



Golden Triangle RC&D  
Resource Conservation and Development Council

# ANNUAL REPORT 2019

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## ***Enhancing Southwest Georgia***

Serving the citizens of Baker, Calhoun, Clay, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Miller, Mitchell, Randolph, Seminole, Worth, Stewart, Terrell and Thomas Counties



## **OUR VISION AT GOLDEN TRIANGLE RC&D**

is a sustained natural resource base, increased social and economical opportunities, enriched communities, and an improved quality of life.

**Cover & Table of Contents photos of Spring Creek by Margaret Tyson.**



## Greetings Members, Partners and Friends,

Thank you for helping us to make 2019 yet another remarkable year for our council. This year marked 27 years of service for our organization. Our dedicated staff has done an incredible job of expanding our outreach while strengthening our programs and services.

**Rhonda Gordon**  
Executive Director

**Golden Triangle is stronger than ever due to our continually expanding service delivery area that supports our mission.**

We are well positioned and will continue to build upon our legacy, working alongside our board members, stellar staff and community partners, while pursuing our goals.

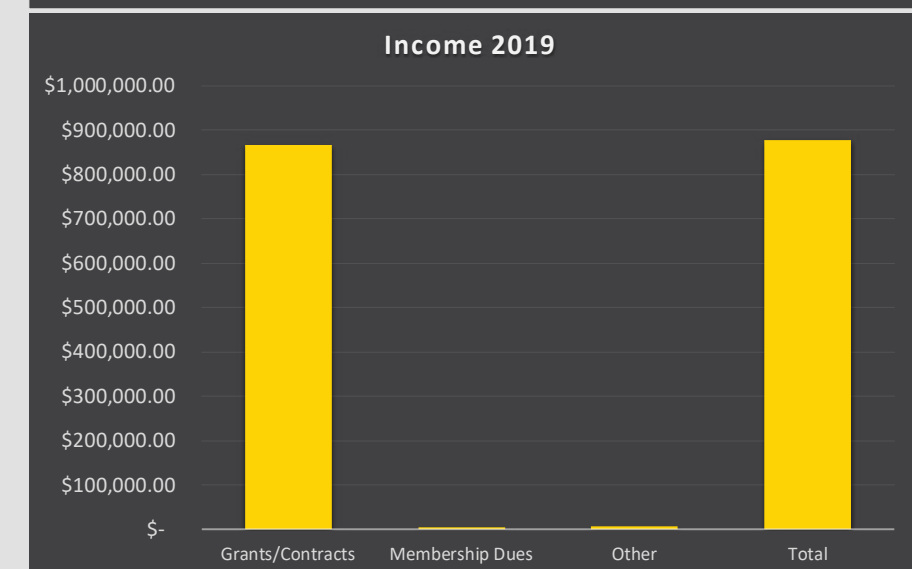
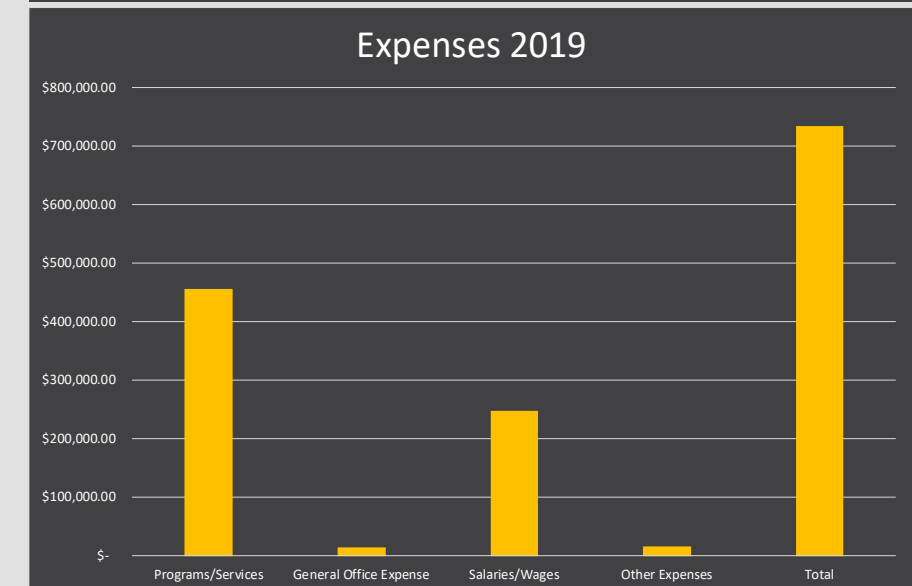
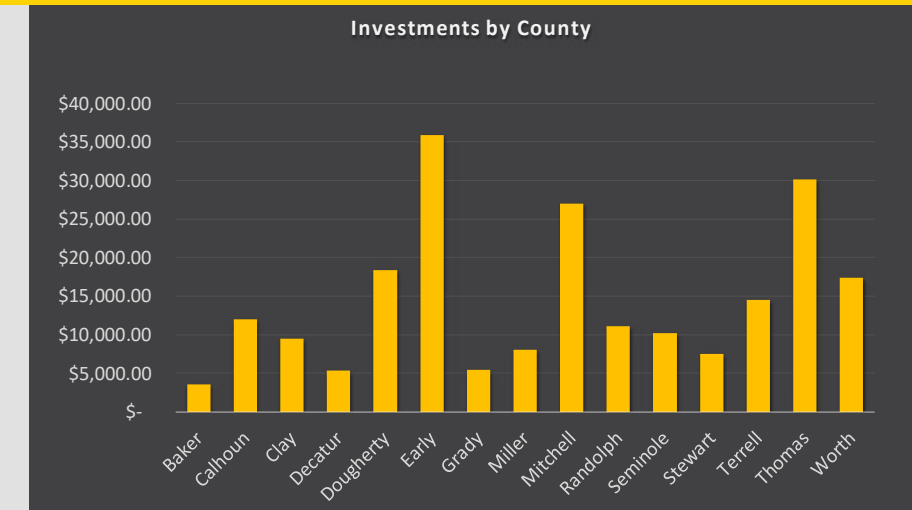
We've experienced extraordinary growth over the last year. We've implemented more workshops than ever, created more on-site educational offerings, and pioneered partnerships with state and federal governmental agencies, municipalities and other nonprofits, all of which add up to more people reached and greater impact. We have once again been able to increase the value of services delivered directly in the field.

