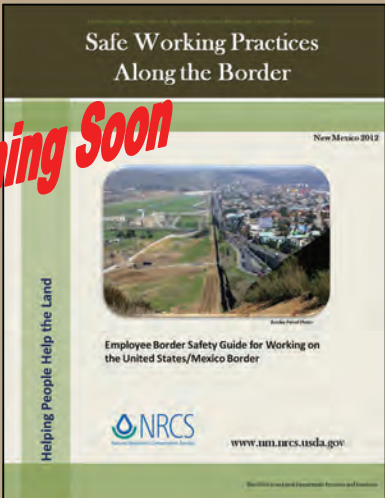


they input dietary and physical activity choices into the tool."

The *SuperTracker* allows individuals to set goals, track foods and physical activity, measure pro-

gress and gain tips and support to help make healthy choices.

To access this free online tool visit ChooseMyPlate.gov.



Coming Soon: A guide for safe working practices for NRCS NM employees working along the border. More details will soon follow.

NRCS Selects STC for NM *continued from cover*

It was a good lesson for me because it helped provide important feedback to NHQ about the program," Montoya recalls.

The new State Conservationist is a strong believer in family – the immediate and the extended NRCS family. "I am a success because of my family," Montoya proudly proclaims. When speaking of the NRCS, he views all of the employees as a family "and we should act as one." He considers NRCS partners as part of that same family as well.

"Conservation Districts are the first part of our family. They're not partners, but family. They were with us from the beginning and will stay with us to the end. Keep our partnerships strong and growing – we need to continuously grow our partnership," Montoya spoke emphatically.

Montoya is the 11th State Conservationist in New Mexico since the first appointment of one in 1951. He replaced Dennis Alexander, who retired in October after serving 40 years with NRCS.

Call for Content

If you have a story you would like featured in an upcoming issue, we want to hear about it. Also, if there is a subject or area you would like to have more information about, please let us know. We want to hear from you! Please contact the Public Affairs staff (Contact information on page 2).

STC Notes *continued from page 2*

2.) Being Open, Honest, Transparent and Accountable

If we do the work we are supposed to do, following the rules and policies as prescribed, then we have no need to concern ourselves with violating public trust or misrepresenting our agency. I will be honest with each of you in the manner in which I conduct myself and I expect the same from everyone who works for NRCS New Mexico. We have nothing to hide and should be willing to have our work withstand the light of day.

3.) Meeting all of our Challenges

The challenges are many – so are the opportunities. The budget; audit; new and current customers; new and current Farm Bill; energy

issues; aging workforce; new workforce; technology; our structure; and soil health are just some of what we will deal with today and tomorrow.

There are opportunities to teach the public about whom we are and what we do. Take the opportunity to tell our story at every available moment. We know who our existing customers are; take the opportunity to tell someone who doesn't know about us, our mission and our goals.

NRCS is still one of the best kept secrets in USDA and federal employment. It shouldn't be. We need each of us to serve as a positive role model, a mentor and recruiter for this agency. We need to ensure that our aging workforce

doesn't walk out the door without tapping into that corporate body of knowledge.

My role as your STC is to look into the future not only for the agency, but for New Mexico. I have to look at every decision that I make and ask, 'is it right for New Mexico?' Some decisions you won't like; some you will.

I want you to know that I value your honest and professional perspective. I have an open door policy, stop by and say hello or if you would like to discuss something that needs more time feel free to schedule an appointment so we can discuss what's on your mind. Lastly, I want to thank you for making me feel so that I truly am back home!



NRCS in the News

Local media have begun to show interest in snow and drought data this year, contacting NRCS New Mexico's Hydro Technician Wayne Sleep for the latest information.

In early January, KOAT Meteorologist Eric Green contacted Sleep for information about New Mexico's current drought situation. Sleep explained the conditions and methods NRCS uses to measure and collect snow data. The story aired on KOAT Channel 7 in early January.

Sleep was again contacted in February by another local station, KRQE, for information on the runoff and how it is looking for the year ahead. The story aired on KRQE Channel 13 in early February.

To view the KRQE story follow this link: http://www.krqe.com/dpp/news/environment/runoff-forecast-has-been-released?CMP=201202_emailshare

Mescalero Apache Reservation Reaps Several Benefits from Three CSP Contracts

The 2011 Mescalero Apache Reservation Project encompassed three Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Contracts that led to significant natural resource conservation improvements on their Tribal lands. The Reservation is nearly 720-square miles and home to approximately 4,000 Native Americans located in south-central New Mexico.

