



# Wisconsin

## Successes from the Field Featuring Local Farmers & Landowners Fiscal Year 2023



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# Easement Closing Leaves Door Open for Partnership



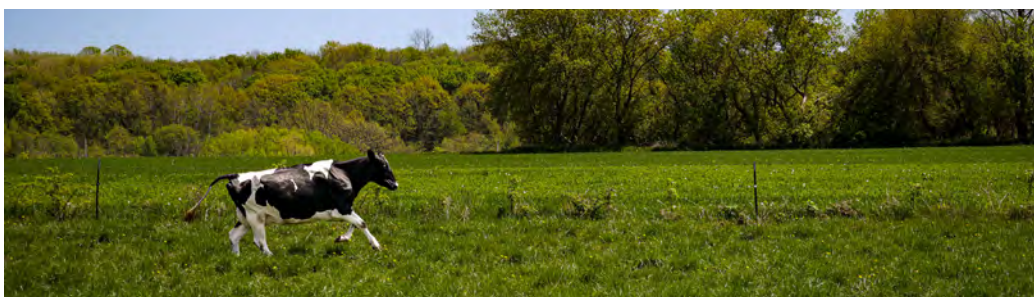
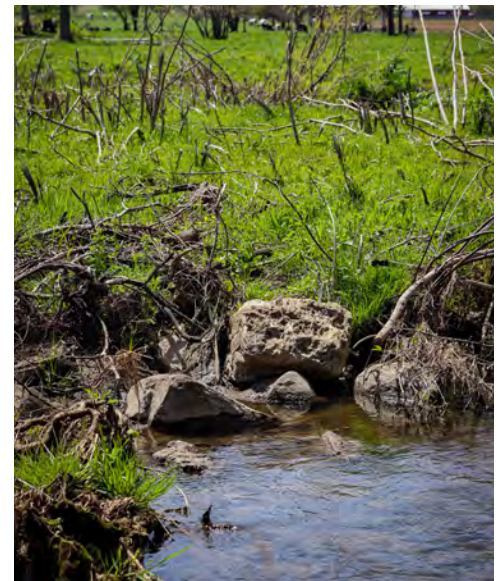
Wisconsin conservation partners celebrate a groundbreaking easement closing through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Wisconsin announced the closing of four agricultural land easements through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The purpose of easements is to permanently protect farmland for future generations, protect prime and unique soils that make up Wisconsin's most productive farmland, and preserve natural areas consisting of wetlands, floodplains, and hydric soils for floodwater management and weather resiliency. The four easements were voluntarily enrolled by private landowners and add another 361 acres of preserved farmland in the Milwaukee River Watershed. It took a strong partnership of farmers, county Land and Water Departments, land trusts, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), and NRCS to make these easements possible. Several key stakeholders involved in this partnership visited the Lettow family dairy farm in the rolling hills of Kewaskum, Wisconsin to celebrate the easement closing and acknowledge the work and effort put into the multi-agency collaboration.

The 64-acre easement, owned by David and Heather Lettow, contains prime and unique farmland soils, maple-beech woodland, wooded wetland, and a meandering section of Kewaskum Creek. Kewaskum Creek is a tributary of the Milwaukee River, which drains into Lake Michigan. The easement is adjacent to two other agricultural land easements, creating a corridor of more than 300-acres of protected farmland, and is the vicinity of a state forest and locally protected lands. The Lettows pursued an easement to permanently protect the farmland for the next generation of farmers—their children. David and his wife Heather farm approximately 500 acres of crops that include corn, soybeans, wheat, and alfalfa and milk 100 cows. Half of their acres are certified organic, and they graze their replacement heifers on 20 acres of one of their other farms. David and Heather have implemented several conservation practices over the years to protect their soil and maintain future productivity for their children if they choose to farm. Some of the practices implemented include a nutrient management plan, cover crops, contour farming, buffer strips, no-till and crop rotations. "Because of the easement program, we were able to purchase local farmland at affordable prices, while protecting the farming nature of the community," said David. The Lettow family also provides opportunities to children from local 4-H and FFA chapters who want to learn about farming, offering to hire them throughout the year to work with animals and instill a sense of responsibility while learning the trade.



Landowner David Lettow (left) welcoming NRCS staff, including David Gundlach (right) and Ryan Gerlich (center).





The RCPP is a unique Farm Bill program in that it leverages the capabilities and resources of federal, regional and local partnerships to target assistance where it is most needed. The partnership collaborates in the assistance of protecting, restoring and enhancing conservation practices on agricultural lands and wetlands through easements. “Partnership is what drives RCPP,” said Ryan Gerlich, Wisconsin NRCS RCPP Coordinator, “it uses the strengths of federal and local partners to get conservation on the ground that benefits the producers, the community and the folks downstream.” Ryan, along with Kristin Westad, Easement Biologist, and Alice Klink, Easement Specialist, are some of the instrumental NRCS staff involved in closing the RCPP easements. “They build relationships that I can trust, and you got to get the right people in place for that. They don’t distance themselves when they’re working with the farmer because us farmers like to work with people we trust,” said David Lettow on working with the partnership, which also included NRCS District Conservationist, Michael Patin, who helped develop and implement a Conservation Plan to reduce water runoff and improve soil health and wildlife habitat.

Other members of this Milwaukee River Watershed partnership reflected on the effort involved with closing the four easements through the RCPP program while touring the Lettow farm together. “The woodlands, the creek, and this active farmland, that’s really what Working Soils® [the MMSD farmland easement program] is about. Protecting the natural resources and the farmland all in one property,” said David Grusznski, Milwaukee Program Director with The Conservation Fund. MMSD Senior Project Planner, Kristin Schultheis, added “this has really been a great partnership. It was a really difficult process at times, [but] we remained patient with one another. I think we all knew we wanted to see this through and so it was worth it. We don’t do this very often where we just get together and take a moment to acknowledge what we’ve accomplished.”



David Grusznski (left) and Alice Klink (right) presenting the geographical layout of completed and upcoming project focus areas of Kewaskum Creek.



Members of the Milwaukee River Watershed Conservation Partnership from MMSD, The Conservation Fund, and USDA-NRCS Wisconsin with David Lettow.



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# Demo Farm Produces Next Generation of Caterpillar Caretakers



Father-son duo showcase conservation practices that welcome vital pollinators.

## Background

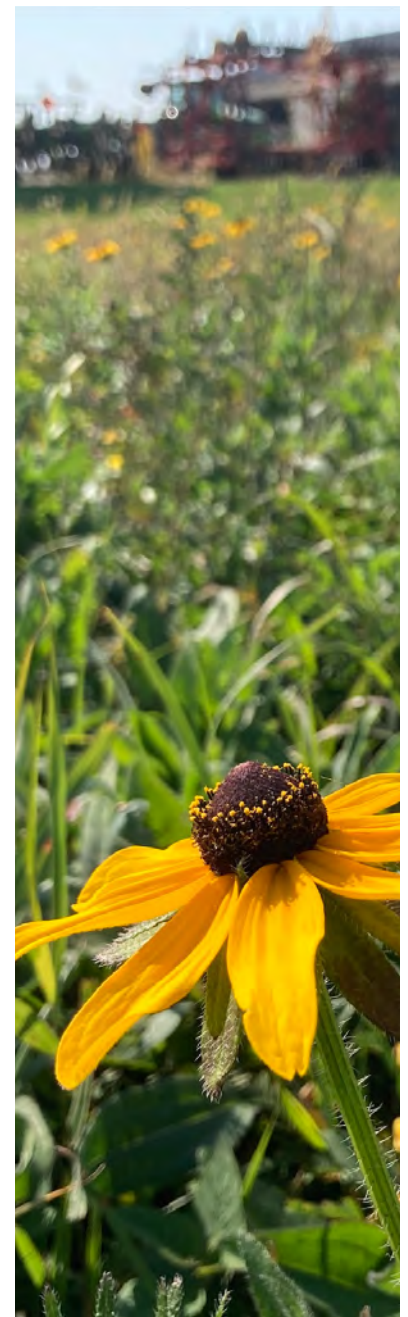
Just a few miles off the Lake Michigan shoreline, father-and-son farming team, Roger and Brian Karrels, operate a cash grain operation growing corn, soybeans, and winter wheat on about 1,600 acres in northern Ozaukee County known as Lake Breeze Farms. In the earlier days of operation, their typical tillage would include fall chisel plow, followed by several passes with a field cultivator and no green covers going into winter to protect the soil. But in 2018, the Karrels joined the Ozaukee County Demonstration Farm Network, a project under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), to showcase and demonstrate leading-edge conservation practices in cooperative effort with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Ozaukee County Department of Land & Water Management.

