Leopold Conservation Award®

PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

2024 Award Recipients

2024 IOWA LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD
RECIPIENT, WENDY MARIKO JOHNSON

It was Aldo Leopold who wrote, "the landscape of any farm is the owner's portrait of himself".

In Leopold's influential book, *A Sand County Almanac,* the renowned conservationist, landowner and scientist called for an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage. His idea of a "land ethic" is alive and well today in thousands of American farmers, ranchers and forestland managers who improve soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat while they produce food and fiber.

For more than 50 years, Leopold's land ethic has guided Sand County Foundation's work to inspire and empower more landowners to recognize and embrace conservation opportunities on their land.

Today, with dozens of partners and sponsors across the U.S., Sand County Foundation proudly presents the Leopold Conservation Award in 28 states to private landowners who exemplify the spirit of Leopold's land ethic.

The award program recognizes extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation, inspires other landowners, and helps the general public understand the vital role private landowners play in conservation success.

An award program of this stature could not exist without quality landowner nominees and contributions both large and small. Sand County Foundation and its many partners and sponsors invite you to become part of this important story.

To learn more about all past LCA recipients visit www.sandcountyfoundation.org/LCARecipients. For questions about the award and sponsorship opportunities, contact Lance Irving at 608.663.4605, Lirving@sandcountyfoundation.org

Dear Friends,

We are so proud to present this year's class of Leopold Conservation Award recipients.

By telling the stories of these agricultural landowners, they become an inspiration to their peers as well as a reminder to America of the critical role these quiet heroes play in keeping our water clean, our soil healthy and productive, and wildlife habitat abundant.

These farming and ranching families will restore your faith in how individuals can make a big difference in their communities. These award winners take on leadership roles and outreach opportunities. They seek out partnerships with research universities, industry, and conservation groups.

It was 75 years ago that Aldo Leopold articulated his vision of a "land ethic," a personal responsibility to care for natural resources. Sand County Foundation is keeping that vision alive.

In partnership with our sponsors, we are proud of the great land stewards we honor each year, and we hope you know that with each new award presentation, we are inspiring and invigorating a private land conservation movement across the nation.

Sincerely,

Kevin McAleese
President and CEO
Sand County Foundation

CALIFORNIA BOWLES FARMING COMPANY

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Sustainable Conservation · California Farm Bureau · Harvey L. and Maud C. Sorensen Foundation

With more than 160 years of farming the same land, the importance of responsible agriculture is not lost on the Bowles and Lawrence families. Trends come and go, but sustainability and resilience have defined this family business for generations.

Bowles Farming Company's roots trace back to when Henry Miller began farming in the San Joaquin Valley in 1858. Miller is also credited with establishing his ancestors' commitment to conservation.

When Miller noticed that Tule elk were being erased from the landscape by hunters, he made an investment to protect the species. At a time when conservation wasn't top of mind, Miller had horsemen round up the last remaining Tule elk and relocate them to a protected area. From these few dozen individuals, Tule elk now inhabit various areas within their historical range in California.

Miller's ancestor, Cannon Michael, carries on that legacy by providing leadership on habitat protection, water conservation, soil health, sustainable farming, and sound farm and environmental policy as president of Bowles Farming Company. Michael leads the business that his grandfather formed with two siblings in 1965 with curiosity, open-mindedness, and genuine concern for the well-being of people and the planet.

Across the 11,200 acres under his management, Michael has embraced innovative conservation practices including cover crops and precision technology to optimize water and nutrient management. Bowles Farming Company participates in rigorous certification programs for its crops of tomatoes, corn, herbs, garlic, wheat, alfalfa, melons, carrots, almonds, and cotton.

With farmland adjacent to the San Joaquin River, key riparian corridors have been restored and 650 acres of wetlands dedicated in a federal easement provide critical habitat for migratory birds. Michael's concern for California's water resources stretches beyond his farm gate.

Michael is described as a natural convenor among farm, NGO, and water-user communities, who seeks lasting policy solutions. He regularly hosts large group dinners at his farm for agricultural and conservation leaders to build trust and identify areas of common ground on challenging water and land issues. As a member of the Environmental Defense Fund's Ecosystem Committee, he helped shape its approach to water policy, climate-smart farming, and Endangered Species Act implementation.

Bowles Farming Company boasts a growing list of collaborations with state, federal, and NGO partners. With assistance from Pollinator Partnership, it established a 1.5-mile hedgerow around the perimeter of its managed wetlands. Michael credits Audubon Society biologists with helping him see how cropland can be managed to provide better bird habitat. In addition to conducting bird surveys, he invested time and resources into protecting raptors by trapping pests in crop fields instead of using poison to control them.

Michael's openness to innovation led him to be an early adopter of installing solar arrays on his farm and utilizing composted green waste from nearby municipalities. The diversion of organic, green waste from landfills reduces methane emissions, which helps California meet its climate change goals.

Michael's appreciation for the environmental benefits of native plants led to the creation of Great Valley Seed which uses his farming expertise to scale up the production of cost-effective native plants. It's that sort of resilience that has always served as this farm's cornerstone.

This Merced County landscape has witnessed a lot of changes over the past 165 growing seasons. Under the conservation-minded leadership of Cannon Michael, the Bowles Farming Company has found a way to innovate, adapt, and thrive.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

CAROLINAS RUSSELL HEDRICK

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Carolina Farm Trust

BASF We create chemistry

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE *North Carolina*

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE *South Carolina*

With a winning entry of 459.91 bushels per acre, Russell Hedrick shattered the dryland corn yield record in 2022. Not bad for someone who began farming 10 years prior on tight red clay with a propensity for erosion.

A few months after his win, Russell shared the secret of his success at the National No-Till Conference. His open-book approach is a testament to his passion for helping other farmers achieve yield, while promoting soil health principles and conservation.

Over the course of a decade, this student became the teacher. Russell has spoken to agricultural audiences in 46 states and eight countries. Not limited by constraints of conventional or regenerative agriculture dogma, he is revered as an approachable, sensible expert in nutrient management, farm equipment, and business. Along the way he earned the moniker of The Regenerative Farmer.

It's quite a transformation for a first-generation farmer who watched his grandfather, Robert Richard, work a factory job while tending to 15 cows and a hay field. That glimpse into agriculture was enough to spark something within Russell. He'd spent a decade working as a firefighter before saving enough money for used farm machinery and his first 30 acres.

He began focusing on yield. After watching winter rains erode his soil, he investigated how conservation practices could prevent erosion. Russell devoured everything he could learn on the topic. He attributes his successes to the luck and grace of meeting the right mentors at the right time.

He stopped tilling the soil and began planting cover crops and diverse crop rotations to reduce sediment and nutrient runoff while increasing biodiversity. He added compost to his fields and integrated grazing livestock to build the soil's organic matter.

This combination of conservation was working. The cornfield that produced the record-breaking yield saw its organic matter levels rise from 1.7 percent to 8.2 percent by early 2022.

Russell also reached out to the developer of the Haney Test, which uses a unique method to determine which nutrients are available in soil. Having that information in hand helped him drop his input costs, especially nitrogen, by an estimated 70 to 80 percent. By comparison, there are farmers applying the same amount of fertilizer as Russell does, only to achieve one-third of the yield that his rejuvenated soils do.

Russell now grows 650 acres of non-GMO corn and soybeans, along with barley, oats, triticale, and wheat. His crops thrive amid drought thanks to the soil's improved capacity to infiltrate and hold moisture, while cycling biological nutrients. He credits soil health practices with reducing greenhouse gas emissions and protecting nearby streams from sediment runoff.

Russell is described as an innovator who is willing to try anything to improve his farm's profitability and resilience.

