



## Recognizing Our NRCS Caribbean Area Veterans



Edwin Almodóvar, Jay Rodríguez, Luis García.

This month we celebrate Veterans' Day to honor America's veterans for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice our country. For generations, American service members across every military branch have made tremendous sacrifices to defend our freedom and liberty. Many veterans continue to serve the public in civilian life. At USDA, we are lucky and honored to have more than 11,000 veterans on our team.

We recognized and thank our NRCS Caribbean Area veterans, and all veterans in the Caribbean, for their service to our country:

- Edwin Almodóvar: State Conservationist, State Office (SO), US Army.
- Jay Rodríguez: Administrative Officer, SO, US Army.
- José "Lino" Rivera: Resource Conservationist, Arecibo FO, US Army/Navy.
- Benjamín "Benji" Torres: NRCS Retiree, Arecibo FO, US Army Retired.
- Luis García: Support Services Specialist, SO, US Army Retired.
- Ramón Báez: Soil Conservation Technician, Juana Diaz FO, US Army.
- William Díaz: Soil Conservation Technician, Corozal FO, US Army.
- Israel Vega: District Conservationist Utuado FO, US Navy.
- Luis Díaz: Budget Officer, retired, SO, US Air Force Retired.

### USDA at 150 Factoid

In 1899, USDA initiated the U.S. Survey to systematically investigate the origins and properties of the nation's diverse soils.

## NRCS Shares EQIP Program Info with Organic Producers



SRC, Jaime Valentín, and SC/HEPM, Rafael Sierra, interact with an organic producer.

organic producers held in Arecibo on October 25<sup>th</sup>. The meeting was sponsored by the Agricultural Extension Service with the Agricultural Experimental Station.

NRCS Conservation Agronomist, Carlos E. Morganti, presented conservation practices applicable for organic producers and how NRCS staff can assist farmers through the Conservation Technical Assistance Program. NRCS Staff Resource Conservationist (SRC), Jaime Valentín, described the Conservation Innovation Grant program.

NRCS staff shared technical and financial program information with 35 organic farmers, Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture agronomists and Agricultural Extension Service staff during a meeting for

Arecibo Field Office (FO) Soil Conservation Technician (SCT), Linnette Rosado; Soil Conservationist/ Hispanic Emphasis Program Manager (HEPM), Rafael Sierra; and student intern, Dayana Estades, also participated in the activity. They displayed and distributed information describing NRCS conservation technical assistance program benefits and civil rights and equal employment opportunity policy, and met individually with farmers and potential program participants. The activity concluded with an afternoon field trip to Soto's organic farm to observe residue management, crop rotation and cover crop conservation practices, as well as a demonstration of land preparation with oxen. For details on the EQIP organic initiative, contact your local NRCS field office or visit [www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov).



Linnette Rosado, SCT, provides materials and program information to an organic producer.



## Director's Corner

Hello NRCS Caribbean!

First, let me thank you for helping the Caribbean Area meet all our FY 2012 goals. Without your help and dedication we wouldn't be able to make it happen. As the Holiday season approaches, I want to wish you all a safe and joyful Christmas and a Happy New Year. Enjoy this plentiful season with your families!

Lastly, in this edition we highlight our Veterans in the Caribbean. As a Veteran, I can share with all of you that it is not easy being a Vet, but we feel proud of being part of a strong tradition. To all our Veterans, thank you for your service to our country and for fighting for our freedom.

Yours in Conservation,

Edwin Almodóvar, Director  
USDA-NRCS Caribbean Area

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## USDA Puerto Rico Rural Housing Director Honored as Public Servant of the Year



**Award Recipient, Arlene Zambrana (left) receives her award from Alejandro Brito (right), President of Puerto Rico's Housing Builders Association.**

In late September, Arlene Zambrana, USDA Rural Housing Program Director, was recognized as the Public Servant of the Year by the Puerto Rico Housing Builder Association.

Mrs. Zambrana has been working with the Agency since 1986. She began her career as an assistant Loan Specialist of the local San Sebastián office. She has continued to advance throughout her career, culminating in her present tenure as Rural Housing Program Director. As part of her responsibilities, she successfully administered a budget

of \$1,071,533,067 during fiscal years 2009 to 2011 and provided homeownership opportunities to 7,830 families.

