



# Leadership for Midwestern Watersheds

## AGENDA

FEBRUARY 27-28, 2025

STARVED ROCK LODGE & CONFERENCE CENTER

ONE LODGE LANE, OGLESBY, IL 61348

A NETWORK FOR KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AMONG AGRICULTURAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS

\* all sessions meet in the Starved Rock Room, all meals are served in the Great Hall \*

### Wednesday, February 26th

7:00 PM Pre-event social (La Salle Room)

### Thursday, February 27th

8:00 AM Registration and breakfast

9:00 AM Morning sessions:

**Welcome and Introductions** – Craig Ficenec and Haleigh Summers, Sand County Foundation

**Regenerative Leadership: Principles for Navigating Your Toughest Challenges** – Ryan Erisman, Odyssey Collaborations, LLC

**Farmer Leadership Case Studies and Panel Discussion** – Multiple Farmers from the Midwest

12:00 PM Buffet lunch

1:00 PM Afternoon sessions:

**The Evolution of Wisconsin’s Producer-Led Program** – Dani Heisler, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

**Farmer Panel Discussion** – Wisconsin Producer-Led Watershed Protection Group Leaders

**Updates from the Diverse Corn Belt project: Enhancing Rural Resilience through Landscape Diversity in the Midwest** – Emily Usher-DeaKyne, Purdue University

**Facilitated Small Group Discussions**

5:30 PM Happy hour followed by group dinner

### Friday, February 28th

7:30 AM Breakfast

8:00 AM Morning sessions:

**Farmer-Industry Collaboration to Meet Climate and Water Conservation Goals** – Jim Eckberg, General Mills

**The Conservation Practitioner Poll: What Do CPs Need to Get More Conservation on the Ground?** – Catherine DeLong, Iowa State University

**Farmer Leadership Case Studies and Facilitated Discussion** – Multiple Farmers from the Midwest

**Closing Activity**

12:00 PM Buffet lunch, and adjourn

Presented by Sand County Foundation and partners, with financial support from North-Central SARE and the following sponsors.



# Presentation Lineup

## **Regenerative Leadership: Principles for Navigating Your Toughest Challenges -**

Ryan Erisman

Discover a framework for leading transformational change using regenerative principles that apply equally from the farm field to the social field. Learn why so many change initiatives fall short. This brief, interactive workshop will help you see whole systems and ways to plant powerful seeds of change.

## **The Evolution of Wisconsin's Producer-Led Program - Dani Heisler**

Sharing the evolution of a bottom-up, producer-led organizational approach to improving Wisconsin's soil and water quality.

## **Updates from DiverseCornBelt: Enhancing Rural Resilience through Landscape Diversity in the Midwest - Emily Usher-DeaKyne**

The Diverse Corn Belt Project (#DCB) is a five-year, multi-disciplinary research project exploring opportunities beyond corn and soybeans and investigating the real-world impacts of diversified farming systems. Emily will share updates and next steps from the Diverse Corn Belt Team, highlighting opportunities and challenges related to diversified agriculture as well as visions and priorities for the future.

## **Farmer-Industry Collaboration to Meet Climate and Water Conservation Goals -**

Jim Eckberg

This presentation will describe how the food industry is collaborating with conservationists and farmers to meet sustainability goals. Jim will present a whole farm insetting methodology that translates farmer adoption of conservation practices into GHG reduction for the industry. He will also share results showing how climate-smart practices improve farm economics and water quality.

## **The Conservation Practitioner Poll: What Do CPs Need to Get More Conservation on the Ground? -**

Catherine DeLong

Learn about the findings of the 2nd Conservation Practitioner Poll which asked CPs in the Mississippi River Basin states about local office needs, climate smart ag, and job satisfaction.

## **Farmer Leadership Case Studies -**

Dubuque County Farmer to Farmer – Iowa  
Dodge County Farmers for Healthy Soil & Healthy Water – Wisconsin  
Farmers for Lake Country – Wisconsin  
Fields of Sinsinawa Farmer Learning Center – Multi-state  
Hill Country Watershed Alliance – Wisconsin  
Jo Daviess County Soil & Water Health Coalition – Illinois  
Lake Wisconsin Farmer Watershed Council – Wisconsin  
Sauk Soil & Water Improvement Group – Wisconsin  
Vermillion Headwaters Watershed Committee – Illinois

Throughout the event, multiple farmers will describe how they provide education, demonstration, and incentives to their peers through locally-led initiatives. Case studies will include farmer-to-farmer mentoring, cover crop seeding projects, upstream-downstream alliances, administrative support, and more.