He has co-founded a handful of farmer-first businesses. Regen Mills is a mobile grain milling operation that increases returns on investment for its farmer-owners. Heritage Ground is a direct marketing company that saves farmers the time and effort required to market their milled products to consumers. Farmers Reserve Distillery sells bourbon and other liquors made from grain grown by regenerative farmers. Through Soil Regen, an organization advancing regenerative agriculture, his advice to other farmers about their production systems impacts more than one million acres.

As for the red clay he purchased in 2012, its texture now resembles black cookie crumble, a sure sign of soil health.

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COLORADO JAKE HAMILL•HAMILL RANCH

▶ Watch video of Jake Hamill•Hamill Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Colorado Cattlemen's Association Advancing the Legacy · Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust · American AgCredit · CoBank · Farm Credit of Southern Colorado · Premier Farm Credit · USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. Department of Agriculture

Resiliency defines Jake Hamill and his ranch.

Beyond ranching's normal challenges of unpredictable weather and market conditions, Hamill Ranch is in Moffat County, where high elevations and lack of water pose serious obstacles.

But from early on, Jake had a vision to tap into the underutilized natural resources of the ranch his father homesteaded in 1917. Jake and his late wife Calista purchased Hamill Ranch in 1963 and raised sheep before transitioning to cattle 10 years later.

Jake developed an uncanny knack for finding a way to conserve natural resources and wildlife habitat while expanding his cow-calf herd from 120 to 300 head. With assistance from Soil Conservation Services (the predecessor of the Natural Resources Conservation Services) Jake found ways to move water using gravity which allowed him to graze cattle on mountain tops and other remote areas of the 4,400-acre ranch.

His passion for water and its application for conservation drove him to other innovations. He developed springs and reservoirs and installed more than 20 miles of pipelines that deliver water to large storage and stock tanks. This allows cattle and wildlife to have water available in places that would otherwise not be efficiently grazed. To maximize forage production, Jake leveled a riverside hay field and pumped water to higher fields using pivots and sprinkler guns.

"What Jake has been able to accomplish with water for his pastures and hay fields exhibits a level of brilliance that few, if any, would have ever thought possible," said ranch manager Darrell Camilletti.

At the age of 86, Jake and his daughters outsourced the day-to-day management of Hamill Ranch to Camilletti and his son Joe. The Camillettis credit Jake with showing them the economic and environmental value of conservation practices. They credit his past practices for making it possible for them to graze cattle amid three years of prolonged drought.

Hamill Ranch's pastures are strategically placed with wildlife-friendly, cross fencing to prevent over-grazing and allow regrowth of preferred grasses. Native plants from bluebells to silver lupine have flourished thanks to Jake's meticulous work to control noxious weeds and brush.

Hamill Ranch straddles the Williams Fork River, which can vary from barely flowing to flooding. To prevent soil erosion, Jake stabilized its banks with rip rap and controlled grazing methods.

Through the years, the Hamill Ranch's economic resiliency was bolstered by the successful irrigation and outfitting side businesses that Jake created.

No single act or achievement shows Jake's personal resilience like his response to tragedy in 1995.

A fire in his workshop destroyed several outbuildings, tractors, haying equipment, tools, and irreplaceable items his parents had gifted him. While preventing the fire from spreading to his house Jake suffered first, second, and third degree burns over half of his body.

He could have given up, but he didn't.

Instead, after leaving a burn center in Denver his priorities were harvesting hay so his cows would have feed that winter, and building a calving barn before spring.

With the help of his community, he rebuilt what was lost over the course of several years. It's that sort of grit and commitment that has marked his six decades of ranching.

Jake's success and longevity at Hamill Ranch is the epitome of resilience.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

ILLINOIS RICHARD LYONS

Richard Lyons says his conservation ethic began to evolve shortly after the death of his father.

He began noticing things about the land they had farmed together. Crops wilted sooner over areas of compaction from tractor and truck tires. Water running from grassy areas after heavy rains was free of sediment.

Without a father or grandfather to explain how they had farmed in the past, Richard began farming with an open mind to prevent soil erosion from wind and rain.

With dual careers of farming and teaching agriculture, Richard was in a unique position to give his students first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a conservation-minded farmer. During 37 years as a high school and college agriculture instructor, he taught students what he practiced on his own land.

Early on he retired his moldboard plow and began to chisel plow cornstalks to prevent erosion. In 1976, he also began planting no-till corn into soybean stubble to reduce fuel and labor costs. At that time, research showed that nearby Lake Lou Yaeger was Illinois' fastest-silting lake. It provides drinking water for 10,000 Montgomery County residents. Determined to be part of the solution, Richard took steps to improve the water quality in a creek that runs through his farm and into Lake Lou Yaeger.

Richard undertook a ditch and streambank stabilization project using large rock to prevent the undercutting and eventual collapse of the streambank where it curves. He installed filter strips to capture runoff between farmland and the creek. These areas provide wildlife habitat in a region primarily used for row crop production. Improved nesting areas support pheasant and quail, and their predator, the coyote, which aids pest control in soybean fields.

In addition to contour planting crops parallel to the filter strips, Richard has targeted nutrient management plans created for his farmland. He conducts soil tests every three years to guide the application of commercial fertilizer using variable rate technology.

In 2012, Richard began growing deep-rooted cover crops of rye, oats, and radish to improve soil health by encouraging biodiversity, breaking up soil compaction, recycling nutrients, and sequestering carbon. Covering soil with year-round living roots improves water infiltration while preventing erosion. Since 2019, Richard has grown overwintering cover crops of winter barley and Austrian winter peas for their ability to further reduce sediment loss.

Richard initiated a soil health training program by collaborating with individuals from various conservation organizations in Illinois.

This summer he established pollinator-friendly habitat on a two-acre triangular parcel that was difficult to plant with large machinery. These are the latest examples of how Richard's readiness to embrace new ideas and technologies, while remaining grounded in practical considerations, sets an example for others.

"In my heart and soul, I believe that soil and water conservation on my farm is an ethic that I wish to live by," Richard said.

His farm is located 13 miles from a tragic accident that took place on Interstate 55 because of dust clouds caused by wind erosion from tilled soils. That day his cover crops were waving in the wind, but their root structure was holding the soil intact.

Richard notes this unfortunate incident underscores the interconnectedness of people and the land that Aldo Leopold wrote about.

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IOWA WENDY MARIKO JOHNSON

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PRACTICAL FARMERS of Iowa

CDI CONSERVATION DISTRICTS OF IOWA

Farmer, conservationist, entrepreneur, mentor, and messenger: all describe Wendy Mariko Johnson.

Following a career in California's fashion industry, the Iowa native and husband Johnny Rankin returned to Floyd County to farm with an innovative flair. Their brand of land stewardship combines soil, animals, and plants, to produce local food and a healthy ecosystem. It also led to the family farm evolving into two farms.

At Center View Farms they grow a diverse rotation of 1,000 acres of no-till corn, soybeans, and small grains with her parents. To improve soil health and protect water resources, they have established prairie strips, grow cover crops, and host research trials of 60-inch rows of corn.

As an organic eater, Wendy sought to grow more organic crops. That transition was aided by growing alfalfa due to its ability to suppress weeds while boosting soil fertility. With acres of forage available she began acquiring livestock.

The environmental and economic benefits of grazing led to the rebranding of 130 acres as the organically certified Joia Food and Fiber Farm. Where conventional corn once stood, there is now a perennial pasture for adaptive rotational grazing of sheep, cattle, hogs, and poultry sold at wholesale markets and direct-to-consumer.

"I am providing animals a good life, one that involves their innate abilities to get their food on their own," Wendy said.

The holistic land management practices at Joia Food and Fiber Farm build soil health and biodiversity, sequester carbon, and enhance wildlife habitat.

