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2022

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Working Together for the Common Good

Aldo Leopold's Legacy Lives on Through Private Landowner

Above: Jim Pines, landowner of 3,400 acres in Columbia and Sauk counties, Wisconsin, in front of one of his restored savanna grasslands.

The word 'partnership' implies several positive outcomes—equity, mutual care and sustainability. In his 1939 essay, "*The Farmer as a Conservationist*," famous Wisconsin conservationist, Aldo Leopold, used it to define conservation. "When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation." It's fitting that the neighbors to Aldo Leopold's historic property, the Pines family's Riverside Farms, have also taken that word to heart as they care for their land in the conservation context of the surrounding landscape. Within the last ten years, the second generation of the Pines family, Jim and his three siblings (Debbie, Tom and Ed) have continued what their father, Phillip, started in the late 1970s. A conservation legacy of their own, the four siblings are the current stewards of what their father Phill started over 40 years ago.

Phill Pines began purchasing land in 1979, acquiring the original 435-acre homestead. "My father was from Chicago and was looking for things to do outside of the city because he had a natural love for the outdoors. As adjacent properties became available to the original farm, he would purchase them," explained Jim. Over 32 years, the Pines family added 25 more parcels to the property, that now totals approximately 2,600 acres. As a land and wildlife enthusiast, Phill's passion for conservation and taking care of the land was instilled in Jim growing up. "I've been conditioned to what I was exposed to when I was growing up. I was taught to care for the land and I want to continue what my father did to honor him, so my kids learn the same land ethic and I can eventually pass the property to them," said Jim.

When Jim and his wife, Margie, became the caretakers of the land, they continued to enhance conservation on the original homestead, as well as adding more acreage when the opportunities presented themselves. Jim and Margie now steward the family's conservation legacy in the care of 3,400 acres spanning both sides of the Wisconsin River. The land consists of the original 2,600 acres on the north side and 1,000 acres on the south side that Jim and his wife acquired in 2015. The southern property is in Sauk County and adjacent to Aldo Leopold's famous property, now a National Historic Landmark.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation (ALF) was incorporated in 1982 by Aldo Leopold's children. As more people visited the famous conservationist's property, the foundation acquired more land and realized they could demonstrate Leopold's land ethic by communicating his message to a broader audience. The foundation owns 600 acres and coordinates the 12,000-acre Leopold-Pine Island Important Bird Area (IBA), which includes state, federal and private lands, and the Pines family properties.

Jim's parents were friends with the late Nina Leopold Bradley, Aldo Leopold's daughter. The families have had a lifelong connection and share common land ethic values. "At the time that my folks were first introduced to the Leopold Foundation through Nina, the foundation started to help plan and perform conservation practices on the original 2,600-acre farm. The seeds that were originally sewn through these interactions created a lot of really good work on the land over a long period of time. We are especially proud of the Important Bird Area that is led by the ALF crew and deeply supported by Margie and I," explained Jim.

The Pines family, ALF and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) are principal partners in the IBA, along with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). "We all had been doing active management for years on our properties adjacent to one another, but we wanted to pull together in the same direction," explained Steve Swenson, Program Director for the ALF.

The IBA program came to Wisconsin in the mid-2000s. This global initiative aims at identifying and conserving the most important places for bird populations. This allowed an opportunity for those interested in bird conservation to put their stamp of approval on places that are important for birds and 93 IBAs were identified across Wisconsin. It also promotes active conservation to assist in providing essential habitat for species of birds in breeding, wintering or migration. "These areas are of high value to birds and represent key sites for conservation and careful management decisions," explained Chris Miller, NRCS Sauk County District Conservationist.

NRCS District Conservationist Chris Miller (right) and Land Manager Carl Cotter (left) view land maps of recently restored prairie on Jim Pine's acreage.

NRCS District Conservationist Chris Miller (left), Aldo Leopold Foundation Program Director Steve Swenson (middle) and Land Manager Carl Cotter (right) view a restored area where trees were removed to expand grassland habitat for birds.

The Pines' family land, along with land owned by ALF, WDNR and USFWS became the Leopold-Pine Island IBA, dedicated in 2008. "The partnership gave us a vision for the land beyond what we were doing on a particular acre; it gave us a holistic view for all the properties together in a shared conservation goal," explained Swenson.

Through the partnership and guidance of NRCS and ALF, a Forest Management Plan was established on Jim and Margie's 1,000-acre parcel. The plan was written by Carl Cotter, Jim's land manager, who also worked with ALF at the time. "The plan helped mesh together land management goals of Jim's land and the partner's adjacent land at the landscape scale; the IBA objective was also successfully built into the plan," said Miller. "Many landowners don't have a forestry background. A forest plan helps those landowners to connect with foresters and natural resource professionals to assess their property and provide guidelines for keeping their land healthy. Forestry practices are almost like a large garden that you need to harvest every 15–30 years; you have to thin the carrots to keep that garden functioning."

Once the plan was established, NRCS partnered with Jim through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install conservation practices across a diverse landscape of agricultural, savanna, grassland and forested acres. "Our goal for the 1,000 acres was to restructure the conservation value of the entire property. The agricultural land needed to be converted to more soil health and regenerative practices, and in some instances back to restored prairies, which is what the land originally was. The prairie and forested areas also needed to be actively managed and restored," said Jim. The land consists of 200 agricultural acres, at least 350 acres of prairie and the remaining are forested floodplain acres adjacent to the Wisconsin River. "We knew from 1937 aerial photographs and historical data, much of the land was former savanna and we had an opportunity to restore and manage for that," explained Cotter.

After planning discussions with NRCS and ALF, Jim decided he wanted to recreate the original savanna woodland structure, restoring the acres back to their original purpose. Incorporating the IBA component, the partners came up with a comprehensive plan to target at-risk bird species, build habitat and restore the property. First, timber harvests were completed to create savanna structure. "Overall, stands were 80% canopy cover and we wanted to get around 5–15%. After harvest, we were at 30% and now we are managing with other practices, like fire, to reach the final goal," said Cotter.

Part of the understory was removed to not only combat invasive species, but also native tree species, such as red maple, that are detrimental to the rehabilitation of the former swamp white oak savanna. "It takes time, at least 3-4 years, for the unharvested tree tops to deteriorate and for the original grasses to come back," explained Jim. After harvest, a forestry mower was brought in to control invasive buckthorn and the residual growth of the maple. The grassland communities came back and are helping create large-scale fire blocks to be used during fire management. "The targeted species we want are naturally regenerating and thriving," added Miller.

Through EQIP, after harvest, active brush management and prescribed burning continue to take place. Results are already being documented. Monitoring is increasing of the priority species, such as the Red-headed Woodpecker, American Woodcock, Blue-winged Warbler, Field Sparrow and others. "In our bird surveys, we are seeing an increase in our targeted species abundance as a result of the active management," said Swenson. Through those same surveys, they are seeing increases in target species in the savannas that have had active management and no significant increase in species where management has yet to take place. The conservation practices are proving positive results.

In the Forest Management Plan, Jim has a regular schedule of prescribed burning and brush management to actively manage the acres planned for the future. "In terms of NRCS involvement, at the start, the vision could not have been accomplished without receiving funding to implement these key conservation practices—Chris Miller [NRCS] made the process simple and helped perpetuate the vision," explained Jim.

The partners looked at the 12,000-acre Leopold-Pine Island IBA as a whole and planned the landscape to optimize each diverse area of habitat to work cohesively with the others. "There are many different areas of habitat and this property had the most grasslands, so, we wanted to create the right habitat for those targeted bird species," said Jim. "The EQIP program does a great job of acknowledging that the care of land costs money; to have the federal government step forward and help with conservation, because there is a vested public interest in helping maintain healthy water quality, air quality, natural beauty and diversity is excellent," added Swenson.

Jim also partners with NRCS and ALF to combat invasive species. Through EQIP, the use of a forestry mower increased capabilities to target large-scale improvements. Cotter and staff are working to keep invasive species, like buckthorn and garlic mustard, under control. "With the savanna structures and turning acres back to

Before savanna restoration: Jim's property with undesirable trees marked. The tree line projecting out into the middle of the grassland bisects the habitat value of these grasslands.

After savanna restoration: Jim's property after undesirable tree removal. The removal adds to the habitat value of these grasslands and also aides in establishment of permanent ground vegetation to improve water quality.

prairie, what happens naturally is more sunlight gets to the ground. There's a historical seed bed that starts to come up; natural grasses want to come back when there is less canopy cover," explained Jim.

"Because of the timber harvest and management actions, we are promoting native sedges and grasses," added Cotter. Controlling invasive species and putting fire back as a management process on the landscape enables the ecosystem to function along a natural continuum from prairie to savanna to woodland to forest. Before harvest, Cotter and staff were spending up to 250 hours every spring spraying garlic mustard. Last year, they only spent 10 hours in that same area. "The vision moved us into these large-scale land management approaches—instead of controlling 5 acres of garlic mustard here or there, which doesn't make a big impact, now we are doing more through large-scale approaches, for example, 50 acres of invasive species control," explained Miller. "These much bigger projects are more impactful on the landscape."

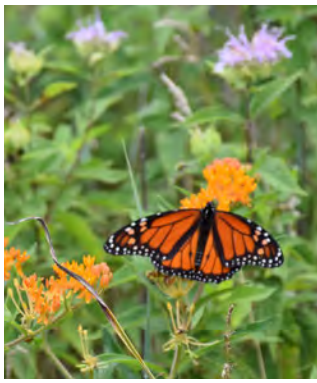
Jim has a unique opportunity with his diverse acreage to combine agricultural systems and natural systems management together. Swenson explains, "With the IBA partnership, NRCS and Jim's land, it's a melding of how we create systems that produce agricultural food and fiber and also the natural benefits of land for conservation to help wildlife." Jim and Margie appreciate the opportunity to carry on the legacy of the land they take care of, and recognize the deep responsibility associated with it. "With Aldo Leopold's roots, and the impact on habitat and wildlife that we have created through the IBA, I feel that we have made a great deal of progress in fulfilling the responsibilities that come with taking care of this important land. It's a labor of love and I'm thankful to be the temporary caretaker; I want to keep things moving in the right direction," said Jim.

This work benefits wildlife, enables neighbors to come together for the good of conservation and helps heal the land. "I am so thankful for this outstanding partnership. Chris Miller with NRCS, Buddy Huffaker and Steve Swenson with ALF, Carl Cotter as my land manager—they have been there, day-to-day and have helped me have a better understanding of the potential for my land. They lay it out, have ideas and provide alternatives. The partnership with NRCS and ALF has been phenomenal in putting conservation on the land," explained Jim. Swenson further explains, "Having a connection to the NRCS, not only the funding, but also to a natural resources professional and conservationist who has been around the county and understands the issues at scale, knows how to right-size projects and build ambition with the landowner—that's what I see as a key to our success. It's these types of relationships with conservationists who provide mentorship that makes a large-scale impact possible."

Looking forward, Jim plans to partner through EQIP to complete more prescribed burns and brush management. Jim also plans to work with NRCS to implement regenerative agricultural practices on the agricultural acres, until those are eventually turned into savanna. Under the direction of NRCS, Jim also plans to use the Conservation Stewardship Program to further conservation efforts as it aligns after major EQIP practices are installed.

Conservation practices through NRCS have supported Jim's goal of achieving the land's highest, best contribution. Jim looks at conservation as allowing mother nature to use her tools and ecosystems to take care of the land. He's happy to help supplement conservation that assists the natural ecosystem responsibly. Jim explains it best, "The light bulb has gone on for me. Through the partnership with NRCS, I am now able to quantify how conservation practices installed can provide on-the-ground results. For example, every five years, a bird count has shown what specific practices are creating prime habitat for these diverse species. I can see with these practices, what I am getting back with the large increase in targeted species on my property; it's very powerful to see." The Pines family, ALF and NRCS will continue to further Aldo Leopold's idea of land ethic—and Phill Pines' legacy—by working together for the common good of wildlife and the natural resources upon which we depend.

