



# Leaving a Conservation Legacy

*Fifth-Generation Farmers  
Revitalize Dairy Operation*

*Above: (L to R) Bill and Tom Vande Wetering, Vande Wetering Farms; Barry Bubolz, NRCS District Conservationist and GLRI Coordinator, next to the water quality monitoring station on a Vande Wetering farm field.*

The Vande Wetering family has been dairy farming in Greenleaf, Wisconsin, for almost 150 years. Tom and Bill Vande Wetering took over the farm from their dad in 1994. The brothers are 5th generation farmers. Tom’s adult sons, Luke and Tyler, also farm, which makes the start of a successful 6th generation on the farm. They are happy to see that the family farming tradition will continue for many years to come.

In 1994, Tom and Bill took over with 140 dairy cows and now have an upgraded facility and 350 dairy cows. The Vande Weterings farm around 1,000 acres, planting corn for silage, alfalfa and grasses. They also plant wheat for straw to use as animal bedding. “We didn’t really want to get much bigger when we took over, we wanted to get better; that’s why we’re focusing on working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in partnership with the Fox Demo Farms, funded through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, to get leading edge conservation on the ground,” said Tom.

The Vande Wetering brothers started implementing conservation on their farm in the mid-2000’s, trying to combat washouts and erosion issues, while also wanting to increase their soil’s health. In 2002, the Vande Weterings worked with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install a waste storage facility, do critical area plantings, install a sediment basin, complete roof runoff management, heavy use area protection, underground outlet and manure transfer practices. With these successfully implemented conservation updates on their farm, the Vande Weterings were ready to try more conservation practices mutually beneficial to their farm and the natural resources they so greatly rely on.

The brothers knew conservation was not only about reducing their farms environmental impact, but also there was a financial and time savings associated with many of the practices. The Vande Weterings implemented residue and tillage management - no-till to ensure some of the soil nutrients would stay on the land. They immediately reduced their cost of commercial fertilizer use and equipment. In just trying one soil health practice, no-till, they realized the soil was too hard and it made it difficult for seed to take to the soil. Cover crops are another key soil health practice they needed to implement. The brothers tried cover

crops and they were the answer to their issues. They also worked through the GLRI-EQIP to install a stream crossing, grassed waterways, a vegetated treatment area, a water and sediment control basin, a grade stabilization structure, and try conservation crop rotations. “After implementing these practices and a few years of cover crops, soil health practices are the key to our success,” said Tom. “Cover crops helped increase the soil structure and improved infiltration rates, which has reduced sediment and nutrient runoff,” said Barry Bubolz, NRCS Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Coordinator. The Vande Weterings now no-till and cover crop over 400 acres.

In 2016, the Vande Weterings were approached by the NRCS and introduced to a partnership network called the Lower Fox Demonstration Farms Network (Fox Demo Farms). Fox Demo Farms is a GLRI project designed to showcase and demonstrate leading edge conservation practices that improve Great Lakes water quality by reducing phosphorus from entering Green Bay and Lake Michigan. The partnership is the first of its kind in the Great Lakes region. It consists of eight producers within the Fox River Basin, their crop consultants, Brown and Outagamie County Land and Water Conservation Departments, University of Wisconsin-Extension, and NRCS.

NRCS and the U.S. Geological Survey asked the Vande Weterings to partner as a Fox Demo Farm site to install an edge-of-field monitoring system. Edge-of-field monitoring is an effort to help farmers improve and verify the effectiveness of agricultural conservation practices and systems installed on their farm. Monitoring equipment is installed at the edge of a farm field to evaluate the quality of water draining from the field. Collaboration with producers in edge-of-field monitoring demonstrates the effectiveness of system-wide conservation approaches and their effect on overall water quality. For the past three years, the Vande Weterings have farmed a 40-acre plot conventionally to gather water quality baseline data. Now they are working on incorporating no-till and cover crops for the second season to watch their soil health improve and subsequently improve field runoff and water quality. They have also established a waterway, in which the monitoring station is evaluating on this field. “NRCS has really helped us with implementing no-till – it’s working and we’ve had



great yields; there is a lot less input and time with no-till; you don't have to run across the field 4 or 5 times anymore," said Bill. The edge-of-field monitoring results are eye opening to the Vande Wetterings and they've since worked to install many more conservation practices on their farm to help the land and water.