This year Golden Triangle was recognized for its service to the SWGA region through an award presented by the Southeastern RC&D Association. We were recognized as the "2019 RC&D Council of the Year." This award recognizes the RC&D Council that

makes the greatest impact on the priority concerns of the local service delivery area and beyond by developing partnerships that contribute to the overall area plan, fostering participation by partners and local citizens, facilitating efforts to implement projects, and ensuring the sustainability of the RC&D Program through good non-profit management. Golden Triangle is truly honored by the award and affirms the "true team effort" it takes on a consistent basis to win an award of this merit.

As you read this annual report, I hope it will remind you of the diversity of our projects and the passion that we have for our work. I hope that it is apparent that we are still inspired by our mission and motivated by our vision. For those of you who have tirelessly committed time and energy to the success of this organization, I thank you. For those of you who are new, I welcome you to the Golden Triangle family. I look forward to working with all of you in 2020.

Best Regards,  
*Rhonda Gordon*



## 2018 Community Grant Recipient: Wolf Creek Trout Lily Preserve



**Golden Triangle was recently invited to an event at the Wolf Creek Trout Lily Preserve to celebrate the installation of viewing signs along the parks wonderful trails.**

Funding for these signs was made possible through a 2018 Community Grant from Golden Triangle RC&D.

Established in 2009 through the efforts of volunteers from the Magnolia Chapter (Tallahassee) of the Florida Native Plant Society (including some Georgians), Wolf Creek Preserve is designated to be undisturbed from human development, protecting the many acres and literally tens of millions of beautiful yellow and maroon dimpled trout lilies and thousands of maroon spotted trillium.

*For more information on Wolf Creek Trout Lily Preserve visit the parks website at [wolfcreektroutlilypreserve.org](http://wolfcreektroutlilypreserve.org).*



## 2018 Community Grant Recipient: Lake Park School



**Lake Park Elementary school is a K-5 neighborhood school located in Albany, Georgia with approximately 580 excited, bright future leaders.**

Almost a decade ago, a student garden was installed and teachers incorporated it into science lessons for a variety of curriculum such as the plant life cycle, the water cycle, climate, and many others. The area serves as an outdoor classroom, as well as a place to celebrate positive behavior for students. The garden is accessible

to all staff and students for use during lunch or reading time. The school system provides seedlings and starter plants in the fall and winter that are integrated with the school nutrition plan. Students are able to be a part of a real farm-to-table learning experience by eating the same foods they helped plant and harvest.

Currently the student garden contains six raised planting beds. The grant from Golden Triangle allowed the school to add two additional planting beds and more vegetables to add to the mix. Two handicap accessible garden beds were also added.

The additional garden beds provide more room during planting and harvesting time so more students are able to participate. Additional seating made the outdoor classroom element more functional.

The school plans to use this area not only for learning but also to cultivate a positive climate throughout the school. The area can function as a place of gathering during parent- teacher conferences, student-administrator discussions, and even quiet reflection to calm a student at a time of need.

# 2019 Community Grants

As with the past several years, Golden Triangle provided the opportunity for area communities and agencies in our 15 county service delivery area to apply for one of our community development grants for up to \$1,000 to improve the lives of area citizens. Here is a look at grants that were awarded in 2019.

### City of Colquitt Police Department

Leverage other funding to enhance a piece of property to offer gun safety, self-defense courses, obstacle course for training and health and wellness and recreational activities.

### Early County Board of Commissioners

To establish a green space downtown with tables, seating, fountain, and landscaping to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the founding of Early County

### Stewart County Commission

Printing for a tourism brochure

### Randolph County Chamber of Commerce

Signs in recreation fields and basketball goals

### Spring Creek Health Cooperative

Signage for the Family Resource Center

### Pelham County Chamber of Commerce

Welcome to Pelham GA signage



### Clay County Family Connection

Learn for Life #4

### Grady County Commission / Chamber of Commerce

Video for Wolf Creek Trout Lily Preserve

### Pataula Center for Children

Educational and Outreach materials to promote awareness and increase education on the topic of child abuse



In addition to our main community grant program, Golden Triangle provided an additional grant opportunity in 2019 to area communities. In recognition of the hard work and necessity of Southwest Georgia's rural fire departments, we continued our reimbursement grant program that was started in 2018. One volunteer fire department from each of our service counties had the opportunity to apply for a \$1,000 reimbursement grant to cover supplies and/or training events in support of their mission.



### Newton/Baker County Fire and Rescue

Four water rescue vests

### Stewart County Volunteer Fire Dept.

14 Vantage 180 flashlights

### Mitchell County Fire and Rescue

Four Adult CPR mannequins and four infant CPR mannequins

### Colquitt Miller Fire Rescue

Two Tele Crib All in One Strut: used for patient extraction in crashed vehicle

### Randolph County Fire and Rescue

Technical rescue equipment for search and rescue-200' Life Safety Rope, 150' Life Safety Rope, Search and Rescue bags, single pulley, etc.

### Birdsong Nature Center

Equipment upgrade and replacement for prescribed burning

### Decatur County Fire and Rescue

Laptop for training

### Calhoun County Fire/Rescue/EMA

Purchase firefighter training manuals

# Conservation Planning Services

**Golden Triangle continues to provide Conservation Planning Services through our exceptional team of Conservation Planners. To date, we have provided 276 plans to our partners at NRCS and their clients.**

A conservation plan is a tool designed to help you better manage the natural resources on your farm. Through a cooperative agreement with NRCS, Golden Triangle visits with landowners identified by NRCS to help evaluate their property and their resource concerns. The alternatives the landowner decides to use are recorded in a conservation plan which includes a schedule for installation. Implementing the conservation plan helps the landowner protect the environment on and off their farm.

