

Conservation SHOWCASE



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Conservation Programs Improve Soil and Water on Organic Farm

Junction City, Ore.—Organic farming is a passion for John and Christine Deck. The 320-acre Deck Family Farm lies nestled in the rolling hills west of Junction City, Oregon. It includes stretches of tranquil creeks, green pastures with grazing livestock, and expanses of luscious woodlands.

“We are an integrated family farm and a grass-fed operation. We believe in feeding animals what they are naturally inclined to eat,” John explained.

Above: John Deck oversees the implementation of conservation practices on the Deck Family Farm

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), along with its partners, has helped the Decks improve soil and water quality on their property as they convert what was a conventional farm into a thriving organic business. Financial and technical assistance are made available through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a Farm Bill program that provides assistance for agricultural producers interested in implementing conservation measures that protect natural resources and encourage sustainability. NRCS has also partnered with FSA and the Oregon Department of Agriculture to implement the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to restore riparian areas, protect water quality, and enhance fish and wildlife habitat.

Using funds through EQIP, the Decks began their conservation efforts by installing a fence along

Owens Creek to keep livestock out of the water while also enhancing riparian areas. To ensure continued water access for livestock and wildlife, the Decks installed a large water storage tank and distribution system on the property. Water is pumped from the creek to a storage tank and then delivered by gravity flow to the watering troughs distributed throughout the property.

The Decks then began work on a similar, although more complex, project near Turnbow Creek, this time making use of the combined technical and financial assistance available through CREP. As before, the Decks implemented fencing to block livestock access to the waterway. They also planted a variety of native trees to shade the waterway and help keep the water cool for fish, stabilize the stream bank to prevent erosion, and provide shelter for wildlife.

Continuing their conservation efforts closer to home, the Decks added a concrete slab in the heavy-use area next to the livestock barn. Gutters and downspouts were installed to direct rain off the roof and into the drainage. The slab mitigates the development of muddy conditions in areas that see a lot of livestock traffic. A portion of the concrete slab will also serve as



the foundation for a covered manure storage building, planned for the future. Once this is installed, they will have the option to make compost from the stored manure.

The Decks acknowledge that even with NRCS and partner assistance, the process of adapting their farm to organic practices takes patience.

As he looked out over a healthy, green pasture, John explained, “The grass gets addicted to nitrogen, and when you stop using it, the pastures look pretty bad for a couple of years.” He found the most effective way to improve grass performance was to apply lime to balance the pH and add amendments such as composted chicken manure to improve the overall fertility of the soil.

“We are shooting for an ideal pH of six for the pastures,” John said. He is progressively working individual pastures up to that goal and planting



Fences constructed with NRCS assistance to prevent livestock from entering nearby waterways.



Water storage tank on the Deck Family Farm provides water to livestock troughs by gravity.

new varieties of grass. He plants both red and white clover along with the grass to improve nitrogen fixation, a process where nitrogen in the atmosphere is converted into ammonia, making it available to the plants.

The Decks are also trying to increase the amount of forage that is available for their cattle by reducing their hay production and focusing instead on planting fields with an earlier season grass, such as annual ryegrass, while planting other fields with later-season forage, such as sorghum sudangrass. “We will try to get the fields used for forage for as much of the year as possible, and we will import hay if we have to,” John said.

John and Christine have raised all five of their children on the Deck Family Farm, and they hope to pass on the legacy of conservation through the generations. “I hope some of these kids will stay on the farm,” John said as he watched his youngest daughter happily swing her legs up to mount her pony and ride it down the hill, passing the pastures of contented pigs, chickens, and beef cattle grazing on the organic pastures.



Livestock thrives on the Deck Family Farm thanks in part to the practices implemented with NRCS assistance.