

## Weerts Family Farm Recognized by Marion-Cass SWCD for Forestry Conservation



Pictured Above: Judy Weerts, Michael Weerts & Gene Weerts

Michael Weerts, the manager of the Weerts Family Farm in Cass County, received the Texas Region IV Outstanding Forestry Conservationist from the Association of Texas Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the 2021 Outstanding Forestry Conservationist from the Marion-Cass Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) for excellence in forestry conservation.

Weerts has been managing the family farm since September 2013. However, the farm has been in his family since 1918, when his great-grandfather Frank Lummus made it the family home. The Weerts family owns a total of 215 acres, but the focus of their management efforts has been on the original 85 acres. The management goal is to create a productive forest that can be used as an example to other local landowners of what can be achieved. Of the 85 acres, 30 acres is planted in short leaf pine, 13 acres is dedicated to native plants and wildflowers, 15 acres is mixed timber, and 17 acres is a streamside management zone (SMZ).

Weerts has been working Amanda Lowey, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) district conservationist and the Marion-Cass SWCD to develop a long-range conservation plan to enhance wildlife habitat and forest habitat. In addition to conservation technical assistance, Weerts received financial assistance from NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to implement tree/shrub site preparation and tree/shrub establishment and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In 2020, he replanted 30 acres of native short leaf pine through the Short Leaf Pine Initiative. Future plans include implementing sequential patch burning and forest management to enhance understory vegetation under CSP.

With the help of the Texas A&M Forest Service, Collins Academy, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, and TPWD, Weerts hosted a small landowner workshop in February 2020. Topics included wildlife management on small acre properties, hardwood and shortleaf pine management, forestry best management practices, pollinator plantings, hardwood management and exotic controls, benefits of

prescribed burning and a short, prescribed fire demonstration. As a result of the workshop, he has begun working with other property owners with prescribed burns and habitat management work. He has also worked as a district cooperater for the past couple of years.

Management work on the farm began in 2014 with prescribed burning of the open land areas. In April 2017, he partnered with Gary Endsley and the Collins Academy. The Collins Academy develops innovative educational programs and creates hands-on learning opportunities that focus on environmental conservation and outdoor learning. They work with multiple schools in the area for outdoor teaching opportunities. Their focus on the Weerts Farm has been planting for pollinators and studying the water quality of the creeks. With the help of the Collins Academy, they have planted almost 10 acres of pollinator habitat. With the assistance of the SWCD, he was able to get a grant from the Northeast Texas RC&D in 2018 which was used to purchase bee keeping equipment and beehives to help with his pollinator project.

In September 2019, with the help of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) he was selected from over 20 applicants for the Northeast Texas Habitat incentive Program due to the habitat work that was already started. Since then, with the help of grants from TPWD he has installed firebreaks and has been performing prescribed burns on the property. He has planted over a \$1,000 worth of Dunstan Hill Chestnut trees, numerous fruit trees, and a variety of other hardwood trees, and has cleared and created numerous wildlife plots throughout the property.

In the future, he plans to host other groups such as the Cass County Master Gardeners, Caddo wildflower group, and the East Texas Timber Owner Association. He will also be working with local fire departments using the prescribed fires as a training for wildland fire fighting.

"This isn't always the prettiest or what you would call a show place where everything is manicured. It is managed to be the most beneficial for wildlife and a healthy forest, -" says Weerts