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**SPEAKER BIOS**  
**FEBRUARY 27-28, 2025**  
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## **Josh Behnke - Behnke Farms**

Josh is a sixth-generation farmer, growing 300 acres no-till corn, soybeans, and alfalfa, and raising 100 cow-calf pairs on 200 acres of pasture in Durango, Iowa. After receiving a degree in agronomy at Iowa State University, he began experimenting with rye and oat cover crop mixes, planting green, and founded a custom cover crop planting business. Josh advises other Dubuque County farmers on cover crop practices and fertility plans with the purpose of leaving soil, water, and farms better for the next generation.



## **Cade Bushnell - Bushnell Farm**

Cade is a farmer from Stillman Valley, Illinois who serves on the Ogle County Soil & Water Conservation District board. His father began experimenting with no-till practices in the 1970s. Cade adopted no-till practices in the 1990s and began growing cover crops in 2006. The Bushnell's decades-long efforts to improve soil conservation earned them the Conservation Farm Family of the Year title in 2004. Cade now farms with his son Ross.



## **Catherine DeLong - Water Quality Program Manager, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach**

Catherine works to bring people together to share resources, ideas and perspectives about water quality, and to help Iowans understand the role they can play in Iowa's water future. She has an MS degree in soil science from Iowa State University, and a BA in international relations from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Catherine has experience at all levels of conservation, having previously worked for the county-level Soil and Water Conservation Districts as well as an international non-profit serving conservation professionals.



## **Jim Eckberg - Senior Scientist, General Mills**

Jim leads programs that empower farmers with data to drive sustainable solutions that improve farm economics. He works with farmers, their advisors, and scientists to reduce emissions in the dairy industry. He translates this work to business leaders to rethink and reimagine the way industry invests in sustainability programs focusing on practical solutions that add value to farms. Jim completed a Masters in ecology (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) and PhD in agroecology (University of Minnesota).



## **Ryan Erisman - Odyssey Collaborations, LLC**

Ryan grew up on an innovative Illinois grain and livestock farm and left for the challenges of the Marines. A decade into his four-year plan, Ryan commanded a rifle company in combat and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. Today, Ryan raises pastured pork, grass-fed beef, and feed crops in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin using regenerative practices. He founded Odyssey Collaborations to help sustainability leaders navigate complex challenges, cultivate high-impact change, and create well-being for themselves, their organizations, and their communities.



## **Mike Gleason - Vice President, Lake Wisconsin Alliance**

Mike is a Chicago native who studied health administration at Western Illinois University. After retiring from a 37-year career in international air freight management at O'Hare International Airport he and his wife moved to their summer home in Merrimac, Wisconsin. It was there he joined the Lake Wisconsin Alliance to help improve the ecological conditions of Lake Wisconsin and the Wisconsin River. Through community education and collaboration, he is working toward that goal.



### **Danny Harms - Co-Chairman, Vermilion Headwaters Watershed Committee**

Danny farms in partnership with his father and uncle. Five years ago, they transitioned from conventional tillage to strip-till and no-till practices, and began growing cover crops. They also operate a business that provides custom strip till, spraying, and side-dress applications for other farms. Danny serves on the Indian Creek Watershed Steering Committee, Vermilion Headwaters Committee, and the newly formed FLASH (Farmer Led Advances in Soil Health) group.



### **Andy Hawley - Hawley Family Farm**

As a sixth-generation farmer in Jo Daviess County, Illinois, some of Andy's first memories include his father teaching him and his brother Mark about no-till and soil conservation. They have since taken the farm's conservation practices to the next level and hope Andy's sons will do the same. Andy is a Jo Daviess County Soil & Water Conservation District board director. He also serves on the steering committee for the farmer-led Jo Daviess County Soil & Water Health Coalition.



### **Dani Heisler - Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant Program Manager, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection**

Dani supports 50 producer-led groups throughout Wisconsin in her role with Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. In addition to sharing her passion for agricultural conservation, she practices the art and science of managed grazing in Wisconsin's Driftless Area. Dani grew up on a beef operation in western Wisconsin, and received a Bachelor of Science, studying animal science, agronomy, and food science at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls.



### **Scott Hendricks - Conservation Agronomist, Dubuque County Watersheds**

Scott works with Dubuque County farmers to identify and implement conservation practices that benefit their bottom line and the county's watersheds. His work focuses on soil health and helping farmers improve their return-on-investment. He also helps implement conservation practices with a renter on his family farm near Dubuque, where he also enjoys hunting and fishing. Scott also loves to travel, hike, and camp.



