# ROOTED IN RESILIENCE

*Multiple Generations. Three Farmers. One Story.*



RURAL INVESTMENT TO PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT

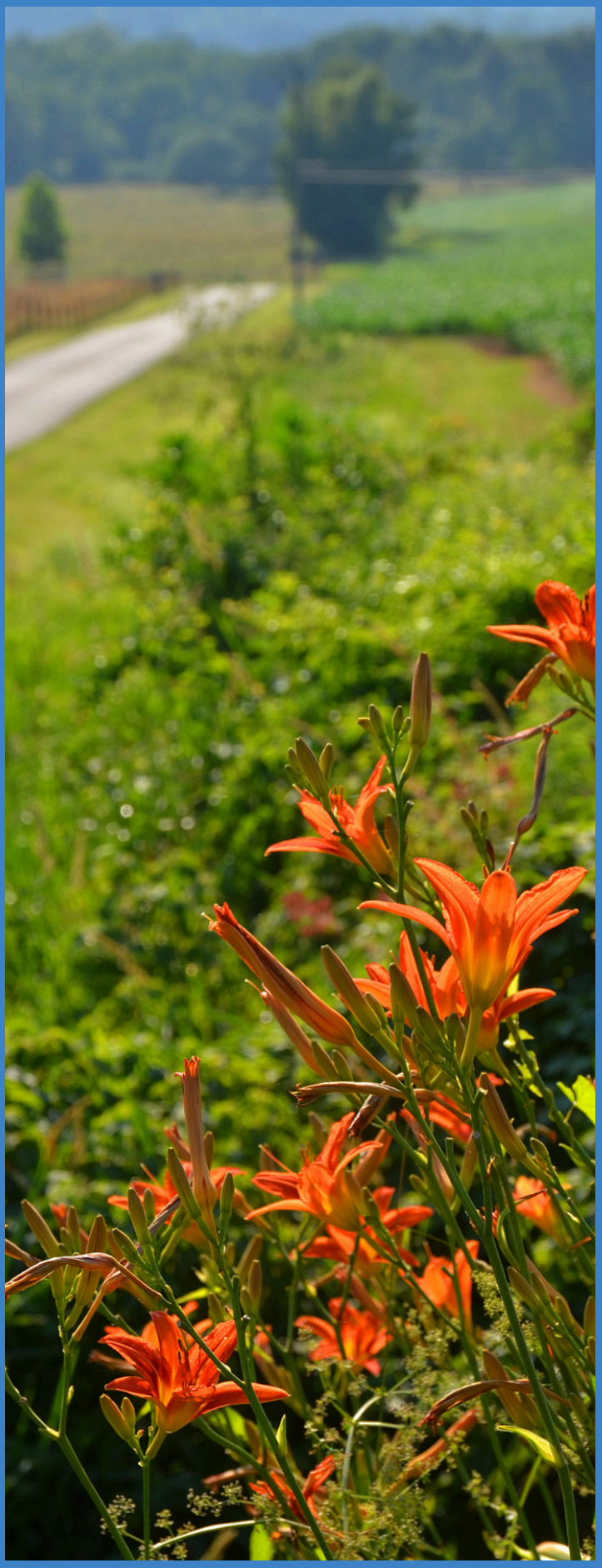
NBGC
NATIONAL BLACK GROWERS COUNCIL

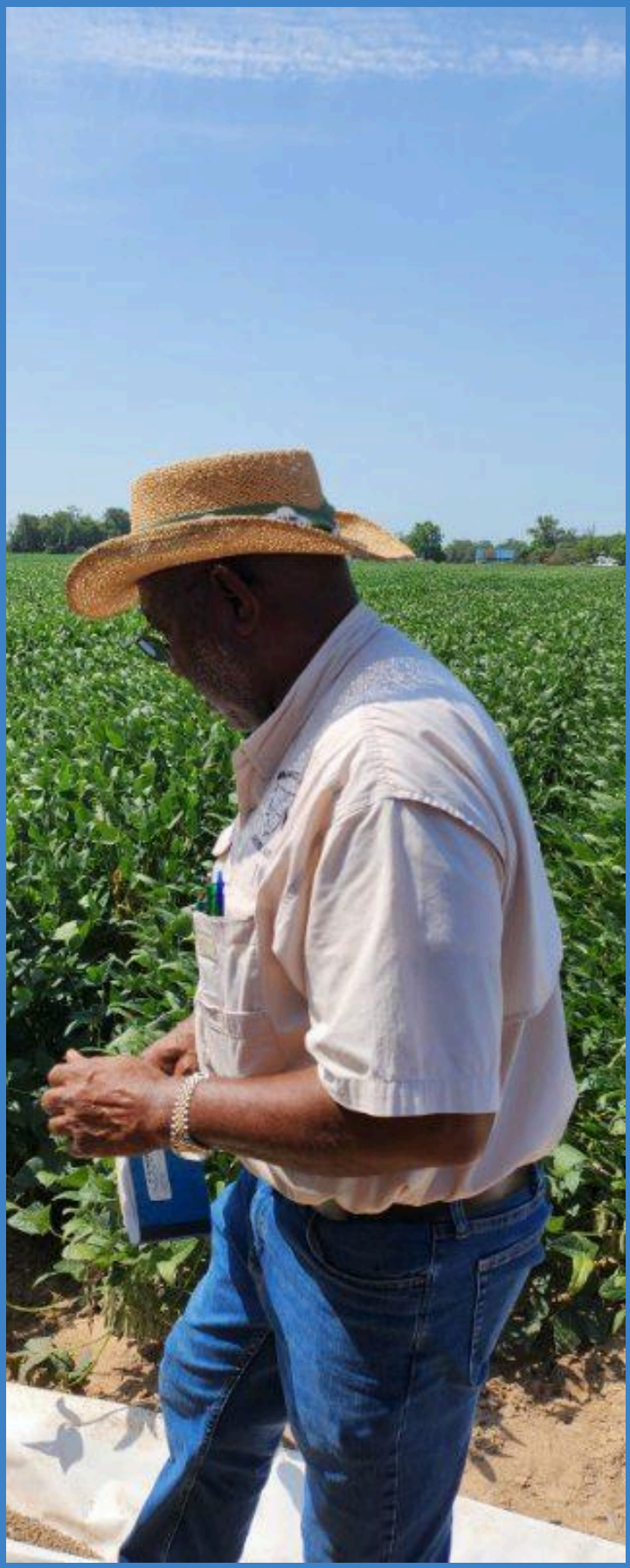
# THE RIPE WAY

RIPE is on a mission to increase voluntary conservation practice adoption and make regenerative agriculture the norm on American soil. We want to see farmers and ranchers fairly compensated for the ecosystem benefits created by their use of key conservation practices. This requires removing risks and obstacles farmers and ranchers face when adopting or scaling such practices.

Farming and ranching looks different across the country, as does rural America. This Storytelling Project shares the unique perspectives of farmers and ranchers across the United States who are adopting voluntary conservation practices at scale and transitioning towards more sustainable food and fiber production systems. Our producer-led Coalition helps us to identify key challenges to prioritize, and the stories shared in this series provide examples of conservation challenges and opportunities on farmland in action.

RIPE'S Coalition is composed of a bipartisan Board of Directors and three producer-led advisory groups who help guide our priorities and advocate for our approach. Our coalition exists to best represent those we serve, giving farmers and ranchers a voice in developing and advocating solutions to remove obstacles that producers face. We are proud to partner with **National Black Growers Council**, who is a member of RIPE's Steering Committee.





# NBGC IN ACTION

National Black Growers Council's mission is to improve the efficiency, productivity, and sustainability of black row crop farmers. We are multigenerational producers who advocate for the best interests of Black farmers locally, statewide, and nationally. We promote agriculture in the United States and abroad. Our Board of Directors consists of 12 farmers who operate farms in 11 southern states, from Virginia to Texas. Collectively, our Board farms nearly 60,000 acres of row crops across the region.

We all own our farms and seek opportunities to expand our operations. We strive to teach our young men and women about the virtues of farming, the importance of agriculture, and the commitment it takes to be successful in the global business of agriculture. The NBGC was organized to represent the unique needs of full-time Black farmers. We have formed partnerships with each other, with majority farmers, and with corporations, because together, we all contribute to the global food supply.