## Highlights

Roger and Brian learned about the technical and financial assistance through NRCS while working with the Ozaukee County Department of Land & Water Management, as well as hearing from their farming peers about some of the opportunities through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Staff from the NRCS West Bend Service Center met with the Karrels to discuss their options for voluntarily enrolling their farm in NRCS financial programs for assistance with the planning and implementation of their goals. EQIP provided incentives to help offset the initial costs of adjusting their planting equipment, changes in nutrient management, herbicide application timing and modes of action. “We’ve definitely seen an improvement in soil quality, reduction of soil erosion and water infiltration with the addition of cover crops, reduced and no-till to our operation,” said Brian.

After noting some of their best corn yields implementing no-till into a green cover, the Karrels decided to have Lake Breeze Farms join the Ozaukee Demo Farms Network because their aligning overarching goals of improving soil health, reducing inputs and most of all, saving time with limited help on the farm. “The technical/agronomic assistance of our Demo Farm Manager Ted Hoffman from In-Depth Agronomy has been the reason our Demonstration farm has been successful. It’s a great example of how the private sector and public sector can work together to assist our shared clients,” remarked NRCS District Conservationist in West Bend, Michael Patin.

With the success achieved through EQIP, Brian decided to apply for CSP in 2020 and installed a monarch pollinator field on their farmstead. Both father and son knew the importance pollinators play in the ecosystem, but the real motivation came from Brian’s wife, Deanna. When their children were younger, they would search the local pollinator field for monarch caterpillars as a family. Having the pollinator planting nearby has brought back fond memories for Deanna, who is excited to be able to search for caterpillars with their grandchildren as they grow up and appreciate the natural world around them.







Brian admitted that planting the wildflower field tested his knowledge of his planter to get the seeding rate just right and questioned if the curated pollinator planting mix would grow. But with the knowledge and advice from the staff at the local USDA-NRCS West Bend Service Center, Brian was able to successfully remove the previous grass/hay cover, plant a diverse monarch pollinator seed mix and mow to manage weeds the first year. In 2022, as a part of the Ozaukee Demo Farms, Lake Breeze Farms hosted a Pollinator Field Day for local farmers and landowners to showcase how pollinator habitat planting can be incorporated into their landscape and conservation plan to benefit their soil health and future crop production.

## Future Plans

For the Karrels, flexibility and patience have been key to building successes through no-till and cover cropping as their soil improves and profitability increases year by year. With a network of support and knowledgeable experts guiding them, they have gained confidence adopting these practices into their crop rotation routinely and adjust as they continue to learn. “If we can show that no-till, cover crops and other soil health practices can work to be profitable on heavy clay soils, within 3 miles of Lake Michigan and all of its micro-climate effects, we can demonstrate that they can be implemented anywhere,” said Patin. As for the monarch pollinator habitat, the Karrels are looking forward to guiding the next generation of caterpillar caretakers.



The Karrels experienced some of their best corn yields by implementing no-till into a green cover.





# Barron County Success from the Field

## Creating Dynamic Wildlife Habitats



### Background

In Chetek, Wisconsin, Terry Elwood manages a diverse range of landscapes. He has 95 acres of cropland and owns over 200 acres of forest and wetlands along Moose Ear Creek, a gushing trout stream that flows through southeastern Barron County. Already active in conservation, Terry partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and set out to create a dynamic habitat for wildlife.

### Highlights

In 2019, Terry enrolled his cropland in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Catering to Monarch butterflies, he converted 19 acres of cropland into a pollinator habitat; planting favorites like milkweed, coneflower, and bergamot, among many others. Despite a slow start and a thistle infestation, dedicated management helped the planting take off. “In order to make this a success, I knew I’d have to stay on top of prescribed mowing,” said Terry. As a result, his acreage is teeming with pollinators. “A successful planting takes at least three years to establish,” explained Barron County NRCS District Conservationist, Pat Richter. “In the first year it sleeps, the second it creeps, and the third it leaps. And this year, it really leaped.”

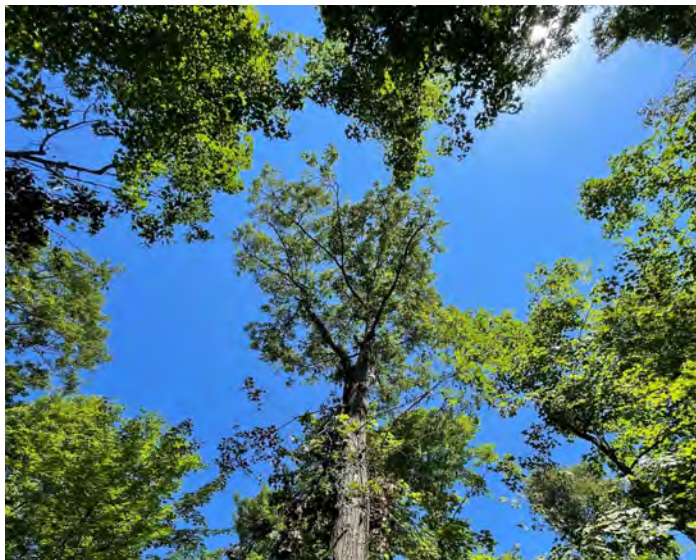


Hummingbird moth on Terry Elwood’s bergamot planting.

Terry has continued to partner with the NRCS and enrolled his forestland acreage in CSP as well. He began removing buckthorn, an aggressive invasive plant that suppresses wildlife-friendly shrubs and trees. Beneficial species like hawthorn, hazelnut, and winterberry started thriving in areas of buckthorn removal. On other parts of the property, Terry provided habitats and beneficial resources for wildlife by managing the tree species. In one stand, trees surrounding oaks were thinned to open the canopy for mast production. In another stand, alders were sheared to create an early successional habitat ideal to native bird species.

### Future Plans

The conservation practices Terry continues to implement on his property has attracted birds like Golden-Winged Warblers, Woodcock and Ruffed Grouse. He plans to further his conservation efforts through invasive buckthorn removal and prescribed thinning to provide even more permanent habitat for a host of local wildlife.



Oak tree dominates the canopy after an enhanced prescribed thinning.





# Brown County Success from the Field

## Wildlife Habitat Meets the Bees Needs and More

### Background

In 1987, James and Carol Crawford of Denmark, Wisconsin purchased a degraded dairy farm in Brown County. Shortly after that purchase, they enrolled in the Farm Service Agency (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to plant 20,000 trees on the property. As a retired Department of Natural Resources Air Resources Engineer, James had two main goals for his property: carbon sequestration and establishing wildlife habitat. As the planting developed and nearby farming increased in intensity, the Crawford's property became an oasis for wildlife. James partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to make his acreage the 'bee's knees' for a host of pollinators to thrive.

### Highlights

Thirty years after planting, James recognized the growing need for technical assistance to manage this forested area in a way that would continue to meet the Crawford's goals. James reached out to the NRCS Green Bay Service Center and worked with staff to come up with a plan for his 60 acres of forest land and 15 acres of cropland.

After discussing conservation practices and NRCS financial assistance programs, the Crawfords decided to utilize the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to implement a timber stand improvement plan that would reduce the forest stand density and implement a native prairie planting on the cropland acres.

The treatment plan designed by NRCS staff worked to open the forest canopy by removing every fourth row of trees in the timber stand, allowing the remaining trees to grow much faster and sink (absorb) more carbon. The harvested trees were left to decompose where they fell, feeding the biology in the soil and promoting "regenerative agriculture" through additional soil carbon sequestration.

The cropland acres had previously been farmed with conventional tillage methods, which releases (burns) more carbon than it stores. To further improve their carbon storage and meet their diverse wildlife goals, the Crawfords planted a prairie mix of native grasses and forbs designed to both target pollinators and build deep carbon-rich soil.



James Crawford showcasing his pollinator stand.