USDA helps thousands of Americans achieve the dream of homeownership each year. To find out more about programs that may benefit you and your family, visit [www.rurdev.usda.gov/HSF\\_SFH.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/HSF_SFH.html).

## PR Paint Plant Goes Solar with USDA-RD Grant

On September 13, Master Paints & Chemical Corporation in Guayanilla, PR, achieved their goal of becoming independent of fossil fuels. This local rural paint manufacturer employs 260 people—one of the main employers in Guayanilla. Past electric bills cost the company more than \$180,000 annually, making energy savings a company priority. By installing a new solar system, the company eliminated their energy bill.

USDA Rural Development's (RD) Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) awarded the company \$210,176 to purchase and install a 286,000 kW "Grid-Tie" photovoltaic system. The company also received a PR Green Energy Fund incentive of \$380,787.

As a result, USDA-RD, in partnership with local government, was able to help this small rural business reduce its carbon footprint and retain jobs. For details on USDA energy programs that can help your rural business, visit [www.rurdev.usda.gov/Energy.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/Energy.html).



## Coquí Ilanero Listed as Federally-Endangered



On October 3, 2012, the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) listed the *Coquí Ilanero*, Puerto Rico's smallest tree frog, as an endangered species, giving it federal protection. The *coquí Ilanero's* habitat, 615 acres of freshwater wetland in Sabana Seca, Toa Baja, also received federal protection.

This frog was discovered in 2005, and its eggs have only been found on the bull-tongue arrowhead plant. It has such a high-pitched frequency call that it can barely be heard. Scientists estimate that only 300-700 *coquí Ilanero* frogs remain in the wild.

## Mayagüez Landscaping Group Embraces Soil Science

The Mayagüez MLRA office conducted a practical soil science workshop on October 22, 2012, for the Mayagüez Municipality Landscape group managed by Agronomist Wilma Toro. NRCS Soil Scientists Samuel Ríos and Manuel Matos and Earth Team volunteer, Keila Ortíz, delivered presentations to the 13-member landscape crew, showcasing the principles and importance of soil science.

On this beautiful fall day, NRCS soil scientists used hands-on activities to teach the landscapers about 'What is Soil?', how soils are formed, and how to identify different soil textures. The soil scientists also showed how to collect soil profiles with the Giddings probe and how to make soil survey maps using the Web Soil Survey online application. This activity provided NRCS staff with an excellent opportunity to promote soil science and soil conservation to clients of varying ages and backgrounds.

For details on the MLRA Soil Survey program, visit [www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov) or contact Carmen Santiago at 787-766-5206 x127 or [Carmen.Santiago@pr.usda.gov](mailto:Carmen.Santiago@pr.usda.gov), or Manuel Matos at 787-831-3416 x108 or [Manuel.matos@pr.usda.gov](mailto:Manuel.matos@pr.usda.gov).

**NRCS soil scientist, Manuel Matos (right), describes soil properties to Mayagüez landscapers.**



## New Soil Web App has Coverage of Puerto Rico and the USVI

Recently, the University of California Davis' Soil Resource Laboratory, along with NRCS, developed a Soil Web application and added Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands soils survey data. With this application you can explore mapped soil survey areas using an interactive Google map and view detailed information about map units and their components. This app runs in your web browser and is compatible with desktop computers, tablets, and smart phones. It uses real-time access to USDA-NRCS soil survey data and retrieves graphical summaries of soil types associated with the user's current geographic location. The example below shows use of the app on the Agricultural Research Station in Lower Love, St. Croix, USVI. The app features a description of the soil type, a soil profile, and graphs of soil properties and qualities, along with the smart phone's real-time GPS. The app is free and can be downloaded from: <http://casoilresource.lawr.ucdavis.edu/soilweb/>.