We've weathered droughts and floods, fought hungry bugs and tough weeds, battled heat waves and freezes, but there's nothing else we'd rather do. We've had profitable years and disastrous years, endured discrimination and intimidation, but there's nothing else we'd rather do.

# AGRICULTURE IN THE BAYOU STATE

Farming in Louisiana began with indigenous tribes cultivating crops like tobacco and corn, and it grew through colonial eras into a diverse modern agricultural economy. During the 1700s, early planters heavily focused on indigo and cotton before shifting priorities. Cotton then became the dominant cash crop in northern Louisiana. Sugarcane was cultivated in the state by 1750, and in 1795, sugar was successfully crystallized near New Orleans, making southern Louisiana a powerhouse for sugar production.

Large antebellum plantations operated like self-sufficient villages. Enslaved African Americans performed the vast majority of the grueling agricultural, construction, and domestic labor. Enslaved people often grew personal food crops like rice, corn, pumpkins, and sweet potatoes in the swampy lands behind the main cash crop fields.

Southwest Louisiana expanded commercial rice farming significantly by the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the help of specialized canal systems and rice mills. Modern Louisiana agriculture spans diverse commodities, with soybeans currently serving as a highly-valuable crop alongside sugarcane, rice, cotton, and sweet potatoes.





# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Northeast Louisiana is a  unique location for agriculture due to its rich alluvial delta soils between the Ouachita and Mississippi rivers, producing a massive share of the state's row crops like corn, cotton, soybeans, and rice. It is also vulnerable to a variety of environmental stressors. For example, heavy downpours and severe tropical weather systems frequently inundate low-lying farmlands in the Mississippi River alluvial basin, destroying staple crops like soybeans and rotting stored feed.

From 1980-2024, there were 106 confirmed weather/climate disaster events with losses exceeding $1 billion each to affect Louisiana. These events included 15 drought events, 10 flooding events, 1 freeze event, 44 severe storm events, 27 tropical cyclone events, and 9 winter storm events.

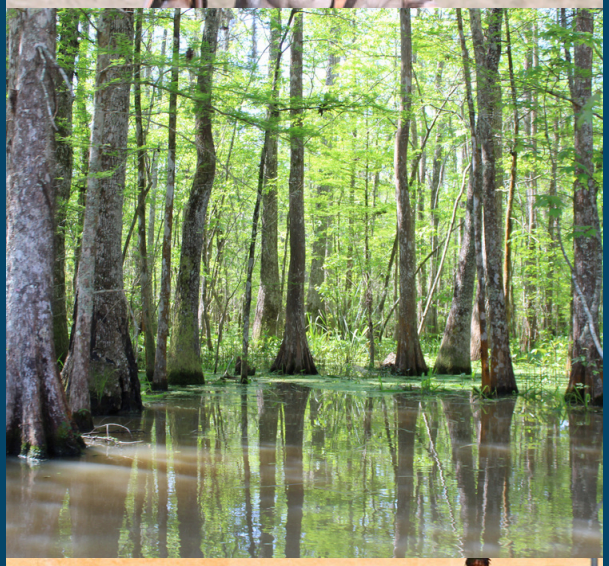
To keep the soil fertile and the land prosperous for future generations, key conservation practices on working lands are no longer optional. Read the stories of three Louisiana farmers whose families have been working the lands for generations, and what they are doing to help their lands and their soil flourish.



# MEET DENIM HILL

*5th Generation Producer*







Morehouse Parish, Louisiana is known for its flat, fertile farmland, agriculture, and timber production. It covers about 800 square miles and features fertile alluvial lands, rolling uplands, and wooded swamps. It is also home to 5th generation farmer Denim Hill of Hill's Farm. His great-great-grandfather purchased the land where his shop now sits in the early 1900s. *"I actually take special care of that piece of land, because I'm going to one day inherit majority of it*," he says of this particular parcel of land, which accounts for roughly a quarter of his acreage. *"One day, it'll be mine, so I pay special attention to it*."

