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## Successes from the Field

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# Conservation Collaboration

## *Glacierland RC&D Partners to Implement Farm Bill Programs*

*Above: (L to R) Nick Myers (Glacierland RC&D), Matt Rataczak (NRCS Manitowoc County District Conservationist), Betsy Doolittle (NRCS Area Resource Conservationist) and Ryan Jacques (Glacierland RC&D), by the rainfall simulator at the Sunset on the Farm field day in Brown County. Staff operated the simulator to demonstrate to participants the importance of soil health.*

Glacierland Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council is continuing its effort to implement good conservation in Northeastern Wisconsin through conservation collaboration with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through a Conservation Collaboration Agreement with NRCS, Glacierland RC&D was able to hire Ryan Jacques and Nick Myers (pictured above) to fill Soil Conservationist positions in both Brown and Manitowoc County USDA Service Centers as of January 2019.

Through the Conservation Collaboration Agreement, Nick and Ryan are able to take on a variety of tasks and responsibilities related to protecting and conserving our natural resources in partnership with NRCS. Their day-to-day work in the USDA Service Centers allow them to assist NRCS staff with implementing the conservation provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill, developing conservation plans that address natural resource concerns and providing technical assistance to agricultural producers in Northeast Wisconsin.

Nick and Ryan have assisted NRCS staff with fiscal year 2019 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) sign ups and with fiscal year 2019 Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) sign ups for Brown and Manitowoc Counties, as well as three counties in the southeast area also. Between the two new employees, they also helped to reduce workload for NRCS staff by conducting nearly 40 highly erodible land and wetland checks spanning over five counties for the 2019 Food Security Act compliance reviews. This was in addition to completing 60 USDA Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract status reviews in Manitowoc County alone.

Landowners in the area have been pleased with the additional technical service and support the Glacierland employees offer to the area. “It’s great that there is finally some extra staff in the county to get to smaller priorities like this,” said one landowner as Nick Myers assisted him with plant identification in his new CRP planting. “Usually I just receive a letter or phone call telling me what to do next without really knowing what I’m looking at out

here." Myers was able to provide one-on-one assistance to the landowner, meeting his needs.

Landowners are not the only ones happy with how the agreement is going. Matt Rataczak, NRCS District Conservationist in Manitowoc County explained, "It has been a good partnership so far with Glacierland RC&D and NRCS. I think both NRCS and Glacierland RC&D are benefiting out of this agreement and we are lucky to have good quality employees like Nick and Ryan gaining valuable experience in the field office, while also implementing good conservation."

As we move into the fall, Nick and Ryan will continue to offer their assistance by taking part in the fiscal year 2020 EQIP sign up and by contracting the funded fiscal year 2019 EQIP and CSP applications, along with anything else they can do to assist NRCS staff in the Northeast Area.

The current contract between Glacierland and NRCS is a three-year agreement that will continue through September 2021 but has the potential to be renewed after the initial three years. "We're excited to bring on Nick and Ryan as partnering staff to increase the conservation on the ground in northeast Wisconsin. NRCS enjoys working with partners to extend available resources and further meet our customers needs; the agreement between NRCS and Glacierland RC&D is a perfect example of this," added Eric Allness, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships.

Ty Larson, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in the Northeast Area, is very pleased with the agreement also. "NRCS is extremely excited to team up with Glacierland RC&D once again to deliver conservation through a Conservation Collaboration Agreement," said Larson. "This grant will assist NRCS in putting more boots on the ground in Northeast Wisconsin for conservation planning and implementation. Glacierland has been a long-time conservation partner with NRCS Wisconsin and has a great track record of conservation efforts and accomplishments."

Angela Biggs, State Conservationist, adds, "Nick and Ryan jumped right into their positions and are teaching the importance of soil health out in the field already. They recently demonstrated our NRCS rainfall simulator at a field day, sharing the four principles of soil health." NRCS is working with producers to ensure the four basic principles of soil health are at the forefront – minimize disturbance, keep soil covered, energize the soil with plant diversity, and maximize living roots. These conservation principles, along with others, are being shared through the collaboration.

Both Glacierland and NRCS have high expectations for the agreement and know these conservation efforts and accomplishments will continue long after the current contract expires.

To learn more about Glacierland RC&D, visit www.glacierlandrcd.org. To learn more about NRCS and the technical and financial assistance they provide farmers and landowners, visit www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov.

*Clockwise: A close-up of soil samples after rainfall simulation.*

*Earthworms are known to be an indicator of soil health, playing an important role redistributing organic matter.*

*A close-up of the rain gauge on a rainfall simulator sample.*

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# Farming on the Cutting Edge

## *GLRI Demonstration Farm Incorporates Sustainable Agriculture Technology*

*Above: (L to R) Barry Bubolz, NRCS Area GLRI Coordinator, with Aaron Augustian, of Augustian Farms LLC, inside an Augustian dairy barn.*

Augustian Farms LLC, of Kewaunee County, is owned and operated by Aaron, Todd and Ginanne Augustian. Brothers, Aaron and Todd, wanted to continue the dairy farming legacy their grandparents started. Todd took ownership of the farm from his parents in 2001, milking 60 cows in a stanchion barn. In 2005, a devastating barn fire destroyed the farm facilities and the entire milking herd. “We went to a neighbor’s farm for four years to build our equity back up. We rented a barn and started building the dairy herd once again,” explained Aaron. In 2007, Aaron joined his brother Todd, bringing 100 animals to the farm, officially starting a farm partnership. In 2009, the brothers started an LLC and came home to the original farmland to build a new dairy, accommodating 400 cows. The farm continued to grow to what it is today, with 1,200 cows and some young stock raised off-site by custom growers. The Augustians also farm 1,100 acres to grow feed for their livestock.

Both brothers worked off the farm after completing school, but the farm always called them home. “I worked off the farm for 10 years after technical school and realized that wasn’t what I wanted to do. I wanted to farm and work for myself. Once it’s in your blood, it doesn’t leave. There’s something about being out on the land every day and working with employees. We all share the same passion and we enjoy seeing each other grow,” explained Aaron. When rebuilding after the fire, the brothers had an opportunity to improve the farm, building new dairy barns and a milking parlor. Along with building new structures, the brothers wanted to increase conservation efforts on their farm to make it truly regenerative for the future.

In 2002, through a partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Augustians completed nutrient management and residue management no-till practices. After successfully completing their first Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract, the Augustians worked with NRCS to implement more conservation over the years. They planted conservation cover and critical area plantings, installed vegetated treatment areas and pumping plants, restored grassed waterways, completed mulching, waste transfer, heavy use area protection, and tried cover crops for the first time. “The waterways were narrowed due to tillage practices in the past; we widened the waterways to 30 feet and straightened them back out. Now, we trim them a few times each summer. This has really kept the water flowing well,” explained Aaron. The Augustians also planted conservation cover with native grasses to benefit wildlife and honey bee habitat on the acreage.

The Augustians grow corn, alfalfa and wheat, all used as forage for the cows. “All the corn gets chopped and we also buy some alfalfa, dry corn and corn silage from our neighbors. We have manure agreements with our neighbors and they buy nutrients back from us to apply on their land; the partnership works very well,” said Aaron. Because of their conservation efforts, the Augustians were approached to join the Door-Kewaunee Watershed Demonstration Farm Network, funded through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). The Network features four farms that demonstrate the best conservation practices to protect the Great Lakes. The USDA-NRCS and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, are guiding this effort in cooperation with Peninsula Pride Farms, a farmer-led organization. “The Network also has two demonstration farm managers, Nick Guilette and Nate Nysee; these key people help the partnership succeed,” said Barry Bubolz, NRCS Area GLRI Coordinator. “I enjoy working directly with the Augustians and the partners through the demo farms. This partnership fosters beneficial conservation management decisions on these demo farms, and subsequently, on many area farms, that help keep our natural resources sustainable for future generations,” said Guilette.

Through the demo farms and GLRI-EQIP, the Augustians are focusing on interseeding cover crops, applying manure to a growing crop, using management practices to handle leachate water and managing cover crops and manure application. Working through the GLRI and the network collaboration, the Augustians tried multi-species cover crops. “We started small. We have done some no-till in the past but never incorporated

cover crops before. We planted 23 acres of cover crops and had success. The following year we planted 100 acres. Between alfalfa, rye and multi-species cover crops, we now have half the farm in cover over winter," said Aaron. The demo farms have enabled the Augustians to partner with NRCS and the other participating farmers to learn and network. "We all put our heads together to see what works and learn from each other's successes and failures," explained Aaron.

The brothers have tried multi-species cover crop mixes, including radishes, rye grasses, clovers, and sunflowers. "That mix ended up growing knee high and I thought we were going to have an issue with a thick mat on the ground come spring. I was amazed in the spring, when all that biomass had decomposed, and the field was bare; it just disappeared over winter. The soil biology is working, and it really did what NRCS said it was going to do. It was hard to believe at first, but I've seen it works," explained Aaron. "Growing the cover crops, we're not sacrificing yield, while changing and updating our practices."

When the Augustians joined the Demo Farm Network, soil tests were done on the farm for baseline data. A soil sensor electrical conductivity test was also completed to map potential bedrock and further see different soils and pH levels. "We will come back at the end of the initial five-year contract and do the same tests again to see how much we built organic matter and lowered phosphorus," added Barry. "I know the soil health numbers will go up because I can already tell, with the increased no-till and cover crops, the ground is much more mellow now compared with the conventionally tilled fields," added Aaron. The Augustians have also seen a decrease in erosion. "If we can get that cover crop established well in the fall, it really helps in the spring to give protection," said Aaron.

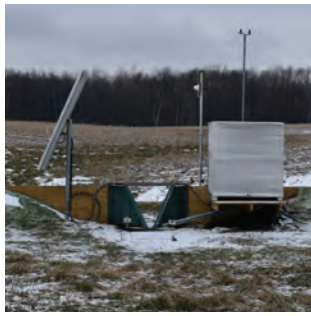
"Conservation is very important to me. With the economy of farming right now and the tight margins, the less passes we can do with tillage and heavy equipment are going to make us more profitable and we are also building the soil health at the same time. I don't know how we put a price on that but it's going to be huge," added Aaron. Through conservation efforts, the Augustians want to leave their land better for the next generation. "We were doing things the way we had been taught and now we realize there is a much better way. I would like to get to 100% no-till and cover crops. We are working on figuring out our nutrient applications and I know we can get to that goal," added Aaron.

The brothers are proud of building their dairy back after the fire. "The Augustians have an openness to try new ideas, think outside the box and hold field days to share ideas as part of the Network. This forward thinking makes it a pleasure for NRCS to partner and see their success," explained Bubolz.

The Augustians tried interseeding alfalfa for the first time, at the same time the corn was planted. This attempt worked successfully, and they are going to try more acres in the future. "This was an out of the box idea that was successfully implemented in 2018 and they have since had some good success with interseeding into growing corn with rye grass and clovers too," said Bubolz. The Augustians have agreed to try more acres because it worked so well the first time. "When we chopped the corn off, the cover crop was already established and really took off," said Aaron. "Getting the diversity into the system was what the soil needed," added Barry.

In December 2018, through a University of Wisconsin Discovery Farms partnership, the Augustians placed a surface water monitoring station on their farm. Baseline data was already recorded with conventional tillage from an earlier study in the county, now, the brothers are doing a no-till cover crop system with low disturbance manure to see how surface water data changes. "We are looking forward to seeing the positive difference conservation management systems make over time," said Aaron.

"We're 100% committed to the Demo Farms; technology is rapidly changing, and the Demo Farms Network provides an avenue to learn about those advances, try them and gives us the support we need to succeed," said Aaron. The Augustians are happy their farm is part of a greater purpose and helps farming communities learn and progress. "The Augustians have been a pleasure to work with over the years and are leading the way in demonstrating the latest technologies on their farm. They strive to teach other farmers the benefits of soil health and cover crop practices. NRCS can help farmers try these proven methods on their farm; they just need to stop into their local USDA Service Center to get started," added Joe Johnson, NRCS Kewaunee County District Conservationist. "So many good things are coming out of this partnership. Farmers are generally concerned about the land and we're all working to adapt our best practices; we feel like the Network partnership has given us an avenue to make a difference. It's also nice to be on the cutting edge of technology at the same time," said Aaron.



*Top to bottom:* Todd, Ginanne, and Aaron Augustian. Interseeding cover crops into corn. Barry and Aaron check covers over winter. The surface water quality monitoring station installed.

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# The Proof is in the Soil

## *Fox Demo Farm Thrives Through Use of Cover Crops and No-Till*

*Above: (L to R) Barry Bubolz, NRCS District Conservationist and GLRI Coordinator, with Derek Van De Hey, New Horizon's Dairy, viewing giant cover crop radishes in a mixed cover crop field with sunflowers, peas, tillage radishes, clovers and turnips.*

In Wisconsin's Great Lakes Region, Dave and his three sons, Matthew, Ross and Derek, manage New Horizons Dairy. The farm has been in the Van De Hey family since 1899 and they strive to continue the farm legacy Dave's great-grandfather first built. Matthew and Ross work closely with the cattle and Derek works closely with his father to explore cropping opportunities on over 2,500 acres. Over the years, the farm has grown in acreage and cattle, from 40 to 750 animals. In 1996, a milking parlor was added. Derek also manages dry cows and heifers on-site. The three brothers work together to ensure their farm continues to thrive, focusing on conservation that is environmentally sound and profitable.

The Van De Heys grow alfalfa, winter wheat, soybeans and corn, diversifying their crop rotations yearly. Dave and Derek also practice no-till and plant cover crops on many of the farm's acres. "We started using cover crops in 2007 for extra heifer feed; that evolved into using cover crops for effective cover and soil health once we realized the multiple benefits," said Derek. In 2007, the Van De Heys also started no-tilling many of their acres to build an effective soil health system, improving their soil's quality and infiltration. "We started by no-tilling around 5–10% of our acres a year; every year, we increase the percentage as we learn what works and adjust our seeding rates and mixes accordingly," added Derek. In 2017, the Van De Heys planted all 1,760 acres in cover crops and plan to no-till all those acres in 2018.

Through USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Great Lakes Restoration Initiative assistance, the Van De Heys are able to try different multi-species cover crop seed mixes to maximize their soil health benefits. Initially, they grew covers to use as feed for their heifers and reached their goal of maximizing yields on one field. Double cropping opened the door to a host of other benefits. After a few years of cover crops, they noticed improvement in soil structure and infiltration. "The cover crops fields are significantly more stable than the conventional fields," said Derek. In 2017, for example, a large field was planted with a multi-species cover crop mix containing sunflowers, tillage radish, red crimson clover, berseem clover, winter peas and turnips. The cover crops established well, water infiltrates and soil is held in place over winter. As an added bonus, the covers attract honey bees, monarchs and other beneficial insects. "If we can keep farming and also help the wildlife on top of that, it's a bonus; instead of having bare fields, doing cover crops and having flowering tillage radish and sunflowers really attract bees, butterflies and other pollinators. We see many more wildlife and beneficial insects around," said Derek.

"One of the biggest changes we've seen since implementing cover crops is that the process is easier and quicker, with the same or better results on the fields for yields. We don't have to work the fields near as much, so it's cheaper too; the fields are also firmer and more stable after rains," said Derek. "Cover crops give you that live root advantage, increase water holding capacity and nutrient uptake" added Barry Bubolz, NRCS-GLRI Coordinator. NRCS also works with the Van De Heys to provide technical expertise and assistance in experimenting with different cover crops mixes and seeding rates for individual fields. "We're getting the right planting rates down now. Every year, I used to fix ditches in fields because spots didn't drain; with cover crops in those areas, ditches no longer form and water is infiltrating instead," said Derek. Cover crops are a time saver, a money saver and a soil saver. "Derek has really been proactive in getting cover crops established just as soon as the silage or winter wheat gets taken off; giving those plants as much time to grow, so we get the most benefit of that cover crop," added Bubolz.