Tom and Bill next began exploring, with the help of NRCS, the potential benefits of managed grazing for their dairy heifers. The Vande Wetterings worked with NRCS to develop of managed grazing plan through GLRI-EQIP and started grazing in 2016. Through the help of NRCS, the brothers implemented forage and biomass plantings, fencing, watering facilities, livestock pipeline, prescribed grazing, heavy use area protection and critical area plantings. They began small, grazing 25 acres and three years in, are now grazing 90 acres. "We started out with an alfalfa grass field and interseeded the Grassworks Grazing blend pasture mix in it," explained Bill. They also have 125 acres of pasture cover crops. "This year was an exceptional year; grass likes moisture, like your lawn. We harvested part of our grazing acres three times because we couldn't run enough animals on it! It was a really good year for grazing; plenty of production and feed," said Bill. Ideally, the Vande Wetterings plan to graze year-round. The older dairy facility is being used to keep the cattle while there is a large amount of snow on the ground, otherwise, they are grazing," said Tom. The Vande Wetterings graze two groups of 60 bred heifers. They also graze the breeding group most afternoons. Most days, they have 150–200 grazing cattle.

"This is the first time we've tried interseeding for pasture. We've interseeded cover crops and done aerial seedings on our non-pasture crop ground, but this was something new. Through the Fox Demo Farms and GLRI funding, we started interseeding in our corn, 50 acres with red clover and crimson clover, 10 lbs per acre. We also interseeded 30 acres with annual rye grass, red clover and radish," explained Tom. The Vande Wetterings interseeded the cover crop, a few weeks after the corn was planted. "The clover was already spouted under the corn; and as soon as we harvested the corn, it took off," said Tom. The brothers let their heifers graze on the cover crop for one month and then took them off when snow was on the ground. They didn't want the cattle grazing the cover crops too low so the crop would live through winter. "Through the Fox Demo Farms, they were able to get started with uniquely grazing cover crops," added Bubolz.

Now that the Vande Wetterings are three years into rotational grazing, through GLRI-EQIP, they are installing



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Left: Cover crops and no-till for clean water sign highlighting demo farm work. Right: (L to R) Bill and Tom Vande Wettering with the cows grazing.

movable water lines. Having movable water lines increases the ease of managed grazing, getting water easily out to their cattle. The pastured acres on the farm are mutually beneficial to the cattle and also wildlife and bird species. "The health of the animals coming off the pasture is great, they are just the right size, their body tone and muscles look great; they are happy cows," said Tom. "It's amazing how well the cows have trained to the wire paddock grazing; we've seen a real difference in the health of our heifers out on pasture," added Bill.

Managed grazing has many benefits including improved animal health and welfare, improved soil structure and infiltration, financial savings from reduced feed costs and labor costs, as well as improved wildlife habit. The brothers have noted seeing many new bird and pollinator species on the farm that haven't been there in years. "What it used to take to feed our cows, the harvesting, the storing, the hauling the feed every day, now we don't need a large facility building to hold them. The daily difference—no more mixing, feeding, cleaning barns 1.5 hours a day. With the rotational pasture, it takes 15 minutes to move the fence," explained Tom. "We've worked with NRCS for years and the local field office. We worked with Soil Conservationist Julia Hager to get contracted for managed grazing through GLRI-EQIP and then Soil Conservationist Adam Abel helped us set up the grazing paddocks and is a continual resource for questions we have had throughout the process," said Bill. "The pasture is making it fun again, moving the cows and trying something new is rewarding and we're seeing it working well," added Tom.

For the Vande Wetterings, keeping their farm thriving and healthy is the key to their farm's future. With so much conservation already on the ground through GLRI-EQIP, they are now enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program, taking their conservation efforts one step further. They are now using GPS targeted spray applications, they harvest hay in a manner that allows wildlife to flush and escape, they leave standing grain crops unharvested to benefit wildlife, they apply enhanced efficiency fertilizer products and they perform plant tissue tests and analyze them to improve nitrogen management. "Saving the soil is most important; we've been here over 100 years and we want to be here at least another 100," added Bill. In future years, the Vande Wetterings are planning to install a seasonal wetland for migrating birds species and continue their dairy with soil health practices and managed grazing. "Listening to the farming stories from my grandparents I knew I wanted to continue farming. My father is over 80 and he is here every day on the farm. Our family just loves it," added Bill. "We're still here and making a good family life and living, we are proud to be a family farm," added Tom.

Below (Top to bottom): Close-up of red clover. Clover cover crop thrives after corn harvest. Barry and the Vande Wettering brothers assessing field conditions.



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