## A Conservation Plan includes...

- Aerial photo or diagram of the fields
- A list of the farmer's management decisions
- The location of and schedule for applying new conservation practices
- A soil map and soil descriptions; information sheets explaining how to carry out
- The farmer's specific management decisions
- A plan for operation and maintenance of practices, if needed

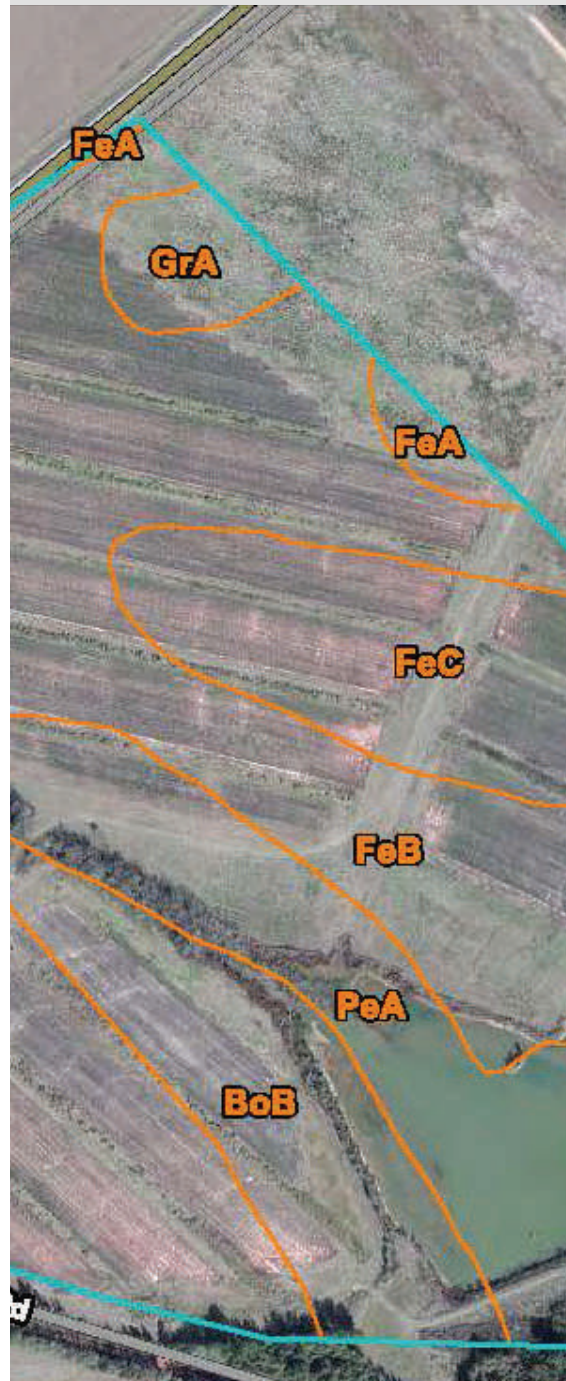
## Benefits of a Conservation Plan...

- Protection of the soil and the farm's productivity
- Helping improve quality of the water in the area
- Improve the soil's fertility and management of soil moisture
- Possible attraction of desirable wildlife by creating nesting sites and winter cover
- Protection of the productive value of the land for future generations
- Makes for more readily complying with environmental regulatory requirements
- Possible eligibility for USDA farm programs.

Golden Triangle RC&D and NRCS have a common purpose of helping to bring about the conservation and sustainable use of land, water, wildlife, and related resources.



Rhonda Gordon with Golden Triangle and Floyd Hooker with NRCS discuss a new contract



# Household Water Well Loan Program



**This loan program is designed to help low income rural homeowners construct or upgrade household water well systems. The funding is provided through USDA Rural Development's Household Water Well System grant program.**

The Household Water Well Grant program complements environmental initiatives and provides support for rural residents. Many rural residents do not live in areas where a centralized water system is available, therefore it is essential that rural residents have access to wells that are safe and working.

USDA Rural Development's mission is to increase economic opportunity and improve the quality of life for rural residents. Individuals may be eligible for loans if their annual household income does not exceed 100 percent of their state or territory's median non-metropolitan income. This loan may not be used for home sewer or septic system projects.

Golden Triangle has been awarded this grant every year since 2010. USDA officials from Washington D.C., recently visited Golden Triangle to see first hand how the program is being implemented and how important it is to area residents. Through 2019, 106 wells have been installed or repaired for low income citizens. Golden Triangle continues to see ongoing need for this program among area rural residents who often have very few, if any, other options to recover lost drinking water access.

# Better Back Roads

**The Better Back Roads Program helps road crews, superintendents, and county administrators understand important ways to minimize erosion into streams, resulting in significant maintenance cost savings over time.**

## Golden Triangle hosted a Better Back Roads event in Dawson on March 28, 2019.

The challenge of navigating often uninformed local perceptions about aesthetic road appearance and shoulder vegetation was discussed along with how implementing common misguided citizen preferences can be costly and destructive to roads.

After the classroom portion of the workshop was complete, Golden Triangle accompanied the road department crew to visit several road sites in need of repair.



## Golden Triangle RC&D recently hosted Jim Bates, biologist for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, to revisit dirt road areas of Early County.

These roads were previously part of a "Partners for Fish and Wildlife" project to help protect endangered mussel species in the area. Joining Mr. Bates were Julie Shutters, Implementation Manager for Golden Triangle RC&D, and representatives for Early County and the Early County Roads Department.

The primary purpose of this visit was to review the stability of the work previously done to these roads, assess causes of new damage and discuss ways to improve and repair using Best Management Practices.





## Eco Camps



## Eco Workshop



**Golden Triangle participated in the "H2O" camp for area 4-H students again this year.**

The June 6th event involved young people from 10 southwest Georgia counties learning about diverse aspects of water use and conservation.



At the Golden Triangle learning station "Professor Frizzle" (Julie Shutters) provided the kids with a creative opportunity to learn about watershed stewardship by going through the Georgia Adopt a Stream water testing process. Everyone got hands on experience as the kids and chaperones were able to "Create" a river system and decide if the system was healthy or unhealthy.

Thank you to UGA Extension's Stripling Irrigation Research Park (Camilla) for inviting us again!