Conventional farming in the Midwest provides a very short window of opportunity to work the land and plant. Applying spring manure is rarely an option. However, applying manure in the spring provides a higher likelihood for nutrient uptake and restores the risk of nutrient loss due to surface water runoff. Derek plants winter wheat in August and chops corn in September. He also surface applies manure onto covers in the fall and after the corn is planted. Due to increased soil health, Derek distributes manure in the spring, alleviating pressure on fall applications and allowing more time to plant covers after harvest. Improved soil health and better infiltration rates due to cover crops and

*Left: (L to R) Derek and Barry inspecting cover crop root growth.*

*Right: A turnip cover crop on a multi-species cover crop plot.*

*Below: A honey bee visiting a sunflower in the multi-species cover crop field. Derek and NRCS employees inspecting cover crop growth. A close-up of multi-species cover crop emerging.*

no-till also help reduce stress related to unpredictable weather patterns.

Cover crops also help the Van De Heys improve nutrient uptake and drastically reduce their need for the use of commercial fertilizer and weed control; a huge cost savings. “One thing we like about doing cover crops and no-till are less weeds. Once you get all the cover crop going in the fall, no weeds can compete with it in the spring. You know what you are doing with it in the spring because you planted it there,” added Derek. “We found if we do no-till in the fall, the fields are much firmer in the spring. With a live cover crop, I can no-till and surface apply manure and the sediment doesn’t leave the field; the nutrient is taken up immediately by the live roots,” explains Derek.

In 2014, the Van De Heys were introduced to a partnership network called the Lower Fox Demonstration Farms Network (Fox Demo Farms). Fox Demo Farms is a Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) project designed to showcase and demonstrate leading edge conservation practices that improve Great Lakes water quality by reducing phosphorus from entering Green Bay and Lake Michigan. The partnership is the first of its kind in the Great Lakes region and it consists of six producers within the Fox River Basin, their crop consultants, Brown and Outagamie County Land and Water Departments, University of Wisconsin-Extension and NRCS.

“We were introduced to the Fox Demo Farms when the partnering organizations were looking for good locations to install U.S. Geological Survey edge-of-field monitoring stations,” said Derek. Edge-of-field monitoring is an effort to help farmers improve and verify the effectiveness of agricultural conservation practices and systems installed on their farm. Monitoring equipment is installed at the edge of a farm field to evaluate the quality of water draining from the field. Collaboration with producers in edge-of-field monitoring demonstrates the effectiveness of system-wide conservation approaches and their effect on overall water quality.

The Van De Heys have two edge-of-field monitoring stations located on two 4-acre fields, side by side. The Van De Heys farmed both 4-acre fields the same, conventionally, for the past three years. The monitoring stations quantify the amount of sediment that leaves their land. For Dave and Derek, the results have been eye-opening. Preliminary data shows high losses of sediment in surface runoff, averaging approximately 4,000 pounds per acre annually on edge-of-field monitoring Fox Demo Farm sites, including the Van De Hey's sites.

As responsible farmers, the Van De Heys recognize the importance of addressing erosion and reducing their impact on our local waterways. Now that baseline data is established, Derek is starting to farm one of the 4-acre fields with no-till and cover crops and the other will stay farmed conventionally. This will help show the real difference soil health practices make on the ground. “In 2018 and 2019, we plan to plant corn on both fields using the different methods; we’re excited to see the results,” explained Derek.

Being an active participant in the Fox Demo Farms has given the Van De Heys a network of resources to figure out what works in the Great Lakes area. “I am very happy to be able to collaborate with NRCS and other farmers who are interested in soil health and other conservation practices, sharing information and resources to make conservation work and to see direct impacts on Great Lakes water quality,” said Derek. As part of the network, the Van De Heys host and participate in field days for information sharing. They enjoy learning locally, applying new techniques and building and adapting them to meet their individual farm’s goals.

The Van De Heys love farming; Derek grew up on the farm and has never thought about doing anything else. They started their conservation work on a small scale and have worked their way up to where they are today. Derek plans to stay at the current acre and cattle size and his goal is to get every field planted in cover crops and continue to decrease their tilled acres. “The Van De Heys, though the Fox Demo Farms collaboration, continue to work on more surface applied manure onto growing crops and covers,” said Bubolz. He explains, “The farm sits on the banks of Apple Creek, which flows into the Fox River; by embracing these conservation practices on their farm, they are taking big steps to protect and improve water quality.”

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# Doudlah Farms Uses Cover Crops to Armor Their Organic Soil

## *Producing Nutrient Dense, Safe Food*

*Above: (L to R) Lucy, Mark, and Jason Doudlah, of Doudlah Farms, LLC, and David Gundlach, NRCS District Conservationist, in Cooksville, Wisconsin, on the Doudlah farm acreage in front of an old Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) truck his grandfather drove.*

Organic farming is a regenerative way of life for Mark and Lucy Doudlah. Owners of Doudlah Farms, LLC, and FarmRite Organics, the Doudlahs farm 1,750 acres with 20 different varieties of crops in Cooksville, Wisconsin. They also raise free-range, soy-free, organic poultry and eggs, grass-fed pork and grass-fed beef. Mark attributes much of his organic success to the use of cover crops.

In 1982, when Mark was a sophomore in high school, his dad rented him the first farm they purchased. “This was my first experience taking care of land on my own,” said Mark. From there, he worked at Agrecol, one of the largest producers of native local eco-type seed and plant species in the Midwest. In 2008, Mark’s father, Earl, was diagnosed with cancer. Around the same time, Mark decided to farm full time on 1,400 acres. “With news my dad had contracted cancer, I knew I wanted to make a healthy change on the farm. When he passed away, I decided to transition 40 acres to organic in his honor,” said Mark. “This was a paradigm shift for me; I wanted to be a part of the solution,” added Doudlah. Mark hasn’t looked back, and today, the Doudlahs have transitioned all 1,750 acres they currently farm to organic production.

On those 1,750 acres, they grow over 20 different varieties of crops including black beans; pinto beans; dark red kidney beans; corn; seed corn; vetch; rye; winter wheat; winter barley; soybeans; food grade beans; forage peas; red, white, blue, and yellow flint corn, sunflowers; barley; buckwheat; oats; mustards; clovers; sorghum; and various cover crops.

Mark is a mentor, a key note speaker, and has held annual farm field days reaching over 1,000 farmers, promoting organic production. “He’s an educator of soil health, plant health, organics, and how it relates to human health,” explained Lucy. Mark notes how small of a community organics is, and how nice and open the farmers are to sharing ideas and collaborating. “When I go somewhere as an organic producer, we are a community trying to help everyone move forward,” added Mark.

Mark also talks with many conventional farmers as a speaker at field events, promoting the use of various cover crops and trying cereal rye, one of his first cover crop successes. “I always ask, why aren’t you doing crimped cereal rye? It will give your soil a rest; let soybeans, the most erosive crop we grow, become a regenerative year for your soil by using cover crops,” explained Mark. Doudlah also promotes the use of essential oils in organics. He explains, “I hear, I can’t do organic because I can’t use anything to treat the fields. We’re using 8 essential oils to treat our acres and protect our crop. We use garlic and clove oil for weed and insect control, to name a few.”

Mark attributes his organic success to the use of various multi-species cover crops. “The really cool part is how the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has actually helped and allowed us to do conservation practices, like cover crops. Had we not made that connection of cover crops and organic practices with the help of NRCS, we wouldn’t be here today. Organic is all about cover crops for me,” said Mark. “My grandfather was the NRCS District Conservationist for Dane County in the 60s, so, in this family, we have a long history of conservation; I knew I needed NRCS help to make the transition a success,” said Mark.

In 2008, Mark worked with the NRCS to try different multi-species mixes of cover crops on different fields. He also signed up to do residue and tillage management using no-till, strip-till and direct seeding methods. In 2014, Mark decided to plant cereal rye during the organic transition phase with the help of the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). He continued his use of multi-species cover crops on different fields, learning and growing from his experiences through the help of EQIP. “We planted cereal rye on all our corn acres. I

knew I needed to transition to organic, but I am farming one third highly erodible land. After learning about crimped cereal rye, I thought we could do it," said Mark. Doudlah offers some advice for organic farmers wanting to try cereal rye, "Getting the cereal rye in timely in the fall, right after harvest is key. The cereal rye provides a nice, thick mat, which armors the soil from further erosion the rest of year, conserves the moisture, and feeds the biology a slow feed of carbon long-term. The root system of the rye is what typically feeds the soybean that year. The biomass above ground feeds the soil as it decomposes."

Mark also used the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to provide conservation cover for monarch butterflies and other beneficial insects on his farm. The Doudlahs are currently working with NRCS to plant over 60 acres of pollinator habitat on field borders and to act as a buffer around their organic farm. They are also working to enhance their field borders by planting conservation cover to reduce water induced erosion along the edges of their fields. "The yearly CSP payments help protect pollinators and also helped us invest in the right equipment to plant cover crops successfully on our farm; it allowed us to plan and save for 5 years to get the tools for this to work," said Mark. "The Doudlahs are making a positive change in the food production system by promoting the connection between the health of the land and human well-being. They are implementing conservation to restore soil health, improve water quality, and increase wildlife habitat," added Dave Gundlach, District Conservationist.

To further his soil health and organic advocacy, Mark is a member of the Cropping Systems Advisory Board of the Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania. Rodale researches organic agriculture best practices, sharing their findings with farmers and scientists throughout the world. Mark has a passion for advocating policy that supports farmers and educating consumers about the health of organics for people and the planet. "One of our biggest challenges is educating the public about the importance of food safety and the benefits of eating organically," said Mark. The Doudlahs want to pass on these valuable lessons to their children, Emily and Jason, regarding biological production agriculture, a rural work ethic and involving them in the organic conservation community.

Financial and technical assistance provided by NRCS helps Mark to successfully run his organic program. "Transitioning 1,750 acres has been a tremendous undertaking and a steep learning curve. In the transition years, you are using organic inputs and getting conventional prices, so financial and technical assistance from NRCS through EQIP and CSP can help. Fundamentally, I believe in organics, so we were all in," added Mark. "The demand is rising for organics; we want to be more than sustainable; we have to be regenerative; organics are the future; nutrient dense, safe food is my goal," explains Mark.

Mark and Lucy have plans to continue their passion for organic agriculture. "Our vision long term is to create a holistic wellness center to include organic food and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), hold field days and events there, and more. Our daughter, Emily, is studying chiropractic and holistic medicine. We can incorporate her studies into the center and our son, Jason, plans to incorporate his studies in agriculture and agronomy," said Lucy.

The Doudlahs were recently awarded a U.S. Department of Agriculture Value-Added Producer Grant. Taking their various products from conventional to organic is considered value-added. "We really want to leave a legacy, something our kids can be proud of and continue," explained Lucy. "Dave Gundlach, my local NRCS District Conservationist, has made working with NRCS really easy. The financial gain has always been a benefit to do the right thing conservation-wise. Working together is a win-win for the consumer, the farmer and for regeneration of the landscape," said Mark. "We wouldn't have been able to do cover crops on all our acres without the help of NRCS or add monarch and pollinator habitat." Lucy adds, "NRCS makes us feel good about doing the right thing for our land."

*Clockwise: The Doudlah family and David Gundlach view freshly planted pollinator habitat as a field border.*

*Jason Doudlah in his field of sunflowers.*

*Lucy Doudlah inspects pollinator habitat growth.*

*A bee flourishes on the organic Doudlah fields.*

*Mark and David inspect the organic corn crop.*

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# Log-Grown Shiitake Mushrooms

## *Misty Dawn Farm Shares the Magic*

*Above: (L to R) Ingrid and Paul West, of Misty Dawn Farm in Dane County, Wisconsin, show shiitakes growing on logs harvested from their forested acres in Vernon County.*

Shiitakes and logs are two peas in a pod. When talking with Ingrid and Paul West, of Misty Dawn Farm in Stoughton, Wisconsin, you'll certainly learn why. The Wests lovingly care for their harvested logs that grow homegrown shiitake mushrooms. Willing to share the magic of growing the nutritious fungus, they beam with passion and knowledge. Log grown Shiitakes are a healthy diet staple, versatile, hearty, and rich in vitamins and minerals. With a rich meaty texture, they embody a pleasant, savory taste many can't get enough of.

The Wests purchased 50 acres of land in Vernon County over 20 years ago as a getaway space with the hope of creating more biodiversity, improving the watershed, offering water quality protection, and creating habitat and food for wildlife. With these goals in mind, the Wests signed up for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Managed Forest Law program, planning how to actively manage their forest to be regenerative. "We have 35 forested acres and 15 acres of pasture. We enrolled in the program and planted 9,000 trees on the property right after we bought it," explained Ingrid.

When Ingrid and Paul were scheduled to do their first planned forest thinning, they found out that many times, loggers leave the tops of trees behind because they hold little market value. "We knew we had a lot of red maple tops that were going to be a waste product," said Paul. The Wests didn't want to have much forest waste, so they started researching how they could use the wood and found out about the various benefits of growing shiitakes. "Our family farm grows shiitakes because we wanted to do something meaningful with our trees and growing mushrooms was a wonderful way to diversify our forest," added Ingrid.

The Wests knew that forest thinning could take a toll on their acres if not done properly. That's where the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offered Ingrid and Paul assistance. The landowners worked with the Vernon County NRCS District Conservationist, Sam Skemp, to plan conservation practices to assist with their active forest management. Through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Wests installed 1,000 feet of forest trails and landings to better access their property, protect well-traveled areas, and select trees for harvest. They also worked with NRCS to install an 1,800-foot stone ford, a surfaced stream crossing to stabilize the stream while allowing for equipment to cross with minimal disturbance to the stream ecosystem. "Our land is at the headwaters of the Pine Watershed; by installing a ford, we were able to help protect the watershed downstream," said Ingrid. The Wests continue to conduct maintenance on all their conservation practices with technical assistance from NRCS. "The work the Wests continue to do to improve their woodland and protect the watershed is a great example of how landowners can benefit from multiple land uses through our EQIP program," added Skemp.

Once their property was successfully thinned, the Wests received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Grant to grow shiitake mushrooms on different species of wood harvested from their forested acres. They collected growing rate data on different substrates including red maple, sugar maple, red oak, white oak, aspen, and hickory logs. This enabled them to find out which species and processes were best for growing shiitakes locally. "We did the research and really liked shiitakes; we wanted a premium product that was value-added. We're growing log grown shiitakes and it's an interesting niche market that restaurants and consumers want and like," said Ingrid. Paul notes that the product is not only the mushrooms they produce, but the value-added wood logs they use from their land to grow them.

Ingrid and Paul have 500 logs in production during the growing season, from March through November. "During the springtime, we have inoculation events where we have friends come

out and help us prepare the logs to grow mushrooms," added Paul. Each log produces about a half pound of mushrooms during a fruiting and may fruit 1–3 times over the course of the season. The logs rest for approximately eight weeks between fruiting. "Our mushrooms are really nurtured and grown outside, not in indoor environments, which we believe ensures a robust, flavorful, high quality product," explained Ingrid. The Wests sell their shiitakes to local restaurants, direct consumers, and through farmers markets. "These mushrooms are locally grown and harvested so they come to you farm to table, super fresh, affording the highest levels of vitamin D," added Ingrid.

The Wests are also working to share education and information about conservation practices and growing shiitakes with others. "We contracted with our Amish neighbors to graze our pasture and they are also doing a sugarbush on the top of our ridge to get maple syrup; we're always talking with them about the benefits of conservation," said Ingrid. The Wests are also part of the Shiitake Growers Association, helping new shiitake mushroom growers by providing workshops and hosting field days on how to care for and fruit shiitake mushroom logs. The Wests also provide logs and growing kits to new growers. Ingrid also volunteers to sit on the Wisconsin NRCS State Technical Committee and the Forestry Sub-Committee, representing the Shiitake Growers Association. She is interested in education and sharing the great things NRCS can do to help forest landowners; especially since she and her husband are a success story themselves through the EQIP program. "Being able to share resources with others and help shape policies; it's great to be able to give my perspective as a grower and we can do so much more together as a team," added Ingrid.