Below: (Top to bottom) Pollinators, like the monarch shown feeding on the Pines' property, benefit from diverse grassland habitat. Carl Cotter (left) and Steve Swenson (right) view restored grasslands on the Pines' property. Bird surveys and sightings are one way success is measured. After restoring habitat with conservation practices, a Red-headed Woodpecker was seen on Jim's acreage.



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Barron County Success from the Field

Oak Direct Seeding Restores Storm-Damaged Forest

Background

In July of 2019, a derecho storm ravaged through much of northern Wisconsin. Nearly 250,000 acres were impacted throughout the state. The heaviest hit areas included Polk, Barron, Oconto and Lincoln Counties. The 120-acre Jorgenson family forest was directly in the storm's path and most of the forestland was severely damaged. Rod Jorgenson took action and began the salvage logging process to remove downed and damaged timber. The western edge of the forest, consisting of a northern hardwood mix, was the most critically damaged, with nearly 100% tree mortality.

Highlights

Rod connected with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and applied for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to pursue options for introducing an oak component into the forestland. "I wanted to try something different to diversify the forest and the EQIP program was available to help," stated Jorgenson. Working with NRCS District Conservationist Patrick Richter, NRCS Soil Conservationist Michelle Cliff and Ruff Grouse Society Forest Wildlife Specialist Jared Elm, a plan was developed to direct seed red oak acorns onto 6.1 acres of the most damaged areas.

Once EQIP funding was approved, a dozer was used to prepare the site. The downed and damaged timber had been logged, but the tree tops, stumps and vegetative layer did not provide an adequate seed bed. Site preparation, NRCS conservation practice 490, was utilized to provide mineral soil for proper acorn germination. Without seed bed preparation, the acorns would be shaded out by competing vegetation and have a difficult time reaching optimal temperatures to properly germinate. Richter stated, "I was glad EQIP had a scenario for this project to help the landowner restore the property after this catastrophic storm."

Rod purchased acorns from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources State Nursery program at a seeding rate of 2 bushels per acre. A grapple head on a skid steer was used to create furrows for the acorns and then they were hand-seeded. After seeding, the skid steer and a drag were used to close the furrows and ensure good seed to soil contact of the seeded acorns. With full sunlight and little competition, the acorns have an opportunity to thrive.

Future Plans

Monitoring of the planning area in the future is essential. Northern hardwood species will naturally seed into the planning area. Rod's long-term goal is to have a strong oak component in the forest. In 5–10 years, timber stand improvement to release oak from faster growing species, such as red maple and aspen, may be needed to ensure long term success of the planting. NRCS looks forward to continuing conservation efforts with the Jorgensons.

In 2020, site preparation with furrows is shown prior to seeding.

In 2021, monitoring shows good population of oak seedlings throughout.

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Burnett County Success from the Field

Managed Grazing Makes a Difference

Background

Tim Bandoli owns and operates Bandoli Family Ranch, which is located near Shell Lake, Wisconsin, in Burnett County. Tim's operation consists of 120 acres, where he manages a cow/calf beef operation and also raises feeder cattle. Tim sells the majority of his beef at local farmers markets, grocery stores and to community members.

Highlights

When Tim took ownership of the property in 2018, much of the land was annually planted in row crops. The soils were heavily compacted and the cropland rarely received any soil amendments. Tim partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and was awarded a contract through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program resulting in the development and implementation of a prescribed grazing system. Tim partnered to convert 55 acres of cropland to pasture. Fencing and other facilitating conservation practices were installed to support a prescribed grazing system. Tim is now moving his livestock to a fresh paddock every day.

"It is truly remarkable to see how the land has recovered since Tim began implementing a prescribed grazing system. Despite having little rainfall this summer, Tim's pastures are doing remarkably well and it is a testament of the resiliency of his healthy soil during a drought," said Ron Spiering, District Conservationist.

Tim is committed to growing and managing his operation. In doing so, he attended a "Grazing for Profit" class in Montana and he continues to attend other trainings and classes to benefit his farm's conservation resiliency.

Future Plans

Tim's future plans for the farm include further subdividing his paddocks so they are 300-feet-wide, which will allow him to move his temporary fence more efficiently while implementing a more intensive grazing system.

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Calumet County Success from the Field

From Family Farm to Wildlife Sanctuary

Background

Over a decade ago, Calumet County couple Ryan and Jessica Peterson reached out to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for ideas on what to do with their small farm located just west of Brillion, Wisconsin. Ryan and Jessica, both local school teachers, were hoping to convert part of their property to a wildlife habitat.

Highlights

After discussing their options for conservation programs with the Chilton NRCS Service Center, the Peterson's decided to enroll a small portion of their acreage in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). They selected a particular field due to its diverse mix of soils to achieve their planting goals. After an assessment from NRCS, they were able to draft a plan for a mix of upland wildlife habitat along with a wildlife scrape.

Since the transformation of their 6.7 acre field, the Peterson's have worked hard to maintain the native grass habitat and keep the invasive species from encroaching. The proof of their hard work is shown in the exceptional nesting success that has occurred on the property over time. During nesting season especially, the Peterson's have counted at least thirteen species of ducks utilizing their wildlife scrape and surrounding sanctuary. Over the past year alone, the Peterson's have noted ten nests containing well over 100 eggs from Hooded Mergansers, wood ducks and mallards. The Petersons' sanctuary is also home to multiple types of grassland birds. The couple diligently upkeep birdhouses available for a wide array of species.

In addition to the waterfowl and feathered fauna, white-tailed deer are routinely spotted using the habitat area to give birth to their fawns.

Ryan and Jessica's wildlife scrape in early summer.

Future Plans

Unfortunately, Phragmites have been encroaching from neighboring properties, prompting the Peterson's to secure a grant for invasive grass treatment in the near future. The wildlife scrape is also being overtaken with cattails, leaving very little open water for the native wildlife to utilize efficiently. Over the next few years, Ryan and Jessica hope to be able to correct the overgrowth and bring more open water back into the scrape.

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Chippewa County Success from the Field

Dedication to Conservation

Background

Heather Flashinski and her husband, Mark, own and operate Farm Sweet Farm in Cadott, Wisconsin. Farm Sweet Farm is an 80-acre, grass-based family farm which raises and sells grass-fed beef, pastured chicken and free-range eggs directly to customers. The Flashinskis are dedicated to using organic principles that mimic nature to holistically manage and produce food that is beneficial for human health and the environment. After graduating from the University of Minnesota, Heather and Mark started raising and grazing cattle in Boyd, Wisconsin, on rented land in 2003. In 2006, they found a farm to call their own and Farm Sweet Farm was born. Rotating the herd daily and the chickens every other day requires farm chores to be done as a family, including the Flashinskis' son Nicholas and daughter Helayna.

Highlights

"NRCS was able to assist the Flashinskis with Prescribed Grazing programs that fit their same goals of grass-fed beef. They have been leaders within the grazing network, willing to improve wildlife benefits on their farm. It has been enjoyable to work with a farm family that really cares about their land," said Tammy Lindsay, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), District Conservationist in Chippewa Falls. Heather has long been familiar with conservation and NRCS programs. She previously worked for the River Country Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D), a non-profit conservation-minded organization which works with NRCS to create grazing plans for their members. In 2007, she applied and was accepted for a NRCS contract through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), to install permanent fencing and an above-ground water system to establish their rotational grazing system on the farm. Since then, they have utilized EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to plant a windbreak, interseed overgrazed pastures and establish a prescribed grazing plan. Heather is an active member and conference planner of GrassWorks, a non-profit, farmer-led membership organization which promotes grass-based agriculture by providing leadership and education to farmers. In 2017, the Flashinskis hosted the Annual GrassWorks Picnic and Pasture Walk as an enhancement to their ongoing CSP contract. When asked why they got involved in NRCS programs, Heather said,

Heather Flashinski hosting the Annual GrassWorks Picnic and Pasture Walk at Farm Sweet Farm in 2017.

"to benefit the community as well as our own farm. We want other grazers to know that they are able to access assistance so they can graze longer and more environmentally."

Future Plans

The Flashinskis recently purchased new land, which they are currently using as hayland. NRCS completed an inventory of the new land to write a new grazing plan for these acres in 2021 to prepare for a new EQIP application for Prescribed Grazing. The family's continued goal of having the cattle harvest most of the feed through grazing, instead of the custom hired baler, and extend the grazing season by stockpiling forages will be implemented in the next 5 years.

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Crawford County Successes from the Field

Expanding a Wildlife Paradise with Monarch Habitat

Background

Jeff and Dennis Lenzendorf restored 264 acres of grasslands and forest for wildlife habitat in Eastman, Wisconsin. Dennis first started restoring grasslands with his students at Wau-nakee Marsh in 1975. Jeff worked as an engineer in Prairie du Chien, and in 1989, the brothers and their wives purchased 160 acres. In 2000, they added 100 acres. Over the years, their main enterprises have been corn, hay and timber. They enjoy involving family, friends and neighbors in managing their land. "Jeff and Dennis have created a lot of wildlife habi-tat over the years. The diversity of milkweeds they have es-tablished for Monarch butterflies is a highlight on their prop-erty," said Karyl Fritsche, Crawford County United States De-partment of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conserva-tion Service (NRCS) District Conservationist.

Highlights

Upon purchasing the land, Jeff and Dennis encountered inva-sive species that shaded out desirable trees, forbs and grass-es. Jeff and Dennis completed their first prescribed burn in the spring of 1990 to restore an oak savanna on the property. They enjoyed seeing the results of the restoration. In 1992, they partnered with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to enroll 26 acres of crop fields into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). They established fields of native warm season grasses with technical assistance from NRCS. Jeff and Dennis have also carefully added native wildflower seeds to improve the habitat. Today the fields are loaded with native grasses and flowers, such as wild indigo, which thrive because of man-agement practices, including prescribed fire. "Over time we gained experience and confidence with prescribed fire and started to burn in the fall because it helps wildflowers to re-seed," said Dennis.

In 2020, Jeff reached out to Golden Sands Resource Conserva-tion and Development (RC&D) Council Soil Conservationist Robert Bauer to learn about opportunities to improve wildlife habitat on two crop fields. Jeff then applied and was accepted for an NRCS contract under the Honey Bee Pollinator Fund Pool in the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). In 2021, Jeff seeded 3.4 acres of a specialized Monarch habitat mix of native grasses, wildflowers and milkweeds. Grasses provide fuel for prescribed burns that help to control

Jeff Lenzendorf (L), Nancy Diekelmann (M) and John Diekelmann (R) are proud of the unique species, such as Prairie Indian Plantain, they have introduced to fields enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). John and Nancy have been restoring their adjacent 240-acre prop-erty for almost 50 years and often provide guidance on pollinators and wildlife to their neighbors. Photo courtesy of Jeff Lenzendorf.

invasive brush. "We have really appreciated all of the help with paperwork to enroll in EQIP from the RC&D and NRCS, and it means a lot to us to have partners who support our efforts to restore wildlife habitat," said Jeff.

Future Plans

Jeff and Dennis are looking forward to using the property to teach their kids, grandkids and neighbors about conservation. They plan to monitor the planting for wildlife. Robert Bauer added, "once established, it will attract a lot of Monarchs and bees because at least three species will be blooming at all times and more than five hundred milkweed stems per acre will dot the fields." The brothers also hope that, combined with the acres enrolled in CRP, the planting will support grass-land birds such as Bobolinks. NRCS looks forward to continuing to work with Jeff and Dennis on their wildlife habitat efforts.

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Dane County Success from the Field

Small, Diverse and Thriving Organic CSA

Background

Kristen Kordet, owner and operator of Blue Moon Community Farm, has turned her love and passion of agriculture into a successful 6-acre farm. Established in 2004, Blue Moon Community Farm is an organic farm in the Town of Dunn (near Stoughton, Wisconsin), modeled after the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operating plan that formed the foundation of the farm.