Over the past decade more than 6,000 fruit, nut, and hardwood trees and shrubs have been planted. Silvopasture, the deliberate grazing of areas with trees, has been embraced. Mowing is delayed to encourage grassland birds to nest.

"I am helping clean water before it flows downstream from me. I am helping slow water down," Wendy said of her efforts to restore riparian areas and stabilize streambanks.

Wendy now grows Kernza, a perennial grain known for its ability to infiltrate water and build the soil's organic matter. She is vice president of Perennial Promise Growers Cooperative, which provides farmer-led, collective marketing, and technical support to other Kernza growers.

Wendy is invested in strengthening local food systems. She worked on the creation of 99 Counties, a direct-marketing food company for small to mid-sized producers, promoting regenerative agriculture. She also started Counting Sheep Sleep Company, a value-added business to promote regenerative organic grass-fed wool.

Wendy hopes that starting conservation-based farm businesses, and sharing the successes and failures that follow, will inspire other farmers to do the same. She believes conservation provides endless opportunities for farmers to grow their businesses, buffer against the worst effects of climate change, and provide the equity needed to do more on less land.

In addition to chairing the Iowa USDA Farm Service Agency's state committee, Wendy is a prominent figure in other local, state, and national organizations promoting conservation, soil health, climate disruption mitigation, and farmland preservation. Her thought leadership is generously shared with audiences ranging from regional farmer networks and federal policymakers to local Charles City high school agronomy students.

Wendy looks to the future when describing her conservation advocacy, "I am part of a growing conservation ethic movement consisting of farmers and landowners who believe we are temporary land stewards and hoping that our conservation efforts will have long-term effects for future generations."

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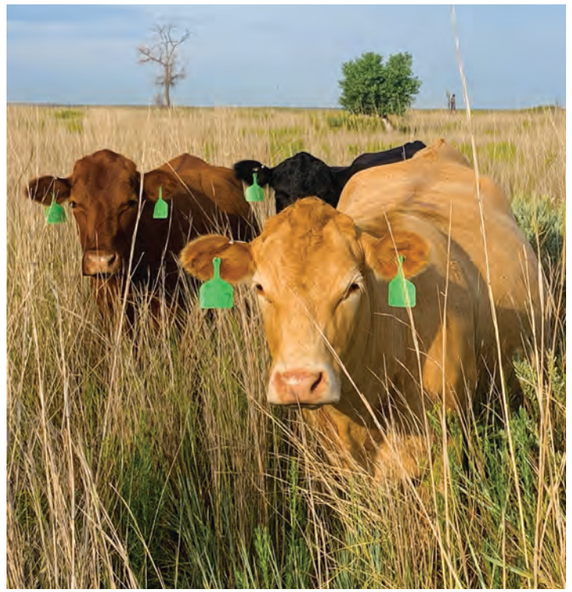
KANSAS BARBY RANCH

▶ Watch video of Barby Ranch



Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

OKACD
Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Ranchland Trust of Kansas
An affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association

Barby Ranch's remote location poses some challenges, including no permanent access roads and no utilities.

But that doesn't deter Bill Barby. His passion for conservation and collaboration knows no bounds.

Through rotational grazing, prescribed burns, and removal of invasive trees, Bill has restored the ranch's native habitats and ecological functions. Thousands of acres of healthier grassland and riparian areas provide habitat for imperiled species like the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, whooping crane, and Arkansas River shiner. Conservation partnerships have achieved improved water quality, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration on the landscape.

Bill says rotational grazing is the cornerstone of Barby Ranch's revival. Decades ago, he and wife Debbie divided the ranch into two pastures, high ground in the sand hills, and lower ground along the Cimarron River that flows through the ranch. They later tapped into conservation program resources to finance cross fencing and water developments. Two pastures became nine before the ranch was further divided into 26 paddocks.

For grazing efficiency, the Barby's cow-calf herd is moved through the paddocks as one group. Their movements are scheduled by a plan that provides grass rest and full recovery between grazings. This system has allowed the Barbys to profitably increase their stocking rate by 40 percent. Neighbors took notice of this successful strategy and adopted the same approach.

Rotational grazing encourages growth of deep-rooted grasses that can rebound quickly after drought or wildfire. This was put to the test when the entire ranch burned in 2017's Starbuck wildfire, the largest in Kansas' history.

Given the ranch's remote, off-the-grid location in Clark and Comanche counties, solar energy powers water wells while gravity-flow pipelines supply watering tanks. Cameras monitor movement at the perimeter gates and water tank levels, and photos sent to cell phones cut costs by saving many miles of driving.

Bill undertook a mix of mechanical removal and prescribed burns to stop the encroachment of Tamarisk and Eastern Red Cedar trees along the ranch's productive and valuable river bottom corridor. Widespread tree cover was replaced with more than 200 varieties of native grasses, plants, and forbs. Strong populations of native fish and birds at Barby Ranch are indicators of clean water and healthy grasslands.

Bill also used prescribed fire to manage Sand Sagebrush on pastureland instead of broadcasting chemicals that would have killed nontargeted broadleaf vegetation. These beneficial plants can comprise more than 30 percent of cattle's diet while benefitting pollinators and grassland birds.

Though not common practice in Kansas, Bill's use of prescribed fire as a conservation tool has demonstrated a natural alternative to control tree infestation and prevent wildfires. A variety of landowners and conservation professionals have visited Barby Ranch to see its transformation and the innovative practices being used.

Bill's conservation ethic has led him to serve in local and regional leadership roles, including the Cherokee Strip Prescribed Burn Association and the Lesser Prairie Landowner Alliance.

"The most successful and difficult thing I have done is to develop and implement a succession plan with a non-family heir," Bill said of leasing his ranch.

Now in its third year, the tenant owns a percentage of the cattle and conducts day-to-day operation, while Bill oversees the land's management.

At a time when the Great Plains' grasslands are among the most threatened ecosystems in North America, and bird and pollinator populations are in decline, who better to mentor the next generation than Bill Barby.

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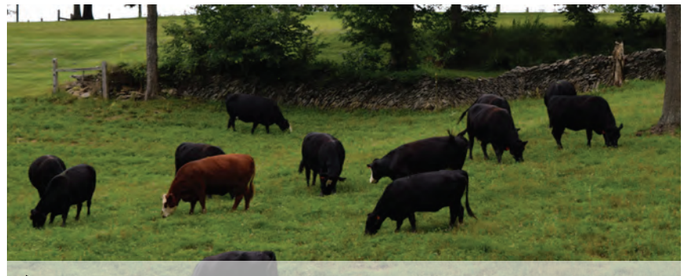
KENTUCKY WHISPERING HILLS FARM



▶ Watch video of Whispering Hills Farm

Presented in Partnership with

Mike and Tammy Wilson started from the ground up when they purchased 75 acres in 1999.

Overgrown with hedge apples, cedars and thorn trees, Mike used a track hoe and dozer to clean up Whispering Hills Farm acre by acre. After their home was built, the Wilsons used timber harvested from the property to build fence posts and two barns.

Conservation practices that protect soil, water and wildlife habitat were critical in turning an unproductive piece of land into a successful beef cattle business. After re-establishing a mix of forages on 45 acres of pastures, Mike began a rotational grazing system to efficiently prevent overgrazing and provide a month-long rest period to allow for plant regrowth.

Thirty acres of forests were maintained, as were 300-foot wooded buffers between pastures and creeks to prevent soil erosion and protect water quality. In addition to leasing 65 acres for grazing, the Wilsons have purchased adjacent parcels that bring their farm's size to 197 acres.

Alleyways were installed to facilitate rotational grazing, as were nine frost-free automatic waterers connected by a water distribution system. Forage density is maintained by providing 2.5 acres to every cow-calf pair.