**On June 10th Golden Triangle, through sponsorship and funding provided by USDA/NRCS, Chehaw Park and Working Lands for Wildlife, hosted our 2019 Eco-Conservation Workshop.**

The workshop was held at Chehaw Park in Albany Georgia and brought together attendees from all over southwest Georgia.



The event included special guest speakers from Quail Forever, NRCS, Wolf Creek Trout Lily Preserve, Andrew College and Georgia Forestry. Topics such as ecology habitats, invasive species, prescribed burns, conservation programs and Working Lands for Wildlife were discussed throughout the day.

The workshop also received a special visit from the Chehaw Animal Park Jr. Zookeepers. The volunteer's brought numerous reptiles, amphibians and birds for our guests to have a hands on experience.





# Burn Workshops



Photography by Matt Hanner

**Fire has always been part of the environment and plays a vital role in maintaining certain ecosystems.**

On February 15, Golden Triangle RC&D hosted a prescribed burn workshop in Dawson, Ga. The class was taught by Golden Triangle Forester Justin Smith with guest speakers from UGA-Tifton, Attack 1 Fire Management and the Georgia Forestry Commission.

**Attendees were taught how to use prescribed burning as a silviculture tool to:**

- Safely reduce excessive amounts of brush, shrubs and trees
- Encourage new growth of native vegetation
- Maintain plant and animal species whose habitats depend on periodic fire.

Class participants were also given the opportunity to tour the Georgia Forestry Commission's "West Central Georgia Prescribed Burning Trailer" and learn about tools used in prescribed burns.



## WaterWays Events



**Golden Triangle completed the fifth partnership event with Georgia-Pacific aimed at teaching area school children about responsible forest management and water-shed stewardship.**

The event was held at Seminole County Elementary school in Donalsonville, as part of Georgia Pacific's effort to reach out to the counties surrounding its Cedar Springs Facility, including Early, Seminole, and Miller.

Golden Triangle also received a grant from Georgia-Pacific to complete a similar event at the Miller County Elementary school in Donalsonville.



## 12th Annual Georgia Pacific Water Ways Festival

**Golden Triangle participates in the 12th annual Georgia Pacific Water Ways Festival. The Festival was held Thursday, October 5 at Kolomoki Mounds State Park in Blakely, Ga.**

The goal of the event was to teach area 4th graders that water is a precious resource and why we should conserve and protect our waterways.



# Soil Health Workshops

## South Georgia Academy

Golden Triangle visited Southwest Georgia Academy to hold our first Soil Health Workshop in area schools. The SGA 6th graders were given a presentation on soil health and stewardship. Students used local soils to make soil taxonomy reference cards. The class also took part in hands on activities to demonstrate soil capacity, infiltration and runoff.



## Camilla

Soil is at the bottom of the food chain, yet it is the cornerstone of life on earth. The more people we have on earth, the more important it becomes for us to understand, appreciate, and create healthy living soils.

Golden Triangle RC&D, through a cooperative agreement with NRCS, hosted a free Soil Health Workshop on March 14th, 2019. The Workshop was held at the C.M. Stripling Irrigation Research Park in Camilla, GA. The workshop "Dug In" to soil types, erosion, high tunnel crops and many more topics.



Guest speakers for the workshop included Calvin Perry (Stripling Research Park), Cale McCloud (Water Agent), David Hall (UGA Extension) and Dr. Andre da Silva (UGA Tifton).

## Valdosta

On July 18th Golden Triangle, through sponsorship and funding provided by USDA/NRCS, hosted a Soil Health Lunch & Learn. The session was held at the Southern Georgia Regional Commission in Valdosta, GA and was conducted by Julie Shutters, Implementation Manager for Golden Triangle RC&D.



Soil diversity, erosion, compaction, moisture, pesticides and fertilizers were just a few of the variety of topics covered in the class. Attendees were also given a Soil Health workbook and information to take home.

# Workshops for the Historically Underserved Producers

Golden Triangle hosted two agricultural workshops this year, thanks to a grant from the USDA Office of Advocacy and Outreach (OAO) to assist Historically Underserved Producers, beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged and/or veteran farmers and ranchers.

Events in Nashville, Ga. and Colquitt, Ga. both featured a diverse array of speakers from UGA Extension, USDA agencies, Georgia Citrus Growers, and the Georgia Heirs Property Law Center.

Some 75 participants from across Southwest Georgia joined us to learn more about the opportunities to diversify and strengthen their agriculture operations.



## Working with the EPD



Golden Triangle was delighted to host Christine McKay from the US Environmental Protection Agency and Veronica Craw from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division in October of 2018. Ms. McKay and Ms. Craw were given tours of the Golden Triangle service area, Better Backroads projects, damage from Hurricane Michael and White Oak Pastures.

Golden Triangle hosted a town hall meeting for Georgia Environmental Protection Division on March 29, 2019 in Dawson, Georgia. People across the region were invited to attend the meeting to provide EPD with feedback regarding the 2019 update of the Statewide Non Point Source Management Plan.

## Andrew College



**On August 16th Golden Triangle, was honored to be a guest presenter at the freshman orientation for Andrew College.**

The presentation was held at Andrew College in Cuthbert, GA and was conducted by Julie Shutters, Implementation Manager for Golden Triangle RC&D. This was an amazing opportunity to speak with over 60 students about soil diversity, erosion and the importance of land conservation. Thank you to Andrew College for giving us the opportunity to teach the importance of a healthy earth.

## Earth Day



**On April 22nd Golden Triangle was asked to attend the "Earth Day" festivities in Thomasville.**

Golden Triangle Implementation Manager Julie Shutters was able to share the importance of watershed stewardship and the value of our natural resource conservation work with the youth of Thomas County. This year a special emphasis was placed on climate change education and helping the children understand their impact on the environment.

## Sharing with the Community

**Golden Triangle was privileged to have several opportunities to share about the work and vision of our organization.**

We were invited to speak at various community gatherings around our service area. The Blakely Rotary Club and Birdsong Nature Center both received presentations from our staff.



