Conservation: a family tradition and a way of life for Earl Garber

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Growing up on a dairy farm on the outskirts of Lafayette, LA, Earl Garber learned the same skills all farm kids do: How to milk cows and grow corn for silage and how to cultivate pasture grass and harvest hay.

But Garber’s father was also founding chairman of the Lafayette Soil and Water Conservation District, and that meant every agronomic teaching also contained a lesson in conservation. Pastures on the family’s farm were always planted on erosion-prone hillsides, while flatter land was reserved for corn. Any water that did run off cornfields was directed through grass filters to remove sediments and nutrients. Permanent pastures also weren’t tilled; instead Garber’s father would simply overseed bermudagrass with ryegrass when the time came to rotate, so that there was constant ground cover.

Conservation was in fact so central to the farm’s operations that Garber never learned to see the two as separate, and he keeps many of the same traditions on his own land today. “I’ve got a farm laid out very similar to the way my father did,” Garber says. “It’s that type of leadership that I followed.”

Garber may be following his father’s example, but he has also become a leader in his own right. After decades of serving on local soil and water conservation district boards in Louisiana, Garber was elected in early February to a two-year term as president of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD)—the organization representing the 3,000 conservation districts across the country that work to protect natural resources on private lands. In 2002, he also became a CCA, and his participation in both organizations has left him more convinced than ever of the wisdom of his father’s approach.

Conservation: A hidden agronomic practice

“Conservation on farms or other working lands is a big part of how producers have become more efficient, whether it’s precision-leveling to save irrigation dollars or structures that control erosion,” Garber says. “I’ve always said conservation is a hidden agronomic practice. The two tie together every day, and young producers especially are looking for opportunities to protect their resources while making good yields and a decent income.”

The grounding Garber received in that philosophy as a youngster has stayed with him his entire life. Then again, life on a dairy farm is ground-