

# Marathon County Success from the Field

## The Evolution of a Conservation Farmer



### Background

Mark Easker, of Norrie Lake Dairy Farm in Birnamwood, Wisconsin, lives the story of what has happened to many dairy farms in Wisconsin. Although the farm name is Norrie Lake Dairy, Mark hasn't had cattle since spring of 2008. Today, he farms 280 acres of corn and 250 acres of soybeans following the key principles of soil health to protect his land.

### Highlights

In 2014, Mark became familiar with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) when he signed up for cover crops financial assistance through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). At that time, the cover crops gave him an advantage over other farmers looking for cropland to rent. The landowners in his area were sportsmen who wanted cover crops on the fields for over-winter wildlife food. The first cover crop he planted was a mix of annual ryegrass and tillage radish. The landowners thought it was good cover for wildlife. Mark thought it was one of his best established cover crops aerial seeded over soybeans.

As the years went by, Mark planted different cover crop mixes using aerial seeding. He has had his share of successes and failures trying different mixes and applications. White mold devastated his soybean yield in 2016. He observed that the beans that had less tillage were not damaged as much by white mold as the beans in the fields with more tillage. In 2016, he added no-till to his management system. Mark realized that he was saving time and money without doing extra tillage.

"Mark has expanded his conservation efforts into the forest that he owns through the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program," said Amy Neigum, Marathon County NRCS District Conservationist. He took his conservation efforts one step further by installing nine bat houses near surface water. He also erected a barrier to exclude deer browse so that natural regeneration of the forest could take place.

### Future Plans

Mark recently requested technical and financial assistance to increase irrigation efficiency on 101 acres through the EQIP program.



A multi-species mix of cover crops was interseeded into corn.

Mark shared that NRCS technical assistance helped to motivate him and expand his knowledge about cover crops. He is also thankful for the financial assistance provided by the NRCS, which helped when problems arose on his land and helped with subsequent costs. NRCS looks forward to continuing to work with Mark to meet his unique conservation needs.