Initially, James was apprehensive about the pollinator stand mix, reporting "the first couple years, had a lot of weeds come up that we had to mow several times a year to keep them from proliferating." NRCS Resource Conservationist Myles Elsen reminded James that fighting weeds in the initial stages of a native seed planting is normal. The rule of thumb for native seed planting goes— "sleep, creep, leap," — the first year the plants sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.

### Future Plans

Unfortunately, with native habitat in an otherwise forested ecological region, there can be issues with encroachment when the prairie stand is not heavy on grasses. The Cottonwood from the forested area adjacent to the Crawford's property has begun seeding itself amongst their prairie planting. Left unmanaged, the seedlings outgrow the prairie flowers, effectively stamping out their efforts to create a diverse stand for pollinator and wildlife. James plans to pursue additional NRCS cost-share programs to continue learning about conservation practices that will help him win the seedling battle and maintain the 'bee's knees' of pollinator plantings.





# Calumet County Success from the Field

## The Power of Community and Conservation



### Background

Marvin Thiel owns 150 acres of land within the township of Stockbridge, straddling Lake Winnebago and Lake Michigan. 60 of those acres are part of the family farm co-owned with his brothers, that have been in Marvin’s family for generations and primarily farmed using conventional methods. Although the Thiel family doesn’t operate the land anymore, Marvin is still dedicated to caring for and restoring the land he grew up on.

### Highlights

Marvin approached the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with a concern that his waterway was losing capacity and filling in with sediment after every rain event. After an on-site assessment, NRCS staff determined that serious erosion upstream, causing gullies up to six feet in some areas, were cause for the cascading effect. The biggest challenge, was how to address the problem with multiple families and properties involved. While the original Thiel family farm made up the top of the watershed, the land was now owned by five different families. The middle section of the watershed was owned by three different families, while the lower part belonged to Marvin and his wife.

Marvin coordinated both virtual meetings and socially distant discussions in his garage, rallying neighbors from all properties involved. The project also required the assistance of the highway department to install rock for additional erosion and sediment deposition control where the grassed waterways and subsurface drains outlet before going under the highway.



Marvin Thiel next to the bottomless culvert stream crossing.

Marvin and his neighbors applied for the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to implement grassed waterways, two water and sediment control basins, grade stabilization structures, mulching, subsurface drains with multiple underground outlets, and stream crossings for farm equipment.

In total, the project involved the implementation of conservation practices on 120 acres of land owned by 3 different entities and 8 different families. The project took about one year from submitting the program application to successfully improving the efficiency of the watershed and eliminating erosion. Joe Smedberg, NRCS District Conservationist at the Chilton Service Center, assisted Marvin and some of his neighbors with the application and funding process. He says, “This was one of the more challenging projects I’ve been involved with, but also one of the more rewarding ones. Working with Marvin was so much fun. His passion for caring for the land is second to none.”

### Future Plans

Marvin is very enthusiastic when sharing the success of this collaborative effort between neighbors amidst the pandemic. “This was a major project; we couldn’t have done it without NRCS,” said Martin. He is confident he and his neighbors will be able to maintain the waterways and structures for years to come.



Part of Water and Sediment Control Basin (WASCOB) installed.





# Chippewa County Success from the Field

## Improving Agronomy through a Passion for Research



### Background

After receiving her degree in Marketing and Communications with an emphasis in Agriculture from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, Southern Minnesota native, Jody Wilhelm, met and married her husband, Aaron. They decided to put down roots in Fall Creek, Wisconsin, where Aaron took over his family's 1100 acres farm. Jody was intrigued by the lighter soil colors of northern Wisconsin, mainly attributed to a deficit of soil organic matter and a coarser texture. In 2015, Jodi and Aaron launched A&J Agronomy, a crop and soil health consulting company servicing West Central Wisconsin.

### Highlights

Jody has a strong passion for agriculture and figuring out the best way to do things. As she experiments with on-field solutions to reduce cost of input for producers, her efforts have naturally supported existing conservation practices. Her unique access to a wide range of producers around the Eau Claire area allows her to create an impact with more ease and trust. She passionately talks to landowners at many events about her personal on-farm research trials and methods.

The main driver of research on the farm is finding solutions for reducing fertilizer inputs by increasing soil organic matter, therefore improving soil health. Some of Jody's current trials include understanding how inputs and yields fluctuate by comparing conventional to exclusively no-till systems; effects of cover crop species mixes inter-seeded into corn grain; the effect of soil moisture on fertilizer availability at specific depths; and how rye cover crops affect long-term profitability.

Thanks to the financial assistance provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Jody has been able to seed rye cover crops for ongoing evaluation and analysis. Currently in the fifth year of their EQIP contract, Jody is dedicated to implementing soil health practices, including rye and multi-species cover crop mixes.



Jody Wilhelm standing next to her corn grain plot.

### Future Plans

Jody is currently studying the effects of soil texture compared to nutrient availability for her master's program at Iowa State University. One of her main goals for upcoming trials is to improve the seed mix in the inter-seeded corn plots—taking into consideration factors such as crop nutrient and water requirements, as well as the optimal timing and rate of planting. No-till farming has become a priority focus for Jody's future research, knowing the practice allows for less labor, time, fuel, and passes across a field, which all calculate to lower input costs. She plans to add more no-till plots little by little, monitoring closely for yield drops.

An experimenter and businesswoman at heart, Jody is keeping an open mind to other innovations and research as it evolves. The NRCS Chippewa Falls and Altoona field offices are excited to discuss the progress and outcomes of Jody's recent on-field experiments with the hopes of being better able to serve and understand landowners and the influences behind their operational decisions.

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# Clark County Success from the Field

## Wetland Scrapes the Surface of Land Restoration Goals



### Background

Retired Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) technician, Carol Eloranta, grew up on a dead-end road in Clark County. Her parents bought the 80-acre plot in 1944 and raised all 8 of their children on that land. Prior to their purchase, the property was a working dairy farm for over 60 years, then rented out for growing cash crops until 2016. Inspired by the book “Silent Spring” by conservationist Rachel Carson and disheartened by the way row crops were eroding the fields, Carol decided to stop renting and restore the land back to its natural state. She wanted to give something back to nature and not lose what she grew up loving about life on the farm and in the outdoors.

### Highlights

In 2017, Carol began partnering with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in hopes of restoring her cropland to wetlands through a cost-share program. She enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which provided initial assistance with converting her fields from row crops to perennial grass. In the following years, she planted corridors of trees and shrubs and a strip of pollinator native seed mixture.



Pollinator mix featuring Black Eyed Susans, Boneset & Cardinal flower.



Carol Eloranta next to the wetland scrape established on her land.

In 2020, a shallow scrape was constructed on the property that maintains standing water even through unusually dry seasons. The pollinator planting has matured into a thriving habitat for bees and other native pollinators. Although her trees and shrubs are still growing, she looks forward to the habitat they will eventually provide for the badgers and short-eared owls that already frequent the scrape. Even in retirement, Carol is continually working to create spaces on her property where wildlife can thrive. Now when she works outside, she can listen to the bubbling songs of the bobolinks accompanied by a chorus of frogs and toads that live in her wetland scrape.

### Future Plans

Carol wants to continue to create more biodiversity and improve the soil biology while lessening soil compaction on her land. She is working to control the ever-present Canada Thistle and manage the native plants that are slowly coming back. She is hoping to continue working with the NRCS and eventually enroll her land in the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to protect the progress she has made on the land her family has stewarded for nearly 80 years.

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# Crawford County Success from the Field

## Direct Knowledge Inspires Conservation Improvements

### Background

Jack-of-all-trade brothers, Eric and Chris Hammell, started farming in Southwest Wisconsin in 2004. Since purchasing their parents' farm in 2010, they have used their collective acreage to farm corn, soybeans, winter wheat, alfalfa, and a sizeable beef cow herd.

Along with farming, the brothers run a construction business that would often be contracted by the U.S Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for local conservation plan installations.

### Highlights

Implementing the construction of conservation plan recommendations funded by NRCS cost-share programs for neighboring landowners and producers, gave Eric and Chris inspiration and first-hand knowledge to pursue assistance for their own farm improvements and upgrades.

The Hammell brothers first received assistance from NRCS in 2010 through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with the planning and application of rotational grazing and fencing. In the following years, the brothers were approved for assistance through EQIP for aerial application of cover crop seeding on their fields.