The NRCS conservation practices installed were a huge success and the Wests look forward to implementing more conservation. "Sam Skemp, the NRCS District Conservationist in Vernon county has been working with us a lot; he's been wonderful. We have talked with him about many possibilities and are looking forward to helping our land more in the future; we have goals for streambank protection and erosion

control because of our steep land elevations," said Ingrid. "We're also looking at doing some invasive species control and plantings to increase diversity through EQIP in the future." Ingrid and Paul also want to further their timber stand improvement efforts. They want to continue to work on promoting diverse regeneration in their forest. "Ingrid and Paul have been great land stewards and are a pleasure to work with on their acreage," added Skemp.

Conservation is one of Paul and Ingrid's number one goals on their acreage. "Conservation is really important to me. I am a first generation American; my parents are from Germany where there are many long-time intensively managed forests. I did a lot of mushroom foraging with my grandfather and my father wanted to be a forester, so the love for conservation has been in my family for a long time," said Ingrid. "When we bought the land, we wanted to live closer to the land and be part of it. It gives us an outlet and an opportunity to work with the land and conserve it," said Ingrid. "It's very rewarding to see the changes and it makes us feel like we are making a difference locally, and in the watershed," added Paul.

"Our family lovingly cares for our mushroom logs; we are so proud of the mushrooms we produce and feel fortunate to share our passion, knowledge and magic of growing shiitakes with others," said Ingrid. The Wests realize they wouldn't be able to grow their wonderful shiitakes without taking care of their forested acres to produce healthy logs. "We're really trying to improve our land, making it more sustainable and biodiverse; nurturing it to a point where it's a more sustainable ecosystem with biodiversity of wildlife thriving," said Ingrid. Ingrid and Paul will continue to nurture their land, their trees, and continue their love of growing shiitake mushrooms for customers to enjoy.

*Clockwise: Paul West walking their forest acres.*

*A large shiitake mushroom grows on an oak log harvested from the West's forest.*

*An aspen log bearing shiitake mushrooms.*

*Ingrid views resting logs after fruiting.*

*The forested acreage in Vernon County with an access road.*

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# Creating Tranquility in Nature

## *Restored Habitat Provides Oasis for Butterflies and Birds*

*Above: (L to R) Helen Leavenworth, NRCS Soil Conservationist, Eva and Tom Wedel, Oak Woods Foundation, and Matt Miller, Soil Conservation Technician, view an established monarch habitat prairie on the Wedel property.*

Oak Woods Foundation, in Argyle, Wisconsin, is an awe-inspiring oasis of tranquility. Rolling prairies and forests provide habitat for fluttering monarchs and other butterflies feeding on milkweed and various wildflowers. Tom and Eva Wedel started the foundation to preserve the peaceful benefits of their land. The Wedels main goal for the property is to promote the welfare of endangered and threatened species of concern, both animal and plant, and to take care of them by providing habitat to flourish. “We want to provide an environment in which they can thrive, and we can benefit from the beauty too,” explained Eva.

The foundation has 400 acres of land. Tom and Eva kept their house and 50 acres to continue to live on the grounds and care for them. The beautiful landscape has 120 acres of prairie and 280 acres of forested and non-farmable land. Tom and Eva were looking for land in Southwest Wisconsin and found the property in 1972. It was previously a dairy farm where the barn had burned down. The Wedels had found the perfect location to purchase and revive the land. “All the tillable land was in corn and the rest was pasture and trees,” explained Tom. While the Wedels contemplated what they wanted to do with the land, they rented it to a neighboring farmer who cropped it conventionally and kept their cows and horses on the property.

Tom and Eva decided they wanted to revive the conventionally cropped and grazed land. “When we decided we needed to restore the cropped acres, we found out about the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and their Conservation Reserve Program (CRP); we wanted to sign up,” explained Tom. At the joint USDA Service Center, the Wedels were introduced through the FSA to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), learning about beneficial conservation practices and technical and financial assistance available to landowners. With the help of both FSA and NRCS, the Wedels were ready to jump in and get started. The Wedels enrolled 120 acres into CRP. They also planted a monarch and pollinator mix on 45 acres that were previously in corn, to build the soil back up after years of conventional cropping and to increase pollinator habitat. Once their farmable acres were in CRP, they wanted to restore their forested and prairie acres. “In 2014, we visited the USDA Service Center to work with NRCS and we started collaborating,” added Eva.

The Wedels enrolled in the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program to develop a Forest Management Plan with the help of a Technical Service Provider (TSP). Once the plan was in place, they were ready to install planned practices to improve their forest. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), they did brush management, planted conservation cover, and did prescribed burning in many areas. “We have nine areas of the forest in the plan and we now have details set for each area and what we want to do to revive it,” explained Eva. “NRCS, through EQIP assistance, helped us clear all the woods of brush and make them more manageable and healthy,” added Tom.

The Forest Management Plan helps the Wedels prepare for the future with manageable goals. “We learned about the life span of the different species of trees like black oaks and burr oaks. Our TSP said something that resonated with me. At the end of their life span, trees will fall; you can either harvest it according to plan before it falls, or you can clean it up after it falls,” said Eva. “We have a lot of really old oaks and we realize we need to manage our forest properly,” added Tom. The Wedels also had a large sloping field covered with gooseberries and rose

*Left: (L to R) Helen, with Eva and Tom, checking prairie species growth.*

*Right: A monarch rests in the Wedel prairie.*

*Below: A bee visits purple coneflowers blooming on the Wedel prairie acreage. Butterflies enjoy feeding on milkweed. A bee pollinates the blooming Wedel prairie.*

bushes; they were determined to restore the area. "We needed to free up the trees in the area and we started work. We made burn piles and cleared the area. That is now part of our flourishing EQIP prairie," explained Eva. "Much of the acreage was corn and cows and it has greatly changed; we didn't set out to do anything vast at the start, and all these little goals, with the help of NRCS, are completed and are really pulling the land together for the better. NRCS helped us to be purposeful each step of the way," added Tom.

The Wedels also had many acres of prairie they wanted to restore for monarch butterflies and other beneficial insects. They enrolled in EQIP to plant conservation cover and do prescribed burning of their prairie acreage. Tom and Eva planted 12 acres of a multi-species pollinator mix, four of those acres were to specially benefit monarch habitat. They also planted one acre of a multi-species wildflower mix. Tom explains, "We took what funding we had left and planted an acre of 12–14 different varieties of wildflowers for beneficial insects to have habitat; everyone enjoys all the wildflowers." As the habitat establishes, more monarchs and beneficial insects are finding the benefits. "One of the species we love seeing thrive over the years and come back is orange milkweed for the monarchs," added Eva.

"The Wedels love sharing their land and love of nature with their sons and three grandchildren," added Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician. The Wedels recognize many species the restored areas are benefitting, not just monarchs. We see many different butterfly species including Mourning Cloaks, Baltimore Checkerspots, Swallowtails, Yellows, Eastern Tailed Blues, Eyed Browns, Pearl Crescents; we love seeing all these species and the Henslow's Sparrow too," added Eva. "We have so many butterfly species out here and bird species too. We had a hobby birder out here for three days and he counted 73 different species," said Tom. "

The farm gives the Wedels a purpose to work and enjoy the scenery at the same time. "It's quiet and we love being outside. We both love the outdoors and we both enjoy the work. We see that it makes a difference for people, wildlife and beneficial insects," explained Eva. "These landowners are very conservation-minded and really take caring for the land to the next level. They've made efforts to work on and restore every acre they own. They even cleared their local creek of trees to benefit grassland bird species," added Miller.

The Wedels took conservation to the next level by enrolling over 240 acres in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program. Through CSP, they planted multi-species monarch and pollinator habitat mixes that will be thriving in a few years. "The thing about NRCS is, it's a working relationship but they are really our friends too. They genuinely want us to succeed and are there for us offering assistance; everyone in the office that we have worked with; it's just been lovely," explained Eva. "We have many goals for the acreage and our love and passion for the land keeps us working on it."

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# Ashland County Success from the Field

## Early Successional Habitat Development—Alder Shearing

Steven and Debbie Thurber, landowners in Ashland, Wisconsin, wanted to create better habitat for birds, deer and other wildlife. They partnered with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service and were awarded Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding under the Lake Superior Restoration Partnership. The property had become overgrown with shrubby vegetation, especially Alder outcroppings. These areas are less desirable habitat for many animals.

To create better habitat and generate young regrowth on the Thurber property, it was necessary to cut or shear patches of old growth Alder. Alder shearing uses high-powered wide-tracked machines for strategic vegetation shearing and is best performed under frozen winter conditions to prevent rutting and resource disturbance. Vegetation also responds with greater growth recovery when harvested during dormancy.

By applying early successional management practices through Alder shearing, the Thurbers were able to construct new habitat and maintain existing openings in forested areas.

*Site condition with invasive Alder thickets.*

*A mower used for Alder shearing.*

*Site after winter shearing application*

*July following Alder shearing.*

"Many species of plants and animals prosper at various stages of plant succession. Early successional development improves forest nesting habitat for Golden-winged Warblers, Kirtland Warblers and Sharp-Tailed Grouse to name a few," said Callie Bertsch, American Bird Conservancy Habitat Coordinator.

Wildlife on the Thurber property now enjoy sedge meadows and a variety of cover that meets their needs. "Having the opportunity to partner with Steven and Debbie has enabled the NRCS office to facilitate a positive outcome of natural, healthy habitat development," explained Raymond Dezek, NRCS Soil Conservationist. Forest Management practices that increase young forest habitat may be eligible for financial and technical assistance through the EQIP program with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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# Barron County Success from the Field

## Impaired Lake Gets a Helping Hand

## Background

Duane and Nancy Kodesh, along with their sons Trevor and Justin, and their families, operate a second generation 335 cow family dairy farm near Rice Lake, Wisconsin, in Barron County. They currently also operate 1,300 acres of cropland northwest of Rice Lake. In the past, they have hosted the well-known on-farm Wisconsin June dairy breakfast and they also maintain an immaculate operation that has been featured on the cover of American Dairymen magazine.

## Program Successes

The Kodeshs started partnering with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service through developing a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP). In 2006, they implemented some no-till planting and nutrient management. In 2015, as the Kodeshs expanded their operation, they decided an updated CNMP was needed to identify additional needs that had arisen since the development of the first plan. Silage leachate runoff was identified as a resource concern and NRCS continued to partner to correct the issue.

"It was important to get this water quality concern addressed since the farm is located in a watershed of an EPA 303d listed impaired lake," said Patrick Richter, District Conservationist in the Barron USDA Service Center. The NRCS standard for Vegetated Treatment Area was newly updated and approved, and a redesign and plan revision was done to address the issues. "We had great cooperation and communication with the Kodeshs throughout this project, which was needed to get this done according to contract timelines," said David Jorgenson, Civil Engineering Technician for northwest Wisconsin NRCS.

Ground was broken in late summer of 2017 for the project, which included abandoning the original feed pad and installing a new leachate collection system with soil liner, drain tile, subsurface drain, asphalt pad, waste transfer and storage. "We knew we had a runoff issue and wanted to do our part to help the lake," said Duane Kodesh. The Kodesh farm now collects all of the silage leachate and contaminated runoff for a 25-year rain event and land spreads according to their nutrient management plan. This was completed just in time for silage harvest in 2018.

**The Leachate collection system and waste storage on the Kodesh farm, designed for a 25-year rain event.**

## Future Plans

The Kodeshs plan to maintain their family farm and have children interested in taking over at some point. They are interested in pursuing participation in the Conservation Stewardship program to add to their good land stewardship and to help their local water quality and soil health. NRCS looks forward to partnering with the Kodeshs for years to come.



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# Buffalo County Success from the Field

## Letting the Land Determine the Legacy

## Background

Larry and Jane Linse operate a 300-acre farm just outside the town of Modena in Buffalo County, Wisconsin. The rich and diverse history of the farm is evident; the Linse name has been on the mailbox for 118 years. The land was purchased in 1900 by Henry Linse, who was not only a farmer, but also the town butcher. Henry farmed several parcels of land, which was uncommon back then. Larry's father, Arthur Linse, bought the farm from his father's estate in 1932 for $6,000, a Depression-era discounted price. The 1930s were tough times, with Arthur grossing only $650/year. The farm was eventually paid off in the late 1940s after WWII when farming became more profitable. Over the years, the farm has gone through many transitions. Originally a dairy, the farm moved to raising turkeys in the 1950s. During the 1970s, beef cattle were added to the rotation as the poultry operation was phased out.

In addition to raising beef and managing cropland acres of corn and hay, both Larry and Jane worked many years off the farm molding the minds of young children. Larry was a science teacher in Lake City, Minnesota and Jane was a physical education teacher in Winona, Minnesota. Now retired, Larry and Jane fill the void left from decades of teaching by spending time with their own kids and 14 grandchildren.

## Conservation Highlights

Conservation has always been at the forefront on the Linse farm. Larry began planting walnuts in the 1970s. In the 1990s, many additional tree plantings were done through the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). In 2007, Larry applied for and received Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funds through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to stabilize an eroding streambank.

Prescribed grazing practices started in the 1980s when the Linses realized they needed to efficiently utilize their property after losing some rented pasture land. In 2003, Larry was approved for EQIP funds for a prescribed grazing plan. Since then, Larry has been intensively managing his pastured acres through rotational grazing and out-wintering cattle on cropland. He has also interseeded pastures with cool season grasses and clover to provide a more diverse forage for his beef cattle. Larry indicated during a recent field visit that, "The keys to successful grazing are managing herd size and having a diverse stand."

In 2017, Larry enrolled both his agricultural land (cropland and pasture) and forestland into the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). With CSP, Larry was able to address additional wildlife and plant productivity resource concerns. He established a native grass and pollinator buffer on a cropland field adjacent to a stream and a few small pollinator habitat areas in the woods. Larry also works to control invasive garlic mustard.

**Larry and Jane Linse pictured next to one of many apple trees found on the farmstead.**

**Larry stands proudly next to his pasture while his beef cattle graze in the background.**

## Future Plans

Through CSP, the Linses have additional work planned. Larry plans to install much needed watering facilities in the pasture, as well as complete forest stand improvement to release walnut trees that were planted on the farm. Dennis Reimers, NRCS District Conservationist in Alma notes, "CSP is a remarkable program that allows producers to maintain existing conservation practices, while embracing new opportunities such as pollinator plantings." Larry and Jane have always strived to do what's best for the land. They hope all the work they've put into their farm over the years will leave behind a legacy that their kids and grandkids can enjoy for many years to come!

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# Burnett County Success from the Field

## Wild Rice (Manoomin) Seeding

The Environmental and Natural Resources Department for the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin are focused on conservation activities and programs to ensure sound management of soil, water, air, plant and animal (SWAPA) resources and enlist information and assistance from their local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office.

Autumn is a time to reflect on all that there is to be thankful for, as you enjoy the harvest of nature's bounty during gatherings with family and friends. In Indian Country, culture and tradition are sustained through shared meals with family and the community. Traditional foods are a powerful way for each new generation to connect with and honor its history and its ancestors.

A decline in wild rice production was observed and documented by department and Tribal members in Burnett County. Concerns were also expressed by Tribal elders about the loss of unique wild rice seed that various water bodies provided. In 2008, the first wild rice seeding project was contracted through the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) to include eight acres of planting completed on Rice Lake in Burnett County, Wisconsin. Seeing the benefits of native wild rice harvesting and seeding, four additional contracts were developed between 2008 and 2018, through WHIP and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). To date, a total of 44.4 acres of planting has been completed on five different bodies of water in Burnett County, Wisconsin.

Clam Lake, in northwestern Wisconsin, had been the premier wild rice gathering water body in the state, with almost 300 acres of the lake covered with dense wild rice in most years. In 2007, the St. Croix Tribal Environmental Natural Resources Department, along with staff from the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission observed a very sharp decrease in wild rice growth and harvest. Clam Lake was down to 207 acres of very sparse wild rice. By 2009, wild rice was restricted to 84 acres located in only isolated regions of the lake. The primary factor limiting wild rice growth was narrowed down to common carp. Over 656,300 pounds of common carp have been removed from Clam Lake. NRCS and partners continue working to reduce the common carp population on Clam Lake to the lowest possible level. This will provide a benefit to wild rice, the native fishery, which includes sturgeon, a clan species, native aquatic vegetation and waterfowl. Tribal, federal, state, county, local partners and volunteers have helped make this project possible.

