

# Walworth County Success from the Field

## 16th Annual Prairie Walk Returns To Its Roots

### Background

Sixteen years ago, Ray and Sharon Rippel, of Burlington, Wis., hosted the very first Prairie Walk in Walworth County. On September 28, 2016, the Rippels again, hosted the Prairie Walk. Ray and Sharon own approximately 35 acres of cropland originally enrolled in 1999 in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program. "We started simple, with the four big grasses; Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Switchgrass, and Indian Grass," said Ray. Over the years, the Rippels have worked very hard to maintain a high quality prairie on their property.

### Program Successes

In 2012, with the help of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and FSA, the Rippels converted some areas of their prairie into pollinator habitat. Herbicides and mowings were used to suppress the grassed areas. Then, 20 different forb species were planted. Prescribed burnings were also used to aid in forb establishment and for maintenance purposes.

Ray has several areas in the prairie that are his favorite (see pictures). These areas are typically very diverse or areas where unique species are thriving. Ray also notices areas that need extra work and attention. Those areas are almost a monoculture of switch or indian grass that have taken over the forbs. Ray and Sharon will continue to work on grass suppression while re-establishing the forbs in those areas needing extra attention.

The 16th Annual Prairie walk at the Rippels, attended by 60 farmers, partners, and general public, was a great success on a cool fall day. Participants enjoyed guest speaker PJ Liesch, UW-Extension Entomologist, presenting on bee identification and biology. Attendees also viewed a demonstration of bee handling gear by Ray and Sharon's granddaughter, Emma. Following the speaker's presentations and a beautiful walk through the prairie, attendees also enjoyed a warm, locally sourced and donated lunch.



*Participants get an up-close look at bee hives on the Rippel property. Their granddaughter, Emma, is using the hives as part of an agriculture project for her senior year in high school.*



*Ray points out Rattlesnake Master to participants on the 2016 Prairie Walk in Walworth County.*

Walworth County's Annual Prairie Walk is organized by NRCS, FSA and UW-EX. It is held annually in different seasons to facilitate the discussion of different topics and points of interest. Looking to the future, locations have already been confirmed for 2018.

