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Water management project saves North Carolina farmland

Roy Roberson

Apr. 18, 2013

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• Upon completion last summer, the (officially) 46-year project cost \$13 million dollars, protects 24,000 acres of land and more than 7,000 acres of North Carolina's most productive farmland.

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Talk of saving the eastern North Carolina hamlet of Swan Quarter Village, and a big chunk of the state's finest farmland from encroaching salt water, began in the 1940s.

It ended last year with completion of a 17.7 mile diking system that surrounds the historic town.

Swan Quarter Village is a small, rural town in North Carolina's most isolated county — Hyde County, located along the Pamlico Sound, roughly 165 miles east, and some local residents contend a half century in time, from the state capitol in Raleigh.



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NORTH CAROLINA State University Cooperative Extension Agent Mac Gibbs describes the loss of farmland to saltwater intrusion at a recent farm tour.

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“Being so far away from Raleigh is sometimes a blessing and sometimes a curse,” says Hyde County native and long-time North Carolina State Extension Ag Agent Mac Gibbs.

“In terms of getting the Swan Quarter dike built, it was definitely a hardship,” he adds.

In 1955, four hurricanes devastated the small, rural county and talks of a dike to prevent salt water from destroying the village, farmland, and timberland began in earnest.

Being a long way from anywhere and virtually surrounded by water, Hyde County suffered in its anonymity and federal and state funds needed to complete the project

seemed ever so far away at times.

“Sometimes we even had to fight with our own folks to get this project done,” Gibbs says.

Upon completion last summer, the (officially) 46-year project cost \$13 million dollars, protects 24,000 acres of land and more than 7,000 acres of North Carolina’s most productive farmland.

Flooding from storms and from an ever-increasing tidal rise threatened to inundate the small town and surrounding rural land with saltwater, leaving a layer of salt that, if left untreated, could destroy everything in its path.

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“It’s not just the farmland that was at risk, homes and businesses and highly productive pine forests were also at risk.

“The salt didn’t necessarily kill pine trees outright, but it weakened them and pine bark beetles and other insects would come in and just devastate everything that is coated with salt from the saltwater intrusion,” Gibbs says.

Hyde County is one of North Carolina’s largest counties by acreage and consistently among its most economically depressed.

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