**For generations, Native Americans in the northern Great Lakes have harvested wild rice. It is an important food source and a cultural touchstone that tribal members are trying to pass on to younger generations.**

Jeremy Bloomquist, Land and Water Resources Manager for the St. Croix Environmental and Natural Resources Department, states "Working with the staff from the Spooner NRCS office under the EQIP program has helped address several resource concerns here at St. Croix, especially wild rice restoration. The genetics of Clam Lake wild rice is also very important to the St. Croix Tribe. Only seed from Clam Lake or Long Lake, which is connected to Clam Lake, is used for seeding on Clam Lake." NRCS and partners will continue to work with Tribes to support wild rice populations in the future.

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# Chippewa County Success from the Field

## Beginning Farmer Builds Habitat and Soil Health Through Prescribed Grazing

## Background

Ryan Anderson grew up on a Century Farm in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. He had fond memories of showing Simmental cattle at the County fair and having livestock around. When he moved back to the area, he purchased part of the original farmstead and knew at some point he wanted to have cattle back on the land.

In the spring of 2017, eight cows were delivered to his farm and his family watched the arrival of calves in June. Not only did his young children enjoy the new babies, they also mentioned how many more birds they were seeing around the farm now that 18.5 acres of land was back into grass and legumes.

## Program Successes

When the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) met Ryan and Emily Anderson in August of 2014, they were just starting to think about how to get back into farming, since they also have full-time jobs. Ryan and Emily are friends with other beginning farmers that had introduced them to prescribed grazing by attending pasture walks. Ryan knew the 60 acres he rented out the last ten years wasn't sustainable in continuous row crops, and not part of his long term goal.

Robert Brandt, Grazing Specialist, was also at the farm to talk about rotational grazing. NRCS staff Tammy Lindsay, District Conservationist and Sarah Raith, Soil Conservationist, inventoried the soil. "Even though his family had hay in the rotation previously, after ten years of continuous row crops, the sandy loam soil was very depleted. There was no organic matter, no earth worms, no earthy smell, just stagnant, droughty soil," Sarah Raith, Soil Conservationist, noted in the inventory.

Ryan hired Robert Brandt to write a Prescribed Grazing Plan for the entire acreage. In 2015, Ryan seeded down 18.5 acres with a seed mix from the grazing plan. In fall of 2016, Ryan was ready to participate in the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), since, according to the plan, he was able to have livestock in 2017. NRCS took the original grazing plan and reworked a layout on smaller acres to ease into implementation.

Ryan was selected for 2017 EQIP Statewide Beginning Farmer funding. A perimeter high tensile fence, interior-pasture

**Above: The Anderson's decided they wanted to raise grass-fed beef and liked the mannerism of the British White cattle. They worked with another farmer to purchase the cows. The cattle arrived and started grazing May 24, 2017. Below: The Anderson's daughter helps on the farm's grazing acres.**

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## *Chippewa County Success from the Field (continued)*

paddock fence, livestock pipeline, and a watering facility were implemented along with prescribed grazing—moving the cattle once a day.

## Future Plans

In 2018, the remaining acres of the farm will be seeded down with the EQIP forage and biomass planting. It will be utilized for hay until the Andersons are ready to add additional grazing acres. NRCS will monitor the two remaining years of prescribed grazing implementation in 2018 and 2019.

"The first year of prescribed grazing was very successful for the Anderson family. I am glad the Andersons took the time to think through their options, learn from others and started small to make sure the conservation practices worked for them," said Tammy Lindsay, District Conservationist. NRCS staff enjoyed working with the young family and seeing the farm change to a livestock operation.

When asking Ryan how the first year of transition went, he responded, "All I can say is that it has been great having cows back on the property and the view has greatly improved. The grazing is definitely different than how we raised our cattle from when I was a kid, but its been quite easy to implement and the long-term benefits are easily observed from the start. Both of the kids have really enjoyed watching the cattle and naming each of the calves. Our son's favorite animal is definitely a cow; he talks about them every day. We look forward to what the future holds! Without the help of the NRCS, this dream of returning the farm back to pasture and raising cattle sustainably, would still be just that...a dream."

# Dunn County Success from the Field

## Drinking the Successes of Improved Water Quality

## Background

Jason and Melissa Schutz own and operate a beef farm in tranquil Boyceville, Wisconsin. The farm is nestled in a peaceful valley with springs feeding Annis Creek, a class one cold water trout stream. In 2016, Melissa attended an informational meeting on a local initiative to improve the water quality in the Wilson and Annis Creek watersheds. Melissa's interest was sparked when hearing about opportunities to improve farm efficiency while improving water quality. Soon after, the Schutzs contacted the local NRCS office in Menomonie, Wisconsin, to discuss technical and financial assistance opportunities.

**Lower pasture watering area with continuous cattle access to the headwaters of Annis Creek.**

## Program Successes

The Schutz's operation consists of 50 cow-calf pairs split between two locations, an upper pasture and lower pasture. The upper pasture utilizes a groundwater spring to fill a watering tank that animals drink out of year round. The excess water is collected by a tile and flows into an outlet pond. The outlet pond is where the lower pasture watered with continuous access. During the spring, summer, and fall, the animals utilized the pond for drinking and cooling. When temperatures dropped below freezing in the winter months, Jason broke the ice daily for the animals to drink. The continuous access to the headwaters of Annis Creek posed a water quality risk with the potential of excess nutrients and sediments entering surface waters.

**The newly installed watering facility for the lower pasture with a constant flow of spring water. Notice the gravel surrounding the tank. This assists in stabilizing the area and improving the cattle access during times of high moisture.**

The local NRCS office was able to offer Jason and Melissa technical and financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program to improve surface water quality. With careful planning to meet Jason and Melissa's objectives, the NRCS was able to capture the overflow from the upper pasture tank in a waterline, and install a new watering facility in the lower pasture, greatly improving the water quality. "This is an excellent project, simple, but very effective in improving the water quality within Annis Creek; the cattle have dry feet and manure is not being deposited in the stream," stated John Sippl, NRCS District Conservationist. Jason and Melissa's angus cattle are now drinking fresh spring water. During the early winter of 2017, Dunn County received a two week spell with temperatures not reaching zero. Jason was happy to report "during the coldest weeks of December I didn't have to go out and chop ice for my cattle to drink." With the cattle now having fresh spring water to drink year round, Jason is spending more time with his wife and child.

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# Eau Claire County Success from the Field

## Restoring Wetlands for Wildlife

John Eaton, OAC, Chippewa Falls & Altoona WI

## Background

William Connelly is a private landowner in eastern Eau Claire County, near the town of Augusta. Much of Williams land is dedicated to wildlife; and includes fields, pollinator habitat, managed forests, wetlands, and a 10 acre field that's been enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program in previous years. Overall, William owns 311 acres and is most interested in restoring and managing this land for wildlife habitat and water quality. Connelly bought the land in the 1970s, and he would like to ensure that its taken care of, and in good shape in the future.

**Above:** William and Dave survey and discuss the potential wetland scrape. **Below:** William and his wife, Peggy, are enjoying the restored wetland and the wildlife that has moved in.

## Program Successes

William began his partnership with NRCS around 1987, when he first enrolled some of his land in CRP. His goal was to provide restored habitat for many species of local wildlife; like insects, birds, and deer. Throughout the following years William utilized other NRCS programs; such as CSP to help seed farm-roads on the land, plant pollinator habitat, and install wildlife-friendly fencing.

He has also utilized EQIP to help with a wetland restoration project. William's wetland restoration included 1.5 acres of wetland scrape, spoil-spreading, and critical area planting, which he says he is very pleased with today. "Oh yeah, I would consider this a success. It was obvious there was a wetland here but it was very degraded. Since the scrape we've seen more birds and insects, and there are even fish in these ponds now," says Connelly. Soil Conservation Technician David Lato helped with much of the planning and construction for this wetland restoration. "Putting in something that restores degraded wetlands is always enjoyable. These scrapes are working towards restoring natural wetland habitat, and the landowner is happy that he is helping the environment and has a great place to watch birds and other wildlife," says David.

What was once a field of reed canary grass is now two separate ponds, and they do indeed seem to be flourishing with wildlife. Watch the surface of the ponds for a few minutes and you will be sure to see many different species of aquatic insects and birds utilizing this new habitat.

## Future Plans

As for future plans, much of William's land enrolled in CRP has expired, and he says he would like to renew that CRP and add more acres to it if possible. The land enrolled in CSP for pollinator habitat, wildlife fencing, and non-industrial private forestland is set to expire in 2019, but William says he will continue to manage this land, and re-enroll if he can. As far as his wetland restoration goes, or other projects that come to mind, William would like to continue his partnership with the NRCS by utilizing programs like EQIP and CSP in the future. Connelly says he has not ruled out doing another wetland scrape if the opportunity arises: "The results of the scrapes speak for themselves. I would be very interested in adding to this restored wetland."

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# Pierce County Success from the Field

## Leaving a Legacy Through the Trimbelle Holst Easement

## Background

Mike Holst, an avid outdoorsman, owned land along the Trimbelle River, in Pierce County, Wisconsin. He always dreamed of creating a healthy stream habitat area where people could visit to fish and enjoy the Driftless Area landscape.

## Program Successes

In 2012, Holst met with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service at the local Ellsworth Service Center. He partnered with the agency to complete a stream restoration project through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Dennis Fritz, of the Pierce County Land Conservation Department (now retired), worked with Holst to develop initial plans for the project. Partners NRCS, Pierce County Land Conservation Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), Trout Unlimited and others (see picture to the right) worked together for four years to plan, implement and complete the large restoration effort. The effort enabled a public easement to be established for everyone to enjoy, known as the "Trimbelle Holst Easement."

When Dennis retired, Jeff Kitelinger, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, Ellsworth USDA Service Center, took over the restoration effort and completion of the project. Tree clearing was done and rip-rap and trout habitat structures were installed to restore the stream.

The project was paid for with EQIP (NRCS), trout stamp dollars (WDNR), a donation from Trout Unlimited and by other smaller contributions of materials and labor, including Fairmount Santrol and other volunteers. "This project would not have been possible without the key partnership effort between Mike Holst and participating conservation organizations. Mike was a pleasure to work with; his common goal and passion for restoring the Driftless landscape created a productive partnership," explained Mark Biel, NRCS District Conservationist, Ellsworth USDA Service Center.

## Future Plans

Mike Holst passed away shortly after the project was completed, but his legacy for conservation and healthy stream habitat will live on for generations through the Trimbelle Holst easement.

**A sign marks the location of Mike Holst's public fishing area, known as the Trimbelle Holst Easement. Partnering organizations who made the restoration possible are also featured on the sign.**

**The fully restored stream with better fish habitat and public access.**

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# Polk County Success from the Field

## "Farming Ugly" on the Field Can Pay Off

## Background

David Randall grows corn, soybeans and cover crops on over 1,000 acres near Balsam Lake, Wisconsin. An early adopter of no-till planting, cover cropping and split nutrient applications in his region, David has helped show how "farming ugly" on the field can pay off.

## Program Successes

In 2009, through a friends recommendation, David and his Dad, John, went to the local USDA-NRCS Service Center to inquire about the Conservation Stewardship Program. At that time, the Randalls grew green beans and corn using a combination of primary tillage methods. With the help of NRCS, they decided to plant cover crops after the green bean harvest as an enhancement to their operation. "In year one, the Randalls planted rye after they smoothed the field with a large disk," recalls Keith Zygowicz, District Conservationist. "Sadly, it was really dry; the rye sprouted and then dried up. I thought they would never talk to me again, but the next spring that rye was green and growing; David has kept at it ever since," added Zygowicz.

John was first to decide he wanted to go 100% no-till, helping to build his soil's health and also enabling him to spend more time doing things with the family once the crops were in the ground. David has done endless experimenting to implement conservation practices that help his soil and save him time and money. Some of the practices he has implemented include no-till, cereal rye cover cropping using a drill and aerial application, grid soil sampling, split nutrient applications and plant tissue nutrient testing to target when he should be applying his fertilizer. David figures these conservation practices save him about $45 per acre and a whole lot of time. And the worms, "you've got to give credit to the worms—in hard times and tight budgets, they are the only employees I have, that I don't have to pay," added Randall.

After John passed away in 2017, David decided to go 100% no-till on all the acres. Changing over to equipment for no-till can be expensive, but, as David says "You don't need all the technology, but you need to talk to someone who has used it, in order to find out what will work for your operation." Sometimes modifying older planters is the way to go.

**The typical look of David's fields early in the season, following cereal rye cover crop.**

David is not afraid to "farm ugly" either. He is aware that sometimes what he is doing looks counterintuitive to neighbors and can even look like it's not working. For example, early in the season, his corn is smaller than some of the others and appears paler because it's not accented by black dirt. But, once July hits and the corn crop's canopy is filled in, the crop takes off and is as dark green as any other field.

## Future Plans

In the future, David wants to try full season cover crops; trying a mixture of clovers, sunflowers, millet and small grains. David is looking forward to having more time for himself, to pursue leisure activities that he has missed over the years.

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# Price County Success from the Field

## Positive Steps Towards Energy Conservation

## Background

United Pride Dairy was formed in 1996 with the combining of the Jon Pesko and Ed Jasurda Dairies, both of which were started back in 1911. They began with 300 cows in 1996 and have since grown to 4,200 animals, milking approximately 2,000 cows three times a day. The farm is located near Phillips, Wisconsin, and they operate 5,000 acres surrounded by woods. The farm grows corn and hay to help feed the largest dairy herd in Price County.

## Program Successes

In the past, United Pride Dairy has worked with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) on projects through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), such as comprehensive nutrient management planning, feed management, manure storage, and silage leachate collection. The farm has also participated in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and completed enhancements such as pollinator habitat, plant tissue testing, and GPS spray application of herbicide.

Recently, United Pride is interested in energy consumption and wanted to find out about ways they could become more energy efficient. With the help of the EQIP On Farm Energy Initiative, the farm completed an energy audit in 2014. The farm wanted an energy audit done by a party that was not selling a product so they could feel the audit was unbiased. This goal was accomplished by the plan writer they selected from the NRCS Technical Service Provider list.

United Pride was interested in implementing the recommendations from the completed energy audit. The main resource concern identified were the 20-year-old high pressure sodium lights. It was expected, through the audit, that the cost to replace these lights would have a 5 year payback in energy cost savings. In 2016, the farm worked with NRCS through the EQIP On Farm Energy initiative to replace the lights in 3 barns, the shop, the sand recycling building, as well as 12 outdoor lights.

The lights were replaced with energy efficient LED light fixtures. The strategic light placement and the increased lumens for the LED lighting has resulted in better visibility in the buildings, as well as energy savings. This helped improve management on the farm by making it easier for staff to read animal tags, which helps sort and move cattle more efficiently.

**A 60 stall rotating parlor on the United Pride Dairy Built in 2010 for increased cow and human comfort.**

The brighter shop and sand recycling building also made it easier for staff to efficiently work on equipment.

The farm had always planned to update the lighting, but without the EQIP On Farm Energy Initiative, it would have taken much longer to implement. The program enabled the lighting update to be completed quickly so United Pride could focus on other farm improvements. The energy audit numbers showed the updates made sense financially. Overall Jon Pesko stated, “I appreciate the partnership with the NRCS to help the farm accomplish goals and do good for the environment.”

## Future Plans

In the future, the farm is looking into further improving their energy efficiency by installing solar panels. Over time, solar power technology has become better and less expensive, so Jon feels that it is a good route to take to reduce energy costs and protect the environment. Besides improvements in energy consumption, United Pride is thinking more about soil health and cover crops and how they can implement more cover crops into their crop rotation while dealing with Price County’s short growing season. Melissa Knipfel, the District Conservationist in Price and Taylor County, reminds everyone, “Conservation not only happens in our fields and pastures, it involves all the resources in our community. United Pride has taken conservation in that direction by taking steps to reduce the energy they use.”