## First Annual "Escape from Zombie Swamp" Fundraiser held in Blakely Ga.

**On April 16th 2019, The Golden Triangle RC&D partnered with the Pataula Center for Children to host the first annual "Escape from Zombie Swamp" fundraiser.**

For the event, the Blakely-Early County Chamber of Commerce was transformed into the home of the illustrious Dr. and Mrs. VonBamboozal. Tickets included dinner, a silent auction, and the chance to play the "Escape the Zombie Swamp" escape room game.

All of the teams playing the game managed to decipher the codes and solve the clues to find the hidden key and escape in less than 60 minutes.

Golden Triangle was proud to partner with Pataula Center for Children. The Center is a children's advocacy non-profit that is dedicated to providing a safe and nurturing environment for children faced with mental, physical and sexual abuse. What a great way to raise funds for two very worthy non-profit organizations.

Golden Triangle developed this creative and unique fundraiser that the council shares with other non-profit groups to help raise funds for each group. Known as "Escape from Zombie Swamp" this fun, fast paced escape room game has allowed Golden Triangle to collaborate with groups they would not normally have the chance to work with, raise additional funds for both groups and market themselves to different demographics.





## Georgia Landowner Academy

**Golden Triangle was privileged to join our agency partners in graduating participants from the Georgia Landowner Academy spring and fall sessions.**

Both sessions provided participants with a diverse array of presenters covering issues relevant to new or inexperienced landowners. A total of forty-eight participants graduated from the classes held in 2018. The classes were sponsored in part through grant funds provided by the Office of Advocacy and Outreach.

Presenters in the GLA courses included representatives of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), University of Georgia (UGA) extension program agents, agricultural consultants, and attorneys. Topics ranged from recordkeeping, managing farming and forestry operations, taxes, and estate planning. Participants also received information on heirs property and how owning heirs property can be a barrier to qualifying for programs to improve one's land.

The Georgia Landowner Academy is a collaborative project between the Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council in Blakely, GA, the NRCS Georgia state office, Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, University of Georgia's Southern Regional Extension Forestry, the Farm Service Agency, Georgia Forestry Commission, Georgia Outreach for Landowner Development, National Agriculture Statistics Services, and Fort Valley State University.



## Georgia Association Meeting

**The Georgia Association of RC&D's met in Asheville, North Carolina on Tuesday, August 27th at the SE Regional RC&D convention. The meeting had 8 of the 11 councils present and was able to conduct state business.**

NRCS State Conservationist, Terrance Rudolph informed the councils that NRCS had hired Luther Jones as a part-time ACES employee to work with the Georgia RC&D Councils on projects that would benefit both organizations. Mr. Jones is a retired NRCS employee and many of the council members already enjoyed a great working relationship with him. The group was thrilled to have the opportunity to work more closely with NRCS on future projects. The Georgia Association will be working with NRCS in the coming year to help roll out the new farm bill program.

*Pictured below L to R:  
Rahn Milligan-Pine Country and Central Savannah RC&D, Billy Roland-Golden Triangle RC&D, Eugene Dyal-Seven Rivers RC&D, Ellis Lamme- Upper Ocmulgee RC&D, Frank Riley-Chestatee Chatahoochee RC&D, (Back) Stephen Bontekoe-Limestone Valley RC&D, Jeanette Jamieson- Georgia RC&D Association President, Kim McCollum- Chestatee Chatahoochee RC&D, Dennis Brown- Chestatee Chatahoochee RC&D, Danny Stanaland-Seven Rivers RC&D, Pete Waller-Coastal RC&D, and Rhonda Gordon- Golden Triangle RC&D.*

## Partner's Luncheon

On December 5th, Golden Triangle held a luncheon in Dawson to thank our amazing partner organizations and agencies for the opportunity to join forces with them to help transform Southwest Georgia.

We look forward to both strengthening our current partnerships, as well as finding new partners to help bring about meaningful change.



## Job Fair

On June 22nd a career and education fair was conducted at Marine Corps Logistics Base-Albany at the installation's conference center for service members, civilian military employees and their families.

The goal of the fair is to connect the outside community to those on base. Fair participation ranged from children of service members looking for educational and volunteer opportunities to those about to leave the military looking to obtain employment after they transition out. The fair was a great opportunity for Program Assistant James Andrews to share information on Golden Triangle RC&D, upcoming events, and our mission in the community.



# Legislators Luncheon

**On September 16th Golden Triangle RC&D hosted a luncheon with Georgia House Representatives and State Senators from our member counties.**

The meeting was an opportunity to demonstrate to our area officials what Golden Triangle is doing for their communities and identify ways that we can further help Southwest Georgia.

Elected officials in attendance at the luncheon include State Senator Freddie Powell-Sims (12th), Representative Gerald Greene (151), Representative CaMia Hopson (153), and Representative Darlene Taylor (173). Golden Triangle RC&D was represented by President Billy Roland, Vice President Doug Wilson, Executive Board Member Jack Hufstetler and Executive Director Rhonda Gordon.



The group worked to pinpoint projects in the Golden Triangle service delivery area where we could be of assistance. Some great ideas were generated by the group and will be discussed at the annual meeting in October. We are so appreciative of what our legislators do for our area, and were certainly grateful for their participation in the meeting.

After lunch attendees were given the opportunity to test Golden Triangles newest purchase, Virtual Reality Headsets. The group was shown a 3D presentation on soil sustainability that Golden Triangle currently uses as part of its statewide Soil Health workshops. Golden Triangle RC&D is excited to have had this opportunity to brainstorm with our political partners and we look forward to all of the amazing things that will come as a result.

# Virtual Reality Headsets



outreach, both in distance learning and classroom-based teaching. Research shows that virtual and augmented reality simulations increase motivation and improve collaboration and knowledge construction.

The purchase of a Vuze Xr 3D camera allows Golden Triangle to start creating its own content for VR headsets. Sharing this new content will allow educators all over the world to show their students the amazing attractions we have here in Southwest Georgia.

The funding for this new technology was generated in part from our unique "Escape Room" Game. The game was designed to be used as a fundraiser and shared with other non-profit organizations in our service delivery area.