In 2015, Eric and Chris decided to tackle the challenge that comes with farming the natural steep hills in the Driftless Area of Wisconsin with assistance from the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). They became an entirely no-till operation, which helped control soil erosion and increase their crop yields while saving time, fuel and labor.

### Future Plans

Eric and Chris have grown their collective farming operation to 1300 acres of mainly corn, soybeans, winter wheat, and alfalfa, and they each raise an 80 head beef cow herd. They plan to continue applying conservation efforts and improvements to their farm, along with helping landowners complete projects funded by NRCS financial assistance programs.



Chris Hammell (left) and Eric Hammell (right) by a dam they constructed.





# Dodge County Success from the Field

## Green Pastures Give Back



### Background

For over 20 years, Barbara Salas of Dodge County, Wisconsin has independently managed a grass-fed lamb operation. A distinguished sheep grazer and conservationist, Barbara prides herself on managing her land in a way that allows both agricultural production and wildlife diversity to coexist and thrive. Barbara grew up in Milwaukee and discovered her passion for wildlife and livestock at her uncle's farm. Later in life, she bought a 72-acre farm in Burnett, Wisconsin where she started her business, Salas Farms Grass Fed Lambs, and began her journey in stewarding the land through green pastures.

For the first 15 years, Barbara rented out her land for row cropping and her grazing operation began small with only four sheep. Then, with the assistance received through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), she was able to make substantial strides in expanding her operation. This expansion not only benefited the local wildlife and other natural resources in her area, but it helped transform her pastures into a lush green landscape for her grazing operation of 100 ewes.

### Highlights

In 2009, Barbara applied for her first NRCS financial assistance program and was awarded a contract through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for 8 acres of prescribed grazing. In 2013 and 2015, she received EQIP funding for 27 acres of forage and biomass planting, 3 miles of fencing, 1.5 miles of livestock pipeline, and an additional 50 acres of prescribed grazing.

Along with NRCS, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) and other local partners were able to provide Barbara with the knowledge and resources needed, to ensure her new operation was established correctly. According to Barbara, the technical and financial assistance provided by NRCS has played a pivotal role in the successful conversion of her land to pasture. The Salas Farm continues to be a thriving, regenerative agricultural operation, that gives back to the land. In transitioning the land to permanent grass and implementing a prescribed grazing plan, Barbara has made tremendous efforts to protect water quality, enhance soil health, reduce soil erosion, improve plant productivity, and expand wildlife habitat.



Barbara Salas with her flock of grass fed ewes on pasture.

Barbara is now able to serve her community by mentoring other beginning grazers and opening her property to NRCS staff and the public for learning opportunities. "Barbara has been great to work with over the years. I am aware of quite a few landowners whom she has provided pointers and suggestions, based on her experiences to help grazers along the way," said Cory Drummond, NRCS District Conservationist at the Juneau Service Center, "She has been both an ambassador for conservation and mentor for local grazers."

### Future Plans

Through the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Barbara has plans to expand on her conservation efforts by installing a native prairie planting to benefit pollinators and committing to a multi-year project to control invasive plants like wild parsnip, using prescribed grazing. With retirement on the horizon, Barbara remains dedicated to her flock and grazing journey. Reflecting on the past 22 years, Barbara's words tell a story of unwavering determination and fulfillment, "every single bit of it has been worth it. It's what I've always wanted to do."





# Fond du Lac County Success from the Field

## Continuing a Legacy of Conservation



### Background

John Floyd of Fond du Lac County has always been a steward of the land. The conservation seed was planted in him long ago by observing his father, Joseph “Joe” Floyd, incorporate conservation practices on the family farm purchased in 1963. A dry-waller and plasterer by trade, Joe Floyd, along with his wife Lois (John’s mom), learned about farming as they went. The glacial moraine landscape did not make farming easy, but they planted with the contours of the land and practiced reduced tillage during a time when the plow was still very popular. John credits his mother for influencing and encouraging his father to farm in ways that were low impact in terms of erosion and washouts, which helped their land continue productivity for the next generation of Floyd farmers.

### Highlights

John and his wife, Barb, have been conservation-minded for many decades, applying the mindset from John’s parents to their own mushroom farm off “Mushroom Road” in Eastern Fond du Lac County. After receiving financial assistance through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), they began incorporating herbaceous weed control to manage garlic mustard and honey suckle from invading their forestland and wildlife cover. They also planted 3.5 acres of pollinator conservation cover, then began planting hundreds of trees, such as oaks and maples, on the acreage John grew up on that was originally owned by his parents. To date, John and Barb have planted over 5,000 trees on their property. NRCS District Conservationist, Cory Drummond says, “John and Barb are conservationists through and through. They are so meticulous with the work they have done, and you can tell they take great pride not only in the work that they are currently doing, but maintaining the work John’s parents did before them.”



**Barb and John Floyd with NRCS District Conservationist Cory Drummond standing in the Floyd’s pollinator planting of 30 species mix of prairie forbs and grasses.**

### Future Plans

When asked why he has implemented conservation practices into the management of their land, John says “I’m continuing the legacy of conservation that was laid before me [that] I want my kids and grandkids to hopefully continue after I’m gone.” Barb added, “We really enjoy coming out and observing the wildlife that has been on our land. We’ve seen, eagles, owls, butterflies, turkeys, deer, pollinators such as bumble bees and hummingbirds. It’s been amazing.” John and Barb have shown an appreciation for the NRCS, saying that “NRCS employees like Cory Drummond, Sawyer Schmidt, and Mike Patin, have been helpful in explaining [CSP] while providing sound planning assistance. We’d encourage people who are interested in conservation to give them a call.” The Floyds renewed their CSP acreage for another 5 years and hope to leave the land to future generations to enjoy as much as they have.

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# Green Lake County Success from the Field

## Community Supported Agriculture Growth Increase with High Tunnel



### Background

For 10 growing seasons, Mat and Danielle Boerson and their hard-working farm crew has been “committed to organic and sustainable farming practices that heal the land, increase soil organic matter, increase biodiversity and produce whole foods for local communities” ([www.boersonfarm.com](http://www.boersonfarm.com)). Their focus has been on Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and a conservation ethic of regenerative agriculture. Marketing high-quality organic vegetables, eggs and grass-fed beef, Boerson Farm spans 69-acres and wholesales with two local restaurants and has a significant presence at the Oshkosh Saturday Farmers Market. They also maintain an online Farm Store platform where their buyers can customize their orders and select their pick-up location from 4 neighboring cities or choose to pick up directly from the farm.

### Highlights

Recognizing the value and demand for their organic farm fresh produce, the Boerson’s wanted to pursue building seasonal high tunnels to help them manage their vegetable production and ensure more consistent production. They applied for financial assistance through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), where they also received technical assistance from the Green Lake County NRCS Service Center. “The main benefit of high tunnel systems includes increased plant health and vigor. The system allows the producer to better control the growing environment, extend the growing season and safeguard their crops from variable temperatures, wind, pests, and potential unwanted pollen and pesticide drift,” said Caleb Zahn, NRCS District Conservationist for Green Lake County.

In August 2023, they hosted a Conservation Field Day and served a meal from all on-farm products. The crew of Boerson Farm grow around 45 different crop types, and of these, over 33% are grown in seasonal high tunnels to help maximize the system’s benefits. The high tunnel practice helped them continue to realize their goal of better producing healthy, locally grown food, such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, carrots, celery, herbs and 6 different greens. “Using the high tunnel puts us in a better position to produce a higher quality product, sometimes even better than growing in the field,” said Danielle.



Mat and Dani Boerson standing among some of their September high tunnel tomatoes.

With some assistance from NRCS, the Boerson Farm has expanded their high tunnel growing space to 3 separate buildings, allowing them to increase their growing quantity, quality and variety. The completion of an additional multi-purpose building has improved CSA’s farm pick-up system, houses their coolers to keep produce fresh and supports another bank of solar panels that helps offset the farm’s energy usage, and offers a great view of the farm’s prescribed grazing system and the neighboring Green Lake community they serve.

### Future Plans

Boerson Farm strives to create a resilient, community-supported operation that makes deep-rooted improvements to the environment by producing certified organic produce and pasture-raised meats using systems that sequester carbon and build soil health. They continue to work with NRCS on their two Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts, implementing a pollinator planting, field border, bale grazing, forage stock piling, and providing technical assistance to set up better prescribed grazing infrastructure on a neighboring property they are looking to lease long-term.