To minimize soil disturbance from hoof traffic during winter months, Mike experimented with portable wagons and bale grazing. He was one of two Kentucky farmers to participate in a six-state, three-year project with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to evaluate the practical, economic, and ecological benefits of bale grazing.

In addition to labor and machinery costs, a benefit of bale grazing is the improved capture of nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium). About 80 percent of nutrients fed to cattle pass through their gut into their manure. When managed property, the nutrients and organic matter in manure can be recycled to produce crops and forage, while saving money.

Mike strives to educate himself on new technologies but is not one to adopt the latest fad. Instead, he acts after careful consultation with subject matter experts.

In 2017, he built a heavy use feed pad to accommodate feeding cattle during the winter. His Bo Renfro feeding structure uses a concrete pad, fencing, geotextile fabric, and gravel to serve as the hub of a rotational grazing system. Cattle from multiple pastures can be managed to be temporarily confined or free to enter and exit the structure as they please. Feeders keep hay from being trampled, and cattle do not create muddy conditions around their feed and water sources.

With financial assistance from a state cost share program, Mike has since built two more heavy use feed pads, each serves multiple nearby pastures.

"Mike and I have collaborated closely on many on-farm trials," said Tommy Yankey, a retired Agriculture Extension Agent from Anderson County. "His farm serves as a mini experiment station having hosted many farm tours throughout the years to share successes and failures."

Recently, one of his pastures was planted with a mix of collards, crimson clover, and triticale, as part of a University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment study on extending the grazing season in cool weather.

As chairman of the Anderson County Conservation District, Mike's peers have called him creative, sincere, and persistent when looking for ways to enhance and care for natural resources.

MARYLAND HUTCHISON BROTHERS

Presented in Partnership with

"In agriculture, you are always trying to do better," says Kyle Hutchison. "We like the challenge of always trying to improve yields and profitability while having less impact on the environment."

Hutchison Brothers is a 3,400-acre crop and poultry farm in Talbot County. Thanks to the stewardship of brothers Bobby, Richard, and David Hutchison, and sons Travis and Kyle Hutchison, this 130-year-old family farm has evolved into a sophisticated business at the forefront of agricultural conservation.

The Hutchisons are committed to leaving the land better than they found it by enhancing soil health and crop production through science and technology. They willingly collaborate with others to understand and promote cover crops and other conservation practices that protect the water quality of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

Since 1982 they have hired crop consultants to ensure they use nutrients and chemicals as efficiently as possible to grow a diverse rotation of corn, wheat, soybeans, barley, and vegetables such as cucumbers. Their involvement with the Maryland Department of Agriculture's cover crop program informed how the timing of planting and different seed mixes affect nitrogen levels.

They also participate in studies of biostimulants, which are a range of substances and microorganisms that when applied to plants can improve their growth and boost their ability to tolerate stress from drought, salinity, and heat. This study has the potential to reduce the amount of inorganic fertilizer needed to grow corn. It's one of many examples of how the Hutchisons volunteer to work with researchers on cutting edge conservation practices that have not been trialed to scale but have the potential to make large positive conservation impacts across the country.

Hutchison Brothers has installed bioreactors and drainage water management projects in two of their fields. They also partnered with ShoreRivers on a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) to research on options to remove tile risers from fields to reduce sediment transport to local waterways while maintaining drainage needed for crop production.

The Hutchisons' use of variable-rate nitrogen applications onto crops are split up through the growing season to boost yields while reducing the potential for runoff. To further protect water quality, they practice mulch and strip-till practices, have installed grassed waterways and buffers, and have completed wetland restoration projects and forest management.

Manure produced in the poultry barns is properly stored and transported. Setbacks are maintained for fertilizer and manure applications. Likewise, fertilizer is not applied during the winter.

Having adopted so many conservation practices, the Hutchisons share their experiences with other farmers, conservation professionals, and decision makers by hosting farm tours and having candid conversations about the on-farm benefits and costs of conservation.

While some farmers are apprehensive to work with environmental groups, Hutchison Brothers welcome such opportunities to showcase their conservation ethic and explain the positive effects of certain farming techniques on their business model and the broader community.

They participate on influential state and national boards and committees, including Maryland Department of Agriculture's Soil Health Leadership Advisory Committee.

Bobby, Richard, and David Hutchison credit their father with instilling a conservation ethic in them that has had a profound impact across Maryland.

"We love our land and animals," Bobby said. "If you love something, you improve it."

MINNESOTA DAWN AND GRANT BREITKREUTZ

Presented in Partnership with

Dawn and Grant Breitkreutz know about taking chances.

Converting their conventional cow-calf, row-crop farm into a regenerative agriculture showcase didn't happen overnight nor without risk. Yet they say their farm's survival once depended on it.

Shortly after taking over his family's farm in 1996, crop yields were failing, and cattle health was declining. This prompted the Breitkreutzes to begin exploring a more sustainable approach to raising cattle and crops. They began to see that focusing on growing healthy soil would lead to healthy air, water, livestock, and wildlife.

However, their initial attempts at soil health practices were questioned by some friends and family.

"We were at the edge of quitting," Dawn recalls.

"And then the 'teachers' began appearing in our path," she said of a new network of peers who were making similar changes. As their circle of friends and mentors expanded around the globe, the acreage and herd size at Stoney Creek Farm grew as well.

Today they manage 1,759 acres across Redwood and Renville counties where diverse crop rotations of corn, soybeans, oats, cereal rye, and alfalfa are grown with a cover crop and no-till system. About 100 head of Red Angus cow-calf pairs are rotationally grazed on 675 acres of pasture and fields of cover crops throughout the year. About half of the pasture was converted from cropland, with the rest being remnant prairie.

The Breitkreutzes are pioneers of a prescribed and adaptive grazing system that reduces the need for cropping inputs while increasing forage production and pounds of beef raised per acre.

After splitting a pasture in half during their first year of grazing, they recorded increased grass growth and a prolonged grazing season. It convinced them to enroll in an Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract that provided financial and technical assistance to slice a 49-acre pasture into nine paddocks served by two summer water tanks.

The next year, grass production doubled again. They now leave more grass to rest for the winter than was previously grown in an entire growing season. With proper management and without reseeding, the number of native grass species found in their pastures has ballooned from three to more than 40.

"Our goal is to be the first farm in the neighborhood to be green across every acre in the spring, and stay green throughout the summer and into the fall," Grant said.

Adding to the green are the cover crops interseeded prior to the corn and soybean harvests to provide soil a layer of protection. Their foliage prevents erosion above the ground, while their deep roots improve water infiltration beneath it. This helps protect water quality as Stoney Creek Farm sits on a bluff along the Minnesota River.

Transitioning to growing non-GMO grains eliminated or slashed their use of synthetic insecticides, fertilizers, and herbicides. A diverse seven-grain feed mix was developed for the hogs and chickens they now market direct to consumers. Populations of deer, pheasants, grouse, and bobolinks have all rebounded at Stoney Creek Farm.

"We don't feel the need to compete with other farms. We learned that it's okay to share information and to be an open book," Grant said. "The new principles we abide by can work all over the world."

The Breitkreutzes say farming is now more enjoyable and profitable, proving the risks of conservation agriculture were certainly worth the reward.

MISSISSIPPI TERRY K. MAXWELL

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

FARM BUREAU MISSISSIPPI

Successfully farming in the Mississippi Delta goes hand in hand with properly managing its natural resources, namely water. This relationship is something Terry K. Maxwell has known since he began farming in this unique environment back in 1972.