Kristen believes that good food is fundamental to our health, but the story of well-grown food goes beyond that; it connects directly and meaningfully with the community. Supporting the health of the soil, our environment and local economy is fundamental as well. "My journey into farming began as an eater and as an environmental activist," explains Kristen. After completing her degree in Environmental Studies, she decided to apprentice on an organic vegetable farm in Upper New York's Hudson River Valley where she "got hooked" on growing vegetables.

It became a career in farming over time, with the start of Blue Moon Community Farm in 2004 on 2 acres of rented land. Then, in 2007, Kristen was able to buy a small farm nearby and move the operation to its forever home. Today, Blue Moon is still a small farm, raising about 6 acres of vegetables and utilizing seasonal high tunnels to extend the growing season with the help from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs.

Kristen's relationship with NRCS started when she learned that one of the CSA members worked as a Soil Conservationist at the Dane County NRCS Service Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

The high tunnel moderates the environment to optimal conditions throughout the growing season.

Installing buried pipeline provides for efficient irrigation in the fields and saves on equipment replacement.

Highlights

In 2013 and 2018, Kristen worked with NRCS to meet irrigation needs in their fields and to expand waterlines so that the full acreage could be irrigated. NRCS helped fund and design a micro-irrigation system and an irrigation pipeline through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). In 2010 and 2020, NRCS funded two high tunnels with micro-irrigation through EQIP. "By working with Pattie Haack (NRCS Soil Conservationist) and Eric Swanson (NRCS Engineer), we were able to add these improvements to the farm" says Kristen. "Protected growing areas are very valuable resources for mitigating the effects of heavy rain and wind on tender crops, and these high tunnels have been key to our farm's success," explains Kristen.

Future Plans

Kristen is aware that growing food in the Upper Midwest is proving to be a greater challenge. Extreme weather events like drought, excessive rainfall and temperature fluctuations have prompted Kristen to take steps to conserve and mitigate farm production. She believes climate change will only bring greater challenges. In the future, she sees the farm moving in the

direction of expanded protected growing spaces, more no-till and minimal tillage practices, and increased irrigation needs.

"The summer of 2021 was an extremely dry and hot season on our farm. We were equipped to meet that challenge and still produced high quality crops. NRCS has supported the farm directly by addressing some of our major issues and is well-suited to support our future conservation goals. We look forward to continuing our working relationship with them," says Kristen. The focus for the immediate future of the farm will include soil-building and other NRCS conservation practices.

Kristen's philosophy that "the community is the heart of the farm," is why she invites others to share her passion for organic produce—whether as customers, assistant managers, or field employees. Because the community has responded positively, Blue Moon Community Farm has celebrated over 18 years in business and continues to offer the CSA on her farm and at the Westside Community Market in Madison, Wisconsin.

"Blue Moon Community Farm is a vibrant, enriching and healing place," explains Kristen. "Our success is mostly due to various NRCS conservation practices and local CSA members. Their involvement and support have been the catalyst to Blue Moon Community Farm's success."

Kristen Kordet, owner, giving NRCS the thumbs up for all the valuable assistance provided to small organic producers. Early season greens lengthen her growing season.

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Dunn County Success from the Field

Burning For Success

Background

John Thomas and his wife Kathy are wildlife and prairie enthusiasts. Their involvement in the Downsville Sportsmen's Club and the Chippewa Savanna Prairie Enthusiasts Chapter attest to their conservation ethic. They allow the Sportsman's Club to host its annual fishing event on their property in the flood plain lakes of the Red Cedar River. This allows attendees to view and learn about habitat modifications and its benefits. As members of the local Prairie Enthusiasts, John and Kathy also lead the burn program for the chapter and are active in educating landowners on the benefits of controlled burning. The Thomases have used fire to fight back overgrown brush and reclaim native prairie species on their property reminiscent of pre-settlement days.

Highlights

As John and Kathy's interest in wildlife habitat grew, they researched options to further improve their property. The sandy riparian corridors, mixed areas of oak forest and nonprofitable sandy agricultural fields, became the highlight of their focus. They reached out to the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Menomonie Service Center, and, with technical planning from the Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative and financial assistance through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, a seed mix was hand-selected and a detailed site preparation plan was prescribed. A wildlife biologist with the local Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource assisted in preparing a continuation of care management plan, which included a mowing and prescribed burn schedule. By the fourth year of establishment, the Thomas' prairie had reached a maturation ready for the prescribed fire phase of the management plan. Using oxbows and other natural features of the Red Cedar River, the burn would be controlled well enough to include both the oak forest and the restored prairie. After the initial burn, fire-intolerant plants were set back and new plant species were rejuvenated in the oak forest. Eight years into their prescribed burning management plan, John and Kathy are seeing a large increase in diversity, including crucial fire-tolerant and even some rare plant species they have never seen on their property.

Various burn methods are used to achieve different objectives of each prescribed fire.

"The amount of different forb species we have seen since the fire has been remarkable," said Kathy. With local weather patterns reaching their extremes for precipitation and drought over the past few growing seasons, local botanists have identified even more rare plants on the Thomas' restored property.

John Sippl, NRCS District Conservationist in Menomonie, remarked that, "working with John and Kathy has been a pleasure—they are true conservationists and understand [that] fire is part of the ecological process."

Future Plans

John and Kathy will continue to utilize and advocate for prescribed fire as a land management care plan. Their restored prairie and forest site will continue to be used for conservation education, as it receives regular use by the Chippewa Savanna Chapter of The Prairie Enthusiasts for fishing events and other conservation-focused functions.

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Grant County Success from the Field

All In on Soil Health

Background

Clark View Farms is a dairy and crop operation situated in northwest Grant County, in the hills and river bottoms around Bagley, Wisconsin. The current operators of Clark View Farms are Brad, Brian and Bruce Clark, 3 brothers that took over the operation from their parents. This family operation started with the Clark's grandfather and 30 dairy cows. They now milk 1,000 cows and run nearly 2,100 acres of crop ground.

Highlights

Over 10 years ago, Clark View Farms started working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Grant County through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Their first venture with EQIP included the completion of a waste storage facility, waste transfer system and nutrient management on a portion of their acres. More recently, they worked through EQIP to gear their operation towards a holistic soil health system. Currently through EQIP, Clark View Farms is implementing cover crops, no-till, adding small grains to their rotation, variable rate fertilizer application and low impact manure injection.

Brad said, "One of the biggest issues we faced was ruining hay fields with manure drag lines." Prior to working with NRCS on revamping their operation, all Clark's farms where strip cropped, which wasn't working for them. The equipment traffic and manure drag lines would ruin good stands of alfalfa when they would have to cross those strips to apply manure. The brothers have since switched to block plantings, low impact manure injection and have accelerated their soil health practices, which has proven much more successful.

The brothers have diversified their cropping rotation and decreased erosion by implementing a complete cover cropping system. They mainly aerially seed into growing row crops a winter rye and red clover mix. They also no-till a winter rye, red clover, turnip and tillage radish blend in the bottom land after corn silage. These mixes greatly extend the period in which there are living roots and green plants covering the soil. When spring planting comes, they then plant right into the standing green cover crop. "We are green for about 11 months out of the year," explained Brad. They have also introduced small grains into their rotation, which also allows them

Clark's No-Till planting set up, ready to green plant into cover crop.

the chance to plant an even more diverse cover crop blend after the grain harvest in summer. Most often, they plant a blend of 8 or more species consisting of field peas, soybean, red clover, sunn hemp, sunflower, winter rye, tillage radish and turnip, among others.

On top of the cover crops, their entire cropping system is no-till, topped off with precision nutrient management. The precision nutrient management emphasizes the 4 Rs (right source, rate, time and place), while utilizing GPS to geo reference soil sample locations, input and yield data. Nutrients are applied according to the data collected by the GPS.

"It is great to see the Clark's taking these innovative steps towards good soil health practices as a large dairy in an area with challenging topography and be so successful at it. They can really be an example to other operations on how farms can benefit from implementing soil health practices," said Grant County NRCS District Conservationist Joe Schmelz.

Future Plans

The Clarks plan to continue to utilize programs, like EQIP, to build their soil health across their entire operation, especially in increasing water infiltration and decreasing erosion as much as possible. "Water infiltration is a big one; if we can keep the water and soil here on our farms, it's only going to make everyone's life better," added Brad.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Green Lake County Successes from the Field

Best Management Practices to Benefit Bees and Brookies

Background

Twenty five years ago, Margaret York purchased a property along Dakin Creek in Green Lake County, Wisconsin. Upon purchasing, Margaret took the land out of the Conservation Reserve Program and has never worked with a government agency since.

In 2019, Tally Hamilton, Farm Bill Biologist, asked Tonya Pautzke, Soil Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Green Lake County, to accompany her on a site visit. The Green Lake Sanitary District, Green Lake Association, Green Lake Land Conservation Department and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI DNR) were looking for streambank restoration projects to benefit brook trout. Margaret's property was an ideal spot. Tally and Tonya visited with Margaret and discovered her passion for pollinator plants. She used to work at a native prairie nursey, which sparked her passion for pollinators. It took a little more convincing on the streambank project, but Margaret signed an Environmental Quality Incentives Program application for the streambank restoration and 8.1 acres of pollinator-friendly habitat on cropland.

A rock-lined waterway was installed to address gully erosion.

One of the many species in the pollinator planting.

Highlights

Fast forward to 2021, through these partnerships, Margaret's stream restoration project has been a great success. Margret said, "I learned a lot from the WI DNR and the pollinator planting is an ongoing treat with all the different colors." Margaret's pollinator mix consisted of 23 different pollinator species. "This was a team effort that resulted in the trust of the landowner, building beneficial wildlife habitat for bees and native pollinators and improved brook trout habitat," said Tonya Pautzke, Soil Conservationist for NRCS Green Lake County.

Future Plans

Margaret plans to work with the WI DNR to restore more sections of Dakin Creek and plant more pollinator friendly species to benefit her neighbor's honey bee operation.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Iowa County Success from the Field

Fostering a Land Ethic on the Seven Springs Farm

Background

Thomas (Tom) and Carol Foster live in rural Blue Mounds, Wisconsin, and own and operate Seven Springs Farm. The land is comprised of about 150 acres of cropland, 200 acres of forest and over 50 acres in the Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program, which includes establishment of native pollinator habitat.

The Fosters take action to demonstrate their land ethic daily through their hard work, constant learning and patient engagement with the land they manage.

Highlights

Conservation has been a priority at Seven Springs since Tom's father, Mark A. Foster, bought the land in 1952. On a tour of the farm, Tom shared, "My dad was a fan of anything to do with soil conservation." Mark's passion for conservation was passed on to Tom, who started partnering with the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). At that time, the Fosters were rotationally grazing dairy cattle.

The farm established numerous conservation practices on the land including diversions and a slab surface lot for manure storage, grassed waterways on cropland and a stream crossing. The Fosters also implemented NRCS projects to stabilize streambanks on over 2,200 feet of Class II Trout water on the West Branch of the Blue Mounds Creek. The project enabled clearing and snagging debris from the stream, conservation cover seeding and excluding cattle using fencing.

After retiring from dairying, Tom and Carol trusted a local no-till pioneer to rent their crop ground and have focused on their forest land. Since 2010, they completed 7,300 feet of forest trails and landings, an additional 1,000 feet of grassed waterway, and had a Forest Management Plan written through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Practices completed through EQIP and the Fosters' on-going conservation efforts allowed them to reach the high baseline level of conservation needed to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) on their non-industrial private forest land. Through their 2018 CSP contract, Tom and Carol planted native shrubs using tree/shrub establishment and completed tree/shrub site preparation, in addition to maintaining their previously implemented practices.

Tom and Carol Foster standing in front of a woodland-grassland edge where they planted native American hazelnut and Juneberry shrubs in May 2019.

Iowa County Soil Conservationist Kaitlin Schott has found it a distinct privilege to work with the Fosters on both CSP and EQIP programs and commented, "Hard work is essential to good land management; the Fosters embody how doing that work with patience and caring can be truly transformative for both land and local community." The Fosters have shared the beauty of their farm with many neighbors and friends who especially have come to admire the diverse pollinator habitat.

