



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Massachusetts

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Land of Opportunities

NRCS helps Nuestras Raíces restore urban land for farming

In 2004, Nuestras Raíces, a grass-roots organization that promotes economic, human and community development for the Latino community in Holyoke, Massachusetts, contacted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) field office in Hadley for assistance with conservation planning on land the organization had recently purchased along the Connecticut River.

incubator program to provide business and farm training, as well as access to land and equipment, for members who have an interest in transitioning from urban market garden plots to commercial-scale farming.



In the fall of 2004, the four acre field on Nuestras Raíces' newly purchased land hadn't been farmed in 15 years and was overgrown with invasive plants such as Japanese knotweed and Oriental bittersweet. The land is part of an historical farm, one of the last remaining farm sites in Holyoke, on the banks of the Connecticut River, just outside downtown.

First, NRCS staff worked with Ross and Toensmeier to develop a conservation plan. Later a nutrient management plan was developed and advice on irrigation issues was given.



Proyecto Tierra de Oportunidades farm, Holyoke

Nuestras Raíces, which means "Our Roots" in Spanish, primarily focuses on projects relating to food, agriculture and the environment. The organization draws its membership and its leadership from the 100 families and

75 youth that participate in the network of community gardens established by Nuestras Raíces.

In 2004, a new urban farming project, known as Proyecto Tierra de Oportunidades or Project Land of Opportunities, was launched at the new site.

Nuestras Raíces director Dan Ross and project manager Eric Toensmeier envisioned using the land for a farm



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By the summer of 2005, the land had been cleared and divided into nine cropping sections which were being farmed by tenants. The site is also used for special cultural events and includes an area for artisans to work and sell their wares.

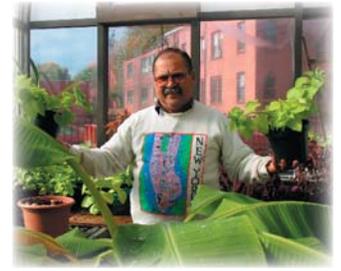
Four to six new farmers farm plots ranging in size from a half acre to one acre, growing crops and raising small livestock, most focusing on raising Latino specialty varieties of crops and livestock. In addition, a variety of youth, educational and community programs are planned at the site.



Other conservation assistance requested by Nuestras Raíces included help designing an irrigation system that would provide water to all of the tillable areas and a greenhouse while conserving water and avoiding soil erosion, creating an organic nutrient management plan and siting a small animal grazing and manure storage area where it wouldn't impact the river and stream resource areas on the site.

Cost-share assistance through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was provided to construct a composting facility and an access road to the composting site.

Due to significant unauthorized motor bike activity on the site, there were some areas of degraded wetland and stream habitat in need of restoration and protection.



The parcel features special wildlife habitat including floodplain forest, riparian habitat, and a reported bald eagle nest. Nuestras Raíces wanted to ensure adequate environmental protection for these areas and compliance with state and federal regulations, while considering alternate uses like recreational trails and river access.

In the spring 2006, Nuestras Raíces was awarded a Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) contract for riparian buffer restoration and invasive plant control on eight acres along the Connecticut River.

Proyecto Tierra de Oportunidades will provide opportunities to a population that has traditionally lacked resources and opportunities. With NRCS's assistance, Nuestras Raíces has also restored a site that is important historically, agriculturally and environmentally.



Eric Toensmeier would like to see Tierra de Oportunidades expand.