The NRCS Alamogordo Field Office works closely with the Mescalero Division of Range Management and Protections to provide conservation technical assistance and

program outreach on a regular basis. The Mescalero Apache Tribe hold three Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts, and hold the largest CSP contract in the state of New Mexico.

The FY 2011 CSP contract consisted of 58,849 acres on tribal land to monitor grazing efficiency, biological suppression of invasive species (musk thistle). The contract also installed solar pumping plants on existing water wells, and 110 wildlife ramps on livestock water facilities.

The Mescalero Apache Reservation CSP work included two additional contracts for 21,395 acres and 30,281 acres, respectively. These contracts were specifically



Water well with solar pump installation

designed to monitor key grazing areas for silvopastures for wildlife habitat, establish pollinator habitat, recycle 100 percent of farm lubricants, and wildlife ramps to existing livestock water facilities.

Thanks to the NRCS Alamogordo's outreach and technical assistance the Mescalero Apache Reservation saw first-hand the positive effects of conservation planning and program participant.

The Los Lunas PMC 2011 Progress Report of Activities is now available!

In this Report:

- USDA-NRCS and the LLPMC Partner with Pecan Producers to Develop Cover Crop Treatments for Pecan Orchards
- Assisting Partners in the Development of Plant Materials
- 'Windbreaker' Big Sacaton Cultivar Release
- National ALMANAC Project
- Continuation of the Biomass Bio-energy Evaluation Study
- Youth Soil and Water Conservation Awareness Days

LOS LUNAS PLANT MATERIALS CENTER 2011 PROGRESS REPORT OF ACTIVITIES

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- Riparian Technology Exported To Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Texas Pollinator Plant Evaluation

To view the report visit: <http://www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/pmc/reports.html>.

Los Lunas Plant Materials Center Participates in National ALMANAC Pilot Project

The Los Lunas Plant Materials Center (PMC) began participation in a nationally recognized project in 2011 to aid in the continuing development of a key vegetation prediction model developed by the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS). The Agricultural Land Management Alternatives with Numerical Assessment Criteria (ALMANAC) model was developed to help understand the response of vegetation to various types of conservation strategies.

The model was designed to simulate the interaction of two or more plant species competing for water, light and nutrients. The competing species can be any type from grass found growing in a forest, to a common cereal grain field infested with a weed species. ALMANAC can also be used to model typical farming monoculture such as corn, sorghum, or wheat crop and has been successfully used to model forage production on native rangeland.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has teamed up with ARS to continue the collection of data for input into the ALMANAC model. The ARS Grassland, Soil and Water Research Laboratory in Temple, TX runs the ALMANAC program and all data gathered for inclusion in the model is sent to that location. The NRCS Plant Materials Program is participating with the ARS in collection of data on native species that are found at different plant material centers located around the United States. In 2011, the Los Lunas PMC began gathering data for the ALMANAC project.

The Los Lunas PMC selected the cultivar release 'Viva' Galleta grass to be used in the ALMANAC project. Galleta is a native warm season range grass and is an important grazing species for large areas of the western United States. The Los Lunas PMC used its existing foundation seed production field of 'Viva' to provide data for input into the ALMANAC model.

A ceptometer was used to gather solar interception in the galleta field during the growing season; it measures the amount of light being intercepted by a plant species using above canopy and below canopy readings taken at a particular time of day and for a specific location. Forage of the plant species canopy is also



Danny Goodson, Agronomist at the Los Lunas PMC, using a ceptometer to measure light interception of galleta forage canopy

needed for the input into the ALMANAC model and this was completed by clipping the plants found in designated plots during the growing season.

Readings from the ceptometer and forage weights were sent to the ARS Grassland, Soil and Water Research Laboratory for analysis and eventual entry into the ALMANAC model. The data will supply much needed information to assist in development of the model and its ability to assess the production potential of many types of land resources. The ALMANAC model is a promising assessment tool that can help guide individuals, agencies and other types of land managers to make informed decisions to help sustain the land they manage.