## Meet the Caguas Field Office



**Caguas Field Office staff (left to right): José Santiago, Bethzaida Hernández, Sonia Burgos, Vivian Marie Vera and Lydia E. Collazo.**

The NRCS Caguas Field Office (FO) serves the people of Aguas Buenas, Caguas, Canóvanas, Carolina, Cataño, Cayey, Culebra, Fajardo, Guaynabo, Gurabo, Humacao, Juncos, Las Piedras, Loiza, Luquillo, Naguabo, Río Grande, San Juan, San Lorenzo, Trujillo Alto, Vieques & Yabucoa, Puerto Rico. We are located at Gatsby Plaza, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Suite 308, on 30 Padiel Street, Caguas, PR.

The team of José Santiago (District Conservationist), Bethzaida Hernández (Soil Conservationist), Sonia Burgos (Soil Conservationist), Vivian Marie Vera (Soil Conservation Technician) and Lydia Collazo (Civil Engineer) provide conservation assistance to the Torito, Turabo, Northeast, East and North Soil & Water Conservation Districts. Eng. Collazo also assists the USVI. Caguas FO staff have a

wealth of experience in the specialized areas of soil science, soil microbiology, agricultural waste management, natural resource management, biology, botany, engineering, water & energy conservation and conservation education.

Currently, the NRCS Caguas FO is following up on previous year EQIP contracts to apply more than 700 conservation practices. We recently joined the USDA Forest Service on a new initiative to encourage farmers and land users around El Yunque Rain Forest to conserve and improve forested areas next to the rain forest. The first public meeting was held on November 17<sup>th</sup> in Naguabo with FSA, Extension Service and PR Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff. Caguas FO staff also began an initiative with the San Juan Bay Estuary Program. The program seeks to improve water quality in San Juan Bay while involving community members, government agencies and NGOs in the process. The initiative integrates urban forestry, community gardens, backyard conservation, green roofs, and several other issues. NRCS Caribbean Area Director, Edwin Almodóvar, foresaw an opportunity for resource conservation through this initiative, and convened the first meeting on November 26<sup>th</sup> in the FSA conference room in Hato Rey. Forest Service, Sea Grant, PR DNR, USDA Food and Nutrition Service and San Juan Estuary Program staff participated. NRCS will assist with urban conservation issues such as backyard conservation, roof runoff water harvesting, developing a Caribbean Area People's Garden, and backyard gardens.

Please call us at 787-743-2743 or visit our office for information or help to conserve our natural resources!

## USDA Funds Farmers Market in Aguadilla

USDA awarded over \$9 million in grants, including one in Puerto Rico, to initiatives to bolster the connection between farmers and their consumers, while improving access to healthy food and strengthening local economies.

*"This year's Farmers Market Promotion Program awards are diverse and illustrate the many different ways farmers are directly connecting to communities and consumers,"* said USDA Deputy Secretary Merrigan. *"From starting up mobile markets to helping new farmers and ranchers, these grants will create new economic opportunities and encourage consumers to eat healthier."*

USDA awarded \$84,625 to **La Tierra Prometida** in Aguadilla to initiate a program of farmer-led workshops related to gardening, food preparation, and healthy nutrition in a low-income area farmers market to increase knowledge about and awareness of local foods. For details, visit [www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/FMPP](http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/FMPP).

## Organic 101: 5 Steps to Organic Certification

The USDA organic label is backed by a certification system that verifies that farmers or handling facilities located anywhere in the world comply with USDA Organic Regulations. Certification involves five steps:

**STEP 1: Develop an organic system plan.** An organic system plan is the basis of the organic certification process. It is created by the producer or handler seeking certification, and details how an operation will comply with organic regulations.

While plans differ based on operation type and needs, they address farming and handling practices, such as tilling, grazing, harvesting, storing and transporting. They also specify approved substances used during the growing or handling process, monitoring practices for organic systems, record-keeping systems, and barriers to prevent intermingling with nonorganic products or contact with prohibited substances.

**STEP 2: Carry out the organic system plan. Have a certifying agent review it.** Organic operations are certified by private, foreign or State certifying agents that have been accredited by USDA. They are located throughout the United States and around the world. Certifying agents make sure that organic products meet all organic standards.

