

Knoxville celebrates Morrow's retirement



John "Allen" Morrow at Hemp training enjoying the day. Photo by Todd L. Reed, Knoxville Area Office.

By Todd L. Reed, Knoxville Area Office area resource conservationist

John "Allen" Morrow grew up on Racoon Creek in Waynesville, North Carolina, right next door to the North Carolina State Mountain Research Station where he enjoyed walking and spending time outdoors on the station grounds. This is where he started developing his love of the outdoors and agriculture.

On December 14, the Knoxville Area Office celebrated Allen's exceptional career with NRCS, which started more than 34 years ago (April 24, 1988) at the Florence, South Carolina, Area Office. Allen officially retired on August 30, 2020.

Incidentally, this is the same Racoon Creek where William Holland Thomas, the only white man to ever hold the title of principle chief of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, was born and where the book "Thirteen Moons" was written loosely about Thomas's life. "Thirteen Moons" is the second book by author Charles Frazier, who also wrote "Cold Mountain." Allen also knew Popcorn Sutton, who was in the area.

Allen graduated Tuscaloosa High School in Waynesville in 1980 where he helped his school's FFA team take their division in the All-Around Livestock Judging category that year. The competition was at Clemson University. It was during the judging contest when Allen decided to go to Clemson University.

Allen graduated from Clemson University in 1985 with an agricultural engineering degree.

After graduating, he worked five different places in four years, and eventually got a job with the County Soil Conservation Service where he was sent to Fort Worth, Texas for concrete training and met Grady Atkins, who told him to come to work for NRCS, then known as SCS, in South Carolina.

Within six months of starting with NRCS, Hurricane Hugo hit South Carolina, and during his first two years, Allen learned through trial by fire about EWP work. Within these two years, Allen spent 13 million in EWP clean-up in the three counties. Allen remembers using more than 27 miles of nylon rope to tie up and secure all the woody debris from the cleaned-out channels in the swamp.

Allen remembers this time as fun and exciting, but also personally a bit difficult because in February 1989, he had a chance to be a movie star. Allen chose to turn down Tom Cruise's invitation for a speaking role in the movie "Days of Thunder." The producers wanted Allen as a main member of the pit crew cast because of his Southern speaking style and his looks. The casting team was at the mall where they met and interviewed Allen and asked if he had any acting training. Allen told them his acting experience included only his high school plays, but they kept calling him over and over asking him to play the part. They even got Tom Cruise to call Allen and try to get him to be in the movie, but Allen turned down Tom Cruise for a career with NRCS and his work on the Hurricane Hugo EWP sites. Allen said he could not just drop and leave the EWP clean-up work and all the people he was helping at the time to have a role in the movie.

A few years later, Allen met Allen Crow while in a training, and within a few days, Allen got three additional calls, one from James Sims. He received a job offer and became the area engineer in the Johnson City Area Office in June 1994.

During this time, Allen started worked on designs for winter beef feeding buildings and he developed the same winter beef building design we are using today. But EWP showed up again, and there was a historic Roan Mountain flood from January 7-8, 1998. When the Doe River flooded the town of Roan Mountain where he worked on 52 separate EWP sites. A later flood would create a very large head cut that would undermine the famous Elizabethton Covered Bridge.

Allen designed and oversaw the building of the weir dam as well as the rock weirs that are just below the Elizabethton Covered Bridge. The reason the weir dame was built and designed the way it was is to preserve the Historic Covered Bridge and a to protect the historic wall built by CCC in the same area.

Allen said one of the most memorable events in his career was working the Elizabethton EWP project and getting to shake hands with Vice President Al Gore. Also, during damage assessment when he met with Governor Don Sundquist to view the restoration work. Allen enjoyed riding in the Blackhawk helicopter but was amazed at the damage caused by the Roan Mountain Flood.

Allen really enjoyed the EWP work during his career. He designed the only debris catcher system of its kind east of the Mississippi. Allen got his idea for the debris catcher to make it like a train "cowcatcher". It looks like the rakes on the front of a steam engine. This debris fence is to protect a church and a youth summer camp from a future mile and half run-out land slide.

Allen's EWP work in Roan Mountain led to an opportunity for him to be on a DART (disaster Assistance Recovery Team) where he got to travel and do EWP work in South Pacific for Micronesia and for the Los Alamos Fires.

With his extensive EWP work from 2012 to 2019, Allen was part of a 12-member Cadre team where he developed and gave national training that focused on the field office. This training course became the Engineering for Field Office Operations course.