Future Plans

The Fosters are in the middle of a large brush management project with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to enhance native forest regeneration by removing invasive brush from 25 acres of forest land. Their recently completed Forest Management Plan was used to establish this as a priority practice.

They plan to apply to reenroll in CSP once their current contract expires.

Conversations with the Fosters always make clear that their goals and plans for the land reach beyond themselves. They are always looking to the next generation of land stewards by mentoring and working with their daughters, nephews and grandchildren on the family land.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Juneau County Success from the Field

Local Forester Makes Big Impact

Background

Forester Lee Herek grew up on a game farm outside of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where his family raised pheasants and quail for sport. In 1985, his father orchestrated a timber harvest on his property, and Lee saw first-hand at an early age, the benefits of proper forest management. After high school, Lee attended the College of Natural Resources at the University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point, and decided to major in forestry. After receiving his degree, Lee worked for several years in private industry before settling in Elroy, Wisconsin with his wife and family. In 2008, Lee struck out on his own as a consulting forester.

The Herek family— (left to right) Lee, Emma, wife Melissa, and Claire— harvesting their Christmas tree.

Highlights

Over his career, Lee has worked with hundreds of landowners, developing forest stewardship plans, managing timber harvests and performing timber stand improvements on thousands of acres. "Lee takes care of all my woods. He managed my 15-acre clear cut and the regrowth is tremendous. He made sure my forest trails were shaped and seeded promptly after harvest. I've recommended Lee to all of my neighbors," praised an Elroy-area client. In 2016, Lee began collaborating with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs division, writing forest stewardship plans under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Lee is responsible for writing 25 different plans in Juneau County alone, while ten additional landowners have contracted Lee to draft their future land stewardship plans.

"Lee's knowledge of how to properly manage a woods has benefitted so many people in Juneau County," said NRCS Mauston Service Center District Conservationist, Jon Field. "The forest stewardship plans Lee writes form the basis for the next 25 years of a landowner's timber management. Not only do the pulp and lumber industries benefit from following these plans, but the forest is more productive and wildlife species have better habitat."

Lee Herek stands with a unique 100-year-old dual red and white oak, grafted together, sharing the same stump.

Future Plans

Practicing what he preaches, Lee and his family spend a lot of time on their own 200 acres of woods in Plymouth Township, Wisconsin. Lee enrolled his forest plot in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program in 2019, which called for 500 trees per year to be planted in forest openings and grassy fields. Over the past 15 years, Lee's property has seen a large thinning for oak regeneration, as well as the establishment of 3–4 acre patch clear cuts in strategic areas for aspen regeneration. The family has also developed large pollinator plots throughout their property. Lee's dedication to forest management, his partnership with NRCS programs and his demonstrated conservation ethic will continue to benefit private land throughout south-central Wisconsin for decades to come.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Lafayette County Success from the Field

Herefords Have Good Disposition When There's No Erosion

Background

Kevin Bennett owns and operates Sand Rock Ranch, a Hereford cattle operation, located in the heart of the Driftless Area near Benton, Wisconsin. This 2,000-acre farm, 1,500 of which are pasture, has been in Kevin's family for 135 years and is still going strong. Kevin's farm is a unique niche, where his cattle go directly to the European market.

Highlights

Kevin came to U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) back in 2016 with an erosion issue in one of his pastures. He wanted to protect a farm lane that was very close to failing due to streambank erosion in two locations. NRCS visited Kevin's farm and conducted a site assessment to determine the resource concerns and causes of the erosion. During the planning process to fix the erosion issues, NRCS discussed the benefit of cover crops being planted after corn silage, and the soil health practice interested him. Kevin applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to address his erosion issues by implementing streambank protection, a stream crossing and cover crops. In fall of 2017, Kevin was awarded financial assistance through EQIP to install 300 feet of streambank protection, a stream crossing and 50 acres of cover crops. The project started in the spring of 2018. Kevin was very happy with the service the NRCS provided on the project. He explained, "The streambank protection practice is the best use of EQIP money because you can see the benefit immediately."

In 2019, Kevin partnered with NRCS again, applying for EQIP funding to address the rest of the erosion issues in his pasture. Kevin was awarded financial assistance to implement 1,310 feet of streambank protection and critical area planting along the stream in his pasture.

After working with NRCS for three years through EQIP, Kevin discussed the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with NRCS. Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservationist, assisted Kevin with his CSP application. His application was approved and Kevin took one acre out of production to plant monarch butterfly habitat. He also planted an acre of trees in his pasture. Matt Miller explained, "Kevin understands that in order to be a successful farmer, he has to also manage for the wildlife on his land."

Kevin Bennett proudly stands in his pasture with his Herefords.

Future Plans

Going forward, Kevin looks forward to his daughter, Stacey, becoming more involved in the farming operation. He also wants to continue to maintain a good relationship with NRCS. Kevin sums up his partnership with NRCS, "Because you never know what mother nature will throw at you, NRCS works well with mother nature and the farmer."

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Langlade County Success from the Field

Minimizing Fire Risk With Woody Residue Treatment

Background

In July of 2019, a catastrophic straight-wind event hit the heart of Langlade County, Wisconsin, destroying thousands of acres of forestland. For 15 years, Chris Johnson had been carefully managing his 40-acre lot through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Managed Forest Law program, only to see his hard work completely destroyed in less than one day.

Highlights

Like so many other landowners across Wisconsin, Chris started to look for guidance on how to move forward. Chris had heard through word-of-mouth about possible assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and immediately made a call to his local field office.

Working for the first time with the NRCS Antigo Field Office, staff provided Chris the necessary steps to move forward with the planning process. A site visit was conducted to determine the extent of the damage. “The level of damage was almost indescribable; you had portions of your land almost completely leveled and other portions you could hardly walk through,” stated Josh Suenkel, NRCS Soil Conservationist for the Antigo Field Office.

Chris’ application was selected for funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program with the goal of implementing 30 acres of Woody Residue Treatment, which helps to accomplish the reduction of hazardous fuels for fires, as well as reduce the risk of harmful insects and diseases. “It will never be the same again, but I am thankful for NRCS providing a way to move forward,” said Chris.

A small fraction of the amount of material cleaned up.

The high amount of debris created a high fire risk potential.

Future Plans

Since the completion of the Woody Residue Treatment, Chris has elected to continue working with the NRCS through the Conservation Stewardship Program. He has hope that the future implementation of tree and shrub site preparation and establishment will help create the foundational blocks to move forward with his forestland rehabilitation.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Manitowoc County Success from the Field

Barn Fire Rallies New Partnerships

Background

No farmer ever expects tragedy to strike their operation. When it does, many may not be prepared with what steps to take next after devastation occurs. In mid-August of last year, Manitowoc County dairy farmers, father and son William and Todd Schroeder, were milking cows inside their barn when a fire broke out inexplicably. With little time to react, as the one-story structure filled with smoke and flames, the Schroeder's lost over 50 dairy cows and 2 calves in the barn fire. Early the following morning, Matt Rataczak, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Manitowoc County District Conservationist, received a phone call from the Francis Creek Fire Department Chief notifying the agency of the deceased animals and seeking advice on proper handling.

Highlights

Matt contacted Jae Sutherland, Northeast Area NRCS Agricultural Engineer, and Kathy Turner, Northeast Area NRCS Resource Soil Scientist, to recruit their assistance on the Schroeder farm. Neither William or Todd had worked with the agency before, but by late morning, NRCS staff, including two Major Land Resource Area soil scientists, were on-site to complete soils investigations. The investigation would ensure that the soil met the criteria to bury the deceased cattle properly. The agency staff also ensured the site met the specifications of the NRCS Conservation Practice Standard 368—Emergency Animal Mortality Management—Burial. The Schroeder's were eager to lay their lost animals to rest as the summer temperatures lingered in the 90s. Matt assured William and Todd that the staff was working to devise a proper burial plan that would meet the standards and specifications for their unique farm situation and confirm that all protocols were being followed for proper burial. While agency staff were still on-site, Matt initiated an early start waiver for Practice 368; funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). With the help of several NRCS agency units, including the coordination of Engineering, Soils, Resources, Area and State Office staff, the waiver was approved within hours and the soils investigation resulted in a proper burial plan.

The completed Practice Standard 368 on the Schroeder farm.

"I'm so thankful for my nuclear drill training and all the NRCS trainings I have participated in regularly over the years to prepare me for a situation like this; my training certainly came in handy. As soon as I received that phone call, I jumped into action. I knew NRCS could help out the Schroeder farm during such a catastrophic event; that's what NRCS is here for—to help farmers in need and make a positive difference," explained Matt.

In addition to having a suitable soil type, an initial 12 inch layer of straw was required to be placed in the bottom of the approved shallow burial trench. Knowing the Schroeder's had lost most of their hay storage in the barn fire, a neighboring farm soon arrived with a wagon-load of straw and the burial process began. By that evening, the family's lost dairy cattle had been laid to rest through the help of partnerships and cooperation of the community and multiple agency staff.

Future Plans

Before the barn fire, the Schroeder family had discussed retiring from the dairy farm business. In the wake of their loss, they decided to cease all operations going forward. William and Todd have applied for EQIP funding and are in consideration to receive some financial relief compensation.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Marathon County Success from the Field

Beef, Bees, Bluebirds and Monarchs

Over the sound of windchimes, Jeff Pawlowski describes his land management style as "watching nature and trying to imitate it." As a skilled welder, Jeff created the windchimes using old Acetylene tanks and sawblades, along with other metal pieces he gathered.

Although he enjoys building windchimes, Jeff's true passion is the farm. He and his son, Luther, raise beef and bees on land where the Plover River slices through the middle of his acres, near Bevent, Wisconsin.

The farm is a mix of rolling pasture, hayland and wooded acres. Jeff partnered with the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to provide additional habitat for Monarch butterflies. He seeded an area with plants valuable to the butterflies. Many milkweed plants beneficial to monarchs and other pollinators are already present in the second year of the seeding. Monarchs depend on milkweed to feed and lay their eggs during migration. Milkweed not only provides food for monarchs, it also supports other pollinators such as Jeff's bees that are vital to agriculture. Milkweed also provides homes for beneficial insects that control the spread of destructive insects.

Jeff also agreed to install bluebird nest boxes and plant trees and shrubs for wildlife food. The nest activity was a success; in the first year, both bluebird houses were used. Since then, Jeff made 12 more bluebird houses on his own. Last fall, he saw 15 bluebirds gather on the fence before the migration.

Becoming aware of the importance of beneficial insects, Jeff also manages his fence lines differently than he did before. He limits the amount he mows underneath the bottom wire and lets the Goldenrod and other wildflowers grow to help feed the 14 hives of bees and other pollinators. He pays special attention to removing Buckthorn seedlings underneath the fence. The bees have responded by increasing their numbers and producing more pounds of honey.

Jeff uses his "watch and learn" management style to rotationally graze his Simmental cattle herd. The cattle have learned to cross the rushing river once a summer to get to the pasture on the other side. Jeff merely has to call and they follow him to the next paddock. He also markets the animals for meat and sells bulls with high quality genetics and tame demeanor.

The RCPP program has increased Jeff's awareness of the birds, wildflowers and insects around his farm. Now, he has more beneficial plants, animals and insects to watch and learn from.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Oconto County Success from the Field

New Demonstration Farms Network Forms Along the Shores of Green Bay

Background

"That would never work around here." If you have ever been on a farm in Northeast Wisconsin and mentioned cover crops, no till, really any cropping-based conservation practice, you have probably heard this response.

Many northern Wisconsin farmers hold a valid concern that practices are tailored to "perfect scenarios" and favor milder climates. To hopefully address these concerns and jump-start engagement at the local level, the Green Bay West Shore Demonstration Farms Network was formed. The Demonstration Farms Network, funded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, involves agency partners including NRCS and Oconto, Marinette and Shawano Counties. Featured farms include Mahoney Farms (Suring, WI), Brown Star Farm (Gillet, WI), Wagner Farms (Oconto, Falls) and Finger Family Farm (Peshtigo, WI).

