

City Girl Turns To Ranching To Reconnect With the Land

One day in 2005, it hit Onika Huggins that she had no home. She'd travelled extensively throughout North America, the Caribbean, and Europe for Pfizer (the Fortune 500 research-based pharmaceutical company) after joining them in 1997, and had sold her house and car after they moved her to New York in 2001 and on to Ireland in 2002. That day in 2005, she was flying back to the US from Dublin, and on the US entry card she didn't know what to enter for her address – her US hotel, her parents' home, the home she sold before moving away, the address where all her worldly possessions were in storage... Shaken by this, she asked her parents to keep an eye out for a place she could buy to return to and that they could look after while she was away. In 2007, they found the perfect one and – with lots of faxes and one trip to the American Embassy – Onika bought it, sight unseen.



Like her parents – who travelled from their home in Chicago for 10-years before finding and purchasing their property in 1986 – Onika planned to raise hay and Angus beef while protecting the land and water. And then she realized: she knew nothing about ranching. After all, she grew up in Chicago – not exactly a rural training ground... Fortunately, her parents (especially her father, who was born and raised on a farm in Scott County Mississippi) and the Neshoba County NRCS stepped in to offer lots of encouragement and assistance.

On the 60-acre Woodpile Ranch (located on Highway 15 in Union, MS), Onika is growing and selling livestock and related products with her parents – currently including Black Angus cattle, free-range yard eggs and chickens, fish, and hay. With the support and guidance of the Neshoba County NRCS office, Onika is near finishing the third step of a five step plan to create a back to basics, self-sustaining property. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is enabling her to more quickly turn Woodpile Ranch into a model of what small farmers and ranchers can achieve using conservation practices and traditional small farm practices.

Once the plan is fully implemented, Woodpile Ranch will offer:

- Breeding stock (cattle, hogs, and goats), which will be sold to local and regional ranchers via private treaty direct sales and auction sales,
- Produce and eggs, sold to local and regional customers via farmers markets and direct sales,
- Meat (cattle, hogs, and goats – on the hoof, and poultry), which will be sold to local and regional customers online and face to face, and
- Cabins, where individuals and groups can see sustainable, traditional, small farm practices first-hand – and eat naturally raised food and homemade canned goods.

Through EQIP, Onika was able get Woodpile ready for grazing and haying years sooner than hoped by adding cross fences and a second pond. An EQIP application was developed and approved to address inadequate stock water supply and poor grazing, and to correct pasture sizing to enable rotation grazing. The existing water source was a single pond, insufficient to service the four pastures created by cross-fencing. The conservation plan included the installation of a 310,000 gallon piped pond, 3200 linear feet of fencing, and multiple fertilizer

applications. Prior to these EQIP-supported activities, she applied 2 tons of lime per acre based on soil tests performed through the MSU Extension Service. All of these conservation practices were installed within two years. This allows approximately 25 head of Black Angus cattle to be over-wintered while still enabling 300+ plus bales of hay to be cut each year. Both ponds – the newer one designed and built through the EQIP Program – are stocked with Bass, Brim, and Catfish and provide a rich source of protein in addition to water for the cattle.

By assisting Woodpile Ranch's preparations for grazing and haying, EQIP enabled Onika put step 3 of her plan – building hay / equipment storage and living quarters – into action at the end of 2011. The 40'x60' hay shed means that bales can be stored on site and the hay's feed value protected, and the attached 24'x60' lean-to protects valuable equipment from harsh weather. Nearly complete, a small apartment under the other lean-to will allow Onika to spend more time building the Ranch into a self-sustaining property.

By using carefully selected, traditional small farm practices on the 60 acres of cross-fenced pastures, hay fields, and ponds, Onika – together with her parents Dolores and James Townsend, who manage the ranch's day-to-day operations – protects the soil, water, native plants, air, and wildlife (including deer, rabbits, turtles and turkey).

With a desire to share and educate, Onika has allowed friends, family, and others onto the ranch for the opportunity to learn of the services offered through the FSA and the NRCS.

Onika is excited about Woodpile Ranch's future, and her continuing partnership with NRCS and the EQIP program, which enables her to push forward her plans and keep the land producing. The Woodpile Ranch name has gotten around in their community. People call all the time when they want quality, Black Angus bulls to improve their herds. 2013 will bring the first offerings of ¼, ½ and whole meat Black Angus steers, raised the old fashioned way and sold directly to the public. In the end, Onika will have a unique property, a working ranch managed sustainably and combined with cabins that enable visitors to reconnect with the land as she has done.

Aside from the Ranch, Onika (a licensed CPA) provides consulting, accounting and bookkeeping services.

The programs, financial assistance and technical assistance available through the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service are invaluable to New and Beginning, Limited Resource, and Socially Disadvantaged farmers like Onika. She still has a lot to learn, but she knows she's not alone.

To see if you qualify for NRCS's EQIP program, contact your local NRCS office.

To find out more about Woodpile Ranch, call 601-774-8977 or go to www.WoodpileRanch.com.