The Los Lunas PMC is scheduled to participate in data collection for the ALMANAC project in 2012. Along with the galleta grass, the center will add a second native grass species, vine mesquite (*Panicum obtusum*) to the project.

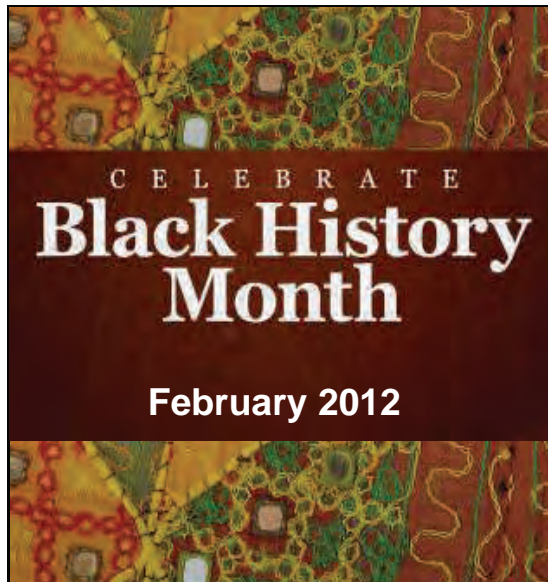
For more information about this project and the Agricultural Research Service's ALMANAC model, contact the Los Lunas Plant Materials Center at 505-865-4684 or Danny Goodson at danny.goodson@nm.usda.gov.

Civil Rights

February is Black History Month—This Year's Theme Recognizes Women

African American History Month began as Negro History Week when Harvard-trained historian Carter Woodson and his organization the *Association for the Study of Negro Life and History* (ASNLH) envisioned and announced the event in 1925. Their goal was to educate Americans about the history of African-Americans, specifically the culture and achievements.

The event was first celebrated during a week in February 1926 that included the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Shortly after the first celebration, black history clubs began to spring up, teachers wanted materials to teach about the subject, and progressive whites began to endorse the effort.



By the 1960s many Americans became aware of the importance of black history with the civil rights movement in full swing, and in 1976 the celebration was expanded

to a month. During a proclamation to the United States, President Gerald Ford urged Americans to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.”

That same year the ASNLH, now the *Association for the Study of African American Life and History* (ASALH), who created the event back in the 1920s, held the first African American History Month. Since 1976, every President has honored the event and the history of African Americans.

This year's theme is “Black Women in American Culture and History.”

March is Women's History Month



Women's history was a foreign topic in the K-12 curriculum *and* to the general public, just 40 years ago. Although women currently outnumber men in colleges across the country, this is only a recent phenomenon.

Harvard, the first college chartered in America, was founded in 1636, but it was not until almost 200 years later, with the charter of Oberlin in 1833, that women were admitted into the college, and even then the courses differed from those of the men.

The topic of women's history remained ignored and

unknown to the general public until the late 1970s when a group out of Sonoma County, California first celebrated “Women's History Week” during the week surrounding March 8, International Women's Day. Their efforts were supported in 1980 when the first Presidential Proclamation came from President Carter declaring the week of March 8, 1980 “National Women's History Week.”

Then in 1987 the *National Women's History Project* group petitioned Congress to expand it into a month-long celebration – and their voices were heard. The month of March was declared National Women's History Month and has been recognized since.

The theme for this year's celebration is “Women's Education – Women's Empowerment.”

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has announced the contribution limits for 2012. These limits affect the amount of contributions participants can make to the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) for the year. The annual limit for elective deferrals will increase from \$16,500 in 2011 to \$17,000 in 2012. Also, the limit for catch-up contributions will remain at \$5,500 in 2012. For TSP purposes, elective deferrals refer to employee contributions that are made on a tax deferred basis. For more information visit www.tsp.gov.

Retirement Planning

History and difference between CSRS and FERS retirement systems.

Let's start with a look at the evolution of the federal retirement system to see how far we've come. Before 1920, civil servants did not have a pension plan. The idea had surfaced from time to time, but the cost of military pensions dating back to the Revolutionary War always led to opposition. Many people believed that civil servants should rely solely on their own savings to provide for their old age.

But on May 22, 1920, a civil service retirement law went into effect. According to *Biography of an Ideal*, a history of the civil service prepared by the Office of Personnel Management, within two months, more than 5,000 employees retired -- some of them more than 90 years old. A mandatory retirement age of 70 was set for most employees who had at least 15 years of service, and employees in more strenuous positions, such as railway mechanics, were required to leave at 62.