Denim always knew he wanted to farm, and having recently graduated from college, he is now overseeing his own operation of close to 1,000 acres. This includes corn, soybeans, wheat, and oats. Being from a small country town means experiencing a unique way of life, and one that Denim embraces as a rodeo competitor when he isn't working on the farm. When dealing with formidable weather that sometimes hinders farm work, he uses rodeo as an outlet to cope.

Nurturing the land and keeping it prosperous for years to come means thoughtfully managing it in the present. Denim uses crop rotation, reduced-tillage and no-tillage across his farm. These practices promote soil health and create additional ecosystem services, which benefit the land that he farms and the surrounding ecosystem.

When reflecting on his own experience and offering advice for new farmers, Denim says, "there's going to be a lot of downs that are hard to get through, so you really have to have that passion down to your core."

*"My whole life is the farm."*

-Denim Hill discussing his background and motivation

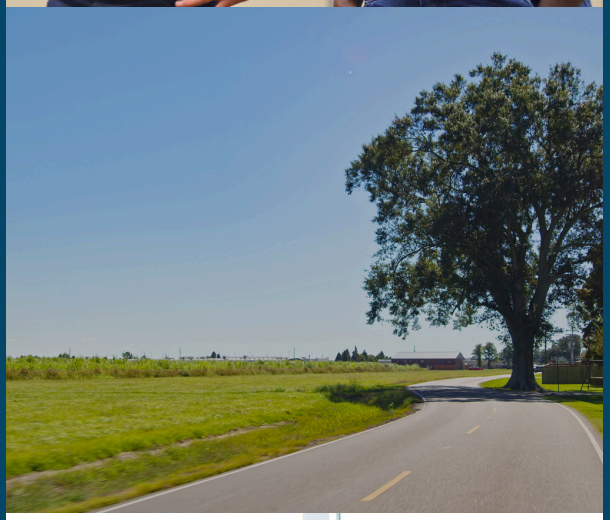
# MEET JUSTIN HUBBARD

*4th Generation Producer*

Tensas Parish, Louisiana is the least-populated Parish in the state, and is centered largely around agriculture and outdoor recreation as home to the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. It is also where Justin Hubbard, 4th generation farmer, lives and works alongside his dad, James Davis. The two generations farm more than 3,000 acres of cotton, soybeans, and corn on land that was once sharecropped by Justin's great-grandfather.



Caring for the land has been in the family for generations, with Justin's grandfather starting the family farm in the 1970s. Following in the patriarch's footsteps, Justin says his heart has always been in farming and nurturing the land.



In a part of the state that is so vulnerable to environmental stressors, thoughtful land planning and management can make or break a farm's success. To combat soil erosion, Justin uses minimal-tillage, because undisturbed soil keeps crop residue on the surface, protecting topsoil from wind and water washouts. He also plants cover crops every year to minimize erosion and reap other environmental benefits, like moisture management and supplementing organic matter. With the combination of these practices, one additional benefit that has been especially helpful to Justin is weed suppression.



Not only do these conservation practices help Justin combat environmental pressures, but they also leave the land better through improved soil health and adjacent ecosystem services. He plans to keep the farm in the family, passing down his operation to his two daughters when they are of age.

*"I want them to be able to see what it takes to raise a crop of your own, or to farm and to protect your land."*

-Justin Hubbard discussing his daughters taking over the family farm in the future

# MEET WILLIS NELSON

*3rd Generation Producer*








An area of cotton plantations in the antebellum era, East Carroll Parish in the early 21st century has about 74% of its land devoted to agriculture. It is best known for its farming industry along with its beautiful seven-mile, cypress tree-lined, oxbow lake that gives the town of Lake Providence its name.

It is home to Willis Nelson, third generation producer who grows corn, cotton, soybeans, and rice in Sondheimer, LA. Willis farms with his three brothers, and while the group considers themselves third-generation, one could argue that they are fourth-generation, being that their great-grandfather was a sharecropper. The next generation of Nelson farmers are already helping out on the farm, too, with the eldest of the new generation in college; one studying agribusiness and one studying engineering with a minor in agriculture.

Willis mentions that most of what his farm grows feeds the food we eat, rather than going directly into our mouths. This is an important element of the food production system that is often overlooked by the public. Not only do Willis' crops support animal agriculture, but his system of crop production supports healthy soil and a healthy farm ecosystem.