Results of the NRCS rainfall simulator demonstration at the first Green Bay West Shore Demonstration Farms Network field day. The event was hosted by Wagner Farms in Oconto Falls, Wisconsin.

Highlights

The new network, established in 2021, kicked off with a live demonstration of low disturbance manure application at Brown Star Farms. As planting progressed, Matt Bruggar of Tilth Agronomy exhibited techniques to plant directly into a green crop at Wager Farms. To round out the spring season, both Mahoney Farms and Finger Family Farm experimented with interseeding a cover crop mix into standing corn.

The Demonstration Farms Network hosted it's first large scale, in-person field day at Wagner Farms in July 2021. The Wagner family was an outstanding host and walked attendees through the successes (and failures) they've witnessed on the journey to making their farm more sustainable.

"Observing new techniques and practices at a local level are critical to conservation work in our area," noted Catie Haight, NRCS Conservation Planner with Oconto County. "Not only can we provide information to the operators that we work with, but they can learn directly from their neighbors on what works on our soils, with our climate."

Future Plans

In the short term, the network hopes to answer the initial questions asked at the beginning of the growing season: Do these practices work locally and/or are there ways to improve success? Looking into the future, partners within the Network hope to see it turn into an outlet for information and as a way to share innovative ideas. For more information or to learn about upcoming events, visit www.gbwsdemo.info or follow us on Facebook @GBWSDemo.

GREEN BAY WEST SHORE
Demonstration Farms Network

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Oneida County Success from the Field

A Little Help Goes a Long Way For Wildlife

Background

Landowner Robert "Bob" Wojtusik developed a strong conservation ethic by managing his 80 acres of forestland and associated agricultural lands in the town of Three Lakes, Oneida County, Wisconsin. He was born and raised in Three Lakes and after living in various farm communities across Wisconsin, returned to the area upon retirement with a passion for wildlife habitat restoration.

Highlights

Before working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bob was able to create several ponds to establish aquatic wildlife habitat with the help of a neighbor. The U.S. Forest Service helped clear conifers from his property as part of a larger aspen tree release for grouse on adjacent public lands, while Bob released oak trees on his property to supply mast for wildlife.

After learning about USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs through local connections, Bob decided to apply for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to further enhance wildlife forage and habitat on his land. Through cost-sharing assistance and help from family, he planted 6.5 acres of clover for conservation cover, established four wood duck boxes (which have successfully promoted nesting), and planted 5 acres of native trees and shrub varieties known to be beneficial to wildlife.

In 2018, with the support of multiple generations of family and the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Bob planted an additional 700 native trees for wildlife on 2.5 acres of his land. He is most proud of the 1.8 acres dedicated to pollinator and beneficial insect planting established through NRCS cost sharing. With extensive site preparation and seeding and a combination of over 20 different pollinator-friendly plant species, the plantings are thriving. Bob noted, "The results of the pollinator planting are outstanding. I have seen bees, monarchs, birds and deer enjoying this area. During peak flowering, it looks comparable to successful pollinator plantings I have seen in other parts of the county."

Part of Bob's established wildlife habitat—wood duck boxes, crops for wildlife and releasing oak trees.

Tim Botting, who is currently a Soil Conservationist with NRCS, stated, "Bob was one of the first customers I interacted with when starting at NRCS. I have been impressed with his conservation ethic and love of wildlife. He is also not afraid to ask for technical assistance to make sure everything is implemented properly."

Outside of NRCS programs, Bob also grows a variety of crops exclusively for wildlife benefit including corn, sunflowers, pumpkins and potatoes.

Over the past few decades, Bob has noted a recurring theme of help from others including the NRCS, the Forest Service, neighbors and family to help care for his land and promote wildlife. His son, Michael, echoed that sentiment while assisting with the pollinator and beneficial insect planting, "We are giving back for all the enjoyment we have had on this land."

Future Plans

Bob plans to continue to promote wildlife on his land as new opportunities become available and plans to partner with NRCS for technical and financial assistance to further his conservation efforts.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Outagamie County Success from the Field

A New Beginning for Grandpa's Dairy Farm

Background

Hunter Strebig knew he wanted to farm when he graduated from high school. Not afraid of long hours or hard work, he worked in construction right out of high school and raised a few beef cattle on his grandpa's farm while attending Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC) in Appleton, WI. He knew he wanted to expand his beef operation and hoped his grandpa's farm was the place for that to happen. His grandpa had his doubts and wasn't very encouraging at first, but Hunter was up for the challenge. The farm, in the family since the 1900s, was a successful dairy farm up until 1998. Since Hunter's grandpa wanted to keep the farm in the family, Hunter was able to buy 80 acres, and began converting the family farm into a profitable, sustainable beef operation. The farm is close to the Fox Cities, just outside the small Village of Hortonville, in northeast Wisconsin—it was a perfect location for the business he had in mind.

Highlights

While Hunter attended FVTC, a guest speaker from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Appleton service center presented during one of his agriculture classes. This initial exposure to NRCS prompted Hunter to visit his local service center and apply for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help make his plan for his grandpa's farm a reality. He was already raising a few beef cattle, but wanted to create a more sustainable farming operation. As a beginning farmer, he knew the technical and financial assistance were going to be a great benefit.

Angus and Murray Gray cattle chosen by Morning Breeze Farm LLC for their calm disposition and efficient growth on pasture.

There were several challenges Hunter had mapped out on the property that he aimed to improve. He gave the farm a new name—Morning Breeze Farm LLC and made many improvements to the buildings on his own. EQIP funding through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative helped Hunter convert row-cropped land into managed rotational grazing, achieving water quality benefits from reduced erosion and nutrient losses. Managed grazing can provide a healthier plant community, decrease erosion and runoff, better livestock health and performance, and reduce costs to the landowner.

In a managed grazing system, livestock are moved frequently among pasture divisions or paddocks based on forage quality and livestock nutrition needs.

With assistance through EQIP, Hunter planted the pastures, built fences and installed seasonal waterlines. A culvert crossing and grass buffer were installed to keep cattle out of the ditch that needed to be crossed to access the new pastures. Hunter wanted to have the cattle on pasture in the winter to bale graze because he understood the value of having the manure on the pastures instead of in the barn. But for that to happen, he needed to install a waterer in the new pasture, which was now further from the barn and main waterline.

While EQIP could not assist with this extra cost of running electric wire, he opted to install a Cobett waterer, which requires no electricity and no concrete pad. Mounted on a 10' deep, 24" diameter polyethylene tube, the Cobett waterer is heated entirely through the conduction of geothermal heat from the earth.

Winter feeding on Morning Breeze Farm.

Currently at Morning Breeze Farm, 20 cow/calf pairs and 20+ young stock are raised on intensively managed pastures and rotated to a new paddock daily during the growing season. “Rotational grazing benefits both our cows and the land. Carefully managing the pastures helps us ensure the cattle are eating quality forage, which leads to high quality meat,“ said Hunter. His beef is sold as Certified Grass-fed, which requires livestock be raised entirely on an outdoor pasture and fed a 100% grass and forage diet. Hunter recognizes the benefits of managing his pastures according to his NRCS approved grazing plan, the forage balance requirements and how managing the land in this sustainable way is valuable to his business.

Future Plans

Along with farm co-manager, Maggie Elliott, Hunter has plans to improve and expand the farm. Plans include continuing to update their online sales of beef, pork, chicken, and seasonal garden produce, possible expansion of their pasture and a new venture to partner with a Wisconsin restaurant to supply grass-fed beef.

Morning Breeze Farm has maintained a connection with FVTC and offers their time to promote grazing through online videos. Hunter continues to work closely with the NRCS staff at the Appleton Service Center. His next goal is to improve the pollinator habitat on his farm by applying for the Conservation Stewardship Program.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Pepin County Success from the Field

Conservation Programs Fulfilling a Life-Long Dream

Background

For Sally Farrar, her 72-acre farm in the hills of Pepin County, Wisconsin, is a life-long dream. After leaving the state of South Dakota, Sally resided in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, for many years before moving to Pepin County in 1999. In 2008, Sally purchased the 72-acre property, which consists of 22 acres of cropland that is currently prairie/pollinator habitat and 50 acres of forestland. Growing up in northeast South Dakota, Sally had become accustom to native grass prairies and the benefits that they have for the environment.

Highlights

Sally first learned about the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2012, while listening to a local radio station discussing the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Knowing that she wanted to convert the cropland on her farm to native prairie, she met with Dennis Reimers, District Conservationist in the Pepin County field office, to learn more about EQIP. Since 2012, Sally has worked closely with NRCS staff to utilize both EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to help fund conservation projects on her property. In 2013, Sally planted 12.8 acres of conservation cover/native grass mixture. In 2019, she completed a prescribed burn to help manage her prairie. Both projects were funded through EQIP. Sally has a 2018 CSP contract for 50 acres of forestland, where she created snag and den trees for wildlife habitat, and in 2020, she planted .70 acres of pollinator habitat. “Being on the planet for this brief human ride, I have the privilege of stewarding a piece of land. Experiencing the earth coming alive with insects, pollinators, birds, animals and native prairie has been a great joy, ”said Sally.

Sally’s passion for the care of her land and environment has led her to become a Conservation Coach through the Wisconsin Women in Conservation (WiWiC) Renewing the Countryside Program, which was formed in 2021. “Sally’s enthusiasm along with her previous and ongoing conservation efforts is a great fit to be a conservation coach. She mentors and inspires women landowners who are interested in implementing conservation practices,” says Jennifer Roetter, Pepin County Soil Conservationist. Sally hosted a field day on her property where over 40 women enjoyed the afternoon networking, while walking through the prairie, discussing NRCS practices

Landowner, Sally Farrar of Pepin County, Wisconsin.

and programs. The field day was a great partnership effort by NRCS, Renewing the Countryside, Wisconsin Farmers Union, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, Midwest Organic and Sustainability Education Services (MOSES), E Resources Inc., Pheasants Forever and Compeer Financial.

Future Plans

Sally is currently working with a Technical Service Provider to complete a Forest Management Plan through EQIP. The Forest Management Plan will help Sally implement additional conservation practices throughout her woodland acres. Sally’s plans are to control buckthorn and open a small area in her woodland that was once a historic oak savanna. Sally hopes to move permanently onto her land in the next few years. In the meantime, she has built a small cabin where she can enjoy the beautiful landscape and peacefulness of her property on a daily basis.

WiWic Field Day participants enjoying the prairie walk. *Photo by Midge Bolt.*

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Pierce County Successes from the Field

Medication for the Soul and Soil: Where Grass is the Remedy on Shadow Ridge Ranch

Background

Randy and Liz Mittag of Shadow Ridge Ranch just south of River Falls, Wisconsin, graze 25–30 cow-calf pairs of registered Polled Herefords across a green 71.5 acres. Not long ago though, the land was in demise. When they bought their current farm in the spring of 2016, it was in rough shape with heavy soil erosion from conventional agricultural operations. Township road graders had to clean roads of soil leaving their valley after heavy rains.

Highlights

Randy and Liz searched for help through grazing circle contacts to try and improve their grassroots grazing efforts. They found River County RC&D grazing contacts Mary C. Anderson, and persistent Brian Brezinski, and were soon convinced to try rotational grazing. They were directed to the Ellsworth Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and spoke with the Service Center's Resource Conservationist, Dana Swanson. Fast forward five years and through three Environmental Quality Incentives Programs contracts, they have the full suite of rotational grazing practices adopted. Practices installed include prescribed grazing, forage and biomass planting, livestock pipeline, year-round waterers, fence, windbreak and herbaceous weed treatment. They also utilized the Conservation Stewardship Program to fine tune grazing practices on their lands.

The Mittags stated they used to start supplemental feeding their herd in August. With intensive prescribed grazing and the increased forage supply, they make it well into October before supplemental forage is needed on the same acreage and herd size.