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# Trempealeau County Success from the Field

## Partners for Pollinators

## Background

On the Southern border of Trempealeau County, in the Black River bottoms, sits a piece of land that was settled in 1905. Dan and Lorraine Beck now own a piece of this once 700-acre property, that was purchased by Lorraine's father back in the 1960's. Dan and Lorraine currently own the original farmstead with 140 acres of land, consisting of 10.5 acres of cropland recently converted to pollinator habitat and 129.5 acres of woodland.

## Program Successes

In 2016, Dan and Lorraine came into the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Service Center to inquire about possibilities that may exist for landowners. The cropland consists of very sandy soils and is not very productive cropland. Dan and Lorraine had been renting the fields to a local farmer when the farmer had talked to them and thought there may be a better use of the land other than crops. Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist Scott Stipetich and Ryan Swatek, District Conservationist for Trempealeau and Jackson Counties, suggested that Dan and Lorraine look into the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) as their first option. Since one of the fields had been cropped it was eligible for CRP. The other field utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to convert the sandy cropland into lush pollinator habitat. Scott Stipetich helped develop a very diverse mix of native forbs, legumes, and grasses.

The fields were planted in late fall 2016 and the area has since transformed into lush, colorful pollinator habitat. "NRCS educated a couple of rookies and walked us through program enrollment, plant selection, field preparation, planting and care. Both Ryan and Scott have made field visits at our request to ensure the fields are progressing. We really appreciate their willingness to work with us and answer our many questions," said landowner Dan Beck.

## Future Plans

While Dan and Lorraine are in their second year of growth on their pollinator planting and still in the establishment phase of the project, they will continue to maintain the area as pollinator habitat with management practices such as prescribed burning, mowing, and herbaceous weed control.

**NRCS District Conservationist Ryan Swatek (left) alongside Dan and Lorraine Beck standing in the second year growth of their pollinator planting.**

**The second year of growth on the Beck pollinator habitat planting.**



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# Brown County Success from the Field

## Grazing to Improve Public Land Wildlife Habitat

## Background

It all started on a few acres in Wrightstown, Wisconsin. Carl and Kathy Tennessen bought two beef cows at the request of their young daughter. “She liked cows and we wanted to raise our own food,” Carl recalled. The Tennessens, at the time, were working, raising a family and just had a few acres to play around with. Sure enough the experiment expanded, and along with more cows came hundreds of meat rabbits and chickens. The Tennessens had caught the hobby farm bug.

They put their efforts toward making their hobby a lifestyle. In a challenging landscape pressured with large farms and urban development, the Tennessens managed to purchase 2 parcels of land with acreage enough to expand the beef herd. They wanted to graze, but hadn’t the experience or finances to get it going. They were just about ready to pull the plug when they found out about the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and started working on a managed grazing plan. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, they installed fence and pipeline on their property. What was once unmanageable hours scraping barns and feeding cattle, turned into 15 minutes a day of moving fences. The herd numbers didn’t have to be reduced, but land and hay access were still challenging their beef business dream.

## Program Successes

Meanwhile, in Brown County, Josh Martinez from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), was looking for a way to maintain the grass cover desired at the Holland Wildlife area. For all the efforts applying prescribed burns, haying and mechanical brush control, undesired shrubs and trees continued to encroach.

The local NRCS Soil Conservationist, Julie Hager, invited Josh out to see Carl’s pastures and grazing management. Josh was satisfied to see that the animals were being moved frequently and were not allowed to overgraze the pastures. Together, Carl, the NRCS and the WDNR came up with a grazing plan to trial cattle at the Holland Wildlife Area to improve the habitat for grassland birds. Fencing and water infrastructure was installed in 2017 and in 2018 grazing began.

The cattle are bringing the desired management to the land in short order. Shrubs are nipped and trampled, and over grown thatch is being broken down through manure and hoof action, allowing a greater diversity of plants to grown and thrive. Julie Hager remarks, “It is a very rewarding project to be a part of because it’s a win, win, win scenario, to the land, animals and to people.”

**The before and after affect of cattle is positively dramatic after one day of grazing. Above: Carl moves the cattle out of willow brush which they have stripped off most all leaves, thereby allowing the desired grass cover to come back. Below: A WDNR sign informs Holland Wildlife Area visitors of the active livestock grazing area.**

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# Brown County Success from the Field (continued)

## Grazing to Improve Public Land Wildlife Habitat

### Future Plans

Carl plans to remove the cattle from the site during the hunting season, and recreational users of the wildlife area can continue to enjoy the site as usual throughout the grazing season.

With a larger land base for their herd, Carl and Kathy can now focus on marketing their grass fed beef and growing their business. The Tennessens finished building their own store by their house and plan to direct sell their meat products.

Carl and Kathy also plan to continue to work closely with the WDNR to manage their grazing in accordance with WDNR objectives. With a fast rate of improved habitat observed at Holland Wildlife Area, expansion of grazing to other portions of the wildlife area are likely to happen in the future.

While fulfilling their dreams, the Tennessen's grazing practices are serving as a wonderful example to other state public land managers and graziers around the state.

**Cattle getting ready to move ground at Holland Wildlife Area.**

**Carl and Kathy Tennessen stand by their new storefront on their farm, where they now sell direct grassfed beef, along with lamb, eggs and other farm raised products.**

**A young calf hides in the thick native grasses.**



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# Calumet County Success from the Field

## Partnership is Key to Success

## Background

Brothers, Joe and Don Geiser, have been dairy farming together for as long as they can remember. Recently, the brothers added a new partner to their farming partnership. Adam, Don's son, is now part of the full time operation and also the future of the operation. Since Joe and Don started farming, they have always hauled their manure daily. The Geisers were determined to address their nutrient management, environmental and farm management concerns brought on by the farmland's karst topography.

## Program Successes

In recent years, Joe and Don started working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to incorporate cover crops into their cropping system. The cover crops were successful on the cropping side of their operation. Next, they wanted to address their nutrient management concerns and the need to haul manure every single day. NRCS, in partnership with the Calumet County Land Conservation Department (LCD), sat down with the Geisers to make some proactive, conservation-minded decisions for their operation. Weighing the tough economic times and market prices, the farm decided to invest in installing a waste storage system with the help of NRCS and the LCD, to best meet their needs. "It was a win-win-win situation," added Joe Smedberg, NRCS District Conservationist. NRCS and the LCD were pleased manure would no longer be applied on the karst landscape daily and the nutrients supplied by the manure would be applied at the most opportune times available for crop up-take. The Geisers were also extremely happy they wouldn't have to haul manure every single day. First, the Geisers needed to complete a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) for their farm. To be eligible for financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for a waste storage system, a CNMP needed to be in place. The project timeline took two years. The Geisers received funding and were able to complete the CNMP in about a year. Once the CNMP was in place, the LCD partnered with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to survey and design a waste storage system that best suited the farms needs. They received needed EQIP financial assistance from NRCS to make the project a reality. Less than 6 months after receiving financial assistance through EQIP for the system,, the Geisers waste storage was in place and fully operational. "Everyone is extremely happy with the results of the project; it wouldn't have been a success without the great collaboration of the Geisers and all partners involved," explained Smedberg.

**(L to R) Don, Adam and Joe Geiser in front of their new waste storage facility. The facility was designed by the Calumet County Land Conservation Department with financial assistance provided by NRCS.**

## Future Plans

Adam is already thinking of ways to mesh cover crops and liquid manure into the management system with the help of NRCS. "It will be a trial and error process, but applying manure on top of growing cover crops using low-disturbance manure application will be the next project for the Geisers," explained Smedberg.



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# Kewaunee County Success from the Field

## From Cropland to Wildlife Habitat

## Small Steps

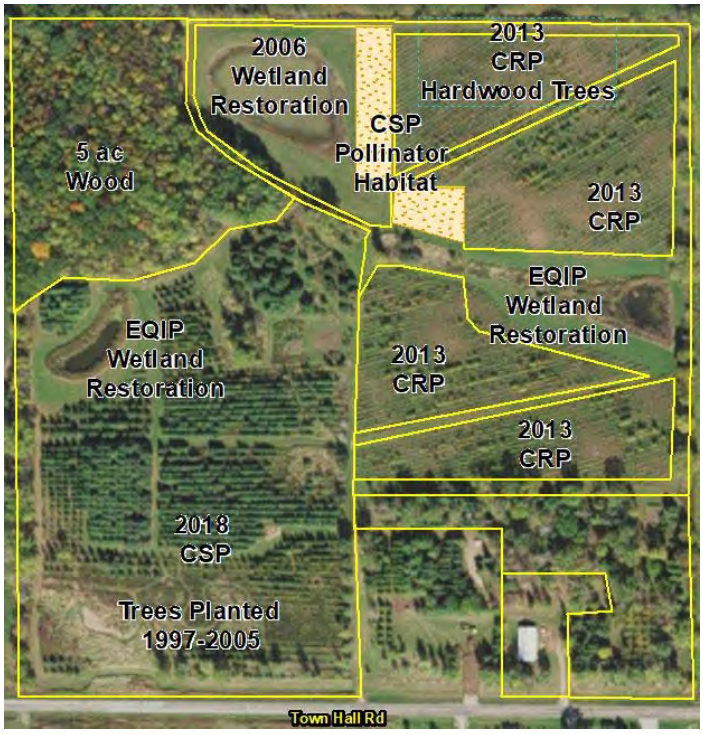
Tom and Renae Werner purchased a 6-acre crop field in 1992, near Luxemburg in Kewaunee County, Wisconsin. They planned to have an area where they could plant some trees and a garden, and install a firepit to get away from town on the weekends. It was just a cornfield at the time, but standing on a small hill in the middle of the property, it was easy to imagine the possibilities. The Werners purchased the remaining 34 acres of the 40-acre parcel, five years later. The acreage was all cropland except for a wooded 5-acre area in the northwest corner of the property.

## Program Successes

After planting 10 acres of the property into trees throughout the years, Mr. Werner approached the Natural Resources Conservation Service in 2005 about enrolling in the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to complete a wetland restoration. "It provided an opportunity to do something I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise," Tom said. The two acre wetland was restored in 1996. "It was definitely one of the most successful small restorations we've had in the county, and I know Tom and his family have really enjoyed it," said Joe Johnson, District Conservationist for NRCS.

More wetland restorations were added in 2013 along with a bat and a wood duck house. The remaining cropland acres were enrolled in a hardwood tree planting practice through CRP in 2013. Tom commented, "I realized I wasn't getting any enjoyment out of the land renting it out for crop production, so CRP seemed like a great option for me."

Partnering with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a snake hibernaculum was completed in 2016 to provide a wintering site for local snakes. An EQIP forest management plan was developed in 2017 to help manage the wooded portion of the property.




## Future Plans

The Werner's plan to plant a 0.5 acre pollinator habitat in 2019, as well as preserve and create den trees within the forested area through their enrollment in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The Werners will continue to enjoy their land well into the future.

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# Manitowoc County Success from the Field

## Healthy Soil Provides Numerous Benefits

When it comes to soil health, Matt Rataczak doesn't mince words.

"Lead, follow, or get out of the way," he said. "It's going to happen with or without you. So let's all work together to get where we need to be with that."

Rataczak, a District Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, recently presented "Soil Health Goals and Costs Associated in Achieving Them" to nearly 80 people attending a soil health and cover crop forum in Manitowoc County.

Rataczak's interest in soil health dates back to his upbringing on his family's 50-cow dairy farm in Marquette County.

After his family sold its cows, Rataczak spent parts of the next six years working on a peppermint, spearmint, sod, corn and soybean farm prior to graduating from UW-Stevens Point. He joined the NRCS in 2002 and has been the Manitowoc-based District Conservationist since 2005.

Rataczak defines soil health as "the continued capacity of a soil to function as a vital, living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals and humans." He added that healthy soil is composed of 45 percent minerals, 25 percent water, 25 percent air space and 5 percent organic matter.

There are four basic principles regarding soil health—keep soil covered as much as possible, disturb soil as little as possible, keep plants growing throughout the year to feed the soil, and diversify as much as possible using crop rotation and cover crops.

Integrating all four principles "is a win-win for the whole soil biology," Rataczak said.

But, he added, "Improving your soil health is not easy. It can be a challenge."

For agricultural professionals, the hard work that goes into healthy soil results in increased production, increased profits and natural resource protection.

Production increases because organic matter and soil organisms in healthy soil improve soil structure, aeration, water retention, drainage and nutrient availability. In addition, organic matter holds more nutrients in soil until plants need them.

**Matt Rataczak in a cover crop field.**

Financial benefits are reaped since healthy soil requires fewer passes over fields with farm machinery, translating to reductions in labor and fuel expenses.

Natural resources also come out ahead since healthy soil's increased water-holding capacity minimizes runoff that can cause flooding. In conjunction, that capacity increases the availability of water to plants during droughts. Groundwater also is protected because of less leaching, and fewer trips with farm machinery mean fewer emissions.

Rataczak said people need to be committed to soil health for the long run.

"Soil health is not a destination—it's a journey," he said. "You don't get to soil health and stop. You aren't 'there.' It's ongoing, and management is key."

Soil health goals can mean different things to different people. They can range from reducing soil erosion and minimizing soil compaction to suppressing weeds and promoting biological nitrogen fixation, among many other things.

"That's one thing you've really got to think about — what do you want your soil health goals to be?" Rataczak said.

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# Manitowoc County Success from the Field (cont'd)

## Healthy Soil Provides Numerous Benefits

He emphasized that no-till farming helps achieve soil health goals.

In particular, Rataczak said no-tilling soybeans "might be the easiest crop to transition from conventional or reduced tillage to a no-till system. They seem to be a little more forgiving." No-till wheat and/or cover crops are beneficial as well, he said. Corn is perhaps the most difficult crop with which to start no-tilling.

Ensuring every seed is at the same depth is more important in no-till than conventional farming to ensure a uniform environment for germination. He said in conventional tilling, the top 4 inches of worked-up ground typically has the same temperature and moisture; whereas in no-till the temperature and moisture can vary significantly from 1 inch to 3 inches in soil profile.

When it comes to no-till or cover crops, Rataczak said, "I get this question asked quite a bit — if I do one or the other, which one is better? Ideally, you need to do them both if you're going to achieve the soil health principles to where you really want to be."

But if someone insists on starting with one, he said cover crops may be better to start with.

With cover crops, it's advised to plant as early as possible to capture maximum sunlight. In addition, Rataczak said drilling cover crops has proven to provide better stands than aerial seeding. He noted that when aerial seeding was used, harvesting corn/soybeans after Oct. 15 drastically reduces the success of the cover crop.

Perhaps most important, he said, is simply making sure the seed gets planted.

"There's one place a cover crop will not grow, and that's in the bag," Rataczak said. "Planting late is better than not planting at all."

*Story courtesy of Benjamin Wideman, The County Today.*

**Soil health is an important topic throughout Wisconsin. This photo, taken west of the town of Nasonville, shows an agricultural field in the foreground (in Wood County), and a farm on the other side of the road (in Clark County).**

# Marathon County Success from the Field

## Finding "Common Ground"

## Background

Jason Cavadini is a soil health hero in his professional and personal life. As the Assistant Superintendent of the Marshfield Agriculture Research Center, Jason has been researching how the principals of soil health respond in the cool, wet soil of North Central Wisconsin. As a partner in Cavern Point Farm, he applies soil health principals to his own farm. Above and beyond applying the principals, he has also started a movement called "Common Ground."

Common Ground is an event focused on unifying people around the future of soil and water in North Central Wisconsin. It is driven by the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), a group of farmers, farms groups, lake stewards, natural resource orientated organizations, agronomists, equipment dealers and neighbors. The goal is to join together around the same table with a vision of integrating resilience into the natural resources, community, and economy of the area.