Terry's Hopeso Farms spreads across 3,200 acres in Sunflower County, where he grows corn and soybeans, and manages 225 acres of hardwood timber. He's a respected figure in agricultural and conservation circles, known for his ability to effectively communicate and inspire others with his conservation efforts and techniques.

Terry first installed drainage pipes beneath farm fields to control erosion and prevent damage to soil from prolonged water saturation. By the 1990s he began the process of precision land leveling. Removing a field's surface irregularities improves drainage while enhancing the performance of farm equipment.

He took another step to reduce runoff by implementing minimum tillage and growing cover crops. In addition to slowing erosion, cover crops enhance water infiltration, improve soil health and biodiversity, and control weeds, pests, and diseases. His $35 per acre cost to plant cover crops is offset by more than $100,000 in reduced input costs from precision agriculture techniques like soil sampling and variable rate fertilizer applications.

Soil samples are taken on every acre, every year at Hopeso Farms. Those results coupled with historical crop yield data inform proper nutrient management. This involves applying different amounts of fertilizer to different parts of a field growing the same crop. The benefits of variable rate fertilizer applications are more efficient nutrient use, lower input costs, and higher profits.

Investments in irrigation efficiency have led to significant economic impacts for Hopeso Farms. Terry was an early adopter of soil moisture meters that compute when sufficient water has reached a crop's root zone for optimal growth. In 2012, he began installing water flow meters to help the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality better manage water being drawn from the Mississippi River Valley Alluvial Aquifer. These changes have resulted in using 25 percent less water and an annual savings of $112,000.

Terry didn't stop there when it came to investing in ways to improve irrigation efficiency. He took 120 acres of farmland out of production to install four tailwater recovery systems, and repurposed an existing natural reservoir to collect, store, and re-use water from field drains and rainfall runoff. This system reduces his energy usage and reliance on the aquifer for irrigation.

Hopeso Farms serves as a USDA Farm Cooperative where hydrologists research how tailwater recovery systems achieve groundwater sustainability by tracking water quantity, quality, and overall usage. This collaboration has led to data collection that has appeared in peer-reviewed publications, and in presentations at field days organized to educate farmers and conservation professionals.

To reduce the impact that compaction has on soil's ability to infiltrate water, tractors and grain carts at Hopeso Farms are equipped with wide tracks to distribute their considerable weight over a larger surface area.

Buffer strips along waterways help filter runoff, and provide habitat for wildlife, birds, and aquatic species. Timber management at Hopeso Farms includes selective harvesting that allows for natural regeneration within a healthy forest. Wooded areas also serve as crucial corridors for wildlife, facilitating movement and genetic exchange between different populations.

Terry's integration of conservation across every acre of Hopeso Farms showcases what is possible in the Mississippi Delta and beyond.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

MONTANA WICKENS SALT CREEK RANCH

▶ Watch video of Wickens Salt Creek Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

I ♥ RANGE

We are Sibanye Stillwater

Eric and Emma Wickens want to leave land, water, wildlife, and relationships better than they found them.

As engaged college graduates, they returned home to take the reins of his family's Wickens Salt Creek Ranch in 2007. They have since prioritized conservation practices to improve the health of their grasslands. Doing so nourishes their cattle and builds a more resilient ranch and rural community for their five children.

By emulating the natural behaviors of bison herds, rotationally grazing their Black Angus cattle contributes to nutrient cycling and carbon sequestration. With assistance from the federal Conservation Stewardship Program, prairies have been restored for livestock grazing and wildlife habitat.

Elsewhere on their 4,700 acres they grow a diverse rotation of peas, barley, hay, and wheat using no-till practices. A mix of sunflower, turnip, sorghum, and radish cover crops maintains continuously living roots in the soil to improve water infiltration and increase soil health.

"There is a large circle of life to study on our ranch," Emma said. "Recognizing how each part has an important purpose really serves to inform the stewardship decisions we make."

Healthy grasslands provide habitat for sage and sharptail grouse, which eat fly larvae, naturally controlling pest populations around cattle herds.

Eric and Emma have reduced their reliance on surface water for their cattle by plumbing their pastures with water lines and drinking tanks equipped with escape ramps for birds and wildlife. Strategically fencing water tanks forces cattle to naturally disperse their urine and manure elsewhere across pastures to feed the soil's microbes. Bale grazing is also used on areas of thin or clay soils to provide the benefits of hoof impact and to supply additional organic matter from manure and compost.

To slow the flow of water through their hilly terrain, the Wickenses have installed analog beaver dams. In addition to creating a deep, slow-flowing creek, and recharging a water table recently stricken by drought, beavers are returning to the ranch.

Eric is noticing a wildlife resurgence. Deer and bird populations are more abundant than they were in his youth. For the first time in his life, herds of elk migrate through Wickens Salt Creek Ranch, and grizzly bear are returning to central Montana.

Early on in their ranching career, Eric and Emma decided to move their calving season later into the spring. Warmer weather and drier ground reduced sickness in the calves.

They also switched from raising only cow-calf pairs to raising yearlings, stockers, and bred heifers. In addition, they developed a backgrounding lot to feed calves and finish fat cattle in the winter with a locally grown ration of barley, peas, and legumes.

Wickens Ranch Beef, a direct-to-consumer branded beef business, offers an opportunity to share their conservation story with consumers. Diversifying their livestock and crop production has generated new streams of cash flow.

"Resilience is directly related to diversity," Eric summarized. "The diversity of our business and biological communities within the ranch create resilience in our entire operation."

Later this year, Wickens Salt Creek Ranch will become a regenerative agricultural education center known as a "Savory Hub." Off the ranch, Eric's community involvement ranges from fighting local fires, to serving on "One Montana" a non-profit striving to bridge the gaps between rural and urban communities.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
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NEBRASKA WORTH RANCH

When Malvern "Cork" Worth purchased his first piece of land in 1962, he recognized the need for change.

The 1,424 acres in Keya Paha County was a far cry from the productive grassland it is today. It had been overstocked with beef cattle and horses with poor fencing and water distribution.

Cork's intuition told him his cattle needed to be rotated through more than one pasture during the grazing season. He would embrace and improve upon that concept once he and wife Janet began practicing managed grazing in the 1970s.

"Ten acres to the cow, and never take more than 50 percent of the grass in a given year" was the hard-and-fast stocking rate they established. This simple yet stern method of grazing management has created a resilient deep-rooted plant community that can rapidly recover from drought.

"We could have run more cattle over the years but trying to squeeze every last productive dollar out of your grazing resource year after year is a recipe for failure," Cork explained.

The Worths saw growing native prairie and perennial grass as the best use of their land from economic and environmental standpoints. With grass their only marketable commodity they stopped raising hogs, sheep, and dairy cattle to focus solely on Angus beef cattle.

"We wanted to develop some of the best Angus cattle in the industry, and it wasn't even a question that we had to have the best grass resource to do this," Janet said.

As the Worths expanded their ranch to 8,000 acres they installed a livestock water pipeline system and cross fencing that allows them to move cattle between 40 pastures. Each has two water tanks fed by a combination of electric submersible wells, windmills, and solar wells. The rotational grazing system has created a mosaic of habitat types for beneficial pollinators, turkeys, grassland birds, and deer.

More than 22,000 trees have been planted on Worth Ranch since 1971. Trees control wind erosion, enhance wildlife habitat, and provide livestock protection in the form of shelter belts. Drip irrigation and mulch to conserve water were added on several of the belts to encourage growth and vigor of trees. There's also hardly a noxious weed to be found on Worth Ranch thanks to their early detection/ rapid response weed management method.

Through innovative conservation practices, Worth Ranch has been able to endure climate extremes. Its well-managed and conservatively stocked pastures and meadowlands have allowed the Worths to maintain their cattle numbers during hot, dry summers without relying on outside sources for winter feed.

