

Featured Earth Team Volunteer Vignette

Featured Volunteers: Walt Sykes, Mario Milani, Walt Bunter, Chuck Velasquez, Pat Grover

Location: Davis CA

Date: May 2008



A custom made Tome Art Gallery pottery bowl like this one pictured was presented to each of the NRCS State Office Earth Team Volunteers. The bowls are hand made by Jan Pacifico of New Mexico.

“It’s a big ego trip when the State Engineer calls you from another state needing assistance with a problem and you are able to solve their problem.”

– Mario Milani

Over one hundred and ninety-five years with NRCS

..... Combined, that’s how many years of service this group of five former NRCS employees had prior to retirement. After all of those years with NRCS their devotion to the Agency mission continues as they are all active Earth Team volunteers. On May 2nd they gathered together at the California NRCS state office to be honored at a special celebration for National Volunteer Recognition Week. In addition to being served cake and coffee each volunteer was recognized for their individual contributions and given a beautiful handmade pottery bowl.

Walt Sykes started with the Soil Conservation Service in Maryland in 1957 as a Cartographic Engineer student trainee and stayed with the agency for 47 years. He came to California in 1961 where he remained for the rest of his career. In 1965 as a Watershed Planning Specialist, Walt was assigned to various projects throughout the state that could last anywhere from two months to two years. The pleasure of working in the field, getting to know the people, the local staff, the local producers and working together as a team kept Sykes working in that capacity for 20 more years. “The best part is the people you meet,” says Walt. He jokes that he signed up as an Earth Team volunteer when he retired in 2007 out of laziness pointing out that it would be easier to come in and help do his job than it would be to write up the job description for it, but the real reason is “keeping in touch with the people” he says.

Starting with the Soil Conservation Service in 1956, **Mario Milani** has worked in various offices throughout California with the following diverse titles: Field Office Engineer, Engineering Specialist, Project Engineer, Area Engineer (twice), Planning Engineer, RC&D Coordinator, and State Construction Engineer. When Mario retired some 46½ years later as Construction Engineer for the Multi State Design Regional Technical Team, he still hadn’t had his fill of engineering. He immediately signed up as an Earth Team volunteer keeping his same title. Milani, who is partially handicapped, says that volunteering also keeps him active and gives him a sense of accomplishment. Mario continues to provide assistance with the American Society of Testing Material’s requirements to State Conservation Engineers across the nation.

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Earth Team volunteer, **Walt Bunter** says “You need to enjoy doing your work assignments. If not, look for another position.” Obviously Bunter enjoyed his work assignments because after beginning his career as a student trainee in 1956, he worked for NRCS for 43 years. He advanced from Student Trainee to Soil Conservationist, to District Conservationist, to River Basin Planner, to Area Agronomist, and eventually became the State Agronomist for California. Since his retirement in 1999 he has come to the state office every Thursday and often works late into the night. His favorite thing about volunteering is continuing to learn as things change or as new developments come about and he feels good about helping. He also notes that volunteering in the state office gives his wife “some relief” by getting him out of the house for a while.

Charles Velasquez was the Assistant State Engineer when he retired in 1994. Having started with the Soil Conservation Service in 1959 he worked for NRCS for 35 years. Chuck was Area Engineer at Riverside and Salinas before transferring to the State Office. Like the rest of the volunteers Chuck signed up as an Earth Team volunteer upon retiring. He says, “It wasn’t easy to give up the work I so enjoyed, working with farmers and SCS and NRCS employees. Volunteering brings back pleasant memories.” Also, having observed through the years a reduction of direct assistance to farmers, he volunteers to help with the operation and maintenance of conservation projects as he doesn’t want to see this reduction happen.

Pat Grover didn’t start her career with NRCS until she was 55. A stay-at-home mom, she decided it was time to go back to work after her two children fledged. She started working in the Redding Field Office. Even though she had a degree in psychology, she found a passion in of the mission of NRCS. Says Grover, “The mission of the agency is so unique in how we operate, so different from other government agencies, working on private lands, all voluntary and the people that are so committed to the NRCS mission.” So, enamored with NRCS and the people working towards its purpose, Pat stayed on with NRCS for 24 years and didn’t retire until she was 79. Even then she wasn’t so sure she was ready to retire. As an Earth Team volunteer she comes to work at the state office one day a week to help track progress on water resources projects and the state office employees are really glad that she does because she brings in cookies every week, a tradition she’s been doing for 15 years. She’s also the treasurer of the USDA golf tournament that takes place twice a year.



*Ginny and Mario Milani, seated, Walt Bunter, Pat Grover, Walt Skykes
Standing from l-r. Not pictured is Chuck Velasquez.*