There were too many other good stories to tell.... but when asked what Allan liked most about his career, he said "It has all been fun. I enjoyed the freedom to experiment and design and come up with ideas to help do more things with people to help them and help the environment. Working with great people and helping people was the best part of my career. NRCS is the perfect place to learn and help and be given an opportunity to practice our craft."

Allen is a friend to many and has supported and helped more employees and producers than can be counted. Congratulations on an exceptional career and have a long and enjoyable retirement with all the grandchildren.

Photo gallery



John "Allen" Morrow at his December 2022 retirement celebration meeting telling stories. Photo by Todd Reed.



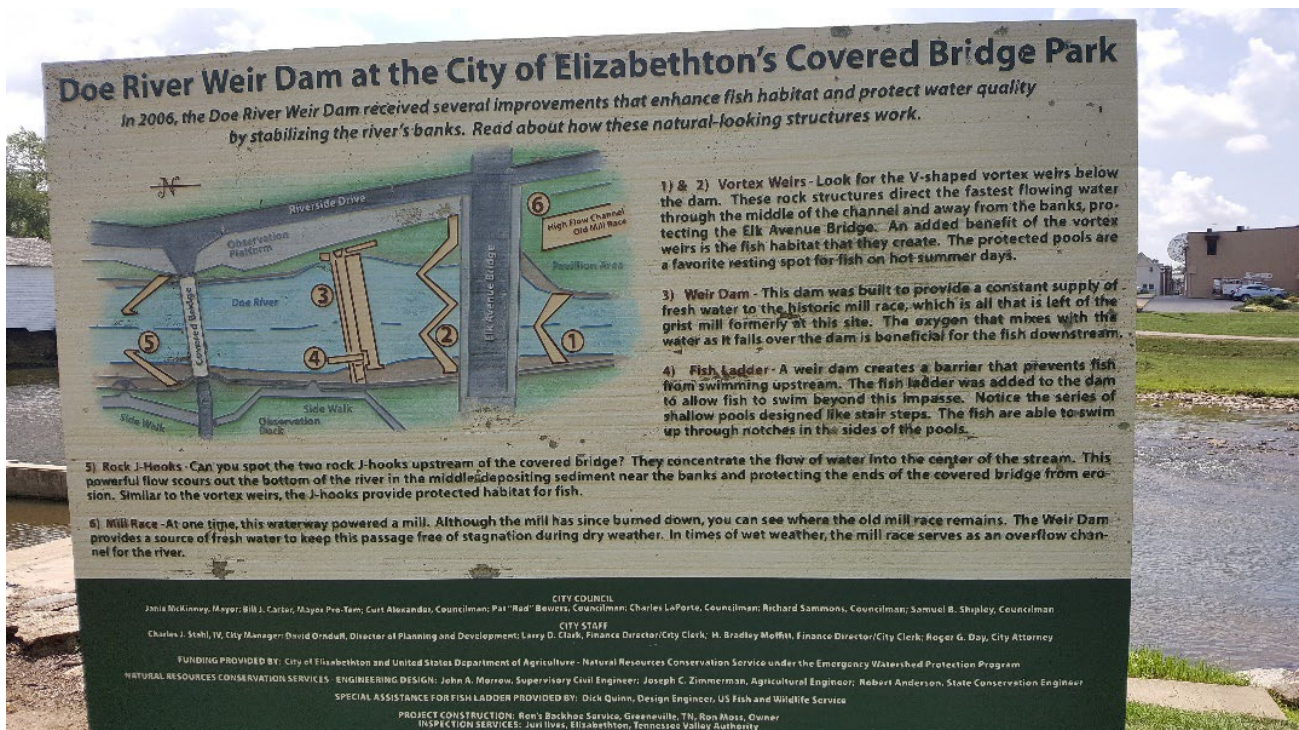
John "Allen" Morrow in the river checking out some streambank stabilization work.



John "Allen" Morrow at a training day. Photo by Todd Reed.



Covered Bridge (in background) over the Doe River in Elizabethton. EWP Weir Dam and V-Weirs and Fish Ladder designed by John "Allen" Morrow. Photo by Todd Reed.



Sign at the Covered Bridge Park describing the work done to visitors. Photo by Todd Reed.



John "Allen" Morrow in his element working with a Mennonite Community in Monroe Co. installing a V-Weir and water intake system for irrigation for the Community. Photo by Jason Miller



John "Allen" Morrow taking a break and enjoying the view during a farm visit on Greg Quillen's farm.
Photo by Todd Reed.