Sustainability at its Best

Beginning Farmer Revitalizes Former Mining Land

Above: Farmer Dan Shelliam, with his cattle on his 475 acre Lafayette County farm.

Dan Shelliam, of Lafayette County, Wisconsin, grew up on a farm and started milking cows when he was 15. In 2000, he started farming full time and subsequently signed up for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Beginning Farmer Program through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Dan runs a cattle and cash crop farm. As a beginning farmer, he started with 25 acres of pasture and 6 acres of work ground. Today he farms around 475 acres, and has 70 cattle. He farms the large area himself, with the help of his two children and wife, Kristie, who's a pro at driving the skid loader to pick up bales. His son Casey, age 12, is an avid farm helper already. Dan says he wants to milk cows. His daughter Alyssa, age 8, loves to pick apples from the trees and feed them to the cattle. "As soon as the cattle see Alyssa, they come running," said Dan.

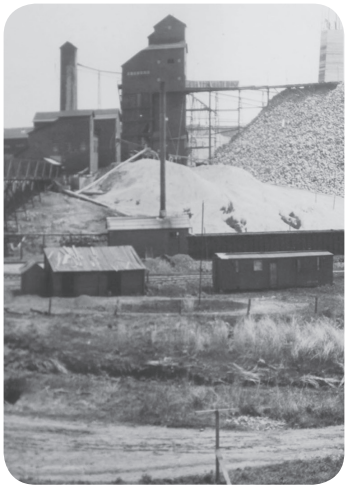
Shelliam's father and grandfather had a milking parlor setup for a while, and that, along with many neighboring farm family and friends, sparked his interest in farming full time. He's been around farms all his life. "I remember riding the tractor, choppers and combines with my dad, venturing around the farm" said Dan. He learned about the agency in watching projects on neighboring farms that had received financial and technical assistance from NRCS. "Seeing some of the practices applied, like forestry and cover crops through EQIP, and seeing what it's done for soil health and bringing wildlife back in, has been very gratifying," said Dan.

"A lot of the land I acquired was what no one else wanted," explained Shelliam. Much of the land was run down, and the ground was previously disturbed by heavy mining. "Truly a bad thing for any farmer out there, there's so many heavy metals on top of the ground around here; in a dry year, those heavy metals contribute to drying up all the soils nutrients," said Dan. "Zinc is normally measured in parts per million and the zinc I had on the land could be measured in grams." The mining ground also had major erosion issues. Dan knew it would take years to fix the soil health issues on his land, but he was up for the challenge with the help of NRCS.

Through technical and financial assistance provided by NRCS, Dan has enrolled 325 acres in EQIP and 200 acres in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Dan applied conservation practices on much of his farm to combat erosion, improve water quality, wildlife habitat, and air quality. He installed grassed waterways, rip rap, stream crossings, back water scrapes, cover crops, and uses no-till and low drift nozzles on his sprayer. "After a few years of applying conservation practices and enhancements to the watershed, areas that used to flood and cause erosion don't flood anymore," said Dan. The application of over 4,000 feet of rip rap and streambank repair in the watershed, installation of a ford stream crossing, and seeding the ford crossing have made a huge difference in grazing his cattle. The installed ford stream crossing helps combat streambank erosion because the cattle

Wisconsin

Left: Dan Shelliam and Matt Miller, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, discuss herd health. Below left: Early 1900's mining ground Dan currently farms sustainably. Below right: Revitalized land with radish cover crop interseeded between corn rows.



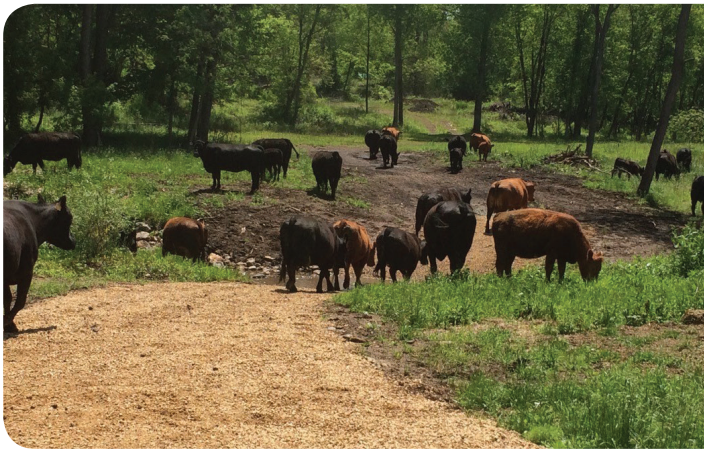
now drink down at the gravel crossing. Shelliam now rotationally grazes his cattle through 6 different paddocks. With rotational grazing and practicing conservation, he sees grass a month longer than most if there's a drought. Dan agrees with Aldo Leopold and recited his famous quote , "Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land – when you see the cattle working the various landscapes through rotational grazing, see the cover crops sprouting after a good rain, when things are managed with conservation in mind, you witness how much better things can be."

Dan has also practiced no-till for 9 years and he utilizes and interseeds multi-species cover crops including radish, Italian rye grass, turnips, and clover. Dan says he's letting his cover crop do the till work from now on. Shelliam is planning to do larger varieties of cover crops in the future. "Little implementations with the help of NRCS programs; each one helps benefit one another to get conservation done," said Dan. Melissa Bartz, District Conservationist in Darlington explains further, "He is always thinking of ways to improve his land and his operation. He wants to work with the land to improve the health of the soil and its productivity. He seeks out information and does the research needed to be successful with new management techniques such as cover crops, no till and rotational grazing."

When asked about the importance of conservation practices implemented and how they fit into the overall plan of his farm, he has a one word answer, "Sustainability." Dan's taken sustainability in conservation one step further through education. In working on over 360 acres of rented land it's important for him to keep in good spirits with the landowners and teach them how conservation can be applied on their lands.

Farming is where Dan's heart is. "If you go to work and it doesn't feel like work, you're doing what you love, you get to see your production and success every year, taking pride in your work. Farming is a hard job, but to be around nature all day, it couldn't get any better."

Dan says the more he's implemented with NRCS, the better off he's been. He enjoys watching the progress. "The turtles and endangered frog populations in our ponds are even more prevalent due to the installed conservation practices aiding in increased prime habitat. All the conservation practices we've done, we've really seen a kick back towards something else, whether it's increased wildlife or combating erosion," said Dan. "Our sustainability is going to be even better in a couple more years."



Above: During (top) and after (bottom) streambank repair and the installation of rip rap and a ford stream crossing and seeding.

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