**Jason and Jocelyn Cavadini at Cavern Point Farm.**

## Program Successes

Jason started working with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) by hosting a soil health day at the Research Station in 2014. He was familiar with the benefits of cover crops because he did his Masters research at Cornell on cover crops. He was also familiar with no-till because he grew up on a farm in the Driftless region of Wisconsin. However, when he came to Central Wisconsin he found those same management practices didn't replicate in his research trials. He reached out to the experts, the farmers who were successfully no-tilling in the area. Together, the no-till group and the research station started learning from each other. Since that time, the Marshfield Ag Research Station has hosted a conservation planning training, pasture walks and Common Ground. At his home farm, Jason and his partners made the decision to implement a prescribed grazing system on the cropland fields shortly after they purchased it. Through the help of the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program the cropland was seeded to pasture, fence installed and a new management system was embraced. Since that time, grazing was successful enough to trial custom grazing diary heifers from a neighboring farm. Cavern Point Farm's latest venture with NRCS is enrolling in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

**Cattle rotationally grazed at Cavern Point Farm.**

Through CSP, they plan to increase forage production and enhance wildlife habitat. Jason continues to speak out about the benefits of soil health. He is especially interested in the resilience it gives agriculture production.

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# Marinette County Success from the Field

## Tag Alder Shearing Creates Early Successional Habitat

## Background

Jim and Katie Matykowski dreamed of retiring to the Northwoods. They bought their own slice of heaven north of Crivitz in the early 1990s. As absentee landowners from the Milwaukee area, they began actively managing their forest when some disease and forest health issues made it necessary to update the Forest Crop Law plan for the property. Since then, they have become members of the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association (WWOA) Phoenix Falls Chapter and advocates for active forest management. According to Jim, "A lot of people don't want to do anything. Uninformed landowners are often resistant to cutting trees. But if you cut according to a good plan, you are helping your woods."

## Program Successes

In 2016, District Conservationist Jeff Maroszek, presented at the local WWOA meeting to highlight financial assistance options for forestland owners through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Jeff specifically discussed the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) initiative sponsored by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC). The initiative focused on creating habitat for the golden-winged warbler, a species that has seen one of the steepest population declines of all songbirds.

In 2017, the Matykowskis received support through the RCPP to create early successional habitat on unproductive land by shearing 5 acres of mature tag alder. "The new growth is renewing the forest; lots of birds! We are pleased with what the shearing has done for our property. Before, it seemed kind of like a wasteland. Now, we see more wildlife activity of all kinds. It's a feel-good thing," commented Katie.

According to Maroszek, "It is refreshing to work with forest landowners that are willing to really manage their land. Seeing the increased song bird populations is truly a sign that we are doing the right thing."

## Future Plans

Jim and Katie have plans to continue actively managing their forestland, including harvesting commercially merchantable timber. They would also like to continue to manage the remaining mature tag alder present on the property.

Through a partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Ruffed Grouse Society, NRCS was able to hire Forest Habitat Specialist, Dan Hoff, based out of the Lena USDA Service Center, to work specifically on these type of projects. The added staff will insure that the program success will continue and more acres can be treated.

**Tag alder sheared in March of 2018. Notice the even mulching, standing trees providing diversity within the sheared block, and irregular border, or edge feathering.**

**Regrowth after one growing season. Alder sprouts from the roots vigorously. This provides dense habitat necessary for birds, like the golden-winged warbler, ruffed grouse and American woodcock. It also creates browse for deer and rabbits.**

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# Outagamie County Success from the Field

## 26 Years of Sustainable Forest Management

## Background

Steve Ring, the owner/operator of Pinevilla Tree Farm near Shiocton, Wisconsin, has been actively managing his 175-acre woodlot since he purchased the land from its former owner in 1993. An active member of the Wisconsin Woodland Owners Association (WWOA) for many years, he was elected to the State Board of Directors in 2013. He served as Vice President and President, and is currently serving as Past-President, also chairing WWOA's 2020-2025 Strategic Planning committee. In 2018 Steve was awarded WWOA's Distinguished Service Award and is 2019's Wisconsin Wildlife Federation's Forest Conservationist of the Year. Steve's dedication to conservation stands out among others. Over the course of the last 26 years, Steve has hosted countless educational days on his woodlot, including 15 field days and 16 sleigh rides. Audiences for these field days have included WWOA members; Fox Valley Technical College students; grade school students; county, state, and federal agency staff; neighbors and friends. Steve loves managing the land and passing on his knowledge and experience to family including his grandkids, other woodland owners and anyone interested in learning about forest management. His hope is that people leave his property with a better understanding of how forests function and an appreciation of how vitally important forests are to the planets ecosystem.

## Program Successes

Steve first learned of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2016, and in that same year, enrolled his woodlot into the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Under CSP, Steve has increased management on his woodlot by implementing forest stand improvement practices that include crop tree release within his conifer and hardwood stands, protection of vernal pools, removal of invasive and unwanted species and improvements to wildlife habitat. Steve has also utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help with the construction and installation of bat houses throughout his woodlot and is currently in the midst of utilizing practice 647, early successional habitat development, by cutting different 0.5 acre sections of a 17-acre Speckled/Tag Alder stand each year to achieve successive growth of the alder stand. This successional growth greatly improves Woodcock and warbler habitat, and Steve feels he's already seen positive results on his property. "I'm very impressed with Steve's knowledge and devotion to improving his woodlot and his willingness to educate and share his property with the community," said Lynn Szulczewski, NRCS District Conservationist.

**Steve standing next to the sign near the entrance to his home and woodlot. His demonstration forest for Outagamie county through Golden Sands RC&D provides countless educational opportunities to northeast Wisconsin educators, landowners, students and resource management agency staff.**

## Future Plans

Steve's intensive management of his woodlot will continue into the future. He plans to continue partnering with NRCS, opening up his land for educational opportunities to any eyes or ears who are interested. "Working with the NRCS staff has been a wonderful experience. They're very helpful and have been a true partner, providing professional advice and financial assistance through their many different programs. We have spent many an hour working together in the last three years, walking the land, reviewing successes of existing programs and discussing new programs that will benefit the woodland and all its wildlife, helping make it more sustainable not only today but for many future generations to come," explained Ring.

United States Department of Agriculture

# Shawano County Success from the Field

## 2nd Annual Queen Bee Event

## Background

In 2017 the Oconto and Shawano County USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), Shawano USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Pheasants Forever and UW Extension teamed up to provide an opportunity for women landowners. The success of that event lead to a 2nd Annual Queen Bee event held August 9, 2018. This event provided an evening of interactive learning and peer discussion at a floriculture farm located in eastern Shawano County. Windswept Acres Specialty Cut Flowers has not only raised cut flowers for many years, but they have been actively applying conservation to their property through the Conservation Reserve Program. Participants had a chance to tour the operation, see a successful pollinator planting and an established wildlife scrape, as well as network with fellow women landowners and a variety of resource professionals.

**Participants at the 2nd Annual Queen Bee Event learned first-hand what it takes to operate a floriculture farm. Windswept Acres Specialty Cut Flowers graciously shared their operation for this event, which also included time for networking, an exercise on thinking about and answering farm legacy questions and a tour of the operation's greenhouses, pollinator habitat and wildlife pond.**

## Program Successes

"Super experience for networking, thinking about farm succession and learning about land stewardship," said Mary Smith, Ag Instructor and FFA Advisor for the Suring School District and participant at this year's event. This sort of comment was repeated multiple times by the end of the night. FSA , NRCS, UW Extension and resource professionals that included Pheasants Forever, Peshtigo National Bank and WDNR organized an event that would give a small group of women landowners from Shawano, Oconto and Marinette counties the opportunity to gather, talk , learn and think about the legacy of their farm and/or property. "This event has been able to spark interest in conservation from an angle we have not used before. I have had several calls from participants interested in planting their own pollinator habitat," said Sherrie Zenk-Reed, Soil Conservationist for Shawano County.

## Future Plans

Windswept Acres Specialty Cut Flowers plans to continue providing quality cut flowers to an ever changing market and remain good stewards of their property. As for the Queen Bee Event, FSA, NRCS, Pheasants Forever and UW Extension are already looking to next year with an event to be planned in Marinette County.

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# Vilas County Success from the Field

## Partnership Teaches Sustainable Practices and Resource Management

Nestled in Eagle River, Wisconsin, on 30 forested acres of land is a natural resources specialty school that uses a combination of field and classroom studies to teach sustainable practices, as well as demonstrating the benefits of contemporary resource management. These field-based programs place students in direct contact with resources that support human needs and teach knowledge and skills leading to responsible lifestyle choices. The experience inspires informed participation in policy-making and promotes stewardship and renewal of natural resources by future generations.

Trees For Tomorrow (TFT) was founded as an independent, nonprofit organization in 1944 by a group of Wisconsin paper and electric utility companies for the purpose of reforesting northern Wisconsin, as well as educating landowners and citizens about the need for proper land management. In the 1940s and '50s TFT gave away tree seedlings, lent out planting machines and hired foresters to develop management plans for landowners. The organization also established an education facility in Eagle River and used the recovering northern forest to teach school students, their teachers and the public about the need for proper forestry practices.

In the 1960s, with reforestation substantially completed, TFT turned all its energy to education. Today, "Trees" is the Midwest's leading natural resource specialty school providing field workshops renowned for their effectiveness in teaching natural resource conservation and management concepts to students, teachers and the public.

## Program Successes

Each year, the school holds a Careers in Natural Resources workshop open to high school sophomores, juniors and graduating seniors. High School students discover if a natural resources career is the path to their future. Students who participate in the Trees For Tomorrow's Careers in Natural Resources workshop meet foresters, fisheries and wildlife biologists, water resource specialists, conservation wardens, recreation land managers and more! They experience real-life field work and develop outdoor skills. They also learn what various occupations require for education or training, what they pay and what today's job market is like. This field day has always brought back memories for NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Tom Melnarik, being one of those very high school students at Trees for Tomorrow back in 1980. "I remember thinking about how interesting a career in natural resources might be," added Melnarik. Little did he know that someday he'd be one of the instructors as an NRCS employee. "It is a great feeling of coming full circle and of giving back," says Tom.

NRCS has been an active participant in the Careers program for the last 10 years, providing students with an introduction into the soil and conservation aspects of our work. "This introductory look into the work we do includes a pitch for all USDA jobs, and gets the students thinking about the many locations and opportunities available around the country and around the world," explained Tom.

Some of the hands-on field activities that NRCS staff provide the high schoolers are an introduction into land surveying techniques. The students also learn how to use a laser level, set up a field book, texture and classify soils according to color and begin to understand how the soil and conservation professionals in NRCS work together to provide technical assistance and on-the-ground expertise to install conservation practices. They are given examples of the sort of projects we do and the varied clientele we serve. Some of these students will surely become the conservation professionals of the future. NRCS staff is committed to spreading the conservation message and encouraging today's youth to consider a career in *Helping People Help the Land.*

# Waupaca County Success from the Field

## Building on a Family Conservation Ethic

## Background

Rachel Bouressa and her children, Natalie and Crosby, live on the family farm near New London, Wisconsin. Rachel's roots in conservation run deep; her parents, Robert and Barbara Eder, were some of the first farmers to adopt rotational grazing in the state. Rachel has taken her educational background in agronomy, environmental science and agroecology, and coupled it with her on-farm experience, to grow a successful grazing and direct marketing business.

## Program Successes

Rachel began working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2015, shortly after she decided to make the leap to leave Madison and move back to and purchase her family's farm. She had a vision to start a grassed-based farming operation and utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with the help of NRCS, to get started. Through the program, Rachel converted some of her cropland back to pasture and also installed fence and livestock pipelines on about 20 acres. She began to implement her grazing plan and quickly saw the benefits. She believes in the value of bringing animals back to her land for both the environmental benefits and animal health. Rachel was so successful with her first grazing endeavor, that she decided to expand. In 2017, she signed up for EQIP again, and converted another 10 acres of cropland to pasture. Also a savvy businesswoman, Rachel markets her products through her website. There, customers can choose from a variety of products, portion sizes and specialty meats, such as sausage. Rachel has hosted several pasture walks to educate others. She also hosted a Women Caring for the Land event to help inspire female farmers. "Rachel is a great example of how a passion for farming and lots of hard work can lead to success," said Lisa Neuenfeldt, District Conservationist in Waupaca County.

## Future Plans

Rachel's goal is to double her grazing acres every three years. In addition, in 2018, she began to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Through CSP she plans to plant a variety of nut and berry producing trees and shrubs in order to diversify the farm. "NRCS makes my dreams come true," said Rachel. NRCS looks forward to continuing to work with Rachel in implementing conservation practices on her land.

**Rachel, Crosby and Natalie Bouressa. Photo provided courtesy of Benjamin Wideman.**

**Rachel Bouressa speaking to attendees of a 2018 pasture walk. Photo provided courtesy of Benjamin Wideman.**



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# Winnebago County Success from the Field

## Saving Energy Makes Sense for Hinz Farm LLC

## Background

Mike and Dan Hinz have been farming in Pickett, Wisconsin, since 1998. Together, the father and son duo operate a 290 cow dairy and 245 acres of cropland. The Hinzs invested in an Agriculture Energy Management Plan (AgEMP) to find out how they could save money and energy on their farm.

## Program Successes

**The new washer extractor that "lightens the load" on the farm.**

NRCS first worked with Mike Hinz in 2008, when he had a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) written for the farm. The AgEMP includes a headquarters efficiency analysis, which is used to identify potential conservation practices to reduce energy consumption from non-renewable sources on the farm. The AgEmp is necessary if farmers wish to seek financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program for the recommended upgrades.

The conservation practices the Hinzs are in the process of implementing are improved lighting in the barn and milking parlor. They are also installing a high capacity washer extractor. The extractor will save on water usage and energy, decreasing loads washed from 7 to 2 daily. A high efficiency on-demand water heater will be installed to solve the hot water shortage issues on the farm. The Hinzs currently run out of hot water before all the milking equipment is clean and sanitized.

Environmental benefits of the project are a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions and improved air quality. The cost-saving in energy is $5,567/year and 201 fewer MMBtU/year being used.

**Mike and Dan Hinz on their family farm.**

Once farmers see how much energy they can save, Merrie Schamberger, District Conservationist, is hoping this will encourage others to get AgEMPs completed for their farms. The Hinzs commented, "we can see now when they are milking. the light is much brighter, closer to natural sunlight." Amy Moore, NRCS Engineer adds, "we're very proud the way the project has turned out so far."

## Future Plans

The installation of the complete upgraded, energy-efficient improvements should be completed by 2020. The Hinzs are interested in learning more about the Conservation Stewardship Program that NRCS offers. If they do apply they will be the first farmers that can answer "yes" to the energy audit questions on the Conservation Measurement Tool.



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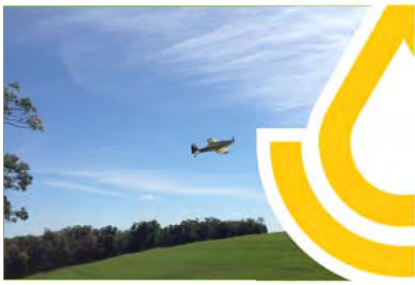
# Crawford County Success from the Field

It Takes a Village….



## Background

While it takes the passion and commitment of private landowners and operators to successfully implement conservation practices, it is usually a direct result of the great people working behind the scenes to build trust, showcase the successes and dig in to find the right fix.

## Highlights

Dave Troester has been the Crawford County Conservationist since 2011. With a background in natural land management, he jumped into agricultural conservation with both feet. Dave enjoys utilizing conservation education opportunities, like poster and speaking contests and youth conservation days, to educate others about the importance of agriculture. He also regularly invests his time training tomorrow's land managers on the value of ecology and species management. While tackling the everyday duties of Farmland Preservation Program compliance, manure storage and livestock siting ordinances, zoning and non–metallic mining, he has added county-wide aerial application of cover crops to his task list. Dave built a program that started with an idea and grew into a huge success. In the past five years, Dave's idea turned into almost 4,000 acres of cover crops aerially applied. Crawford County's rugged topography leaves a challenge and opportunity to assist farmers in keeping their soil in place. This is a win–win for producers who need good topsoil and residents and visitors that enjoy the county's scenic beauty and clean rivers and streams. Cover crops have improved soil health and reduced input costs in the area. This helps producers improve their bottom line.