In walking the paddocks with Randy and Liz, smiles and laughs were shared as the morning dew lifted. Randy stated, after coming home from his city job, "This is my blood pressure medication." Looking around at the picturesque grass covered valley and listening to sounds of happy cattle (the oldest being 15) chewing down a fresh paddock, one could certainly appreciate why Randy feels this way. Liz worked the well-trained cattle into a new paddock with ease as they followed her voice methodically.

The Mittags enjoy telling their story and Shadow Ridge Ranch was even featured in *Hereford World* magazine in the past,

Randy and Liz Mittag walk through a paddock to observe their grazing Herefords.

The Mittag's Herefords are waiting on a smoky July morning to enter the next paddock.

after donating a heifer for the Minnesota Beef Youth Experience Program to be shown at the Minnesota State Fair. Through the program, Randy and Liz were able to mentor a young lady while sharing their passion for conservation and Herefords.

Today, the rolling hills are protected with permanent vegetative cover and the township grader stays in storage after heavy rains. NRCS District Conservationist Jason Barrick stated, "It's a good day for conservation, to see this valley fully protected in grass, whereas not long ago, it was the site of some pretty terrible soil erosion."

Future Plans

Randy and Liz stated they're both eager to continue sharing their story by hosting educational visits on their farm for schools and community groups, as well as through their website www.mittags.org.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

nrcs.usda.gov/wi

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

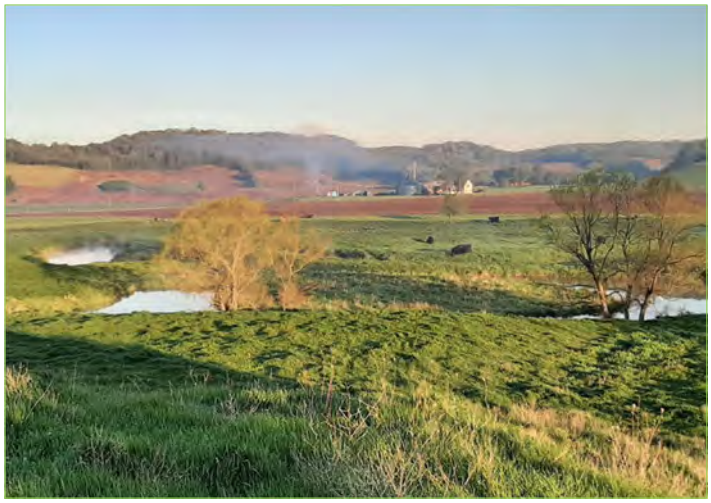
Richland County Success from the Field

Clary Cattle and Conservation

Background

Austin Clary was born in 1993. His father, like his father before him, was a farmer. Even though Austin's father worked off the farm to supplement his income, his heart seemed to lie on the farm. So, it came at no surprise to Austin that farming was in his blood.

Austin married his wife, Emma, in 2016. Together they purchased one of the satellite farms from his grandmother, Barb Clary, and immediately started adding animals. Beef cows, pigs and chickens seemed like a good place to start. Soon after, Austin and Emma started adding to their own family with a son, Barron, and a daughter, Claire. Austin says, "The highlight of each and every day is when we do farm chores together with the kids."



The Clary's property, showcasing the rotational grazing and streambank protection areas along Willow Creek.

Highlights

In the summer of 2020, Austin contacted the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Richland County with an interest in continuing the conservation work that his grandparents had started. In 1999, Ron and Barb Clary enrolled the farm in a fishing easement with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Since that time, they have taken on numerous streambank erosion practices, fixing a few of the worst sites at a time. When Austin purchased the farm, he had an interest in streambank erosion practices along with rotational grazing. Austin said, "I purchased an additional 7 acres of crop ground that adjoined our property with the hopes of moving the fence farther from the stream and converting it to grazing land."

The Clary family in their pasture (left to right: Claire, Emma, Austin and Barron). Photo provided courtesy of Lisa Clary.

With help from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Austin was able to fence out the 7 acres of converted cropland. He also partnered with NRCS to complete over 1,300 feet of streambank protection prior to enrolling 55 acres into rotational grazing. "I hope to leave this land for my children in better shape than it was, just like my grandparents did for me, and NRCS has helped me come closer to that goal." NRCS looks forward to continuing to assist the Clary family in their conservation goals.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Rock County Success from the Field

Grassed Waterways Help Control Soil Erosion

Background

Dennis Green has worked on his family's 340-acre Rock County farm his whole life. For two generations spanning six decades, the Green family has continually worked to improve their land. Currently, Dennis grows corn, soybeans, hay and alfalfa, among other crops, and has roughly 100 dairy cows.

Norman Tadt, an affiliate conservation specialist with the Rock County Land Conservation Department in agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, has worked with the Green family for the majority of his career. "It's a generational thing out on that farm," said Norman, referring to the conservation efforts made towards preventing soil erosion. Norman worked with Dennis's father before Dennis took over the farm, installing conservation practices like grassed waterways, buffer strips and a streambank restoration project with the help of funding provided by the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Highlights

Throughout his farming career, Dennis has partnered with NRCS through EQIP to combat soil erosion with proper management and the installation of grassed waterways. He works to keep the waterways clear of weeds and trees, and as a result is able to produce hay for his cows from them. Over time, the existing waterways will fill up with sediment, but with the help of new EQIP contracts, they can be reconstructed to function as they were designed to do.

After two decades of preventing erosion throughout the field, one of Dennis's waterways had filled up with a considerable amount of sediment and undergone natural reconstruction that occurs over time. Through cooperation between NRCS and the Glacierland Resource Conservation and Development Council, the waterway was redesigned to ensure it would meet current field conditions and not cause any erosion issues to the neighboring farm.

Craig Felt, former NRCS affiliate soil conservation technician for Glacierland, along with Erik Swanson, an NRCS Civil Engineer from the Madison Field Office, helped to complete the project survey and redesign. Once the design was completed, the construction of the waterway was done by on-site contractors, Chuck Stanhope and Tom Cash.

Dennis Green in his newly reconstructed grassed waterway. The waterway was first built in 2002 and was most recently reshaped in summer 2021.

After the waterway was reshaped, the grass grew back more lush then before, and was once again deep enough to allow water to flow through during larger rain events.

Future Plans

The grassed waterways on Dennis's farm are currently meeting his erosion control needs. Future plans for the farm center around maintaining the existing waterways through weed and brush control and potential reconstruction as the practices age. Dennis has expressed interest in partnering with NRCS for future conservation endeavors, including projects on any land he may purchase going forward to help address erosion control needs as they arise.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

nrcs.usda.gov/wi

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Rusk County Success from the Field

Where Wildlife and Farming Mix

Background

Earl Wadewitz and Jane Sorenson have called Rusk County home since 2006. They relocated to the area because they "were done with hills" having farmed in Trempealeau County for much of their lives. They were not done with farming, however. After moving to Glen Flora, they built up a herd of Texas longhorns and managed around 400 acres of grassland, which they hayed and rotationally grazed. They are retired from farming now, but a consistent thread can be found across the years on their property, a keen interest in conservation and wildlife.

Highlights

Earl and Jane's first engagement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) came quick on the heels of their relocation to Rusk County. A portion of their land was not conducive to farming, being too wet, so they hoped to find a good management option. After that initial meeting with NRCS, they began to pursue a Wetland Reserve Program easement to restore the lowlands and improve habitat. In 2008, that culminated in the creation of a 127-acre easement, to which they contributed 53 acres.

When combined with their well-managed grasslands in the adjacent uplands, wildlife thrived on their property. Jane recalled having to train their dog to leave her "chickens" alone. Jane stated, "Over the years, we have seen many different types of wildlife on the farm. We routinely have had the chickens (Sharp Tailed Grouse) at the bird feeders, and Blanding's turtle nests in the gravel along the road." Earl quickly added, "We have also seen otters and nesting egrets on the property as well."

More recently, Earl and Jane have reengaged with NRCS to pursue management on other areas of their farm. Earl and Jane are utilizing the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to have the forested acres on the property inventoried via a Conservation Activity Plan. During those initial meetings, it was also noted that large portions of the woody cover was over-mature tag alder.

(Left to right) Jane Sorenson and Earl Wadewitz discuss the value of early successional forest habitat with NRCS Soil Conservationist Brad Selz.

The Wadewitz property is centered in a core breeding area for the golden-winged warbler, which thrives in early successional wetland habitat. Shearing large stands of mature alder creates ideal habitat for this species. Given this, NRCS staff engaged with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) to consider a project through the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program, ABC: Improving Forest Health for Wildlife Resources in MN, WI and MI. The special initiative is focused on enhancing and maintaining habitat for the golden-winged warbler. The project was approved and is planned to be completed in winter 2021.

Future Plans

The Wadewitz's are looking forward to the future on their farm. NRCS District Conservationist Nick Besasie noted, "Conservation never stops. There is always something that can be improved and NRCS can assist with those conservation goals." In addition to the plan development and the shearing project, Earl and Jane have an application to enroll more land in wetland easements, which would connect their easement to another and create a 250-acre habitat block.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Saint Croix County Success from the Field

From Gullies to Grazing

Background

U.S. Army Veteran Jerod Anderson grew up on a farm and currently grazes beef cattle with his family in the Cady Township of Saint Croix County, Wisconsin. The grass-fed beef operation consists of nearly 20 acres of pasture and follows a prescribed grazing plan.

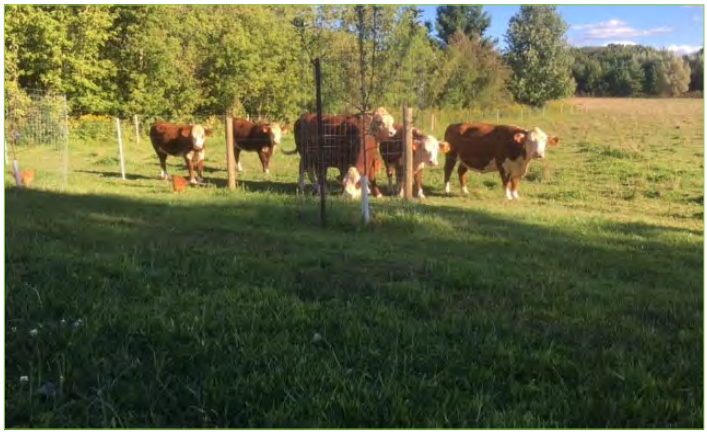
Highlights

Jerod shared that his family was looking at strategies to control erosion due to abnormally severe and frequent rain events on their lands. The local U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA) put Jerod in touch with soil conservation staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Service Baldwin County Service Center. NRCS staff, Luke Breitenbach and Jeff Kitelinger, visited the Anderson family farm and discussed options to update equipment and consider updating farm practices in order to address soil loss and gullies on the farm.

Jeff suggested permanently seeding down a pasture and managed grazing as an alternative to continuous row crops. Luke then explained how applying for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) could potentially help cost-share certain components needed to put Jerod's cropland into a functional grazing operation. Jerod explains, "My wife and I had considered grazing in the past, however, with the required fencing and need for water, that option was not financially possible at the time. After evaluating possibilities with EQIP assistance, converting our cash crop farm into a grazing operation seemed like a viable transition for us and we decided to moved forward with the application process."

"The FSA and NRCS were helpful with eligibility and contracting administration," said Anderson. "A few months into the application process, an intent to proceed letter arrived in the mail and shortly after, we had a contract." Implementation began and now, Jerod's farm is set up with a prescribed grazing plan that includes water, fence and a continuous cover of vigorous grasses and clovers.

"As with all things around the farm, completing tasks and paying the bills can be stressful," explained Jerod. "The Baldwin County NRCS staff have always been available for technical assistance and the financial side has always been timely and without any problems." It gives Jerod and his family great pleasure to see clean and healthy animals on pasture that is not over grazed, in addition to having access to a clean, reliable, water supply. Jerod explains other benefits as follows, "Our ground can now withstand up to 5 inch rains with no erosion problems. Although change can be hard, this was the right move for us and we appreciate the EQIP assistance through NRCS."