Modern federal retirement eligibility rules, allowing retirement at 55 with 30 years of service, date back to 1942. In 1948, provisions were instituted allowing for liberalized retirement benefits for certain employees engaged in investigations

and law enforcement. They could retire at 50 with 20 years of service.

Over time, the Civil Service Retirement (CSRS) became more generous with the addition of survivor's annuity benefits and cost-of-living adjustments, and a switch from using the average of an employee's highest five years of salary to compute retirement benefits to a high-three average. But federal employees did not contribute to Social Security and some critics said the retirement system bound workers to long-term employment with "golden handcuffs" in the form of stand-alone, single, defined benefit coverage. Few employees left federal service at midcareer, because doing so would mean a significant loss of retirement benefits.



By 1984, CSRS had amassed an unfunded liability of about \$500 billion. So Congress put itself and all new federal employees under Social Security, requiring the implementation three years later of a new three-tiered benefits structure

for them known as the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). In addition to Social Security, it relied on a smaller government pension and personal savings in the form of the Thrift Savings Plan.

Early versus Full Retirement

Now, as for the difference between early and full retirement, it's important to note that people use these terms in different ways. Some consider full retirement to mean receiving the maximum CSRS retirement benefit, which would be 80 percent of one's high-three average salary after performing 41 years and 11 months of federal service. Others consider full retirement to mean an unreduced and immediate benefit that a federal employee can receive after reaching the appropriate retirement age with the minimum amount of service required to be eligible for benefits for that age.

Eligibility

Under CSRS, optional, immediate retirement benefits are available at age 55 with a minimum of 30 years of service, age 60 with a minimum of 20 years of service and age 62 with a minimum of five years of service. Under FERS, eligibility comes at an employee's minimum retirement age, which is between 55 and 57, depending on year of birth.

Continued on page 9

True Meaning and Impact of a Volunteer

By Rey T. Adame, NRCS NM Public Affairs Officer

¹vol-un-teen

noun \ vā-lən- tir\ : to offer to do something without being forced to or without getting paid to do it

Triston Lovato visited the State Office in March 2011 to ask if she could volunteer to work with NRCS. She expressed an interest in learning more about the Public Affairs career field. Recently graduating from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Communications & Journalism, Triston's background seemed fitting to work with us.

Her contributions were immediate, providing a positive impact through her writing, photography and video production skills. She created the first -ever Diversity Day video in 2011 for the Civil Rights Advisory Committee and is spearheading the 2012 video for them. She has responded to short-notice requests from NRCS NHQ; delivered briefings and presentations to



Leadership; and filled in on my behalf when I was away from the office. She is the consummate volunteer; the epitome of what makes a great employee. In terms of salary,

she would have been paid more than \$20,000 for her hundreds of hours volunteering with us. But her value to this operation and agency really is immeasurable and certainly worth recognizing. She was selected as the 2011 Earth Team Volunteer of the Year for New Mexico!

Triston Lovato is a rare and welcome site to an organization. She is an employee who is dedicated, loyal, focused, professional and a self-starter – all traits to whom supervisors and co-workers owe a great deal of gratitude and respect.

Retirement Planning *continued* from page 8

Being Financially Ready For Retirement

This is a time when your income from retirement sources will meet your outgoing expenses and you have enough set aside for unforeseen financial emergencies. This income can be a combination of a federal retirement benefit from CSRS or FERS, a Social Security retirement or spousal benefit, other defined benefits (such as a military or private sector pension), and income generated from savings in the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) or an individual retirement account.



With regard to the term "early retirement," it's important to know the context in which it is being used. It can refer to Voluntary Early Retirement

Authority, a tool that agencies use to cut costs by reducing staff size. Sometimes this goes hand in hand with Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments, commonly known as buyouts.

For VERA, the minimum requirements are age 50 with 20 years of service or any age with 25 years of service. But many employees who are eligible for an early out may not be financially ready for full retirement. They may be at a stage of their career where they are still accumulating retirement assets and can't live on the savings and benefits they have available. They will sometimes need to embark on a second career to allow for additional accumulation of retirement savings and to be closer to the full age for Social Security retirement. Under FERS, this is fairly common -- the golden handcuffs tying employees to federal work have been removed.