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# Iowa County Success from the Field

## Forest Management Glow-Up for Grandmother



### Background

Cathy Bleser and Dan Krunnfusz purchased their 49-acre property in rural Iowa County, Wisconsin in 2019. The open-grown oaks and rocky knob topography of the Driftless area drew them to the land. They established their family farmstead on a former crop field and converted the rest of that field to native prairie. Most of their acreage is dominated by oak and central hardwood forest tree species, with a jack pine relict crowning the rocky knob. But in order to see the forest for the trees, they wanted to have a detailed plan to implement as a guide for their conservation goals.

### Highlights

Cathy and Dan recognized the potential of their forestland to provide high-quality wildlife and native plant diversity. They applied for funding assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and received cost-share assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) for a written Forest Management Plan. Once the projects outlined in their initial plan were completed, they applied for additional EQIP funding for 2.9 acres of Brush Management and 24.3 acres of non-commercial Forest Stand Improvement funded through the Beginning Farmer Fund Pool.

The transformation of their forestland has been dramatic. By removing select trees and decreasing understory invasive shrub density, they have been able to create conditions favorable for oaks and understory vegetation. During her visit to Cathy and Dan's restored site, Iowa County NRCS Soil Conservationist Kaitlin Schott said, "It's rare to see such a rapid transformation on our woodlands. The results here are a testament to the dedication of the landowners as stewards of this land."

In every interaction with NRCS, Cathy and Dan have emphasized that their focus for the property is restoration. They have even affectionately nicknamed some of the venerable old-timer open-grown oaks. "I'll never feel as though I actually own all this. We just feel we have to restore it; leave it better," Cathy reflected.



Cathy and Dan with the oak tree they nicknamed "Grandmother."

### Future Plans

Cathy and Dan plan to continue to implement the practices recommended in their Forest Management Plan, including follow-up treatment on their brush management practice and expansion of the practice onto other acres. They plan to continue to use prescribed fire and interseeding as management tools to increase understory native plant diversity. Once they are satisfied with the baseline conservation conditions they have achieved, Cathy and Dan have considered applying for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to continue to achieve their conservation goals.

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# Langlade County Success from the Field

## Forest Management to Promote Wildlife Habitat

### Background

Through his forest management businesses, Randy Paff manages 230 acres of forestland and wetland near Peck, Wisconsin in Langlade County. Passionate about conservation and wildlife, Randy set out to “wholistically” manage the woodlands with the goals of improving forest health, wildlife habitat, and hunting opportunities in mind. Since 2017, Randy has enrolled in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for financial and technical assistance with accomplishing those goals through conservation practices.

### Highlights

With assistance through NRCS programs, Randy has performed successive alder shearing treatments across 26 acres to encourage healthy forest regrowth and provide beneficial habitat to birds such as golden-winged warblers and American woodcock. A wetland scrape was established to restore standing water and provide beneficial open water habitat for wood ducks, amphibians, and other wetland wildlife. In addition, Randy created wildlife habitat for a variety of species by building brush piles and girdling trees to create snags for bird species including woodpeckers and nuthatches, and potentially bats and other cavity-dwellers once cavities form.

Over the past year, Randy’s approach to forest stand improvement has created over 20 acres of patch openings across 10 openings that were predominately aspen. These patch openings add an additional age class of aspen to the forestland and provide both cover features and food sources for wildlife such as ruffed grouse, white-tailed deer, raccoons, mice and many songbird species. He also implemented a single-tree selection harvest across 55.6 acres to limit competition by cutting ironwood, elm, musclewood, and balsam fir from the understory and midstory to promote regeneration of sugar maple and red oak seedlings and saplings that were being outcompeted.

Emerald ash borer, a parasite whose larvae feeds on the inner bark of ash trees and disrupts their ability to transport water and nutrients, has spread increasingly farther across Langlade County. To address this growing forest health concern, Randy harvested four acres of black ash from a lowland stand to salvage before it could become infected, allowing him to maintain income while ash markets are high and start establishing new plants sooner into the area where the ash were harvested.



Before and after photos, showing a clear-cut aspen patch opening in March 2022 and it’s progression into a successful, dense regeneration.

### Future Plans

Randy plans to continue his conservation efforts by applying for edge feathering or early successional habitat management to help address the broken and leaning trees afflicted by severe thunderstorms. “I’m excited to see how the aspen patch cuts turn out,” said Randy. He plans to continue closely monitoring their progress, as well as observe the utilization of girdled trees and brush piles by the different species of wildlife.



# Marathon County Success from the Field

## Grazing Plan Helps Increase Soil Health and Time Outdoors

### Background

James “Jimmy” Bloome has been farming his whole life. His family bought their farm near Colby, Wisconsin in 1989, and over the years, their operation has changed quite a bit. They began by raising pigs, then transitioned to beef, and finally a dairy operation. Currently, Jimmy is utilizing his one-hundred and eighty acres of rotationally grazed pasture to help feed his dairy cows.

Before transitioning to an organic prescribed grazing system, he used to grow row crops to feed his cows. He faced challenges with wet conditions and crop productivity. Although the conventional system worked, Jimmy began looking for new ways for his farm to raise dairy cows.

### Highlights

The challenges Jimmy faced on his farm began with the soil. Wet soil conditions caused by a high water table and poor soil drainage made growing row crops more difficult. During an initial site visit with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), District Conservationist Amy Neigum identified the potential for a pasture and prescribed grazing system.

NRCS also provided Jimmy with a few practice alternatives to compare, and together they decided on which practices were best for his specific property and needs. Jimmy described working with NRCS as easy and enjoyable. “They are a great collaboration of people, who are easy to work with and knowledgeable. They make time for people and if they don’t know the answer they figure things out,” Jimmy shared.

In 2019, he applied for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to develop a pasture and implement a prescribed grazing plan in collaboration with Bill Kolodziej, the Marathon County Grazing Specialist. Jimmy’s plan included nearly three miles of fence, livestock pipeline, and a watering facility to make the grazing plan work. His contract included stream crossings, which help cattle cross safely and limit streambank erosion and sediment loading, as well as construction of trails and walkways that improve the distribution of the animals and their access to food and water.

Charles Schwartz, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, worked with Jimmy and designed some of the practices he implemented. When asked about his progress, Charles said,



Jimmy Bloome explains his grazing plan while his Holstein cows, known for their milk production, graze in the new pasture.

“Change isn’t easy, and neither is farming in Wisconsin weather. But Jimmy’s perseverance and commitment to success got him through those early hurdles.”

When asked what the most enjoyable part of his operation is, Jimmy said, “getting to spend more time outdoors with the animals. Before implementing my grazing system, I would spend as much as 6 hours a day in farming equipment. Now I get to spend that time outside.”

Jimmy participated in a conservation cover planting of five acres in 2021, where he established permanent plant cover composed of beneficial grasses and forbs such as Beebalm, Purple Coneflower, and more.

### Future Plans

Jimmy wants to keep working with NRCS and continue to improve his land. Over the next few years, he will be implementing a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan to ensure proper application of manure and nutrients to his land, and to protect the surrounding resources from runoff and incidental pollution.

Jimmy is also interested in the Conservation Stewardship Program, which helps landowners build on their existing conservation efforts while continuing to strengthen their operation.

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# Outagamie County Success from the Field

## A Strong Partnership Demonstrates Good Conservation



### Background

In 1995, Neighborhood Dairy was founded by brothers Mark and Joe Van Asten, along with neighbors Jerry Evers and Vernon Newhouse. Today, the Van Asten brothers crop around 1,300 acres and have expanded their dairy operation to 1,160 cows. With the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Neighborhood Dairy has adopted a variety of conservation practices focused on nutrient management, water quality, and soil health.

### Highlights

Neighborhood Dairy has a long history of implementing conservation practices with assistance from NRCS, dating back to 1998. “We have been working with NRCS since about the time Neighborhood Dairy was founded,” said Mark Van Asten, referring to their first collaboration with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), to implement nutrient and pest management practices. Since that initial project, Neighborhood Dairy has received EQIP assistance from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) for practices ranging from improving nutrient management to manure handling with the addition of two waste separation facilities. On their cropland, they have established several acres of filter strips, cover crops, and no-till fields with support from EQIP funds provided through GLRI. They also changed manure application methods and found success using a low-disturbance manure tool bar that injects liquid manure 4–5 inches into the soil (rather than surface application), through crop residue and green cover crops.