Through meticulous breeding and performance records, the Worths established a productive and profitable Angus herd that has helped them deal with the ebbs and flows of the ever-changing cattle market.

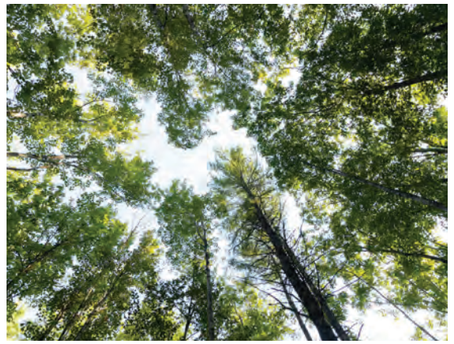
In recent years they have taken a step back in the beef business to help the next generation of ranchers. While downsizing their own herd, they pasture cattle for five local families during the grazing season. This allows the Worths to continue their grass management efforts while reducing their workload during the winter. It also creates awareness of how sound conservation can create abundant, resilient grassland on their own ranches.

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · I AM AFAN · Nebraska Environmental Trust · Cargill · Nebraska Cattlemen

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

NEW ENGLAND DAVID MOSKOVITZ & BAMBI JONES



▶ Watch video of David Moskovitz & Bambi Jones

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

NEW ENGLAND FORESTRY FOUNDATION

FARM CREDIT EAST

Every Earth Day since 1990, the owners of Hidden Valley Farm have taken a group of friends on a hike through their forests to revisit 40 trees marked with metal tree tags to show growth. But these trees only tell part of the story of their growth as landowners.

For 45 years David Moskovitz and Bambi Jones have worked to produce a forest of well-spaced trees of various sizes and native species, where the best trees are left to grow to a large and valuable size.

The couple are Cleveland natives who met as attorneys in Chicago. In the 1970s they moved to Maine as part of the back-to-the-land movement. They bought their first 100 acres to begin organic farming. Bambi ran a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for 120 customers for the next 20 years.

Like most rural New England parcels, part of their farm was forested, so they harvested some timber to build a house and barn.

"I liked that forestry was not as urgent as farming," said David, who used the lessons learned from farming and running a CSA to inform his work in the woods.

Over time, the couple purchased more than 15 nearby forested properties. David and Bambi shifted much of their attention to practicing sustainable forestry and began building a trail network for hiking and cross-country skiing.

They worked with licensed consulting foresters to accomplish their management goals: earning income while continuously improving the quality and quantity of standing timber, creating wildlife habitat, and ensuring the forests' health.

David and Bambi's discovery of a scenic pond near their farm's border inspired them to reach out to neighbors in hopes of preserving and utilizing this special spot. Their CSA experience led them to try a membership-based program for outdoors enthusiasts to financially contribute and help establish a trail system.

In 2007, they established a non-profit organization called the Hidden Valley Nature Center (HVNC) that operated on 1,000 acres assembled from seven purchases over 15 years. With help from a hired director and volunteers, David and Bambi held educational tours on conservation and forestry practices.

Their conservation-minded philanthropy led them to sell the land on which the HVNC operated at a bargain rate in 2016. It was part of a merger with four local land trusts to create the Midcoast Conservancy. At their urging, sustainable forestry is one of its founding pillars.

The trend of forest fragmentation has an impact on biodiversity and wildlife habitat. Both the Hidden Valley Farm and HVNC are unique consolidations of contiguous parcels managed to build resilience and provide continuous cover.

Like at HVNC, Hidden Valley Farm maintains a trail network for non-motorized recreation. Although not a public preserve, Hidden Valley Farm is open year-round to all. Of its 1,200 acres, 15 continue to be managed organically for a neighborhood CSA.

Hidden Valley Farm also contains wetlands, streams, and vernal pools. More than 20 miles of carefully designed logging roads and recreational trails prevent soil erosion and protect water quality. Soil-disturbing activities are limited to frozen or dry-ground conditions. Brush piles, bird boxes and retaining trees — which provide habitat or food — are maintained or installed for wildlife.

It's clear that David and Bambi's collaborative conservation efforts have taken root. Just as their forestland has grown, so has their impact.

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NEW MEXICO LANFORD LIVESTOCK

▶ Watch video of Lanford Livestock

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts

QUIVIRA COALITION

NEW MEXICO FARM & LIVESTOCK BUREAU

Dick and Megan Lanford are brutally honest when asked about raising cattle near a place named Truth or Consequences.

With just 8 inches of annual rainfall, they can't think of a more difficult place to ranch than on their nearly 20,000 acres in Sierra County, but they are finding ways to make it work.

In 2017 the couple moved back to the ranch to help Dick's father raise between 100 and 200 head of cow-calf pairs. The Lanfords also run a construction business that specializes in ranch and wildlife habitat excavation services. Megan is a wildlife biologist and Dick is a numbers guy.

Tests showed high levels of potassium and salt in their soils, and some of the ground water they are able pump is undrinkable due to alkaline. Given the arid conditions, they quickly surmised that raising crops was not feasible.

They took what had been marginal farmland and planted grasses and legumes to establish permanent pasture that was nutritious for cattle and beneficial to the soil. They amended their soil's organic matter by disking manure and grasses into it.

"The cheapest hay baler and fertilizer has four legs" is how Dick explains their decision to graze cattle year-round.

Despite access to thousands of acres of rangeland, the Lanfords rely on 60 acres of irrigated pasture to feed their cattle during dry summers. This gives the rangeland months of rest until rains arrive in the winter. It's a unique take on rotational grazing that is gaining traction in their region.

Megan monitors the herd of crossbred cattle's body conditioning scores, and their fecal samples, to gauge the effectiveness of their grazing management practices.

"From day one, their goal has been to not only improve the condition of their livestock, but to better the land they steward and own," said Kristi Wright, USDA NRCS District Conservationist. "Lanford Livestock takes a holistic approach to solving current and potential issues and challenges. The Lanfords have instituted basic principles of range, pasture, and wildlife management on their operation while moving to greater levels of conservation."

With cost-share assistance from their local Soil and Water Conservation District the Lanfords land-leveled their 60-acre pasture to prevent erosion and conserve water while irrigating and installed solar irrigation pumps to conserve electricity.

Wildlife habitat at Lanford Livestock has been enhanced due to its participation in the federal Conservation Stewardship Program. The wildlife-friendly legumes and shrubs that have been planted feed deer and javelina. Large brush piles provide refuge for a growing population of quail, and bat boxes have been installed.

The Lanfords have worked to eradicate non-native vegetation such as Saltcedar and spiny trees on the ranch they have owned since 1981.

Off the ranch, the Lanfords are active members of the Sierra County Farm Bureau. Dick fights wildfires with state and federal forestry departments. Megan has served as the educational coordinator and district supervisor for the Sierra Soil and Water Conservation District board.

Lanford Livestock regularly hosts youth at the SSWCD's summer camp, and other county agricultural events. Described as an innovator, natural educator, and tireless advocate for agriculture, Megan visits local schools to teach youth where their food comes from.

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NEW YORK SUNNYSIDE FARMS

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

AEM Agricultural Environmental Management

New York State of Opportunity. Agriculture and Markets

Cornell Cooperative Extension

The Ida and Robert Gordon Family Foundation

Farm Credit East

Every seed is planted with purpose at Sunnyside Farms. Brothers Greg and Neil Rejman say it has been that way since their grandfather milked 14 cows by hand.

Today the Rejmans manage a dairy herd 378 times its original size, but the farm's commitment to conservation has not changed.

With 5,000 dairy cows, and 4,000 heifers and calves on 7,500 acres, the sheer size and scale of Sunnyside Farms is impressive, but what happens behind the scenes and beneath its soil is what's most remarkable.