Jerod is building up a healthy beef herd and succeeding at his grazing operation in Saint Croix County, Wisconsin.

Future Plans

Jerod continues to administer Prescribed Grazing (528) through his EQIP contract as he adds to his growing beef herd each year, with the possibility to convert more acres to pasture in the future. He hopes to reach a carrying capacity that meets his goals, while sustainably managing his pastures.

Prescribed grazing is a proven method to enhance a grazing system by providing quality forage, improving overall soil health and benefitting a wide variety of pollinators and other wildlife species.

Luke and Jeff agree that working with Jerod has been a great experience and example of getting conservation on the ground. Luke added, "We appreciate Jerod's efforts and would like to thank him for making conservation a priority on his farm!"

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Sauk County Success from the Field

The Green Fire Forty—Giving Back to the Land

Background

Kathy Pielsticker, who worked for 35 years as a soil conservationist, knew she wanted to farm with conservation in mind to give back to the land. She and her husband, Bill, started farming in 1978. They had just earned their agronomy degrees and were excited to take over Kathy's dad's farm, which was on steep, highly-erosive bluffs. The Pielstickers converted the row cropland to hay land and bought a neighboring 40 acres to pasture their new herd of angus cattle. In the 1980s, they decided to sell the farm, like so many young farmers did, to work elsewhere. Forty years later and both now retired, Kathy and Bill were able to buy 40 acres near Hillpoint, Wisconsin. The land was part of a large dairy farm, of which 26 acres had been converted to prairie and planted to mixed hardwood and pine trees.

Highlights

When they purchased the 40 acres, they assumed responsibility for an 18-acre Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract, which would continue to protect steep slopes on the property with permanent conservation cover. The previous owner had been maintaining the prairie with periodic mowing, but the Pielstickers knew prescribed burning the prairie would be great for regeneration. The couple partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to revise the conservation plan and Bill wrote a prescribed burn plan, which was approved by the NRCS. The prescribed burn was completed in the spring of 2019.

In early 2018, the CRP contract on the 18-acre tree plantation was scheduled to expire. The Pielstickers contacted the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to apply for Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law (MFL) program. The couple wanted to ensure they could afford to keep the 15-year-old tree plantation in trees and to improve woodlands on the rest of the forty acres. Kathy and Bill hired a private forester to prepare a management plan. Twenty-six acres were enrolled in the MFL for a period of 25 years.

In the spring of 2019, Bill and Kathy started with the implementation of practices. They recruited eight neighbors and several professional conservationists to help complete the burn. Bill followed up immediately by mowing down the stubble and treating the Multiflora Rose and raspberry brambles with herbicide. That spring, the prairie emerged quickly, lush with new prairie flowers and a thick stand of grasses.

Kathy (right) and Bill Pielsticker in front of their prairie and tree plantation referred to as the "Green Fire Forty," referenced in Aldo Leopold's famous "A Sand County Almanac."

When the Pielstickers purchased the land, they learned there was an old well abandoned on it. Concerned about the potential for groundwater contamination from it, they applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to receive assistance to decommission the well. At the same time, they also applied for forest stand improvement, tree and shrub pruning, pre-commercial thinning of their tree plantation and to establish another prairie on an acre of old pasture land. Portions of the forest stand improvement, pruning and thinning, as well as the well abandonment, were completed in the spring of 2020 and 2021.

In 2019, as avid bird (and insect) watchers, Kathy and Bill learned the NRCS was accepting applications for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The NRCS plan included practices to enhance habitat for pollinators and to improve woody habitat for wildlife. In the fall, as soon as they learned that their CSP contract was approved, Bill began herbicide treatment of another 1.5 acres of old sod to prepare it for seeding. Early the following spring, they burned the plot and then retreated it with herbicide to knock back regrowth.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Highlights (Cont.)

Early in June 2020, Bill and Kathy employed a no-till drill to seed 1.5 acres of native conservation cover. Also, in June 2020, under their CSP contract, Bill worked on a northern hardwood forest stand on the property to create snag trees and den trees for wildlife habitat. Additionally, he created multiple brush piles for wildlife habitat using material from the tree thinning and pruning project.

Future Plans

When the NRCS staff first asked them what their goals were for their property, Kathy said, “We think of ourselves as part of the community of creatures that share this precious land with us and make it their home. We owe it to that community to do what we can to leave this land in better shape than we found it.” Bill added, “We hope that we are able to give back to this land for many years to come. That is the ‘green fire’ that gets us up each morning to see what new natural wonder is out there.”

The Pielsticker’s plan for 2021 and beyond includes continuing with forest stand improvement on the remainder of the 18-acre tree plantation. This entails winter removal of undesirable trees and shrubs, including stump herbicide treatment, thinning and pruning of the mixed hardwood and pine tree plantation.

The Pielstickers have another 4- to 5-acres of abandoned pasture they plan to eventually convert to prairie. In preparation, Bill is in the process of removing undesirable species, like thistle and Multiflora Rose, by repeated mowing and herbicide treatments. It will be several years before the plots are ready to be drilled. In the meantime, the prairie plots drilled in 2020 will need to be mowed and the non-native species controlled. Eventually, those plots will need to be control burned.

Kathy has also planted native gardens of prairie forbs and wildflowers to harvest for seed. Each winter, she plans to continue to "snow seed" over the prairies to add more native species to keep the "green fire" burning.

(L to R) Before and after photos of completed forest stand improvement and tree pruning activities.

Pruning and forest stand improvement in March of 2021.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Shawano County Success from the Field

Brothers Working to Regenerate Woodlands

Background

John and brother, Jim Hanson, of Hanson Brothers Farm, own 192 acres of woodlands in Shawano County. Jim and John were raised on the property just outside of Tigerton, Wisconsin. Back in 2019, the brothers became interested in protecting their maple and red oak trees from the heavy deer browse that the majority of Shawano County is known for. They applied through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding for 3,581 feet of deer barrier fencing in an effort to regenerate 8.9 acres of forest.

Highlights

The Hansons have always been good stewards of the land. They say it was passed down from their mother, who was a teacher, their father who was a farmer and their uncle, who produced maple syrup on the family's property. Historically, Jim and John have worked with private foresters, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) Foresters and NRCS staff to develop a sustainable forest. They have even participated in the USDA Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for tree planting. The brothers have also planted more than 150,000 trees on their property.

The Hansons were one of the first NRCS participants to be involved in the deer barrier pilot project. Cooperation between Shawano, Marathon and Waupaca county field offices, agreed to rank areas where deer browsing was higher to qualify for financial assistance through the EQIP program.

Sherrie Zenk-Reed, NRCS Soil Conservationist, who worked closely with the brothers explains, "John and Jim's property was perfect for being one of the first to participate in the newly developed EQIP practice. Deer browse was high and the seedlings were there just waiting for some protection so they could take off."

Deer Barriers are at least 8-feet-tall fencing surrounding a given area to promote the natural regeneration of understory trees. According to Eric Roers, WDNR Forester, "Temporary deer exclusion fencing is a less expensive and a more effective method of getting new trees established in larger areas than traditional use of cages or tree tubes that only protect individual trees. With fencing, you are growing a new "complete" forest, with all of the tree species and ground plants protected and growing together."

Future Plans

Ultimately, the brothers have a goal for their forest. Their goal is to maintain forest productivity and health, continue enrollment in the Managed Forest Law program and to pass on their legacy of good stewardship to their children and nine grand children. NRCS looks forward to working with Jim and John in their future conservation efforts.

Jim and John Hanson.

Deer barrier fencing.

Young maple seedlings.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Taylor County Success from the Field

Benefits Through Partnership

Background

Working in partnership to accomplish conservation goals is something that is all too relevant in Taylor County, Wisconsin. Klayton Kree was recently hired for his first job out of college as a Soil Conservation Technician with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in the Medford USDA Service Center. Partnerships are very relevant, in that Klayton's position is due to the partnership between NRCS and the Golden Sands RC&D. Golden Sands RC&D is located in Stevens Point and has been a great partner in promoting and creating opportunities and jobs in conservation with NRCS. The career partnership opportunity has allowed Klayton to work with numerous landowners, including Doug Stanek, a beginning farmer located in the western portion of Taylor County, near Gilman. Doug is a beef cattle farmer with close to 100 acres of grazing pasture. He has adapted new conservation-focused strategies through partnerships with the NRCS and the local Land Conservation Department (LCD). Doug is working to improve the health of his soil, plants and animals.

Partnership Success

Doug has worked with the NRCS and LCD to improve his operation by implementing many different conservation practices such as, prescribed grazing, fencing, livestock pipelines, forage and biomass plantings, heavy-use area protection and a watering facility. Doug has been able to adapt new techniques on his farm to ensure sustainable and conservation-minded measures. With the Yellow River flowing on the North border of his property, he's working to limit resource concerns present on his land. By partnering with the NRCS, Doug has been able to successfully graze his cattle on the property with extremely positive results. The growth of the plants in each pasture is thick and plentiful. Doug strives to ensure that overgrazing is never an option. Typically, he likes to leave half the height that was growing before the cattle were moved to that section. After rotation on a pasture, there is usually around 6–8 inches of plant height, which promotes successful regeneration and growth, as well as nutrient and carbon storage in the soil, increasing the organic matter and improving the soil health. By ensuring overgrazing does not happen, permanent root and plant structure prevents bare soil from being exposed and makes it less likely for runoff and erosion to take place. Klayton said, "As I was out on the property, I saw firsthand how thick and tall the growth was." Doug added, "My father continues to do conventional grazing where he leaves them all year. He just told me that he will need to begin feeding them hay soon. Look around here, I don't think I'll be needing to feed hay for a while." Klayton's partnership with NRCS and Golden Sands RC&D has furthered his personal conservation knowledge, his career and has given him the opportunity to work with landowners, like Doug, to meet their conservation goals. Klayton explains, "After beginning work with Doug, it has helped me also begin my journey into conservation and working with landowners to meet their needs while practicing conservation." Partnerships have been a great way for both Klayton and Doug to tap into agency resources and information, using that guidance to begin the conservation journey of reaching goals. "In the past year working for the NRCS, I have gained a vast amount of knowledge and experience that proves beneficial to me," said Klayton. For Doug, he has been able to incorporate many practices into his operation which has also helped him become a better conservation partner and landowner. Doug explains, "Working alongside the NRCS has helped me in that I can effectively and efficiently construct right the first time, the things I need on my farm, rather than struggle with temporary infrastructures." This allows Doug to properly apply grazing to the land to improve the soil health. Both Klayton and Doug see that partnerships are very important and beneficial.

Cattle grazing minutes after rotation into the pictured pasture. Photo courtesy of Klayton Kree.

Future Plans

Doug wants to slowly and consistently expand his operation. He has been keeping an eye on property nearby and will continue working in partnership with the NRCS to meet his conservation goals. Doug has expressed interest in partnering with NRCS and the University of Wisconsin Extension to host a Soil Health Field day for kids in upcoming years.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Trempealeau County Success from the Field

Driftless Area Trout Stream Restoration

Background

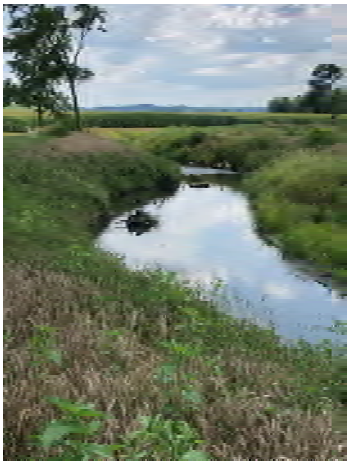
In 1942, Ron Halama's parents purchased 167 acres in the township of Chimney Rock, which is located in central Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, north of the city of Independence. Ron and his wife, Marita, raised a son and a daughter while running the family dairy farm, up until 1994 when Ron sold the cows. Since then, he has raised heifers and steers. Today, Ron and his wife own a total of 300 acres, which consists of a no-till corn and soybean rotation.