One of the most recent projects Neighborhood Dairy has been involved with is the installation of an open channel two stage ditch. The existing ditch would historically flood into adjacent agricultural fields creating sedimentation build up issues and soil nutrient loss. The two-stage ditch design would ideally double the capacity of the current ditch while mimicking the positive impact of a natural floodplain. The two-stage system reduces sediment and nutrient loading, promotes proper drainage, and greatly reduces the potential for dredging in the future. The project was a collaboration between NRCS, Outagamie County Land and Water Department, and NEW Water, the brand of the Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District and utilized GLRI Nearshore Health funding.



*Congressman Mike Gallagher at Neighborhood Dairy, highlighting the innovation of Wisconsin demonstration farmers.*

Interested in sharing their experiences, both Mark and Joe Van Asten are active members of the GLRI-funded Lower Fox Demonstration Farms Network and hosted an on-farm field day to demonstrate the use of low-disturbance manure application equipment.

The Fox Demo Farms Network highlighted Neighborhood Dairy in 2021 as the Clean Water Pledge ‘farmer spotlight,’ and in 2022 for Planting Green—planting directly into live cover crops. “Neighborhood Dairy is well deserving of any recognition they receive. They have worked with us (NRCS) for years and their farm provides an excellent example of successful implementation of conservation practices,” said Lynn Szulczewski, NRCS District Conservationist for Outagamie County. Following these spotlights, Congressman Mike Gallagher introduced a bipartisan resolution, alongside Congressman Ron Kind, highlighting the innovation of Wisconsin demonstration farmers. The resolution was written to acknowledge and promote “the role of demonstration farm networks in expanding the adoption of conservation farming practices that improve the health of watersheds and agricultural lands.”

### Future Plans

Neighborhood Dairy plans to continue utilizing NRCS conservation practices and promoting these practices with Fox Demo Farms and NEW Water’s NEW Watershed Program to improve water quality in the Lower Fox watershed.

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# Portage County Success from the Field

## Generational Conservation and an Educator's Lasting Impact

### Background

Don, Bill and Tom Roth purchased their father's Portage County 320-acre farm in 1973. When their father passed away from cancer later that year, the three brothers were thrown into farming full-time while also balancing student life at both North Central Technical College and Mid-State Technical College. Through their classes, they met Dr. Howard Larson, a UW-Madison professor and dairy researcher, who took them under his wing. To this day, the brothers continue to follow many of the practices Dr. Larson developed in the early 1970s, including not cutting alfalfa until after the first of September and the professor's feed ration guidelines. The farm has grown from 320 acres with 75 milk cows to 1260 acres with 160 milk cows. In 2009, Bill and Tom purchased Don's portion of the farm and assumed full operation of Roth Golden Acres Farm.

### Highlights

Bill and Tom have continued partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), following in their father's footsteps, who installed grass waterways as far back as 1959. Their father was conservation-minded and instilled that mindset in Tom and Bill. Every field they own is surrounded by at least a two-row border of trees. A major motivator for their conservation practices is wildlife habitat. They saw their first deer on the farm in 1961, and they have been leaving standing corn every year for wildlife since. In 2002 and 2017, they enrolled and re-enrolled 74 acres of cropland into FSA's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), which is a part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the country's largest private-land conservation program financed by FSA with technical assistance provided by NRCS. These days, Roth Golden Acres Farm typically has up to 150 deer and dozens of turkeys that choose to winter on the property.

In addition to wildlife habitat improvements, the brothers began planting their fields exclusively with a no-till planter. They implemented a Nutrient Management Plan and use cover crop planting with cost-share program assistance through the Wood County Land and Water Conservation Department. Bill and Tom have seen how poor farming practices have affected the Mill Creek Watershed over the years.



Farming brothers, Bill and Tom Roth, in one of their pollinator habitat plantings.

"You better work with Mother Nature instead of against her," Bill noted. By implementing their father's tried-and-true grassed waterways practice previously established with help from NRCS, their affected fields no longer develop gullies. With consistent no-till and cover crop practices on applicable acres recommended in their conservation plan, the soil organic matter build up is allowing them to plant earlier in the season. In 2018, their applications for funding through two NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts were awarded, allowing them to seed just over two acres of pollinator habitat full of native warm season grasses and forbs and install a half-acre shallow wildlife scrape in the following years.

### Future Plans

Roth Golden Acres Dairy Farm has made genuine and significant efforts to improve their land for farming and wildlife as they maintain a profitable working dairy business. They have applied for contract renewal and hope to continue to implement practices that benefit both their land and wildlife through the Conservation Stewardship Program.

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# Price County Success from the Field

## Stream Crossing Improves Ability to Manage Forest

### Background

Roy Gilge, a logger and former Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WI DNR) Forestry Technician, passed down his penchant for life-long land management to his son Mathew. The Gilge family owns 200+ acres in Price County, Wisconsin, which provides plenty of management and recreation opportunities for father and son. Damaged in a 2010 storm, a stand of timber on their property west of Price Creek was inaccessible without a temporary bridge used during the coldest parts of the winter. The site location had a history of a previously constructed crossing, but Roy needed a better way to access the stand for an upcoming scheduled harvest per his Managed Forest Law plan with WI DNR.

### Highlights

Mathew completed an application and was awarded a contract through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Through a partnership agreement between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection, the design was completed with the help of Cody Overgard, WI NRCS Civil Engineering Technician. With an approved stream crossing design, and many conversations with WI DNR, Roy and Mathew were approved for a permanent stream crossing permit.

Several conservation practices were implemented in the Gilge property project, including Stream Crossing, Access Road, Obstruction Removal, Mulching, and Critical Area Planting. The access road and culverts used for the stream crossing were designed to support the large equipment that would be used during logging practices. Cody designed the crossing to have a long flat portion of the middle of the crossing to allow for logging trucks to flatten out before climbing the hills on either side of the crossing. “The approach to the crossing needed to have enough height to ensure proper ingress and egress for the 80,000 lbs. log trucks,” Cody explained.

The obstacle of placing the culverts in such a remote location proved to be a challenge, but Roy and his good friend were able to successfully place them properly on the first attempt. A plethora of erosion matting and a seed mix would allow for vegetation to grow and hold soil in place on the banks of the crossing. Multiple diversions were put in place to divert surface water away from entering the stream directly.



Two 87" x 63" x 50' aluminized steel arched culverts being placed in the stream bed. Mary King oversaw the construction.

On working with WI NRCS, Roy stated, “everybody was very good to work with, Melissa Knipfel (WI NRCS Resource Conservationist), Cody Overgard and Mary King (WI NRCS Engineer)—I can’t say enough good. It sure turned out well.”

The effort of the well-rounded team of Melissa leading the contract and planning portion, Cody’s design, and Mary King and Klayton Kree (Soil Conservation Technician with Golden Sands Resource Conservation & Development) inspecting construction, made for the completion of a sound project.



Before and after photos of the stream crossing location.

### Future Plans

Roy and his family have plans to continue with forest management on the property following their forest management plan. During the winter of 2021-2022, Roy was able to continue logging and send trucks full of Ash logs to the mill.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service



# Rock County Success from the Field

## The Recipes for Helping People, Help the Land



### Background

Since their initial Rock County property purchase in 1985, Gary and Penny Shackelford have been stewards of land conservation. Though their initial interest in purchasing a plot of land was to have a place to explore their bird watching and wildlife photography hobby, the Shackelfords attended several conservation tours where they got a taste of prairie restoration and conservation. This led to their vision; the dream to return the land back to natural habitat.

Seven years after their initial purchase, they acquired more acreage adjacent to their existing property, and in 1995, the rare Eastern Prairie Fringed Orchid was found growing on their land. The discovery led to the designation of a portion of their property as a State Natural Area through a conservation easement. From that point forward, their vision was reimagined to maintain the natural land communities based on some of the earliest land surveys of their property done in 1837.

### Highlights

The Shackelford's first began working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), a voluntary financial assistance program last active in the early 2000s. With financial and technical assistance from this program, NRCS staff and resources, they were able to remove old commercial apple orchards, cut about 1500 trees, seed with prairie plants and practice regular prescribed burns. These ingredients came together on a recipe for restored habitat for wildlife, native prairie plants restoration and natural control of invasive buckthorn.

