

Easement Landowner Profile

Jewell Family Winneshiek County



by Kerri Sorrell, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

Bobby Jewell grew up on the edge of Decorah, hunting, fishing and watching his dad wrangle Brown Swiss dairy cows on a farm rich with adventure. It was a little boy's heaven, and he certainly wasn't the first or last Jewell to think so. Five generations of Jewells have watched the family farm transform and grow. If they have their way, a few more generations might do the same.

"We've always felt blessed to live where we do," said Bobby. "It doesn't get much better than where we're at."

The farm that raised the Jewells now encompasses nearly 1,200 acres just outside city limits — a mix of row crop, pasture, timber and floodplain. The Upper Iowa River meanders through it, along with a small stretch of Ten Mile Creek and three springs.

The Jewells have raised cattle since the early '70s and turkeys since 1958 (transitioning to organic in 2001). Bobby's father was a seed corn dealer and sold feed and



farm equipment. "We've always thought diversification was the answer, and still do," said Bobby. It's a farm dotted in a long history of innovation and stewardship.

ALE Easement

In 2017, Bobby and family finalized a permanent protection plan for their farm that had been brewing for almost 15 years. With conservation and the longevity of their family's farm operation in mind, the Jewells signed an Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) with INHF and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service on 696 acres.

The federal ALE program, formerly the Farm and Ranch Protection Program (FRPP), aims to protect working lands, and is specifically focused on encouraging and implementing conservation and sustainable agricultural practices. Since 1995, INHF has helped complete more than 20 ALE/FRPP land easements across the state. The Jewell's ALE is the largest such protection in the state of Iowa.

"It's hard to protect almost any land in Iowa without an agricultural component — it's the landscape of our state," said Brian Fankhauser, INHF blufflands program director. "We worked with the Jewells for many years to find the right balance of conservation and agriculture, in a way that was financially feasible for their farm operation."

"We realized what was so special about our place was how it is right now," said Bobby. "Protecting the land assured us that if we ever felt the temptation to sell, it



The Jewell Family takes a picture on their EWP easement.

couldn't be developed or have its wildness taken away." Bobby has passed on his love for the land to his four children — Jessica, Samantha, Robby and Josey — with the hopes they'd take care of the farm, too. Robby now manages the farm with his dad, and has big plans for the future.

"The [ALE] program has really focused us on sustainable agriculture and putting the environment and soil first," said Robby. "In the end, it's the land that makes the money and it needs to be managed properly."

The Jewells are looking forward: plans to experiment with cover crops, no-till farming, mob density grazing (rotating cattle in tight patterns to prevent overgrazing) and expanding their organic crop operation are already in the works.

"What struck me most about the family is their love of natural resources, love of the area and their dedication to thinking big for agriculture and conservation," said INHF President Joe McGovern. "They want to stay a viable ag operation. We wanted to see the natural areas thrive, too. This is a great example of finding common ground with farmers and producers for a shared vision."

"My dad handed this farm down to me, and I'm handing it down to Robby, and hopefully he'll hand it down to his kids," said Bobby.

"Not having this place wouldn't be right," said Robby.

And as he starts in on his ideas for year-round cover crops and soil retention, he explains that "you always have to have a living root in the ground." Maybe he's not just talking about crops.



An aerial image of the Jewell farm near Decorah. The Jewells enrolled the farm in an ALE easement in 2017.