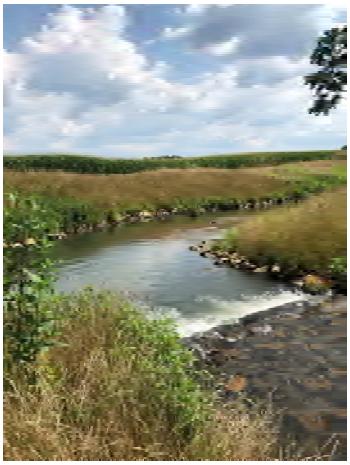
Highlights

Ron came into the Trempealeau County U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Service Center in the Spring of 2019 to discuss some streambank erosion that was occurring along the banks of Chimney Rock Creek. Ron met with Ryan Swatek, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist to discuss the farm issues. Ron has a Class II trout stream that empties into Elk Creek, which eventually flows into Bugle Lake, which is located in the city limits of Independence. The city of Independence recently dredged out tons of sediment from Bugle Lake in hopes of restoring its natural capacity. Being that Ron was on a Class II trout stream, he also wanted to look at installing trout habitat into sections of the stream.

With the assistance of NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Angela Fischer, in spring of 2020, Ron was awarded a contract through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program Regional Conservation Partnership Program (EQIP-RCPP) Driftless Area Habitat for the Wild and Rare. On the furthest southern 2,500 feet of streambank, Ron removed 1.1 acres of trees, installed 35 instream wood structures, 5 instream rock placements, 1,175 feet of streambank and shoreline protection and incorporated 3.5 acres of field border along the stream edge. With only a third of the streambank area completed, Ron applied again in the fall of 2020 to continue working north along the stream corridor. In March of 2021, Ron was awarded a second contract funded through the EQIP-RCPP Driftless Area Habitat for the Wild & Rare Phase 2. He is currently in the process of removing 1 acre of trees and brush, installing 310 feet of streambank protection, shaping 1 acre of streambank, installing 10 instream rock placements, 22 instream wood structures and 1 lunker structure, along with 1.2 acres of another field border.

When asked why Ron was completing this conservation, he responded, "I want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. Bugle Lake is downstream of my property and I want to do what I can to keep it in the best shape. I have never done anything that anyone would remember, so I did this."





Above: A healthy, functioning stream after the stream restoration effort. Left: Public fishing stream easement area sign on the property.

Future Plans

Ron's future plans are to complete the third and final phase of his streambank corridor. He will continue to work with the partners that helped make this all happen, Elk Rod and Gun Club, Trout Unlimited, Trempealeau County Department of Land Management and the NRCS. His stream restoration project will open up over a mile stretch of stream corridor that will include a public fishing easement.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

nrcs.usda.gov/wi

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Vernon County Success from the Field

A Passion for Farming

Background

Tom Sharratt always knew what he wanted to do—farm! Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he gained farm experience during summer vacations working on farms in Dane County. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin–Madison College of Agriculture, spent 21 years in the Army and 11 years teaching high school in Des Moines, Iowa, before returning to Wisconsin. Following three years teaching at Purdue University, he began his search for "the farm." The Driftless region appealed to him. Driving through Vernon County, he found a farm with some good farmland, a tobacco allotment that could help pay the mortgage, some good hunting ground and privacy. The farm neighbors agreed to help manage the farm while he completed his military career and also taught him a lot about farming in the Driftless Region.

His wife, Sharon, grew up on a small subsistence farm in southern Iowa and worked at Farmer's Home Administration prior to their marriage. Being a "farm girl at heart," she shares Tom's passion for caring for the land. Together, they purchased a valley farm near the original ridge farm and gained a nice home and useable outbuildings. Most recently, they purchased a forty-acre parcel adjoining their ridge farm.

Highlights

Early decisions in consultation with the farm manager led Tom to take highly erodible land out of cropland/pasture and plant thousands of black walnut and pine trees. He continued contour strip cropping and constructed a small retention dam to address erosion issues. The newest addition to their farm required major black locust removal. This was done with assistance from a good friend with a chain saw and a crew of high school students piling brush. Soon after, the "Timber Coulee Tree Farm" was established, where Tom and Sharon now host Westby High School field trips teaching forestry and conservation on their tree farm.

In 2016, the Sharratts began applying for assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to address brush management and forest stand improvement. Since then, the Sharratts have completed one EQIP contract and are completing practices on two additional projects.

Tom and Sharon Sharratt proudly stand by their farm sign.

Flooding has been addressed on the stream running through the valley farm with assistance from an Regional Conservation Partnership Program contract. This assistance provided stream habitat improvement, obstruction removal and streambank and shoreline protection.

Sam Skemp (now retired), Vernon County District Conservationist, shared, "Tom and Sharon are true conservation stewards who continue to actively promote sustainable land use. The planning and programs that NRCS and our partners offer fits their objectives closely."

Future Plans

All woodland is enrolled in the Managed Forest Program. Tom intends to follow research conducted by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) in the same watershed back in 1933—first such studies in the nation. He plans to follow those studies in continuing contour farming on his cropland.

Tom and Sharon are looking to the long-term future of their land. To preserve their efforts in caring for their land, they have put all 271 acres into a conservation easement with the Mississippi Valley Conservancy. Their legacy will be to protect this beloved land from subdivision or nonagricultural development and ensure it's use for wildlife and sustainable farming.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service

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USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Walworth County Success from the Field

Retirement Leads Beginning Farmer to Greener Pastures

Background

Beginning farmer, Keith Manssen, started his 34-acre Angus beef grazing operation in Burlington, Wisconsin from the ground up. Shortly after purchasing the farmland, Keith heard about the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through word-of-mouth and decided to utilize their technical assistance. Keith worked with Mike Gehl, NRCS Technical Service Provider (TSP) to implement a grazing plan for his newly-purchased beef operation.

Keith Manssen (left) talking with fence installer. NRCS will help prepare a planned fence design with producers.

Highlights

Keith's primary concern for his pastures was erosion in the lower areas, particularly after rainfall. These areas were most commonly where the herd gathered together, creating an additional issue of the concentrated animal waste scent. Keith partnered with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for the implementation of a grazing plan to tackle these issues.

Since then, Keith has added forage and biomass planting, livestock pipeline, a watering facility, Heavy Use Area Protection and additional fencing to his operation. Keith worked with NRCS staff engineers, soil conservationists and soil conservation technicians on the design and plan for his land, including NRCS Agricultural Engineer Brittany Ehlen, who confirmed the installation of an environmentally-friendly geothermal watering model that does not require an energy source.

Additional fencing installed as part of Keith Manssen's grazing plan implementation.

Future Plans

Keith's career shift to farming after retirement is a passion that provides new and continuing challenges. Having a significant role in the shaping and planning of his land has given him a huge sense of pride and accomplishment. While it is important to Keith that the farm enhances the area visually, he also wants to remain focused on making conscientious choices regarding its environmental impact. With his grazing plan in place, Keith does not anticipate any issues growing his operation to his maximum potential goal of 25 beef stockers through peak finishing season. Down the road, he might even consider a contract grazing relationship with larger beef producers.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Waupaca County Success from the Field

Fun and Profitable Grazing

Background

"Solbakken" in Danish means "sunny hill," which is a fitting name for the picturesque Solbakken Farm located just south of Waupaca, Wisconsin. The rotationally-grazed beef farm is operated by Art and Rheta Richardson, and includes rolling hills and large wetlands. Purchased by Rheta's grandfather in 1920, the farm has been in agricultural production ever since, evolving from a wheat farm, to dairy, and now, to grazing. After selling the dairy herd due to an injury in 2006, Art and Rheta began thinking about alternative ways to farm. During a conversation in 2011 with Lisa Neuenfeldt, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist for the Waupaca Service Center, the grazing idea was discussed. This discussion was followed up by on-farm visits by both Resource Conservation and Development and NRCS to begin the planning process.

Highlights

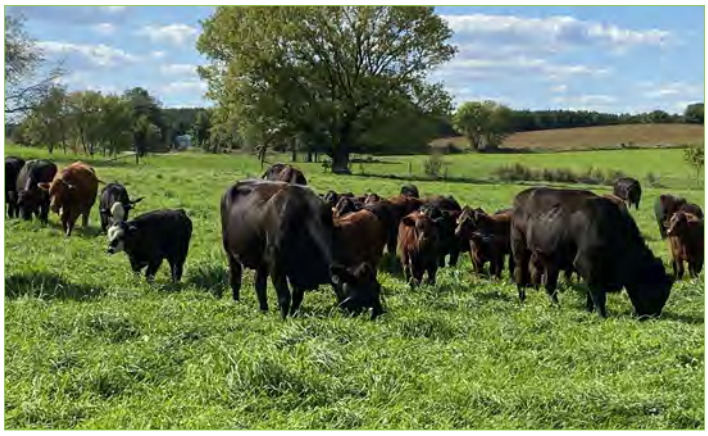
In 2012, Art and Rheta utilized the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for the first time and began rotationally grazing 62 acres. Through an additional EQIP sign-up and the Conservation Stewardship Program, they are now successfully grazing 215 acres and managing a busy direct-marketing beef business. Their operation also includes stockpiling forage for late fall grazing and bale grazing in the winter months.

When asked what they are most proud of, the Richardsons' highlights include: conserving the land and improving water quality, recycling nutrients on the farm, producing all of their own feed, providing habitat for earthworms, monarchs, pollinators and waterfowl, and having healthy animals. Art and Rheta are especially proud of the community pride that comes from local people who support the way they are producing food and improving the environment. They take pride in the resiliency of Solbakken Farm and the pasture's ability to easily withstand periods of drought or heavy rain due to their healthy soils.

Future Plans

Although a lot of work goes into managing a successful farm, Art and Rheta say "it's fun!" They are always making improvements to their operation, which include a finished new fence and livestock pipeline project. "It's a real joy being able to work with the Richardsons and watch the farm's evolution," says District Conservationist Lisa Neuenfeldt. The Richardson's hope to continue to improve the farm for many years to come.

Art and Rheta out moving the cattle.



The cow-calf herd.

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Winnebago County Success from the Field

Buckthorn Wars

Background

Eric Jones owns a 160-acre forest in Winnebago County that his family acquired in the mid-1970s. At that time, they planted around 90,000 trees. After a few decades of being unmanaged, buckthorn, an invasive species, started to move in. Upon Eric's return in 2014, after serving in the U.S. military and the police force, the buckthorn was out of control on the property. Eric knew the invasive species was becoming a problem and he needed assistance on how to control it. With the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Eric was able to develop a plan.

Eric and Sandra in front of their heavy equipment used to clear buckthorn.

Highlights

During a site visit with NRCS, Eric pointed out buckthorn was starting to take over portions of the forest. Eric applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program—Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (EQIP-GLRI) Invasive Species funding to complete brush management to follow his Forest Management Plan through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Managed Forest Law Program. With assistance through the EQIP-GLRI brush management practice, Eric was able to clear 38 acres of buckthorn, an invasive species. "The combination of the forestry mower and foliar treatment are proving to be the most cost/time effective way to keep the buckthorn under control," said Eric. With the removal of buckthorn, more light can reach the forest floor promoting the growth of desirable species. Increasing the diversity of species is making for a healthier forest. Since the buckthorn has been removed, management of the forest has been much easier. Levi Schultz, NRCS Technician, said "Eric and his wife, Sandra, are great to work with. They're not afraid to try different methods to achieve their goals. They even borrowed goats to help control the invasive buckthorn in their forest!"

Sandra picking some bountiful harvest in their no till garden.

Future Plans

Eric will continue to manage the buckthorn with the help of his new machinery. He and Sandra are very interested in a permaculture type system. To implement this, they are looking to construct a high tunnel and plan to plant pollinator habitat in partnership with NRCS through EQIP. The couple also hosted a regenerative agriculture field day to talk about their conservation efforts. NRCS looks forward to continuing to partner with Eric and Sandra.

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