## Future Plans

NRCS assists producers through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program in trying out cover crops with little financial risk. Through EQIP, producers recognize the financial and agronomic benefit of soil health practices, like cover crops, and can make long-term management improvements on their operation. Cover crops have both agronomic and financial benefits. Most producers decide to continue implementing the practice after the initial EQIP funding.

Aerial seeding has peaked producers curiosity in the area. One benefit of using low-flying, bright yellow planes to seed cover crops is the discussion it has generated. Sparked conversations enable NRCS to highlight benefits of the cover crop practice to operators, landowners and other partners in the area. NRCS and Crawford County Conservation will continue to promote cover crops with the goal of proving soil health benefits so farmers choose to continue using the practice in the future, even without EQIP cost-share assistance.

**Dave pictured at the Ferryville Eagle Watch days.**

**Dave conducting a prairie tour.**

# Grant County Success from the Field

## Farm Bill Programs Assist in Habitat Restoration

## Background

The land, which Dan Bohlin now owns, was first purchased by his parents in 1971. It was a recently retired dairy operation and for the following 27 years, the cropland and pastures were rented out to local neighbors.

Dan took the property over in 1998. He had many ideas on how to manage his property and control erosion but was unsure of the best route to proceed. He hired a consultant, and in 2000, developed an Ecological Land Survey and Management Plan; a document used ever since to guide his land use decisions.

## Program Successes

Dan's passion for ecology led him to attempt to restore as many acres as he could to native prairie, along with maintaining his woodlots for wildlife and production timber.

In his land endeavors, Dan partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to utilize most of the programs the Farm Bill has to offer. Dan's crop ground was in a grain rotation causing excessive sheet and rill erosion and numerous areas of ephemeral and classic gullies. The woodlands suffered from decades of grazing and lack of management to control the invasive species and manage the productive timber and wildlife.

Through the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) he established 51 acres in a CP25 cover, which is used for the restoration of prairie and sagebrush-grass using native species to benefit wildlife. He also established 26 acres in CP2, which is native grass plantings to reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and create wildlife habitat. Lastly, he established 24 acres in CP22, which improves water quality and wildlife habitat through riparian buffers.

In addition, he has had several Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (FSA) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (NRCS) contracts installing or managing 13 acres of brush management, 15 acres of forest stand improvement, 21 acres of prescribed burning, 5,400 feet of fire breaks, 1 acre of forest trails, 610 feet of grassed waterway, 4 earthen dam grade stabilization structures and 1 stream crossing.

**An oak savannah restoration with numerous native plants and oak seedlings present. The area is burned on a sporadic basis.**

**Through CRP, a 51-acre CP25 warm season planting is in pristine condition.**

Dan also completed a Conservation Stewardship Program contract which enabled him to expand the management of his non-industrial private forestland with 10 acres of hardwood crop tree release.

Dan stated, "Without the federal assistance I would not have been able to complete the projects I have done." "NRCS and FSA not only provided the technical knowledge but also the financial assistance Dan needed to move forward and complete his land restoration goals," said Joe Schmelz, NRCS Grant County District Conservationist.

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"Dan has always been a pleasure to work with. He knows his property and he knows what his long term land goals are. It's great that the programs we offer have dovetailed together so well with his goals," stated Joe Schmelz NRCS District Conservationist in Lancaster.

## Future Plans

Dan knows very well that the management of prairie, savannah and woodlands is never a completed task. In the future, he plans to continue to battle woodland invasives, complete some selective harvests of his mature hardwoods, utilize more fire as one of his standard management tools and manage various understory populations to promote the regeneration of oak and walnut seedlings.

Dan's final thoughts to woodland owners are, "there is no such thing as benign neglect with woodlots," explained Bohlin.

**Dan provides access to a local apiary to house numerous bee hives on his property.**

# Iowa County Success from the Field

## Artist Landowners Craft a Healthy Stream Corridor

## Background

In October 2004, John Walté and Pamela Callahan fulfilled their dream of relocating to the Driftless Area of Iowa County, Wisconsin. Their artists' studio - Otter Creek Arts, residence, and extensive garden are nestled within 150 acres of forested hills and spring-fed wetlands. Approximately ¾ of a mile of Otter Creek, a locally renowned Class 2 trout stream, meanders through their property.

## Program Successes

John and Pamela have enthusiastically embraced their roles as land stewards. Through their attendance at field days held by Trout Unlimited, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the Driftless Area Land Conservancy, they gained the tools to recognize resource concerns on their land. While working on their Managed Forest Law plan, the DNR forester recommended they work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to address streambank erosion along Otter Creek. Though a core component of their love of the property, Otter Creek also provided challenges. Flooding and erosion along the stream limited access to their home and studio. Through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), John and Pamela were able to access technical and financial assistance to complete an ambitious project including streambank protection and stream habitat improvement and management. The final design included riprap, bank shaping, rock and log deflectors, stream barbs, vortex weirs and lunker structures. Additionally, obstruction removal and brush management were implemented as part of the broader vegetation management plan. Despite the occurrence of four flood events since the completion of the project, John and Pamela have not experienced further access limitations. "NRCS staff provided us with not only technical and financial assistance, but also encouragement and clarity in the many steps during the planning process," said Pamela. NRCS Engineer Lexie Straka did much of the planning, designing and construction inspection for the project. She says, "I've worked with John and Pamela from the start, in 2014, and it's been extremely rewarding to see the impact our work has had on Otter Creek."

**John and Pamela installed 1,160 feet of streambank stabilization along Otter Creek in Highland Township.**

## Future Plans

John and Pamela continue to actively manage their forest lands in accordance with their forestry plan and to encourage native plant diversity on grassland areas. Additionally, as Conservation Stewardship Program participants, they will complete forest stand improvement and conservation cover practices. Looking to the future, they hope to enhance pollinator habitat, continue work on Otter Creek and strengthen surrounding wetlands and tributaries.

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# Juneau County Success from the Field

## Ho-Chunk Nation and the Natural Resources Conservation Service Partner to Restore Wetland

## Background

The Ho-Chunk Nation own a beautiful and diverse 272-acre property in southeastern Juneau County. It is known as the White Otter property. The Ho-Chunk manage the land for native upland, wetland species habitat, and for the quiet enjoyment of their people.

## Highlights

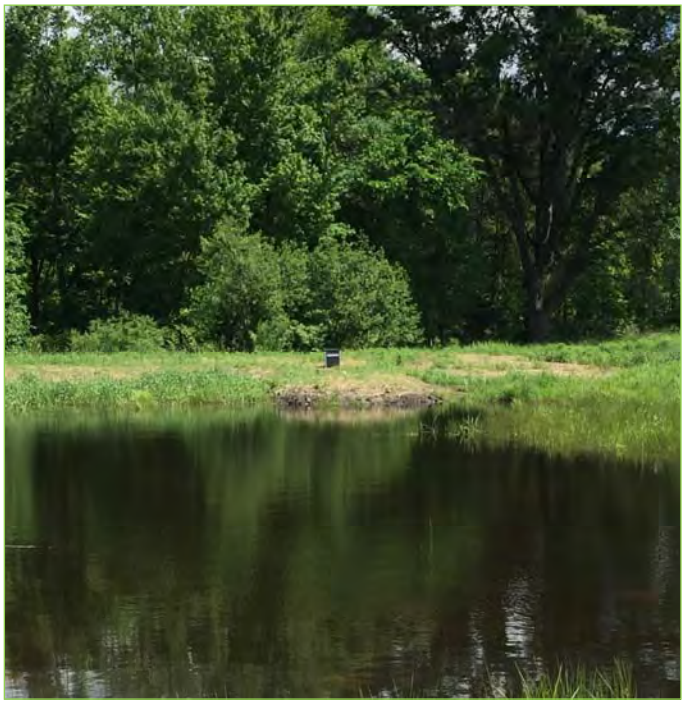
The partnership between the Ho-Chunk and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) began in the early 2000s with an initial conversation about multiple potential partnership projects that could restore the acreage. Funding from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and technical assistance provided by NRCS staff, enabled the design and construction of a 2,600-foot streambank stabilization and aquatic habitat project on the Lyndon Creek, a Class III trout stream. NRCS also assisted in a 41-acre prairie restoration, 1,323 foot use-exclusion fencing project, a stream crossing installation, 2.3 acres of brush management and 0.3 acres of tree planting.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also aided in the construction of a wetland restoration, including a ditch fill and embankment. In 2016, the Ho-Chunk Nation came to NRCS to talk about a needed repair to the embankment. NRCS Civil Engineering Technician, Luther Teller, surveyed and designed a water control structure needed to handle the stormflow through the embankment and to repair the gulley erosion that was causing failure to the embankment. Construction was completed in May of 2017. "The Ho-Chunk Nation is very thankful for the continued partnership with NRCS, for this project and the many other shared conservation projects across the state," said Ho-Chunk Department of Natural Resources Official, Randy Poelma.

## Future Plans

The Ho-Chunk Nation have taken the successful projects one step further, for educational purposes. They installed an interpretive trail through the restored property and built an elevated viewing stand to see the wetland and the prairie while teaching about it. The Ho-Chunk Nation plan on continuing to manage their property for wildlife in partnership with NRCS and will continue to teach current and future generations the importance of proper land management.

**Before installation of a water control structure.**



**Installed water control structure.**

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# Lafayette County Success from the Field

## Making the Dream Come True

## Background

Caleb Coccari-Swift and Eva Denny operate King Fisher Farm, a vegetable and sheep farm in the Argyle, Wisconsin, area. Caleb and Eva own 42 acres of land which are pasture, organic vegetable fields and native sedge meadow. Their vegetable operation consists of micro greens, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and other produce they sell at local farmers markets. Besides farmers markets, they also sell their hot peppers to a company that produces hot sauce out of Madison, Wisconsin.

## Highlights

When Caleb and Eva purchased their land in 2014, their dream of farming was a possibility. Caleb had heard from a former employer of the various practices and programs the Natural Resources Conservation Service had to offer for beginning farmers. When they purchased their property, they immediately went to NRCS for assistance to help create a farm that met their goals of not only being profitable, but sustainable as well.

NRCS provided financial assistance to install many practices to help their operation. First, through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, NRCS assisted Caleb and Eva with the conversion of a sandy, low production crop field to a rotationally grazed pasture for their sheep under the Honey Bee Initiative. Next, NRCS assisted with installing high tunnels and micro irrigation for their vegetable operation. They also enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program to provide nesting habitat for Purple Martins, and are composting manure and vegetable waste for better utilization and vegetable production. Through CSP, they also made mobile mineral feeders to allow their grazing operation to work efficiently. In spring 2018, a prescribed burn was also conducted on their sedge meadow.

“It was awesome to see what species came up so far this year after the burn. This land is an excellent, diverse habitat of native sedges, grasses and forbs. I’ve even seen plants I’ve never seen in Lafayette County come up,” stated Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician.

**Caleb, Eva, and their son, Waylon, standing next to one of the vegetable fields.**

**Caleb (left) and Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, discuss multi-crop production with the newly installed micro irrigation.**

**Caleb moving the sheep to the next paddock.**

# Lafayette County Success from the Field (continued)

When Caleb and Eva were asked what they would have done without NRCS, Caleb replied, "As beginning farmers, the financial assistance, along with the technical support from our local NRCS staff has made our dream of farming a reality! Without it, I don't think we would have made it to the scale we are at now."

## Future Plans

As demand for their produce increases, Caleb and Eva plan to expand their vegetable operation and add a fruit orchard. They also plan to continue managing their sedge meadow for wildlife and pollinator habitat for years to come.

**Cottongrass presently growing in the sedge meadow.**

**Caleb and Eva's sedge meadow.**

United States Department of Agriculture

# Monroe County Success from the Field

## New Landowners Help Save Dam for Wildlife

## Background

In 2017, Jennifer and her husband purchased some land in Monroe County, Wisconsin. One of the selling points was the dam for wildlife on the property. The existing dam was in need of repair. The previous owner had contacted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) about the dam, but since he was looking to sell the property, he had decided to hold off on repairs. Technicians from the USDA Service Center assessed the dam and found water was leaking through the corrugated metal pipe that served as the outlet and was causing soil erosion. The site had already lost over 20 tons of soil due to this pipe failure. The dam was originally installed in 1995, but was not built to USDA NRCS standards. To some of us that doesn't sound very old, but it was over 20 years ago!

## Program Successes

The previous owner suggested Jennifer contact the NRCS about the problem with the dam. Jennifer had never worked with UDSA staff before, but she made a phone call and NRCS was willing to partner in the repair project. "The application process was easy and Dan Gunderson, NRCS Civil Engineering Technician, was great to work with," explained Jennifer. After soliciting four bids, the landowner chose and hired a contractor to complete the construction. The contractor spent about three and a half weeks on-site for the repairs. One evening during construction, the area received five inches of rain, enough to make the site muddy and slippery. Rain delayed the project a few times because the soils need to be compacted while working. Dams that are built to NRCS standards are expected to last at least 15 years. There will always be maintenance that is up to the landowners, such as inspecting the dam after every storm event, keeping the pipe clear of debris, removing debris and sediment from storms and keeping the berm mowed and free of woody plants.

## Future Plans

Jennifer and her husband intend to expand the wildlife value the dam offers. There may be some plantings for wildlife in the future, but for now, the peace of mind that the dam is repaired meets their immediate goals.

**Above: The dam in 2017, showing the gully washing out along the berm. The vertical pipe is set below the top of the berm so water would leave through the pipe rather than over the top of the berm if the horizontal pipe plugged or couldn't carry water fast enough.**

**Below: After repairs are done, the embankment and borrow area are seeded and mulched.**

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# Richland County Success from the Field

## From Renter, to Steward of the Land

## Background

Steve Banker has rented a small farm house nestled high on a bank over looking Knapps Creek in Richland County for 23 years. “I have thoroughly enjoyed my time here, raising a few cattle to subsidize my fencing business, but I’ve always been concerned about the erosion on the banks. Then, in recent storm events, some of the banks moved back four feet and I knew I had to do something,” explained Steve.

## Program Successes

As mentioned above, Steve owns a fencing business. In 2015, he was installing fence for a landowner that had received an Environment Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) contract for Prescribed Grazing through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). While the NRCS technician, Todd Cockroft, was on-site checking the installation of the fence, Steve approached him to inquire if a renter could sign up for a program to help with the cost of eroding stream banks. “I am the renter and caretaker of the property, I run a few cattle in the pasture and rent the farm ground out. I wouldn’t mind spending some of my own money on the improvements, I just can’t afford to pay for all of it,” explained Steve. The NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, Todd Cockroft, made an appointment with Steve to look at his situation and discuss some options and help guide him in the right direction. That simple and quick conversation led to an EQIP contract for streambank stabilization of 2,532 feet and 3,481 cubic yards of rock. From long-term renter to a steward of the land, a transformation that Steve was eager and willing to make.

## Future Plans

Steve is very happy with the results of the stream restoration project, and is appreciative of the technical assistance that he received from NRCS. Banker moved all of the cropland boundaries back and installed a grass buffer along the stream to help prevent any further erosion and filter nutrients. He has also fenced out sensitive areas to more closely monitor the exposure from cattle. When you talk to Steve about the project he is proud of the work that has been done, and of the work he is going to do. “I want to keep this looking nice for generations to come.” explained Steve.

**The picture above shows severely eroded streambanks on Knapps Creek before construction.**

**The picture below shows banks armored with rock, covered with topsoil and grassed over after construction.**

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# Sauk County Success from the Field

## Conservation Observance Day Highlights

## Background

The 2018 Conservation Observance Day is an annual event that recognizes the outstanding achievements of Wisconsin landowners who are protecting and enhancing our state's natural resources.

This year, the Yanke Family, of Echo-Y Farms, hosted and was honored at the event. Echo-Y is a 4th generation farm in Loganville, Wisconsin. Their diverse operation consists of 760 acres of cropland and 275 acres of perennial pasture.

Conservation-minded since the 1960's, they are 100% no-till and currently use cover crops to improve their soil health by increasing infiltration, improving nutrient cycling, and providing pollinator habitat by incorporating flowering species into their cover crop mixes.