The Rejmans have managed their family's farm in New York's Finger Lakes region since the 1990s. The farm is situated six miles to the east and west of Cayuga Lake and Owasco Lake, which provide drinking water to nearly 150,000 people. They've done what is right, instead of what is easy, to protect the water quality of area lakes.

Buffer strips and grass waterways line their corn fields. Facilities were designed to recycle wash water from the milking parlor and capture leachate from their silage storage bunkers. Instead of growing corn on about 900 acres of steep-sloped, erosion-prone farmland, permanent hay fields and grasslands have been established. Each year 100 acres of grass is reseeded to maintain soil stability.

Soil stabilization practices, like growing cover crops and reduced tillage, increase the soil's capacity to infiltrate water, cycle nutrients, and sequester carbon, while decreasing erosion and runoff. Cover crops provide a year-round layer of protection and biodiversity to the soil on the farm's more than 3,500 acres of corn. To reduce the negative impacts of soil compaction, machinery at Sunnyside Farms is purposely equipped with flotation tires.

The Rejmans completed stream stabilization projects, and a variety of conservation practices, in collaboration with the Cayuga County Soil and Water Conservation District, which underscores their dedication to environmental stewardship. Their efforts have resulted in more habitat for wild turkey, geese, ducks, bald eagles, and ospreys.

In 2008, in addition to its significant manure storage system, the Rejmans invested in a manure digester which separates solids from liquids. Solids are recycled as bacteria-free livestock bedding. As part of the farm's precision nutrient management system, liquids are injected as fertilizer into crop fields, rather than spread, to reduce runoff potential.

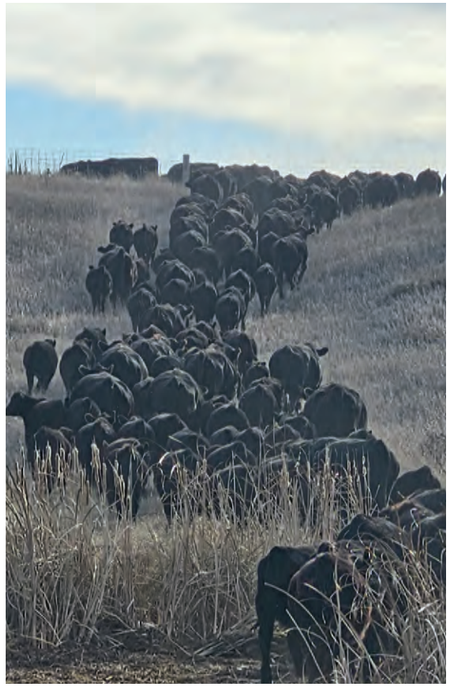
More than 10 miles of underground piping transfers manure from the storage facility to the field. This reduces the need for heavy manure hauling equipment on rural roadways, and likewise eliminates the potential for manure spillage onto roads or ditches. Recently, cover and flare systems have been added to manure storage facilities to mitigate odor and methane's greenhouse gases.

Sunnyside Farms has also adopted an experimental pest management plan, utilizing nematodes in place of pesticides, to reduce or eliminate chemicals that can persist in the environment. Such innovations are aided by the farm's proximity to Cornell University. As host for a variety of crop and dairy research projects, the Rejmans consider themselves lucky to learn from the expertise of Cornell's professors and graduate students.

They also credit Sunnyside Farms' team of about 70 staff with helping them demonstrate agriculture's resiliency in a changing climate. Off the farm, the Rejmans are members of Partners for Healthy Watersheds, Owasco Lake Watershed Inspection Committee, and Cornell's External Nutrient Management Committee.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

NORTH DAKOTA HEATON RANCHES



▶ Watch video of Heaton Ranches

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition

North Dakota Stockmen's Association

North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts

Lewis Heaton is a farmer, rancher, hunter, conservationist, and budding photographer.

He does more than just capture the beauty of landscapes and wildlife; he has been prioritizing their care at Heaton Ranches for decades.

Lewis returned home with a degree in diesel mechanics in 1975 to take over the family farm. The 160 acres near McKenzie in Burleigh County had been in his family since 1926.

From the start, Lewis realized developing resilient and sustainable farm and ranch methods would be key to his long-term success. Long-held practices like traditional soil tillage and calving during the winter wouldn't be sustainable. Experimentation took time, but gradual improvements fueled his growing interest in improving soil health, wetland and freshwater resources, and habitat for wildlife and pollinators.

He embraced conservation practices that were both environmentally and economically beneficial as his business grew to 20,000 acres in four counties. Today, he and wife Sherry, daughter Ella, and sister and brother-in-law Colleen and Albert Kershaw, graze 800 cow-calf pairs on 14,000 acres of rangeland, and grow 6,000 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat, and flax.

Lewis began using no-till farming practices in the 1990s to reduce erosion by leaving crop residue on harvested fields. To introduce more organic material to the soil, he later began growing cover crops of rye grass, turnips, and radishes. By reducing fertilizer costs the profitability of crop production increased.

He also sought new ways to make raising beef cattle more profitable. Grazing cattle on corn stalks following the harvest reduces feed costs while naturally fertilizing cropland with manure and urine. Moving the calving season to later in the spring reduced feed, building, and energy costs during the winter, while improving calf health and mortality rates.

During the growing season, cattle at Heaton Ranches are rotationally grazed across more than 50 pastures. Depending on the pasture's size, location, and water sources, the cattle are moved every three to 20 days. Wetlands are fenced off from grazing when native vegetation diversity and water quality can be improved.

Lewis is a grazing mentor to other ranchers and is a frequent guest speaker on wildlife-friendly grazing practices. Likewise, he only cuts hay after the grassland bird nesting season and starts cutting hay in the field's center to reduce the risk of harming wildlife.

Like Aldo Leopold before him, Lewis understands the importance hunting plays in wildlife management. For the past 20 years, Heaton Ranches has enrolled more that 3,000 acres into the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's program that opens private land to sportsmen.

This, coupled with planting trees and preserving wetlands, has increased the quantity and quality of wildlife found at Heaton Ranches.

To protect pollinators, Lewis limits insecticide use and only plants wheat and soybean crops with noenicitinoid-free seeds. Heaton Ranches also participates in a project examining how carbon can be captured naturally by grassland ecosystems and how grazing cattle can enhance carbon uptake. Selling carbon credits from rangeland is something Lewis hopes will soon be available to more ranchers to provide income and preserve grasslands.

Lewis is passionate about sharing what he's learned with others. He's one of two landowner representatives on the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture management board that oversees issues impacting this environmentally important region.

Photographer or not, Lewis Heaton is the picture of what a conservation ethic looks like.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

OKLAHOMA SCOTTY AND JO HERRIMAN

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Noble Research Institute · Foundation for Agriculture · iTC A Fortis Company · USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. Department of Agriculture · Oklahoma Conservation Commission Our Land • Our Heritage • Our Future

Having weathered droughts and the 1980s farm crisis, Scotty and Jo Herriman thought they knew the ups and downs of farming. Although agile in the face of adversity, nothing could have prepared them for a historic flood's wrath.

The heart of their 2,000-acre farm in northeast Oklahoma sits along the Verdigris River. Fertile river bottom land was cleared and terraced for growing corn, soybeans, wheat and milo in the 1970s, and a riparian area was maintained to prevent soil erosion and provide habitat for wildlife.

It began raining on June 26, 2007, and five days later the Verdigris River crested over 30 feet. A broken levee flooded the Herriman's home and deluged a local refinery, dumping 42,000 gallons of oil into the river. Everything along the float line turned black, and the flood washed away the topsoil the Herrimans had worked three decades to preserve.

