

Local Producer receives the 2009 Florida NRCS Conservation Partner of the Year Award

The mission of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is “helping people help the land.” Every year, NRCS recognizes organizations and/or landowners for doing just that. This year Kelsey and John Payne received the prestigious “Conservation Partner of the Year” award for outstanding stewardship of their land. Father and son traveled to Gainesville on November 16th to accept this honor which was awarded to them by Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist.

The Payne Ranch consists of 787 acres located in Highlands County. The cow/calf operation has been in the family since 1959. To help plan best management practices on their land, the Paynes sought out NRCS and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to assist in developing a conservation plan for the ranch. These plans outline best management practices that, if followed, will result in conservation minded management of the land.

The plan’s recommendations were accomplished with the assistance of the United States Department of Agriculture’s NRCS Environmental Quality incentives Program. This program assists land owners with cost sharing of best management practices such as fencing to facilitate cattle rotation, pasture planting to improve pasture quality, and pond construction for livestock watering facilities.

The Payne Ranch also participates in the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project (FRESP), which is a partnership between 8 ranchers, environmental groups, state and federal agencies and researchers. Their mission is to design a program that will pay ranchers to provide documented environmental services of water retention and phosphorus load reduction in order to improve water delivery and quality to Lake Okeechobee and the coastal estuaries. This model project is designed to analyze the feasibility of paying ranchers to retain water on their land for the purpose of storage and or treatment.

In addition, the Payne Ranch is in the development stages of the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). To protect and restore precious wetlands, 482 acres has been enrolled in a permanent easement. WRP focuses on enrolling marginal lands having a history of crop failure or low yields. These areas are then targeted for the restoration and protection of wetland functions and values, especially for migratory birds and other wildlife. The land was previously used as pasture and cropland on the Payne Ranch.

“The Payne family’s dedication to maintaining and preserving our natural resources is a great example to other Florida producers,” stated State Conservationist Carlos Suarez. This award is particularly special because this is the first time in history that a producer has been chosen as the recipient. In the past, it has always been awarded to an organization. The Payne family continues to support the conservation of Florida’s natural resources by participating in these programs and being such excellent stewards of the land.

In the true spirit of being the representative of one family who is “helping the land,” John Payne stated that “We are honored to be recognized for our conservation efforts and participation in these excellent programs.”

Congratulations to the Paynes for this prestigious award. It’s good to know that we have such responsible land owners in Highlands County who truly care about the environment.