The Yankes use roller crimping on their cover crops to reduce their pesticide and herbicide inputs. They partnered with NRCS to set up a managed rotational grazing system for their Holstein heifers and lowline angus beef herd. By intensively managing their pastures, they are able to graze their cattle well into the middle of winter without having to provide supplemental feed.

## The Day's Events

Participants viewed a soil pit and rainfall simulator demonstration, hearing from NRCS and local Land and Water staff about the five principles of soil health. They were also able to see multi-species cover crop mixes in different growing stages, including a field planted into winter rye and a diverse mix planted into winter wheat. Participants also went on a rotational grazing tour showcasing perennial pastures, watering systems, perimeter and interior fencing, and pasture species selection, as well as discussing herd health and cattle management. "The Yankees showcased many different conservation highlights on their farm. They are progressive and innovative, working to protect our natural resources. It's always a pleasure working with them to implement conservation," said Chris Miller, Sauk County NRCS District Conservationist. He adds, "We were excited to see the Yanke's selected and honored for the 2018 Conservation Observance Day and know they will continue their conservation efforts in the future."

**Attendees were able to explore a soil pit and learn about soil health principles. Earth worms are important to soil health because they encourage a more diverse population of soil microbes.**

**Attendees saw a rainfall simulator demonstration and heard first-hand from the landowner host, Echo-Y Farms, the difference soil health principles can make on your farm.**

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# Adams County Success from the Field

## Innovative Adoptions 'BeeCome' Pollinator Habitat

## Background

Over the past 50 years, Wallendal Farms has always looked for ways to improve the way they farm. Today, the 3rd generation family farm operates about 3,300 acres of irrigated cropland located in Grand Marsh, Wisconsin. Around 550 acres is organic and another 250 acres is transitioning to organic. Not only do they grow an impressive array of 15 different crop types, ranging from alfalfa to watermelon, they also have a long history of innovation. This is top on their list of the farm's core values. A few examples of Wallendal Farm's commitment to forward thinking sustainable agriculture has been their 40-year relationship with on-farm UW-research, their early adoption of strip-till/no-till practices in the mid 80s, their precision agriculture experiments conducted with NASA in 1988 and their 12-acre on-farm research plot.

**Wallendal Farms promotes pollinator improvements and awareness with signs near their habitat plantings.**

## Program Successes

Wallendal Farms demonstrates two more of their core values of adaptability and sustainability, working to provide and promote habitat for bee and native pollinators on their farm. In 2018, as part of their elected enhancements through a Conservation Stewardship Program contract, they established about two acres of pollinator habitat. These acres are only a fraction of the pollinator habitat acres they have established on their own. Wallendal's also have used interseeded blooming cover crops to help attract pollinators out in the fields. Signs are planned to be posted by some of their on-farm pollinator habitats. "We hope that by providing additional habitat for these pollinators and making others aware of their importance, our neighbors will continue to establish pollinator plantings," said Megan Wallendal from Wallendal Farms. And so far, by the comments and inquires from these plantings, the neighbors and custom applicators are already taking notice of these efforts. As Wisconsin's largest pumpkin grower, with over 300 combined acres of pumpkins, squash, cucumbers and watermelons, pollinators on Wallendal Farms fit into the category of 'busy bees'. Caleb Zahn, District Conservationist commented, "Pollinators play an important role in the production of many crops grown in our area including apples, blueberries, cranberries, cucumbers, melons and onions. This is why you may typically see rented hives in the area to aid in the pollination of these crops. Positive improvements for pollinator habitat can result in improvements for pollination and better yields."

## Future Plans

Along with Wallendal Farms future plans to establish additional acres of pollinator habitat, they continue to work on farm research in cover crop trails, look to improve energy efficiencies in their operation and are fine tuning variable rate and precision agricultural practices with emerging technologies in precision irrigation and unmanned aerial vehicles. They are also working on developing their operation to grow, clean and source organic cover crop seeds to increase seed availability.

**Interseeded buckwheat cover crop in a organic cucumber field provides a resting place for a Monarch.**

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# Columbia County Success from the Field

## Wetland Management Landowner Workshop

## Background

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Wisconsin Wetlands Association partnered to hold a free wetland management workshop for landowners. The workshop focused on the benefits of the NRCS Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) and NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE). The evening started at Cascade Mountain, where experts met with landowners to discuss management challenges and techniques faced by local landowners. Next, participants spent time in the field, moving across the road to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Baraboo River Waterfowl Production Area (WPA), a successfully completed WRP easement.

## Highlights

The workshop built landowner partners with each participant providing a short introduction where each shared the location of their property and what they hoped to take away from the workshop. A brief history of NRCS' role with WRP/WRE was given, as well as the history of the Baraboo River WPA site and the extensive restoration process needed to return it to its natural state. Invasive species that one might find in a wetland area were then addressed, as well as different approaches for their control. Finally, the group headed out into the field to get their shoes wet, learn more, ask questions and share their own approaches to wetland management. Hearing the stories and advice that WRP owners offered reaffirmed the importance of these areas for people and the local wildlife.

## Future Plans

Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist, Tally Hamilton, plans to meet with some of the landowners who attended the workshop, on their easements to look at how they can improve management and apply what they learned at the workshop. For more information about the programs NRCS has to offer wetland owners, please visit www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov.

Landowners met with Tracy Hames and Katie Beilfuss of WWA, Greg Kidd of NRCS, Bruce Luebke of USFWS and Craig Annen of Integrated Restoration LLC, to learn more about wetland management and control of invasive plant species.

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# Dane County Success from the Field

## Nonpoint Source Success: Restoration of Pleasant Valley Branch Through Stream Corridor Rehabilitation

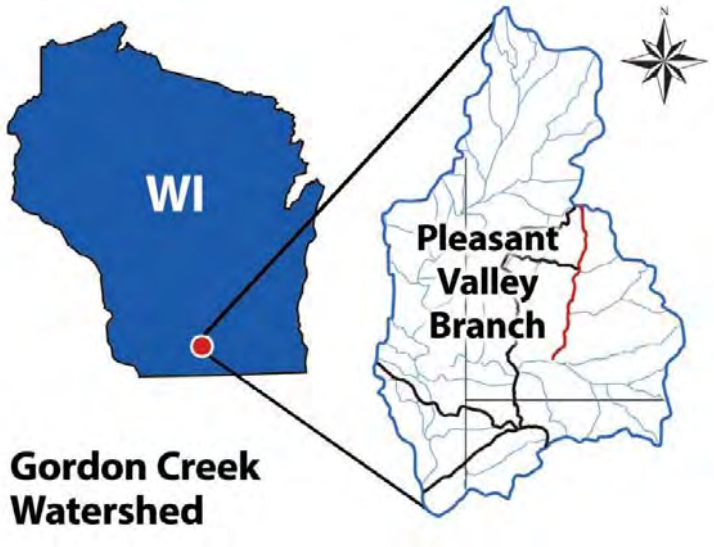
## Background

Pleasant Valley Branch is located in the Gordon Creek watershed and historically served as an important wildlife habitat refuge for coldwater native fish species including the mottled sculpin and brown trout. However, studies and surveys conducted in the early and mid-2000s found that water condition in the subwatershed has been so severely degraded, that it in turn, was having a detrimental impact on the desired aquatic population. For example, habitat and fish assessments found that the stream failed to support its coldwater fish and aquatic life, while a fish survey conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) found that the fish population consisted of pre-dominantly pollution-tolerant species such as white suckers, creek chubs and brook stickleback. The disappearance of trout appeared to be habitat degradation due to sediment deposition as well as excessive erosion caused by livestock pasturing along the stream. As a result, the entire creek was added to Wisconsin's 1998 Clean Water Act (CWA) section 303(d) impaired waters list for degraded habitat.

## Highlights

The Wisconsin Dane County Land and Water Resources Department (LWRD), in partnership with a consortium of public and private partners, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), completed the habitat restoration on Pleasant Valley Branch in fall 2017. The project consisted of carefully implementing coordinated restoration efforts and upland conservation practices to decrease sediment inputs along 2.2. miles of Pleasant Valley Branch to improved riparian corridors and stream habitats while also addressing nonpoint source issues.

The WDNR conducted another set of assessments in 2009 and 2013 after completion of restoration efforts and found that the percentage of fine sediments had dropped from 71 percent to less than half that amount while mean bank erosion dropped from a mean of 2.5 feet prior to projects being implemented to a mean of 1.2 inches afterwards. The health of the fishery also improved as the pollution-tolerant fish assemblage was replaced with a community of pollution-sensitive coldwater species. Based on these results, it was determined that the stream had reached its potential use and was removed from the CWA's list of impaired waters in 2016.




*Pleasant Valley Branch is in southern Wisconsin's Gordon Creek watershed, pictured above.*

Adam Dowling, NRCS District Conservationist for Dane County praised the project and credited its success to the ability for different agencies to come together and work toward a common goal. "This project truly demonstrates how a collaborative energy amongst varying local, state and federal agencies, combined with farmers and landowners who truly care about and believe in conservation, can lead to positive change," explained Dowling.

## Future Plans

Dane County, the WDNR, and affiliated public and private agencies will continue to monitor water temperature, habitats and fish community health. The NRCS will also continue to do its part to make sure that Pleasant Valley Branch continues to maintain its current status as a flourishing subwatershed basin.

*Story content in partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.*

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# Fond du Lac County Success from the Field

## Small Farm Produces Big Conservation Results

## Background

Tracy and Richard Vinz, of Olden Produce LLC, have been working hard to produce heart healthy fruits and vegetables locally in their community of Ripon, Wisconsin. They have done this with a mindset of growing their produce in a way that is both healthy to eat, as well as grown to not harm the environment.

## Highlights

Tracy and Richard are the fourth generation of farmers to operate this 100-acre farm. Tracy can attest that the farm has had its share of challenges, especially since they made the decision to transition from conventional to certified organic. She believes the work that she and her husband have devoted to the farm over the last 10 years has paid off. "We made a decision to become certified organic and have never looked back," explained Tracy. "Our land can be extremely wet. There used to be a gully that would show up year after year. We are located amongst conventional farms that use pesticides and chemicals. These were just some of the issues we've encountered. The NRCS has been more than willing to provide us with technical assistance to address resource concerns on our farm." Tracy and Richard worked with Cory Drummond, NRCS District Conservationist, and other NRCS staff to implement various practices on their land. "The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has been our program of choice. That gully? We were able to eliminate it by installing a grassed 230 ft waterway. We restored a .8 acre wetland, that is now used by ducks and inhabited by huge doles of turtles and armies of frogs, which we absolutely love!" added Tracy. The Vinzs also installed over 4,000 feet of windbreak to serve as a buffer against pesticide drift. "Being certified organic, we are always fighting weeds. We planted 27 acres of cover crops this year to help in that endeavor. We also utilize seasonal high tunnels that help our business extend the growing season. It's amazing how our farm has transformed over the last 10 years," explained Tracy.

"Tracy and Richard have been amazing landowners to work with," added Cory. "They are always seeking out ways to improve their land and their resources. They have been steadfastly committed to conservation, while meeting the demands of being certified organic producers."

Tracy and Richard Vinz in front of the installed high tunnel.

Richard Vinz in the wetland scrape.

## Future Plans

Olden Produce LLC, officially reached certified organic status May 2016. Tracy is on the board of directors of the Oshkosh Farmers Market and has been an advocate for organic farming for years. Olden Produce LLC, now has a processing facility and can process spiralized vegetables grown on the farm. Tracy says she would love to plant a cover of pollinator habitat because she also has honeybees on the farm. She says she intends to continue to work with the NRCS, as Olden Produce LLC, continues to grow.

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# Jefferson County Success from the Field

## Wanting a Change...

Like many success stories it started with a woman who recognized the need for change. Jump back to 1968 when Weenonah Brattset and her husband decided to take up farming as a better way of life to raise their growing family. They found land in Jefferson County and through the years, successfully raised a family and a farm raising two children and growing 260 acres of cropland, pasture and forest.

Fast forward to 2007. Daughter, Kirsten Jurcek, began learning about organic farming and other alternatives to conventional farming methods. Up until 10 years ago, the farm produced row crops and the Brattsets did not manage their pastures for production. Kirsten wanted a change from the continual flux in commodity pricing, wanted less equipment maintenance, and wanted a better way to produce healthy food, a good living and leave a cleaner environment for the next generation. That's when she decided to learn more about prescribed grazing and grass-based beef production.

**Kirsten and Olivia the cow.**

Kirsten heard about the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through a local grazing network, which sent her to her local NRCS office. She began working with the NRCS staff on a prescribed grazing plan and the EQIP process. The funding she received through EQIP financial assistance made it "financially doable" to install fencing, get the water lines established and manage forage production through species selection and moving the animals in and out of pastures correctly. "EQIP can sometimes seem like a slow process, but it is well thought-out to help the producer understand and develop a long-term commitment to the process of prescribed grazing," said Kristen. The prescribed grazing plan helped develop the vision for growth

**Beef cows on pasture.**

on the farm and has helped Kristen become a better steward of the land. As a land steward, Kristen has taken advantage of other NRCS conservation programs available. In 2017, working with District Conservationist Kathy Turner, Kirsten enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). "CSP is cool," says Kirsten, "there is a lot of work that goes into being conservation stewards and this program helps us maintain and reward those efforts." They also enrolled the farm in a NRCS agricultural conservation easement. This helped them ensure the farm will always maintain those strong conservation goals and standards for future generations. "Working with Kirsten and her family is a great example of how NRCS can partner with producers for success," said Kathy Turner.

In 2018, with 3 generations on the farm, Kirsten, her mother and family are most proud of how much they've learned about forage production and soil management, seeing the results firsthand in the animals. What started with 15 animals has grown to 110 animals grazing on 146 acres; 100% grass fed beef, direct marketed to local businesses, restaurants and customers. And it doesn't stop there; Kirsten continues to gain and pass on her knowledge to promote and help others learn about prescribed grazing. She is a consultant and an educational instructor willing to share what she has learned by hosting individual trainings and pasture walks on her farm. "Prescribed grazing is a family-friendly way of farming that offers lots of flexibility," says Kirsten. "The way the farm is set up, we can do this long into the future."

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# Racine County Success from the Field

## Watershed Protection Committee of Racine County

## Background

Racine County has a new producer-led committee with a goal to improve water quality in the county. In July 2017, a group of local producers asked to have a meeting with agency personnel from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); Racine and Kenosha Counties; the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP); and the University of Wisconsin Extension to discuss the possibility of a farmer-led group to help with water quality in the county.

There were concerns with sediment in drainage ditches causing maintenance issues, along with excess nutrients in water sources.

## Partnership Successes

July 2017 was the first meeting of the farmer-led group, Watershed Protection Committee of Racine County (WPCR), wanting to start a local conversation about water quality. This led to the first field day the group put on in September of 2017, focusing on buffering the ditches in the area, and also sparking a conversation on the importance of soil health.

WPCR quickly realized they could benefit from a grant. With the help of the Racine County Land Conservation Department, they applied for the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant and it was awarded in January 2018. With the grant, they were able to host a winter meeting in February of 2018, and an additional Cover Crop Field Day in September 2018. Both events were a great success with approximately 60 attending each meeting. The grant is also being used for incentive payments for farmers who install buffers and cover crops in the Goose Lake Branch, Eagle Creek and Hoosier Creek Watersheds. Another benefit of the grant funding is holding informal bi-monthly meetings for producers to get together and talk about farming and cover crops.

This partnership between NRCS and the WPCR has been mutually beneficial. It has generated a large amount of interest in cover crops in the area, increasing EQIP applications for those who would like to try cover crops, but are not in one of the grant funded watersheds. “We’ve had such an increase in interest locally for cover crops,” said Soil Conservationist, Rhia Holden.

**Area producers at a Cover Crop Field Day, listening to discussions led by Adam Lasch on cover crop species and recommended mixes in the cover crop test plots.**

## Future Plans

The Racine County Land Conservation Department is again assisting the WPCR with applying for the DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant. They are planning to continue holding informal meetings, the winter meeting, and summer field day, along with funding buffers and cover crops in extended watersheds. This group is growing quickly and spreading great information throughout southeast Wisconsin.

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