**Golden Triangle RC&D can now help people to tour world-famous landmarks, dive under the ocean, or visit back in time without leaving their chair.**

Golden Triangle is introducing a Class VR virtual reality system by Tierney Brothers Educational Systems to the groups educational platform. The top-notch system includes 32 VR headsets which participants can wear and instantly be immersed in an animal habitat, farming simulation, pollinator routine, or countless other applications.

This virtual reality technology has the potential to greatly enhance Golden Triangle's education and

# Prescribed Burn Workshops to begin in early 2020

**Fire is a natural part of forest ecology. Controlled burns stimulate the germination of desirable forest trees, helps with fire prevention, and improves the habitat for threatened and endangered species.**

**Fire reutilizes nutrients back into the soil and promotes vegetation growth.**

**Using fire on a regular basis will enhance and maintain wildlife habitat in fire-adapted ecosystems, reduce hazardous fuels, and protect property and natural resources.**

# Community Prosperity Summit

In late June the USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE) endeavored to bring together partners who are key to the revitalization of rural America by hosting a Community Prosperity Summit.

The summit was a series of events designed to foster hope and opportunity, create wealth and build assets in communities across the country.

Because of the work that Golden Triangle has done in the past with the 2501 grant, we were asked to present at the event. The summit gathered state, federal and tribal partners, land-grant universities, Hispanic serving institutions, tribal colleges, historically black colleges and universities, national development organizations, non-profit organizations, faith leaders, veterans, and other strategic partners, to focus on the White House Rural Prosperity Taskforce recommendations emphasizing e-connectivity, quality of life, workforce development, innovation and technology and economic development. The summit assisted communities in the development of local prosperity councils to foster hope and opportunity, create wealth and build assets; illustrated successful practices for developing key partnerships; connected attendees to USDA and other relevant federal programs; and modeled success for communities and future generations of communities. Golden Triangle was proud to present their work to over 250 people from several states in the Southeast.



*Pictured left: Rhonda Gordon, Executive Director, Golden Triangle RC&D; Center: Kenya Nicholas, Program Director, Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement; Right: Calvin Willis, Field Technician, Golden Triangle RC&D*

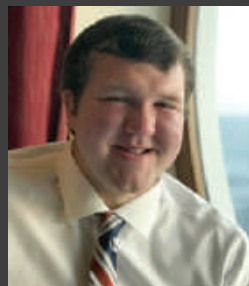
# External Hiring Agreement

Golden Triangle has entered into an agreement with NRCS to provide employees with the credentials and knowledge sufficient to perform the technical services that meet applicable NRCS standards, specifications, and program requirements.

To date, we have hired six employees that work in NRCS offices to provide the technical services needed. On staff in area offices are Justin Smith, Forester, Arthur Carr, Engineering Tech, Jesse Driver, Wildlife Biologist, Jim Bradley, Forester Tech and Lakeisha Webb, Program Support Specialist. Niki Morley, who was employed

as the Area Archeologist, has accepted a full time position with NRCS as the State Archeologist.

*Partners working together to make a difference!*



L to R: Jim Bradley, Forester Tech; Arthur Carr, engineering tech; Jesse Driver, Wildlife Biologist; Justin Smith, Forester; Lakeisha Webb, Program Support Specialist

# NRCS Success Stories



Through a cooperative agreement with NRCS, Golden Triangle has been participating in a project to document landowner success stories across South Georgia and a *Welcome to Georgia* video to showcase agriculture across the state.

As we tell their stories through photos, filmed interviews and written articles, the fascinating narratives of people's connection to the land and agriculture is increasingly evident. The project has provided not only the opportunity to promote the value of NRCS programs, but has illustrated the beauty and value of family farms to our region and our nation.

In recognition of the project, several of the videos are now being utilized by the USDA office in Washington, D.C. to promote its services nationwide. You will be able to view these short videos on the farmers.gov website. Several of the written stories are now on the new Golden Triangle website, and have been published in the monthly newsletter.

Up next, two local producers share their stories. Brian Ponder shares the story of his generational farm and its 134 year-old history. Steve Bailey of Seldom Rest Farm reveals the aftermath of Hurricane Michael and shares the resiliency of producers ten months after the devastation.

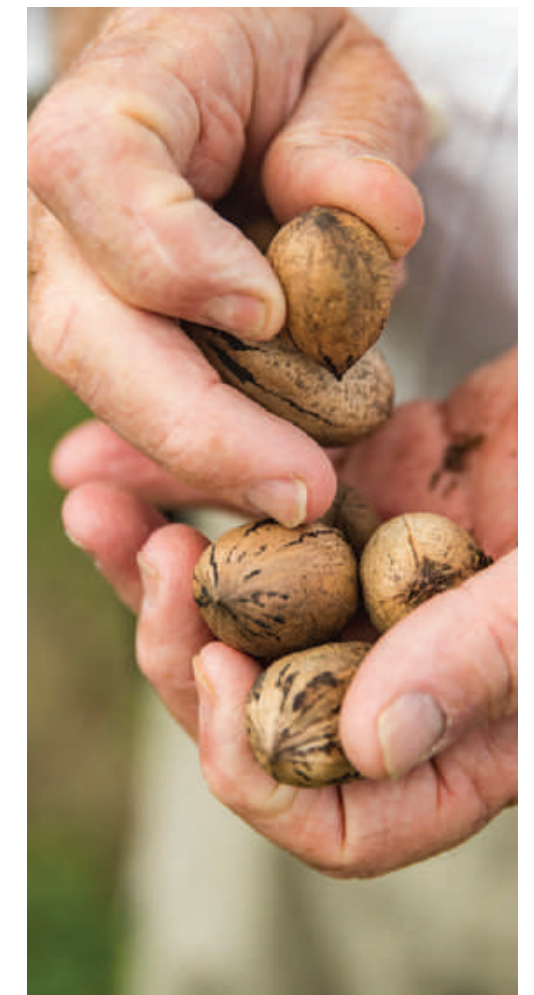


**Terrance Rudolph, NRCS State Conservationist and Rhonda Gordon, Golden Triangle Executive Director**





## Seldom Rest Farm Donalsonville, Georgia



the year's crop was just getting underway, knocking nuts, limbs and trees to the ground. It will take years for growers to recover but the lessons of the historic storm will remain for generations.

