

Pierce County Success from the Field

Conservation Stewardship Program Success



Background

John Robey and his wife Monica, of Rock Elm Dairy, Inc., are dairy farmers in Elmwood, Wisconsin. They operate roughly 200 acres of cropland and have a mosaic of associated agricultural land and forest land adjacent to the crop fields in the northern tier of Wisconsin's Driftless Area. John signed up for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with the hopes of making wildlife improvements to his already conservation-minded operation. Before signing up for CSP, John had been implementing a diverse conservation crop rotation with a long-term hay rotation, mulch tillage and followed a nutrient management plan.

Highlights

John applied for CSP in the spring of 2017. During the initial inventory of the farm, John and a U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) representative, Mark Biel, started discussing potential activities available through the CSP. While there were many options available, John was most interested in the wildlife options to convert marginal cropland into monarch habitat. He operated quite a few acres of wet or steep and stony ground that was not always profitable in a production environment. Converting the land to monarch habitat was a win-win by creating diverse habitat for the declining populations of monarch butterflies, as well as lessening his production costs and protecting soil and water quality resources. The habitat plantings have allowed John to enjoy all his farmland versus the annual struggle that came along with farming these challenging acres.

John has converted about 30 acres of cropland to monarch habitat. The monarch mix included over 10 species of native forbs and 2 species of native grasses. The mix includes monarch-friendly plants, such as Common Milkweed, Black-eyed Susan, and Bergamot. In addition to monarch habitat, John has improved wildlife habitat on his farmstead through other CSP program offerings, such as planting additional trees on his farmstead. John is very happy with the results of the tree and monarch plantings so far. He stated, "Monarch butterfly habitat is one of the best uses for these marginal lands. The CSP has benefited both my operation and the land. We have seen an increase in wildlife including deer, turkey,



John and Monica Robey of Rock Elm Dairy are standing in a 13.9-acre plot of monarch habitat established in 2019. Black-eyed Susan, Purple Prairie Clover, Wild Bergamot and several other pollinator species were seen in bloom during a site visit in August of 2020.

butterflies and other insects since planting the monarch habitat." Pierce County District Conservationist Jason Barrick added, "Especially in the challenging financial years, it is rewarding to see success with producers in finding financially and environmentally beneficial conservation practices."

Future Plans

Rock Elm Dairy continues to evaluate the profitability of their acreage and will be working with NRCS to evaluate other conservation opportunities on their lands. John will continue to manage and inventory the habitat plantings annually to maintain the high quality habitat for monarchs, pollinators and other wildlife to enjoy for years to come.

