

## Wade Ross of Bryan Texas Receives a Top USDA Honor

*Story by Dee Ann Littlefield*

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently recognized Mr. Wade Ross of Bryan, Texas as the top individual honoree in the category of Assisting Rural Communities at the Secretary's 64th Annual Honor Awards held Sept. 12, 2012 in Washington, DC.

The Secretary's Annual Honor Awards are the most prestigious awards given at the Department of Agriculture (USDA). The purpose of Honor Awards is to provide high-level recognition to deserving USDA employees and private citizens who have made outstanding contributions supporting USDA's mission.

Ross was recognized for forging partnerships between government agencies and other entities leading to changes that promote sustainable agricultural client bases and healthy environments for rural and underserved communities. Ross' nomination was sponsored by the Texas NRCS state office.

"Mr. Ross has virtually been a USDA ambassador for small farmers and ranchers across Texas," said USDA- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist Salvador Salinas. "He has taken our programs and helped landowners understand them, implement them on their property and benefit from them.

"He has been a role model farmer, leader and advocate to our agency," Salinas said. "We are proud of his accomplishments and this very deserving high honor he has received."

Mr. Ross's achievements, on behalf of thousands of historically underserved Texas farmers and ranchers, began as an invited voice at the table of agriculture producers and Federal and State agency boards, councils, and committees. His leadership roles have ranged from serving on the NRCS State Technical Advisory Committee and the advisory council for the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, to being an invited speaker at a national Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative conference in Missouri. Mr. Ross lives what he teaches. His conservation outreach efforts and conservation practices that he has implemented on his farm, which has been in the family since 1898, have been recognized and honored at the State level by his local Soil & Water Conservation District and has left a lasting legacy.

Ross founded the Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers Community Based Organization in 1998 and serves as its state director. Ross, a Black farmer and rancher, knew the Department of Agriculture had minority producer programs available that could improve their farming and ranching operations. With a renewed commitment to unify this community of producers and guide them into the future through education and outreach, he began his grassroots efforts asking rural communities and producers: "What are your needs?"

Ross strives to ensure his outreach and education efforts align with the Department of Agriculture's mission and goals of providing leadership in areas such as agriculture and public policy in a science based and efficient manner. Whether he's attending community development meetings in Washington, D.C., or walking a farm in his overalls, his respected voice is heard and his counsel sought as a decision maker.

Ross reaches out to partners from federal and state agencies on communication efforts and to provide speakers for workshops and field days. Information includes conservation planning, technical assistance, Farm Bill programs and community development to provide Texas landowners tools to help meet their land management goals. These partners include NRCS, the USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA), USDA-Rural Development (RD) and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Partnering state entities are the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, Texas Agri-Life Extension and Texas Department of Agriculture. Local Resource and Conservation Development Councils and Soil and Water Conservation Districts are cooperative partners.

These partnerships continue to strengthen rural community infrastructures by benefiting environmental health and natural resources, building and expanding agriculture production, and economic viability for rural agriculture producers.



Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan with Wade Ross, Texas Small Farmers and Ranchers during the Honor Award group photography on the patio of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2012. USDA photo by Bob Nichols.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) helps America's farmers and ranchers conserve the Nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources. All programs are voluntary and offer science-based solutions that benefit both the landowner and the environment.