In Seminole County, Georgia, the pecan orchards of Seldom Rest once spread over 375 acres. Today resident manager Steve Baily looks out on 5,275 destroyed trees and an untold number more that will literally rot from the inside from all the scar and damage. "We don't really know. We've never traveled this path before," Mr. Baily said. He has been the resident manager of Seldom Rest since 1981 and the magnitude of Hurricane Michael was a new experience for even someone like him with over half a century of expertise. "It was only here yesterday," Mr. Baily told us. "We said we (were not) prepared, but I don't know what we could have done to have gotten prepared."

The original trees of Seldom Rest are not the only things showing scars. Due to the area's thin topsoil, the massive wind and rain of Michael disturbed much of the land. Large gullies and washouts spread across the property, making the replanting of new trees even more difficult.

"These scars are (going to) be here for 15 to 20 years," Mr. Baily told us. But that hasn't slowed down his will to restore the property or his optimism for a brighter tomorrow. "That's the mentality of a (agricultural) producer. It's the only industry in the world that buries its money in the ground and comes back (hoping) to get some money back."

Golden Triangle revisited Seldom Rest in August of 2019, ten months after the devastation. Seldom Rest has completed clean-up and planted over 10,000 new trees. New irrigation is currently being installed and the trees are being prepped for the upcoming harvest season.



Steve and Brenda Bailey



**When hurricane Michael made landfall it was the third most powerful Atlantic storm to hit the United States. For Georgia's 2018 pecan crop, a storm of this magnitude was something that had never happened before.**

The mega storm's path mowed over the country's top pecan-producing state with 100 mile per hour winds as harvest for



**"You're going to get out of the land what you put into it."**

**The story of the 134-year old Ponder family farm.**



**Brian Ponder and his brother Ken have a lot of family farming history to glean from as they run their cotton, corn, peanut, timber and watermelon operation.**

Their great grandparents initially purchased about 100 acres in 1884 at the beginnings of a multi-generational farm near Omega, Georgia. As the family story goes, they chose the original plot of land because it had a slight roll. This enabled them to clear the trees off the land for farming and let the logs roll to the bottom of the hill. As it's been handed down through the generations, the farm has expanded to several thousand acres.

Brian Ponder learned early on from his Dad that if you take care of the land it will take care of you. Ponder's father was one of the first in the area that used services through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "He saw the benefits of taking care of the land and keeping it from eroding and washing and he passed

that understanding along to me and my brother," said Ponder. "Over the years, we've tried to learn as much as we could about creating organic matter to hold more nutrients in the soil in order to be able to use less water and decrease erosion." He notes that their land is actually getting better, emphasizing that the land is not really theirs, but is on loan from God. "We want to make sure we take care of it while we have it," Ponder said.

Family ties are a key part of the farm's history and success. The Ponder brothers have been involved with the farm since 1982 and it's all they've ever known. "I've got the best brother in the world," Brian said of his older brother Ken. "He's helped bring me along and keeps me straight. We work well together." Their father is still around the farm at age 84 to keep an eye on things. The senior Mr. Ponder gets excited with projects that involve moving dirt, particularly in the pond building part of their family business. Brian's adult children have grown up on the farm driving tractors and learning conservation practices. Though they're not currently a part of the operation, Ponder

says, "The land is deeply rooted within them."

With such a deep history of working the land, the Ponder family has both great memories and knows what it is to persevere through hard times. "The biggest financial blessing the Lord ever gave me is not a great crop," stated Brian. "Instead, it was in the mid 80's when things were terrible." Following a hurricane and high interest rates the farm fell deeply in debt. Despite seemingly insurmountable odds, they tenaciously persevered and things began to turn around. "After that, I've always said that was a blessing to be in that hole, because you really appreciate it when things got better," he reflected. The Ponder brothers are living proof of their grandfather's assertion that, "There is no way that anybody who works like y'all do, can't make it."

While many years of perseverance have enabled them to now be in a position to weather hard times, Brian expresses concern about the challenges for newer farmers seeking success. "We have to have those young people to carry on growing food to feed this country," Ponder said. "But it's so challenging for them to make it through those hard times; such as when commodity prices are down. We have to help those young people to stay in farming."

He highlights the many older farms with aging owners whose children aren't taking over the farm. This is in part because of the profitability obstacles and the fact that it is so challenging during the hard seasons. "For those young people that do have a love for farming, we need to do everything we can to help make it profitable so they can get a good start and go from there," Ponder said.

According to Brian, a key part of his farm's success today is the workforce of 32 million cotton plants. "I look at that as 32 million little employees and I try and keep them as happy as I can," Ponder said. "I keep water to them, making sure their soil is as nice an environment as it can be and make sure they are fed. I try to do the best that I can for them [so that] our 32 million employees are doing a real good job for us."

He emphasized that the underlying principle of his land stewardship stating, "You're going to get out of the land what you put into it. You're going to have to feed the land what it needs and you have to take care of it."

Ponder's land stewardship has been recognized through



the Tift County Farmer of the Year Award, ABAC Alumnus Master Farmer of the Year and the Georgia Soil and Water Conservationist of the Year Award.

NRCS has served him well in this effort and has been helping the Ponder family sustain the land since Brian was a small child. In earlier years, this included technical assistance for waterway management, terracing and designing drain tile systems. More recently, they've utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in a variety of ways. Among several other benefits, this has enabled the conversion from noisy diesel pumps to more efficient electric pumps. The electric pumps don't involve fuel and oil spills of diesel and their quieter sound profile wins favor with the neighbors.

NRCS continues to be involved with their waterway construction projects designing spillways and piping systems to help ensure dam safety of ponds. Ponder particularly notes the value of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) in the way it rewards quality conservation practices. "We've been involved with CSP since the start of the program," commented Brian. "It's been wonderful because it rewards farmers for a doing a good job to start with."

Along with thankful recognition of God's gifts, perseverance and love for each other, this foundation of quality resource stewardship is why Ponder Farms has remained successful for over 134 years.

