



Cows at pasture © Patrick Flood

Growing Conservation

Outreach in north Alabama is saving farmers money and putting conservation on the ground

Blount and St. Clair counties are home to the Mustang Museum of America, the best bouldering in North America at Horse Pens 40, and a cattle industry that can trace its roots back to the beginning of the state.

For generations, farmers in this area and throughout Alabama have provided for Alabamians in one of its most important industries. Now, with help from The Nature Conservancy, farmers who have worked the land as long as they can remember—and some who are brand new to the work—are improving their practices to save money and protect Alabama’s lands and waters.

“We depend on farmers for food security,” says Alana Reynolds, watershed coordinator for The Nature Conservancy in Alabama. “Who is more intimately acquainted with their property and their land than a farmer? They’re out there every day checking



Alana Reynolds at Big Canoe Creek © TNC

their land for any issues. They want to do what’s best for their land, and their livestock.”

Reynolds is leading outreach efforts to farmers to encourage enrollment in Farm Bill programs that can help develop management plans for the property, save farmers money, and that will also have the end result of expanding conservation practices in priority watersheds.

“Most of the areas in the Locust Fork and Big Canoe Creek watersheds are agricultural and private lands, so in order for us to make any meaningful difference in conservation, we need to work with private landowners,” says Reynolds.

“This is essentially putting their own tax dollars back into their own property.”

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To date, the program has enrolled over 500 acres of private lands in the Locust Fork and Big Canoe Creek Watersheds in Farm Bill programs—largely through outreach to individual landowners and outreach events in partnership with the local Natural Resources Conservation Service offices and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Once a farmer enrolls in the program, a team will visit the property to develop a management plan and identify conservation opportunities and ways to improve production.

“We plan best management practices to help implement rotational grazing, get cows out of the creek, and provide clean and reliable water for cattle. Even just moving your cows around from paddock to paddock will increase water infiltration during rain events, decrease erosion, allow grasses to recover and grow healthier root systems (that make them more robust in times of drought), and decrease runoff and nutrient pollution to nearby streams. This makes for healthier animals and healthier instream habitat and water quality for sensitive aquatic species.

I love working with farmers. I feel like they’re the salt of the Earth, humble people, and they are the backbone of America. They have this giant responsibility to care for their land and it’s a privilege to be able to help them do that.”

Alana Reynolds, Watershed Coordinator

Reynolds comes by her love of the work honestly.

“I grew up in a rural area of Alabama,” she shares. My grandfather was a dairy farmer and my dad grew up milking cows before school.

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Reynolds’ work is currently funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Southeast Aquatics Program. The goal is to enroll at least 2,000 acres of private lands in priority watersheds within the next three years. The work will help protect Alabama’s unparalleled aquatic biodiversity—the state has the most fish, crayfish, turtle, and mussel species in the entire United States.

“We have these incredibly biodiverse streams that are bordered by lush, fertile farmland, and it is a delicate balance to keep those species and instream habitat protected, while continuing important farming operations that feed us,” says Reynolds.

“Typically we will visit the property and check out their current operations. We will look at things like how many grazable acres they have, what kind of grass they have—both cool season and warm, how they rotate the cows, how many paddocks they have, and what water sources there are. We take all that into account and develop a management and conservation plan.”

From there, farmers are connected to a range of programs that provide access to funding for improvements to operations, something a number of early enrollees in the program have already taken advantage of.

ALABAMA



Calvert Prong of the Locust Fork of the Warrior River
© Hunter Nichols/TNC

20 Years of Success

Twenty years of successful restoration projects have demonstrated real benefits for people and nature. Restoration programs, when implemented correctly, can have far-reaching benefits.

How does a conservation and management plan help landowners?

- Landowners and farmers often benefit financially from restoration programs.
- Successful projects can increase farming profits or property value.
- Some programs include free or low-cost infrastructure upgrades.
- Better management can increase livestock health and result in higher profits at market.
- Conservation can help arrest streambank erosion and beautify the natural landscape.

How does this benefit nature and the community?

- Less sedimentation means healthier streams for fish and wildlife.
- These practices conserve aquatic biodiversity for future generations.
- Improved water quality benefits species both in-stream and downstream from the project site.
- Fewer pollutants mean cleaner waterways.
- Better-quality drinking water requires fewer resources and less treatment to meet health standards.
- Conservation practices enhance a landscape’s natural beauty.