

Rita Luedtke

Eastern Will County, Illinois

Operation: 280 acres in corn, soybeans, small grains, hay, wetland, and wildlife food habitat. Also boards 18 horses.



Rita Luedtke and an aerial view of her Will County land.

Heaven So Close to Chicago...?

The majority of Eastern Will County's landscape is made up of highly erodible acreages and being a good steward of the soil can test the mettle of the best conservationist. Practicing conservation has been something Rita Luedtke has done for more than 25 years. She developed and continues to update her conservation plan with assistance from USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to address her resource concerns and reduce soil loss below the tolerable level on all of her fields. She wants to do things the right way and is not afraid to try new techniques to achieve success.

With technical assistance from NRCS and local, state and federal cost share dollars (including Farm Service Agency (FSA), Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the Conservation Practices Program, and Kankakee River Ecosystem Partnership) Luedtke has installed a host of practices to include: grassed waterways; grade stabilization structures; terraces; water and sediment control basins; contour grass buffer strips; field windbreak plantings; wildlife habitat plantings and hedgerows; and tile drainage systems. She and her husband Jerry are involved with a horse boarding facility on the farm and practice rotational grazing through a series of paddocks.

Will County NRCS District Conservationist Robert Jankowski said, "Her plan for the future includes addressing stream bank erosion, establishing additional water and sediment basins for those areas that she feels still need attention." Although she quickly comments on the current sediment basin with 'the basin doesn't seem to have much sediment in it.' "This is because," continues Jankowski, "the soil protection practices on the uplands are doing their job."

Her farm and stewardship practices have served as an educational tour site. She makes her farm available to FFA high school students who evaluate soils and conduct tours for local elementary school students. Luedtke said, "The fifth graders were so much fun. They loved the horses, especially the colt."

Will County is just minutes away from our nation's third largest city, Chicago. Her ability and willingness to ensure that students, so close to urban and suburban influences and landscapes, maintain an appreciation and wonder of the natural world is a testimony to Luedtke's love of agriculture and the environment.

The best thing I enjoy about working for the NRCS is that I know we are helping people today, providing hope for tomorrow's generations, and building on what many other employees have done in the past Luedtke's stewardship doesn't stop there either. She does all she can to spread the knowledge of

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—Rita Luedtke

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(right to left) Rita Luedtke, District Conservationist Robert Jankowski and Soil Conservationist Nick Fritch admire stand of native plants.



conservation and instill the value of it in others who she works and interacts with. Luedtke is currently an active Will County Farm Bureau officer who provides input that benefits local farm operations. She was a member of the GrassRoots Issue Teams (GRITs) of the Illinois Farm Bureau. She served as a director for the Will-South Cook Soil and Water Conservation (SWCD) District and then as Chairperson. In her conservation leadership role, Luedtke advocated the importance of soil conservation practices and served as a spokes person at farm tours throughout the district. She also served as a technical advisor on a team that assisted the Illinois NRCS State Office. She is known within and around her community as a true conservationist.

In 1995, Luedtke worked closely with the NRCS agronomist to collect results of planting systems and tillage over a six year period from trials that were alternately done on corn after soybeans. This made available to area farmers to prove that high successful on highly erodible soils. Luedtke said, "I tried no-till on three plots the first year. Once I saw the yields, I went no-till on the entire farm the following year."

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Even though Luedtke has used cost-share assistance when it has been available, she does not hesitate to move forward if the funds are not there. "I have used some of the cost share programs and they have been very helpful," she said, "but I would have done it on my own anyway; it just would have taken longer."

She has used the expertise of NRCS and funding from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and IDNR to complete a wetland restoration project which has served to reduce runoff, trap sediment and create another type of wildlife habitat. She and Jerry share their farm with deer, pheasants, quail (one of only a few wild coveys left in the county), rabbits, song birds, muskrats, egrets, blue herons, coyotes, insects; just to name a few. To have such a diverse wildlife population so close to the City of Chicago is a remarkable accomplishment. Luedtke has also used the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to establish a filter strip along a tributary of Trim Creek that flows through her property. This practice, seeded to warm season grasses, has reduced sediment load, improved water quality, and offers additional wetland wildlife habitat.

Rita and Jerry will continue to serve as conservationists who happily carve out a productive, profitable and sustainable agriculture operation in the shadow of Chicago, Illinois.