The Nelson family uses different conservation agriculture practices in their operations, and in fact their farm is certified regenerative. Some of the main conservation practices they employ include minimal tillage, cover crops, and nutrient management.

While Willis has been experimenting with regenerative practices for years, recent weather trends have demonstrated the need now, more than ever, to build resilience in rural areas as changing climate conditions create increased environmental stressors on his farm and his community.

# ECOSYSTEM SERVICES OF KEY CONSERVATION PRACTICES

*Benefits for people & the planet*



**Key conservation practices on working lands can benefit the producer and the planet by creating ecosystem services that support human and environmental health.** However, adoption of such practices has been slow to scale because of barriers faced by producers, including time and resource constraints. In order to scale these practices on farms and ranches across the country, we must reduce or remove these barriers, effectively mitigating any associated risks for producers. After all, agricultural producers support the masses through the production of food, fuel and fiber - but they need to be supported too. Let's explore a few key conservation practices and the ecosystem services they create:

1. *Reduced-till or no-till: methods used to prepare soil for planting while minimizing or eliminating traditional plowing and soil overturning*

- Key benefits include preserved soil structure, which can cut down on erosion, retain soil moisture, and lower labor and fuel costs.

2. *Cover crops: any crop grown to cover the soil and may be incorporated into the soil later for enrichment*

- Key benefits include improved soil health, protection from erosion, and boosted biodiversity.

3. *Nutrient management: the science and practice of supplying crops with the right plant nutrients, in the right amounts, at the right time*

- Key benefits include prevention of runoff and sustenance of long-term biological activity and physical structure in soil.

4. *Crop rotation: planting different types of crops sequentially on the same plot of land across a series of growing seasons*

- Key benefits include erosion reduction, improved soil health, and increased nutrients available for crops.





Three farmers across the Mississippi Delta region of northeast Louisiana. Three unique stories about reclaiming and restoring the land, in an area defined by a rich, albeit dark agricultural history. Three people rewriting the story of this region for the future.

Approximately 39% of Louisiana's land area is devoted to agriculture, and no one knows what their land needs better than a farmer. Farmers like Denim, Justin, and Willis need support to implement conservation practices in their operations, which can be costly or resource-intensive to implement upfront, and the benefits of which may not provide returns to the farmer for a few years. We must empower farmers and ranchers across the country to adopt key conservation practices on their working lands.



The National Black Growers Council provides necessary resources to historically underserved producers across the American South and beyond. One of the most important resources is community.
"*In my area, you often feel excluded,*" says Willis Nelson. "*You don't get invited to certain farm field days. You don't get access to the information and resources shared there. (NBGC) helped me get more information, build a network by meeting other people and connecting with other organizations. And it gave me hope because now I know how welcoming and inviting some people can be.*"

Community can establish a sense of belonging and purpose, and can provide practical help as well. Denim Hill acknowledges the importance of the contacts he has connected with through his NBGC membership. "*I can call people that are five miles away. I can call people that are 500 miles away. And probably at some point have faced the same problem,*" he says. "*I'm sure they've already faced the problem. And, whether they're five minutes down the street or 500 miles away, they have some type of resource or some type of way of helping me, you know, get through whatever I'm getting through.*"

# "THEY GAVE ME HOPE."

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# FOR FARMERS. FOR THE FUTURE.

Conservation on agricultural land, including regenerative and climate-smart practices, can benefit producers and the planet alike. To scale conservation on working lands , we need to support our country's farmers and ranchers through federal policy and private market support, creating solutions that fairly incentivize producers for their voluntary conservation efforts.

Existing payment programs available for producers for conservation practices are highly competitive, and do not provide adequate payments that cover the full costs of adoption. The National Black Growers Council is leading the implementation of the Alliance to Advance Climate Smart Agriculture's Climate-Smart Commodities Grant for producers in Arkansas, helping deliver payments to historically-underserved producers. This is just one example of a payment program structure that works for producers, with producers.

RIPE and NBGC are producer-led organizations that are working to promote economic and environmental resilience for farmers and ranchers in rural communities across the country. Visit us online to learn more and get involved.

