



**SWCD**  
Spotlight

*Plaquemines*  
**SOIL & WATER  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

Conservation: “the prevention of wasteful use of a resource.” In other words, to use something but without damaging or depleting it. For millennia it’s been realized that conservation of our most basic natural resources, soil, and water is in the best interest of every citizen. The food in your refrigerator or pantry, the cotton/linen in your clothes, and the leather of your shoes is all derived from the soil and not without ample supplies of water. And not just any soil or just any water will suffice; preventing soil erosion, maintaining optimum soil organic matter, lessening soil nutrient depletion or runoff, stabilizing wetland soils and substrate and other conservation concerns are critical for a healthy environment and productive landscape and cannot be sufficiently implemented without scientifically sound conservation practices.

Such practices have been researched, proven, and standardized over many decades by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service on various soil types and in association with multiple agricultural or engineering uses, mostly on private land. It must be noted that this private land’s conservation yields many public benefits such as higher levels of soil organic matter which not only maintain the lands productivity in support of rural economies, but also its resilience to both drought and floods. Not coincidentally, the same practices that enhance organic matter in the soil will also improve surface water quality by natural filtration of sediments, nutrients, animal waste, and plant matter. These same practices can often also improve essential habitat for many forms of wildlife.

To ensure that private landowners across Louisiana have access to this essential conservation technology developed by the NRCS, local Soil & Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) have been formed across the country to provide local representation for the conservation needs and concerns of their local stakeholders.

In Louisiana, SWCDs are political subdivisions of the state formed by unified consent of 25 or more landowners within the area. Each SWCD is governed by a 5-member board of locally elected and appointed landowners. In the mid-1930’s the Dust Bowl provided national momentum for the creation of the nationwide SWCD effort, but the Gulf South’s erosion by water was at that time as severe in terms of soil loss, but less dramatic, less visible, and less deadly than the wind-blown soil of the western great plains.

In response Louisiana enacted Act No. 370 of 1938 and established the LA Conservation District Law which allowed for the creation of the Soil & Water Conservation Commission and the formation of statewide SWCDs. The Feliciana SWCD was the first SWCD formed and by 1949 SWCDs were created across nearly the entire state except Plaquemines Parish—the powers-that-were in Plaquemines Parish wanted no form of government established there, even if it was to be a locally chartered and operated

SWCD. The early Louisiana SWCDs were large multi-parish SWCDs, usually coterminous with parish boundaries, with several along watershed boundaries rather than parish borders and each SWCD represented locally united or common land use concerns.

SWCDs across the state were then divided into 5 areas representing primary ecoregions or areas of geographically distinct natural communities and land uses of the state. After 1949, these large SWCDs began dividing into smaller districts, usually to more favorably align with parish level support for conservation needs.

Until finally, in June of 1985, Plaquemines parish was the final Louisiana land area to form a SWCD. The major land uses then were production of citrus, peaches, pecans, vegetable crops, beef cattle, as well as commercial fisheries and wetlands conservation and these remain the primary land uses and conservation concerns in the Plaquemines SWCD.

The current Plaquemines SWCD Board members are Ms. Patty Vogt of Port Sulphur, Mr. Bartol Taliancich Jr. of Empire, Mr. Lawrence Rousselle of Belle Chasse, Mr. Earl Armstrong of Boothville, and Ms. Nancy Dupont of New Orleans.

Patty, the current chairperson, raises citrus, produce, hay and cattle throughout Plaquemines Parish. Patty is currently the only certified Louisiana Master Farmer in Plaquemines Parish and her SWCD related sentiments are clear.

“What we need is to ensure that landowners here continue to receive the conservation assistance they need to maintain productivity and sustainability,” remarks Ms. Vogt. “It’s important to everyone in Plaquemines Parish.”

Just a few miles to the south, Mr. Armstrong maintains paddocks for horses and other livestock as well as a fleet of airboats and other watercraft used to manage his watery estate in West Bay and along Southwest Pass on the lower end of the Mississippi River below Head of Passes. Earl’s herd is descended from generations of hardy cattle adapted to life along the river, swimming the river passes, undaunted by expanse and current, to access preferred grazing areas. Using a river barge he built himself, fashioned into a well-organized cattle pen and powered by twin 6-71 GM diesel engines, Earl ensures their timely river-borne transport to market.

Earl’s involvement on the Plaquemines SWCD board has been vital due to his unequalled knowledge of the unique natural resource management needs of Louisiana’s deltaic wetlands, such as the balance of seasonal riverine hydrology with local land uses such as cattle and forage production as well as management of habitat for fisheries and wildlife. He built his family’s cattle operation to more than 1,000 head spread over 14 islands along Southwest Pass. This operation requires many innovations in addition to the self-propelled cattle barge, such as herding cattle with airboats as often as with horses.



***In addition to his river barge, Mr. Armstrong utilizes a fleet of airboats and other watercraft to manage his watery estate.***

Often sought by wetland scientists, researchers as well as local, national, and international media, due as much to his warm and outgoing personality as for his keen knowledge of the natural resources and restoration needs for this critical and rapidly disappearing area. Despite the challenges associated with living and farming in an active deltaic landscape, Earl has no intentions of ever heading inland. Once, when asked if he would ever leave this area, his response was resounding “Oh, no! Not as long as they got mud in the south end of Plaquemines Parish. This is home,” says Armstrong.

One of the most representative conservation works underway in Plaquemines SWCD is the Spanish Pass restoration project, combining strategic river sediment placement with river-flow to create and enhance critical tidal wetlands near Venice. Like many other interagency projects in Plaquemines Parish this project will help to demonstrate the long-term feasibility of other proposed and authorized large-scale restoration efforts that, in part, mimic natural processes with various beneficial impacts. A recent initiative by the SWCD has been to acquire USDA funding to aid in installation of a water control structure on the Wilkinson Canal in the central region of the parish to alleviate recurring hurricane related flooding.

Plaquemines SWCD serves the land users of Plaquemines Parish. The SWCDs resources include 966,000 total acres; 492,000 acres land; 474,000 acres water; 395,000 acres marshland; 1,000 acres cropland; 38,700 acres pastureland; 7,500 acres woodland; and 12,100 acres urban. Its primary objectives include reduction of erosion and land loss, improvement of water quality, soil health, and promotion of wise land use on agricultural land, marshland, and other land in the parish. An ecosystem-based approach is encouraged by all cooperators, and takes into consideration soil, water, air, plants, and animals and how they are affected by conservation practices. To ensure that the SWCDs direction is consistent with that of its parish-wide citizenry, each year the SWCD hosts its “Locally-Led” conservation meeting where stakeholders voice their conservation needs and concerns, helping the SWCD to bring programmatic focus to conservation of all the finer things in Plaquemines Parish.