### **Erik Joost - Watershed Manager, City of Oconomowoc**

Erik guides Oconomowoc's adaptive management program to reach compliance with phosphorous water quality standards in the Oconomowoc River. The program, started in 2015, focuses on watershed-wide P reduction strategies, including land management practices, lake improvements and stream restorations. Erik also helps to coordinate the Farmers for Lake Country producer-led group, which fosters peer-to-peer learning about farming strategies that promote soil health and preserve water quality.



### **David Kell - President, Lake Wisconsin Alliance**

David has enjoyed Lake Wisconsin since 1978 and has owned lakefront property since 1989. As leader of the Lake Wisconsin Alliance, he works to improve the lake's watershed by encouraging networking among lakefront landowners, farmers, and other businesses. The Lake Wisconsin Alliance endeavors to balance the diverse interests of the Lake Wisconsin community while improving water quality, recreational opportunities, and sustaining a healthy ecosystem within the Lake Wisconsin watershed.



### **John Koepke - Koepke Farms Inc.**

John is a member of Koepke Farms Inc., a family partnership milking 320 cows, cultivating 1,000 acres of crops, and managing 150 acres of woods and wetlands. The Koepkes were early adopters of sustainable practices, including no-till farming, contour strip cropping, diversified crop rotation, nutrient management, cover crops, and grassed waterways. As a leader in the ag community, John has helped shape key policies at the local and state level. His commitment to preserving his family's land reflects his dedication to protecting farmland across Wisconsin.



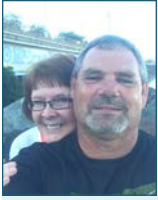
### **Paul Meuer - Land Protection Manager, Tall Pines Conservancy**

Tall Pines Conservancy is a nationally accredited land trust in southeast Wisconsin's Lake Country region. An experienced conservation professional, Paul has worked nationwide as a professional wetland scientist, restoration ecologist, and environmental consultant. At Tall Pines, he leads efforts to protect land through conservation easements and acquisitions, while stewarding properties like the 260-acre Ravensholme Farm Preserve. Paul is dedicated to preserving natural resources and supporting sustainable land management.



### Tony Peirick - T&R Dairy

Tony is the President of the Dodge County Farmers for Healthy Soil-Healthy Water group. He is a partner in T&R Dairy farm near Watertown, Wisconsin, with 200 dairy cows and 1,100 acres of corn for grain and silage, soybeans, and forages. Tony has been experimenting with cover crops for 12 years and has been planting green for the past 7 years. His farm also does custom spraying and harvesting as well as planting cover crops for his neighbors.



### Bradley Robson - Robson Family Farm

Brad grew up on a small dairy farm in the hills of Vernon County, Wisconsin, where he now raises hay, corn, soybeans, small grains, alternative forages, cover crops, prairie strips, and a cow-calf herd on pasture. He farms in partnership with his parents and son. Brad is a co-founder and farmer leader of the Hill Country Watershed Alliance. He chairs the Valley Stewardship Network and is a conservation agronomist with the Monroe County Land Conservation Department.



### Ron Schoepp - Schoepp Farms

Ron farms with his parents, Dave and Nancy, and son Noah at Schoepp Farms LLC in Columbia County, Wisconsin. They grow corn, soybeans, winter wheat, alfalfa, and graze cattle. Ron is a board member of Sauk Soil Water Improvement Group, Lake Wisconsin Farmer Watershed Council, and the River Alliance of Wisconsin. In 2023 the Schoepps were named the Conservation Farm Family of the Year by the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association.



### Michael Schultz - Schultz Farms

Mike and his family operate a fifth-generation, diverse livestock and row crop farm in Jo Daviess County, Illinois. Soil health and conservation have long been priorities for Michael who grew up around no-till practices. He has implemented several cover crop rotations over the past decade.



### Emily Usher-DeaKyne - Diverse Corn Belt Project Manager, Purdue University

Emily is a natural resource social scientist at Purdue. She values the environmental, economic, and social opportunities our natural environment provides. Understanding the balance between these three components drives her research interests in motivators and barriers to adoption of diversified ag systems, public policy development, and community engagement. A Midwest native, Emily enjoys gardening and spending time with her family, friends, and pets.

#### Planning Team:

**Catherine DeLong**, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

**Craig Ficenec**, Sand County Foundation

**Elise Koning**, Conservation Technology Information Center

**Krista Kirkham**, The Nature Conservancy

**Shelby Leick**, American Farmland Trust

**Jenny Seifert**, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Division of Extension

**Haleigh Summers**, Sand County Foundation

**Todd Sutphin**, Iowa Soybean Association

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