*County: Tift | Congressional District: 8th  
Conservation District: Middle South Georgia*



# 2020 New Projects

## NRCS: New Conservation Agreement to include additional counties

This agreement will serve to provide the basis for work to be accomplished including conservation planning, prescribed burning and the filming of best management practices and success stories that will be used to equip landowners with the information needed to be better stewards of their land.

Golden Triangle will promote the importance of conservation planning, prescribed burning and best management practices as a land management tool for landowners; promote NRCS and its mission; increase awareness of the agency; educate landowners on current NRCS programs; help to increase loyalty and trust among landowners; showcase best management practices. All assistance provided by Golden Triangle RC&D will meet USDA NRCS standards and specifications as set forth in the Field Office Technical Guide.

## Georgia Environmental Protection Division

Golden Triangle will begin work to update the Better Back Roads manual across the state of Georgia.

## USF&W: Georgia

Golden Triangle received a new five-year agreement to assist USF&W in continuing to complete road erosion control projects that will benefit stream habitat for listed mussels and for outreach and education.



## USF&W: Florida

Golden Triangle received a new contract to assist with coordinating Riparian/Instream Habitat Restoration projects on private lands to promote population growth of listed and at-risk aquatic species identified in SWAP's for Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Expected outcomes for this project include:

- Securing the viability of existing subpopulations of listed and at-risk species and their habitats.
- Increasing the number of viable subpopulations and the amount of suitable habitat.
- Developing cooperative ventures with private landowners in selected watersheds to restore stream channels and riparian habitat.
- Directly contribute to the 2003 Recovery Plan of 7 Listed Mussels
- Directly contribute to the 1995 Recovery Plan for Gulf Sturgeon
- Increase population growth and improve population resiliency of listed mussels, at-risk species and Gulf sturgeon in response to habitat restoration on degraded private lands with existing populations per recovery lead;

- Restore species composition on private lands to promote other native aquatic communities, such as shoal bass and striped bass habitats;
- Coordinate restoration efforts with State Fish and Wildlife Agencies to promote recovery of listed and at-risk, along with state listed recovery actions;
- Develop awareness of restoration methodologies;
- Implement restoration action items from completed watershed threats assessments.

## Household Water Well Loan Program

Golden Triangle has been awarded the Household Water Well grant for 2019-2020. The grant amount awarded was \$89,000.

The Household Water Well program is a loan program designed to help low income rural homeowners construct or upgrade household water well systems. The funding is provided through the USDA Rural Utilities Division. This program helps us to create a revolving loan fund to increase access to clean, reliable water for households in eligible rural areas (rural towns of 50,000 or less). Golden Triangle must contribute 10% in cash towards the grant.

Terms for the loans include one percent fixed interest rate, 20-year maximum term, and an \$11,000 maximum loan per household. Individuals may be eligible for loans if their annual household income does not exceed 100 percent of their state or territory's median non-metropolitan income. At this time loans may not be used for home sewer or septic systems, however, it has been reported that in 2021 septic systems will be added to the program.

To date, 106 wells have been installed or repaired for low income citizens at a total investment of just over \$700,000. Golden Triangle continues to see ongoing need for this program among area rural residents who



often have very few, if any, other options to recover lost drinking water access.

The Household Water Well Grant program complements environmental initiatives and provides support for rural residents. Many rural residents do not live in areas where a centralized water system is available, therefore it is essential that rural residents have access to wells that are safe and working.

## Educational Outreach

Several new outreach programs are planned in area schools that will feature our new Class VR Headsets.

## Golden Triangle RC&D Receives Award for Southeastern Association of RC&D's

**The Golden Triangle Resource and Conservation Development Council was recently recognized for its service to the SWGA region through an award presented by the Southeastern RC&D Association.**

Biennially, the Southeast US Conference of Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils recognizes several of its member councils with a handful of awards for outstanding service to their particular region. Southwest Georgia's council, Golden Triangle RC&D based in Blakely, was recognized as the 2019 RC&D Council of the Year.

The 2019 RC&D Council of the Year Award recognizes the RC&D council that makes the greatest impact on the priority concerns of the local community and beyond by developing partnerships that contribute to the overall area plan, fostering participation by partners and local citizens (including underserved groups), facilitating efforts to implement projects and ensuring the sustainability of the RC&D program through good non-profit management.

The association identifies councils who promote projects with meaningful and sustainable social, economic, environmental, and/or conservation outcomes - especially projects that can be adapted by other RC&D councils throughout the state - use innovative approaches in solving



*Pictured left to right: Dr. William Hodge, National RC&D President; Rhonda Gordon, Executive Director; Billy Roland, Golden Triangle RC&D President; Craig Sizemore, Southeastern RC&D President*

local natural resource and community development needs; move toward sustainability through good non-profit management; promote the inclusion of underserved groups in RC&D council membership, incorporating the insights and skills offered by underserved groups in RC&D Council work and addressing the needs of underserved groups in the community; and promote lasting partnerships and coordination among project partners.

Golden Triangle was delighted to have their council president, Billy Roland, and their executive director, Rhonda Gordon, at the recent conference in Asheville, North Carolina to receive the award.

"Golden Triangle is honored by the award and affirms the true team effort it takes on a consistent basis to win an award of this merit," said Rhonda Gordon. "We are blessed with a great team, from our directors and members who offer their support and guidance to our amazing staff and partners who work together to make a difference."

## 2018 Annual Meeting

Golden Triangle RC&D thanks everyone who helped to make our 2018 Annual Meeting a huge success. The meeting was held on November 7 at the East Baker Historical Society in Newton Ga. Over 40 guests joined us as we reported on our activities and updated our members and agency partners on all the great things we've had the opportunity to work on over the last year. We are always grateful for the opportunity to showcase our current projects and recognize our amazing partners.



# Golden Triangle Board & Staff

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Vice President



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**Calvin Willis**  
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**Lakeisha Webb**  
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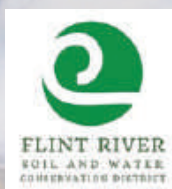


**Jesse Driver**  
Wildlife Biologist

# Thank You To Our Partners



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