With guidance from NRCS staff, the Shackelford's added a helping of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and a serving of the Environmental Qualities Incentive Program (EQIP) in 2010 to their conservation "cookbook." They continued forward with forest management and associated NRCS practices, peppering in brush management and tree plantings. "We have had a great experience working with NRCS who have offered us lots of suggestions, such as how to approach weed control and steered us to valuable programs," said Penny. She found the [Conservation Practice Standards](#) to include just the right ingredients of NRCS



Gary and Penny Shackelford standing in their restored prairie habitat.

program conservation practices to leaven their vision of restoring their land. Today, the Shackelford's own over 380 acres of restored prairie, sedge meadows, wetlands and woodlands in Milton, Wisconsin.

### Future Plans

The Shackelfords have whipped up an impressive recipe out of common conservation elements, reestablishing a delectable habitat for indigenous flora and fauna. Though their initial interest in purchasing land was influenced by their desire to explore their hobbies more easily in retirement, they also wanted a place to call home. Like the (not-so) secret ingredients to all the best recipes, the Shackelford's dedication and love of the land is palpable. Looking forward, they would like to see increased hydrological connectivity to improve riparian areas and wetlands and envision regular prescribed burns and continued control of invasive species in the future management of their property. When they are no longer able to manage the land themselves, Gary and Penny would like to see their land go to a non-profit organization who will continue using the NRCS conservation "cookbook" they have been compiling for their land over the last 30 years.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service





# Rusk County Success from the Field

## Healthy Soil for the Farm's Future

### Background

Nestled in the foot of the picturesque “Blue Hills” of western Rusk County, Wisconsin, sprawls the 500-acre farm of Laurie and Larry Fortuna. They took over Laurie’s family farm in 1985, making her the fourth generation of her family to own the land since 1902. In an area that is known for producing high quality hardwood timber, Larry and Laurie milk 180 Holstein and Jersey cross cattle. Despite challenges effecting their operation, including low soil organic matter composition and soil compaction, they enjoy the life of Wisconsin dairy farmers.

### Highlights

Laurie and Larry have always had a keen interest in conservation and what that means for their farm. Several cold-water trout streams flow through the area, so as the dairy operation grew, they focused on safe handling of manure and other potential waste runoff from the farm. In the 1990s, they applied for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and were able to make several updates to the manure transfer and storage systems on the farm to allow land application while minimizing runoff.

More recently, Larry has engaged NRCS to discuss soil health on his cropland acres. “Over the years, I have fought with compaction and low soil organic matter content, and I want to do something about it,” said Larry. The Fortuna’s follow a typical dairy crop planting rotation for the state of Wisconsin: a few years of corn silage followed by three to four years of alfalfa, and they maintain some acres in a corn - soybean rotation as well. They applied for the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which offers financial assistance to participating landowners based on the level and amount of conservation practices being adopted on the farm. Nick Besasie, NRCS District Conservationist in Rusk County, helped develop a plan with Larry after discussing the options to increase soil health.



Laurie and Larry Fortuna inspecting a no-till soybean planted into a standing rye cover crop.

“The best option for cover crops in this part of the state are after the corn silage is harvested and we also have a small window to drill in winter rye after soybeans come off,” said Nick.

The first step of their soil health plan was to incorporate cover crops into the rotation wherever possible. Cover crops keep a living root in the soil for more of the growing season, scavenge nutrients that otherwise would be lost, and will help break up soil compaction. Larry also opted to increase the use of no-till practices, which can help to alleviate compaction issues and increase soil carbon. “CSP has been great for our farm. The program really provided the incentives we needed to start incorporating more soil health practices into our cropping system,” said Laurie.

### Future Plans

In addition to the soil health practices, Larry wants to provide habitat for the wildlife on the farm and has planted hundreds of shrubs on the property with the help of CSP. Going forward, they want to add more diversity to their crop rotation in the form of small grains, as well as grow their own cover crop seed in the next few seasons.

Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service



# Shawano County Success from the Field

## Improving Water Quality with Indigenous Land Restoration

### Background

The Oneida Nation, one of Wisconsin’s federally recognized indigenous tribes, owns over 32,000 acres of crop and forest land on and around the Oneida Reservation in Outagamie and Brown Counties. As part of the Oneida Nation, the Oneida Department of Land Management oversees 47 lease holders on their agricultural lands. Each year, the Oneida Nation participates in the reacquisition of land on or bordering the Oneida Reservation.

### Highlights

The Oneida Reservation falls within the Great Lakes Watershed, with land draining into the Fox River and Green Bay, which impacts the Beneficial Use Impairments identified in the Fox River and Lower Green Bay Area of Concern. This is a Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) phosphorus priority watershed which has been facing significant nutrient loss from the runoff of agricultural practices. The contaminated sediment making its way into the Lower Green Bay has contributed to poor water quality and the degradation or loss of habitat for indigenous animal and fish species.



Former manure storage facility ready for closure.

Kurt Jordan is project manager for the Oneida Department of Land Management, and has worked in some capacity for the Oneida Nation for over 27 years. In 2019, in partnership with other Oneida Nation departments, Kurt approached the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to request

assistance in closing three existing manure storage facilities. The facilities were purchased from former operators and contributed significantly to the contaminated runoff issue. Oneida Nation was able to secure funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), under the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (WTCAC) fund pool, to properly close the facilities.



Finished grade over the closed manure storage facility site.

NRCS Soil Conservationist and Tribal Liaison Sherrie Zenk-Reed, NRCS affiliate Resource Conservationist for Oneida Nation Jon Habeck, along with the Outagamie County Land and Water Conservation Department staff, partnered in developing and contracting the project. “The work that Oneida Nation is doing, like closing these manure storage facilities, really benefits the residents and the resources in the area, not just the Oneida Reservation,” said Jon.

### Future Plans

The primary goal for Oneida Nation is to continue improving water quality within the watershed through their partnership with NRCS and other organizations. So far their conservation efforts have been very successful. “I’m happy to see fish returning to the waters of the Oneida Reservation,” Kurt observed, as fish are culturally significant to the Oneida Nation. The aim for future collaborations is to utilize the EQIP program to complete a Forest Management Plan on every acre of forestland and to expand their existing successful grazing operations.

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# St. Croix County Success from the Field

## Conservation Practices Produce Fresh Outcomes



### Background

Mike and Jody Lenz have owned and operated Threshing Table Farm, a Community Support Agriculture (CSA) vegetable farm, in St. Croix County, Wisconsin for 15 years. With 300 subscribers and four full-time employees to keep them busy, they have prioritized efficiency, ingenuity, and sustainable cropping practices on their 10-acre vegetable operation. Mike came to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) looking for help upgrading an inefficient irrigation system and with hopes of incorporating cover crops into his crop rotation. After successfully installing two high-tunnels with NRCS in prior years, he knew he wanted to continue partnering with NRCS to achieve his conservation goals.

### Highlights

When Mike first contacted NRCS, a site visit was scheduled with NRCS engineering and resource staff to determine resource concerns and discuss options. His existing irrigation system only allowed him to water half of a management unit at a time, and it could not pump water to the fields furthest from the well. He was also interested in using cover crops to assist with weed management and soil quality improvement in the crop fields. NRCS discussed possible cover crop strategies, gathered information about the existing irrigation system and well, and discussed the possibility of planting pollinator habitat along the neighboring cropland. This would attract more pollinating insects for vegetable production and provide more forage for the honeybee hive on the property. NRCS staff helped determine the appropriate practices through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that would help solve/improve soil quality, inefficient irrigation water use, and terrestrial wildlife habitat resource concerns.

Less than a year after Mike first approached NRCS, an EQIP contract was awarded to install/implement the recommended practices. NRCS designed the irrigation system, assisted with planning the cover crop system, and planned site preparation strategies and a seed mix for the pollinator habitat. Within 6 months, the irrigation system had been installed, the organic site preparation for the pollinator habitat was completed, and seed had been purchased to start planting the 3 acres of cover crops for the year. Mike could not be happier with the early results he is seeing with his irrigation system, stating that “the irrigation system upgrade is life changing.”



Mike and Jody Lenz on their farm.