There are some who consider that

the federal early retirement age is 55, since that's when federal employees are eligible to retire and still be financially comfortable. But for employees who are going to rely partially on Social Security benefits, 62 is the earliest age that most of them would consider retirement. And even that is early, since they would be eligible only for 75 percent of their full Social Security benefit. So as much as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, retirement has different meaning to each person based on their willingness to make sacrifices both before and after their working career is over.

If you are interested in obtaining a personalized retirement calculation, please contact Victoria Suazo-Chanza, Human Resources Manager at (505) 761-4409 to set up an appointment. Nicole Martinez, Human Resources Specialist and Vickie Suazo-Chanza, HR Manager are both available to provide retirement counseling.

Personnel



NRCS Faces in New Places

Effective November 2011

Greg Collins, former Rangeland Management Specialist in Lordsburg, NM, was selected as the District Conservationist in Lordsburg

Clarence Montoya, former RC&D Coordinator was reassigned to a Soil Scientist position on the Soils staff

Maureen Murphy, former RC&D Coordinator was reassigned to the Operations Staff as a Natural Resources Specialist

Raquel Montoya, former District Conservationist in Santa Rosa, NM was se-

lected as the District Conservationist in Silver City, NM

Effective December 2011

David Peterson was selected for the Civil Engineering position in Clovis, NM

Louis King, former District Conservationist in Mountainair, NM, was selected as the District Conservationist in Fort Sumner, NM

Aaron Hird, former District Conservationist in Aztec, NM, is now the District Conservationist in Hebron, NE. His last day in NM was December 16, 2011.

Norm Harris, Budget Officer, retired on December 3, 2011.

Jose Aragon, Laborer at the Plant Materials Center,

retired December 23, 2011.

Charles Hibner, MLRA Project Leader, Soil Survey Office, Santa Fe, NM retired on December 31, 2011.

Marian Revitte, Cultural Resources Specialist, NM State Office retired on December 31, 2011.

Effective January 2012

James Hewitt was hired as a Design Engineer in the state office

Clarice Ford was hired as the Rangeland Management Specialist in Datil, NM

Joseph "Joey" Pruitt was hired as a Rangeland Management Specialist in Las Vegas, NM

John Fajardo was reassigned to Civil Engineering Tech in Deming, NM

Samuel Gutierrez was selected as a Soil Conservation Technician in Alamogordo, NM; he transferred from Las Cruces

Bobbie Tolton-Machacek was selected as a farm Bill Specialist in Lovington, NM

Effective February 2012

Kenneth Lujan former Soil Conservationist in Mountainair, NM is now the District Conservationist in Mountainair, NM

Justin Riggs, Soil Scientist in Las Cruces, has accepted a position with the US Army Corps of Engineers in Albuquerque; his last day with NRCS is March 9, 2012.

Congratulations and good luck to all!

Cut →

NRCS PROHIBITED PERSONNEL PRACTICES Adapted from Title 5 U.S.C. 2302(b)

1. Illegally discriminate for or against any employee or applicant.
2. Solicit or consider improper employment recommendations.
3. Coerce an employee's political activity.
4. Obstruct a person's right to compete for employment.
5. Influence any person to withdraw from competition for a position.
6. Give unauthorized preference or improper advantage.
7. Appoint, employ, promote, or advance a relative.
8. Retaliate against a whistleblower, whether an employee or applicant.
9. Retaliate against employees or applicants for filing an appeal.
10. Unlawfully discriminate for off-duty conduct.
11. Knowingly violate veterans' preference requirements.
12. Violate any law, rule, or regulation which implements or directly concerns the merit principles.

NRCS MERIT SYSTEM PRINCIPLES Adapted from Title 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)

1. Recruit, select and advance on merit after fair and open competition.
2. Treat employees and applicants fairly and equitably.
3. Provide equal pay for equal work and reward excellent performance.
4. Maintain high standards of integrity, conduct and concern for the public interest.
5. Manage employees efficiently and effectively.
6. Retain or separate employees on the basis of their performance.
7. Educate and train employees if it will result in better organizational or individual performance.
8. Protect employees from improper political influence, arbitrary action and personal favoritism.
9. Protect employees against reprisal for the lawful disclosure of information in whistleblower situations.

Fold ↑