**STEP 3: Get inspected.** Every operation that applies for organic certification is first inspected by a certifying agent. These thorough inspections differ in scope depending on the farm or facility. For example, for crops, certifiers inspect fields, soil conditions, crop health, weed and pest management methods, water systems, storage areas and equipment. For livestock, they inspect feed production and purchase records, feed rations, animal living conditions, preventative health management practices (e.g., vaccinations), health records, and the number and condition of animals on the farm. At a handling or processing facility, inspectors evaluate the receiving, processing, and storage areas used for

organic ingredients and finished products.

**STEP 4: Have a certifying agent review the inspection report.** The inspector observes practices on the farm or facility, compares them to the organic system plan, and then presents findings to the certifying agent. The inspector assesses the risk of contamination from prohibited materials and may take soil, tissue or product samples as needed. The inspector also analyzes potential hazards and critical control points and makes sure there are adequate procedures to prevent contamination in place. All findings are then presented to the certifying agent for review.



## NRCS Helps St. Croix East End Communities Protect Watersheds



Volunteers complete planting of residential rain garden in Hope & Carton Hill, St. Croix.

Last year, through the Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTAP), NRCS awarded a grant to the St. Croix Environmental Association (SEA) to complete engineering designs and plans for two of priority restoration projects identified in the St. Croix East End Marine Park (STXEEMP) watershed plan. CTAP helps landowners and nonprofits apply best management practices on private land to conserve and improve natural resources. Types of assistance include habitat protection, restoration, development or enhancement for upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, threatened and endangered species, and fisheries.

The Hope and Carton Road network is one of the two project sites. The steep, eroding roads in this neighborhood have no formal drainage infrastructure. They are a major source of sediment to Solitude Bay, and a safety hazard for residents. Through the CTAP grant, SEA hired Horsley Witten Group, Inc. (HW) to develop a Master Drainage Plan

for this road network and to design and install a demonstration rain garden in the neighborhood.

Last month the project partners and Hope & Carton Hill residents installed the first demonstration rain garden in the watershed! On October 25 & 26, SEA, HW and NRCS staff worked with Bates Trucking to excavate and shape the rain garden, and St. Croix LEAP donated and delivered mulch and compost.

On Saturday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, homeowners Deb & Ed Cullen, partners and volunteers planted over 50 native or naturalized species purchased from the VIWMA Greenhouse or donated by partners and residents. The rain garden got its first test a few weeks later, trapping over 2 inches of rainfall (below). This rain garden will serve as an example of how other homeowners can manage runoff from their driveways, which make up more than 20% of the total road network in Hope and Carton Hill.



HW & NRCS staff also met with 16 residents on Friday evening, October 26<sup>th</sup> (above) to present the draft Drainage Plan and gather input and suggestions to improve the plan. For details, contact the St. Croix Field Office at 340-692-9632 x3.

### New UPR Sea Grant Guides!

The University of Puerto Rico Sea Grant Program has new Thematic Guides available online. Topics include Climate Change, Global Warming, Impacts of Hurricanes on Coral Reefs and Recycling. For details and referrals on these topics and other issues impacting the Caribbean Area, visit <https://sites.google.com/site/crieguastematicas/>.



## Organic 101: 5 Steps to Organic Certification



(Continued from page 3)

**STEP 5: The certifier issues a decision.** If an operation complies with the rules, the certifying agent issues an organic certificate listing the products that operation can sell as organic. The organic farm or facility continues to update its plan as it modifies its practices and is inspected at least once a year to maintain its certification.

While the certification system is rigorous to ensure the integrity of the USDA organic label, thousands of producers and handlers continue to invest in these activities to mar-

ket their products as organic. In light of the continued growth of organic, USDA's new Organic Literacy Initiative helps potential farmers, ranchers and processors learn about how to be certified and how to access related USDA programs. It features a toolkit that helps farmers and businesses answer the question, "Is organic an option for me?" The resource guide will also help current and future organic customers access various USDA programs that support organic agriculture.

*Reprinted from the USDA Organic 101 blog series that explores USDA's organic regulations.*

## Helping People Help the Land...

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## We're on the Web!



[www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.pr.nrcs.usda.gov)

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