Mike can now irrigate two full management units and easily move this system between units throughout the entire property, which will help improve production on soils that are underlain by sand. Mike is also excited about the impact the cover crops will have on weed control and soil health.

The Lenz hosted a field day at Threshing Table Farm last summer for NRCS employees to learn about the conservation challenges vegetable operations face and ways to overcome them. “Mike is a very forward-thinking, conservation-minded farmer, and it was rewarding and fun learning from him,” said Dana Swanson, Resource Conservationist at the NRCS Baldwin Service Center.

### Future Plans

Mike plans to use a soil moisture probe to record and track irrigation water usage in order to develop an irrigation water management plan and ensure over-watering does not occur. He plans to seed his pollinator habitat in the spring and is looking forward to learning more about which cover crops work best on his farm.



# Vernon County Success from the Field

## Life-long Learning Leads to Organic Outcomes



### Background

Pamela (née Staflien) and Alan Seelow grew up on farms ten miles apart, in the hills and valleys of the Driftless area near Chaseburg, Wisconsin. They married in 1983, and ten years later moved to Pamela’s family farm, which was homesteaded in 1886 by her great-grandparents. Their love of the area and fond memories of growing up on the land with their families, led them to purchase both properties to become the next generation to continue the family farming legacy. They chose to combine their family surnames in the merge; and since, SeeStafs Farm has bloomed into 400 acres, with an additional 200 acres of rented cropland and pasture for their organic dairy farm and forestry operations.

Before the purchase, Alan received his degree in heating and air-conditioning and had been traveling worldwide promoting and servicing dairy equipment and bulk tanks for over a decade. Pamela worked part-time and focused on raising their four children; however, farm ownership ignited agricultural interests in the whole family. This included each of their children becoming substantially involved and taking on leadership roles, within their local County 4-H and Future Farmers of America programs. Pamela and Alan’s values of life-long learning lead them to pursue the Wisconsin Technical College’s Farm Business & Production Management training, where they first learned about the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs.

### Highlights

The Seelows began their partnership with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to develop a Nutrient Management Plan. Since implementing the plan, the Seelows have successfully treated soil erosion and improved soil health through the establishment of access roads, rotational grazing and the use of cover crops. The Seelows rotationally graze their 16 paddocks with the use of fences, water lines and water tanks.

Both EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) have been instrumental in addressing erosion concerns, increasing crop production, improving animal health and much more. On the half of their acreage that is forested, EQIP helped add trails and landings and improved forest stands, which lead them to enroll in the Wisconsin Department of



Alan, Pamela, Anthony and Megan Seelow with dog, Nova.

Natural Resources’ Managed Forest Law program. Profits made from the forested land helps to support their organic dairy operation. “SeeStafs Farm is always willing to install conservation practices, whether it is on the cropland, pasture or in the woodlands,” said Tom Kreuzer, NRCS Conservation Technician at the Viroqua Service Center.

In 2004, after recognizing the stable pricing organic dairy production offered and having their preferred farming practices evaluated and compared to organic standards, the SeeStafs Farm officially became a Certified Organic operation. SeeStafs Farm became the 600th farm to join the Organic Valley family farmer-owned cooperative, of which there are currently 1800 farms.

### Future Plans

Pamela and Alan continue to focus on adding wildlife habitat to their land through the implementation of conservation enhancement practices such as installing bird houses and adding a field border. As they look toward retirement, their son and his wife, Anthony and Megan Seelow are prepared to take over the 64-milk cows dairy operation as the 5th generation to farm that land. Pamela and Alan are confident that the conservation efforts they have spent their farming career completing, will be in good hands.

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# Washburn County Success from the Field

## Culturally Informed Land Restoration & Stewardship



### Background

Starting with the purchase of 40 acres from his grandfather in 1975, resident and steward of the land, Damian Vraniak, has since connected over 225 acres along one mile of shoreline of the Namekagon River near Springbrook, Wisconsin. Inspired by the history of the land he stewards and driven by his desire to connect more deeply with his family's traditional cultural relationships with the land, Damian has fostered a place of "preservation, restoration, conservation and consecration," planting tree and shrub species that are of cultural significance to his ancestors and those who have lived on the land before them.

### Highlights

One of Damian's largest projects has been to restore over 100 acres of remnant oak and red pine savannas. In 2020, he was able to remove 48 acres of hazelnut and other brush species with technical and financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), dramatically reducing fuel loads prior to utilizing prescribed burning as a management tool in the restoration process. Not only did this help keep overall fire intensity down to prevent excessive damage to the overstory trees and native forbs, but it set the stage for successful maintenance in the future.

Amongst the savannas, Damian has been working to restore the upland and lowland prairies for over 30 years in partnership with NRCS and several other conservation stakeholders including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the National Park Service. After voluntarily enrolling in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Damian received financial assistance to plant over 200 Saskatoon serviceberry shrubs over the past year. The Saskatoon serviceberry was used to make pemmican, a key dish in the diet of Damian's Nakota, Ojibwe, and Cree ancestors, as well as his forefathers who were Metis voyagers in the fur trade. NRCS Washburn County District Conservationist, Ron Spiering, noted "throughout my career with the NRCS, this is one of the most diverse landscapes I have ever seen in one place."

Damian's book "The Land Knows (me): Restoring Prairie & Savanna, Wetlands, Woodlands & Wildlife in Wisconsin's Northwest Sands Region" published in 2021 describes the process and efforts Damian has applied to the land as "objective, science-verified approaches with the Native



Damian Vraniak in 1975, standing in what is now the center of the restoration of 225 acres of wetlands, upland prairie, and savanna.

American (Iroquoian, Algonquian, Siouan) horticultural, foraging, hunting and fishing heritages of his ancestors to model a cohesive approach to sustainable, shared, subsistence patterns of living with the land, its waters and wildlife, that actually increases abundance and biodiversity rather than diminishes it." Damian explained the importance of partnerships to achieve conservation, saying "the land becomes what it is in a way that's similar to the way we care for and belong to one another. I believe that we can contribute in common cause to enhance the land's health and abundance as a natural ecological community, just as we support a healthy human community, both mutually sustaining one another."

### Future Plans

Thanks to Damian's dedication, the Vraniak prairie and savanna are comprised of upland and lowland prairies, wetlands, oak savanna, and red pine savannas intermixed amongst stands of aspen, birch, and lowland hardwoods. Because of his approach to restoration at a landscape level, the savannas are now interseeded with seeds collected from the surrounding prairies and he has planned for the next prescribed burn in the next year or so. When asked about the future of the Vraniak prairie and savanna, Damian emphasized the importance of guiding projects to relative maturity so that they are intergenerationally sustainable. At the core of his restoration efforts is ensuring that the land can be enjoyed for generations of family and community to come. He continues to promote conservation through tours and retreats that bridge the gap between people and a healthy natural ecology.

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# Winnebago County Success from the Field

## Production Thrives Under Seasonal High Tunnel



### Background

In 2017, Matt Wilson purchased a piece of land in Neenah, Wisconsin. The property had been mostly vacant aside from compacted row crops, so Matt reached out to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for advice on how to improve the soil and land for conservation use before starting on his grand plans to build a house, a barn and a garden on his newly-purchased acreage.

### Highlights

Matt’s military veteran status and being a beginning farmer made him eligible for priority funding. After planting his initial garden plot, Matt reached out to NRCS and applied for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to fund the building of a high tunnel to extend his growing season. His next goal was to improve wildlife habitat by implementing Tree and Shrub Planting and Wetland Restoration with Critical Area Seeding, also through EQIP funding. In the summer of 2022, Matt hosted a Field Day to share what he has learned about pest control, amendments and preparing for winter in the high tunnels.



Matt teaching Field Day attendees about the benefits of a high tunnel.



Matt Wilson, landowner, and his seasonal tunnel in Winnebago County.

Merrie Schamberger, NRCS District Conservationist in Oshkosh, said “Matt is so generous of his time. He has offered guidance to several gardeners who are considering high tunnels. It was a bonus to have him host a field day. People asked lots of questions and there was good dialog.”

Matt said “NRCS helped with how to improve land that was used and abused by the prior operator. We started with cover crops and now have a pasture mix.”

### Future Plans

Now that the high tunnel project is complete and proving successful, Matt is considering getting some farm animals once his pasture is fully revived. He plans to reach out to NRCS for assistance with how to best continue with proper conservation practices while supporting this next venture.

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