Their farm was nearly decimated with just 13 acres of crops left to harvest. That was followed by poor crop yields in 2008. Scotty says he was pushed to consider changing how he farmed.

Inspired by other farmers having success with reduced tillage, in 2010 he adopted no-till soybeans and strip-till corn. In addition to time savings and less equipment maintenance, Scotty noticed positive changes in his soil. The prior year's plant-root channels that dig deep into the ground were improving soil infiltration and creating a more stable and resilient soil structure. Future crops were less stressed by drought and pests due to increased crop vigor.

To reduce herbicide use, Scotty planted a cover crop of cereal rye in 2016. Cover crops suppress weeds and leave a mulch layer an inch thick, which further increases soil moisture retention and moderates the soil's temperature. Today, he sells cereal rye seed to farmers for cover crops and has hosted many farm tours to showcase the soil health benefits of cover crops.

The Herriman Farm was also one site for the Oklahoma Conservation Commission and American Farmland Trust's "Soil Health Case Studies" in 2022. The study analyzed the financial impacts of conservation practices on 350 acres of the farm. It found the farm's net income increased by $4 per acre, per year, achieving a 7 percent return on investment.

The Herrimans have been repeat winners in the National Corn Growers Association's yield contest for dryland corn in Oklahoma. Other sources of pride for Scotty and Jo are their three grown sons, each with agricultural careers.

The Herrimans have always been willing to try innovative techniques, such as terracing, prescribed burning, and brush management. In 1978, they purchased land that included 26-acre Chouteau Lake, the largest lake in Nowata County. The land was full of scattered timber and had poor drainage. Three acres of large trees along the lake act as a riparian area and natural buffer. Several fishing clinics have been hosted at the lake that serves as a popular community resource.

Scotty's passion for working with other conservation-minded people led the governor to appoint him to the Oklahoma Conservation Commission where he served for a decade, two years as chairman. He also served as president of the Oklahoma Soybean Association.

"Scotty is truly inspirational, full of wisdom and counsel, willing to share and gently guide those around him," said Kevin Norton, a retired associate chief with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. "He is absolutely the most humble, peaceful, and optimistic farmer I have ever encountered."

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

PENNSYLVANIA TROY FIRTH

▶ Watch video of Troy Firth

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Heinz Endowments
Howard Heinz Endowment
Vira I. Heinz Endowment

Farm Credit Horizon

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Those words from Aldo Leopold ring true for Troy Firth as he walks through a forest.

Born into a family of loggers, early on Troy worked in sawmills and the woods. He grew unsatisfied seeing forests left degraded by severe harvests, and efforts to take only the best trees. The prevailing practices of the time were threatening the local ecosystem and compromising the long-term health of the local timber economy.

At that same time, Troy's conservation ethic was being influenced by reading Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry. He came to see that forestry done right is an observational science that attempts to mimic nature.

He acquired his first forest land in the 1970s, and has since purchased about 7,000 acres. Through decades of care and diligence, Troy's forests thrived as he built a business that provides rural jobs and a unique model for the timber industry.

In addition to lumber, Firth Maple Products is Pennsylvania's second largest maple syrup producer. Its humble beginnings took shape when Troy began tapping maple trees while living on his family's dairy farm. The 160-acre farm's rolling terrain proved better for growing trees than crops. Troy also found that logging and maple syrup pair well, both seasonally and for managing a workforce.

Troy says, "A bad logger goes to the woods thinking of what he can take out. A good logger goes to the woods thinking of what he can leave."

In addition to his unconventional "worst first" approach to selecting timber for harvest, he removes trees by doing the least possible damage to others left standing. The same care is given to the forest floor to not disturb soil, vegetation, and wildlife habitat.

To foster tree species and age diversity, Troy uses an approach akin to the Femelschlag technique or gap silviculture. Small group selections, no larger than a few acres, are harvested to create canopy gaps where the forest understory stocked with native species allows for natural regeneration to occur. This approach attracted the attention of conservation biologists and avian researchers who conduct a multi-year study of songbird diversity in forests Troy manages.

Troy subcontracts with four teams of Amish loggers who use horses instead of mechanical skidders. This minimizes damage to the forest floor, allowing the understory to recover quickly. Troy was demonstrating horse logging at a field day about 25 years ago when he met one of his conservation idols, Wendell Berry.

"When Aldo Leopold was writing "The Land Ethic" and worrying about "the apathy of private timber owners," he was thinking of the need for foresters like Troy," Berry wrote in his letter nominating Troy for the Leopold Conservation Award.

Troy and his late wife, Lynn, founded the Foundation for Sustainable Forests in 2004 to protect forested ecosystems and highlight sustainable forestry practices. He remains determined to see the organization serve as a regional model for other conservation-minded landowners. To date, Troy has had a hand in the conservation of 2,250 acres of working forests, with more gains on the horizon, including the generous bequest of his own lands.

While Troy's career may sound idyllic, his lived experience is far from it. He has been unfairly criticized for not having what others say is a "realistic" approach to industrial timbering. Yet, his 45-year career is proof that forestry can be both economically profitable and ecologically nurturing.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

SOUTH DAKOTA BLIOUX RIVER RANCH

Presented in Partnership with

Upon graduating from college, Eli Little faced a serious question about his future. Could his family's ranch generate enough income to sustain another partner?

The answer was right under his boots.

Eli and his father Barry focused on improving their soil's health on every acre of cropland and pasture at Blioux River Ranch in Hamlin County. Their renewed emphasis on conservation could reduce their input costs while maintaining, if not increasing, their yields and productivity.

Barry began practicing minimum tillage on his 1,850 acres of small grains, corn, and soybeans in the 1990s. There were also 500 acres next to the Big Sioux River that had been poorly managed for decades. To prevent erosion and improve water quality he enrolled it into the federal Conservation Reserve Program.

Integration of livestock on the land is one of the principles of soil health. However, the Littles had not considered their beef cattle as part of their conservation equation until their first attempt at rotational grazing in 2008. They listened to grazing gurus and combined multiple herds of cow-calf pairs into one single grazing group. After years of trial and error, their grazing efficiency found its groove. Beef production moved from a sidelight at Blioux River Ranch to a profitable enterprise.

From May to October their 200 cow-calf pairs are moved almost daily to a new paddock ranging in size from two to 20 acres. This system has multiple environmental and economic benefits.

The Littles noticed the amount of land they need to annually feed a cow-calf pair dropped from four or five acres, to less than two. That pencils out to quite a difference when local pastures rent for $55 per acre.

Rotational grazing allows pastures to flourish without the need for synthetic fertilizer or pesticides. Following the fall harvest, cattle are moved through cropland to graze on cover crops or crop residue, which further reduces feed costs while improving yields.

Cattle also do more than quickly turn grass into beef, they naturally spread fertilizer onto the land. Afterwards, their gut microbes interact with soil microbes, adding to the abundance of microscopic organisms that create a healthy soil and help re-establish the prairie's natural mineral cycles.

As a result, the Littles find more native plant species in their pastures that they did not plant. The grazing rotation is timed to allow these flowering plants to bloom and provide a food source for beneficial pollinators. A local beekeeper has kept beehives next to Blioux River Ranch pastures since 2016.

To enhance wildlife habitat at Blioux River Ranch, about 100 acres are enrolled into a 30-year wetland reserve easement, while another 20 acres of cropland serve as food plots with a mix of corn and a brood mix designed for pheasants.

Pheasant chicks need habitat for cover and insects for food. The brood mix grows sequentially flowering plants to protect and feed pheasants, while providing a water source from dew on the plant stems. As leaders on the Dry Lake Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Barry and Eli regularly volunteer their time and equipment to plant the brood mix for other landowners.

Now more than a decade into fully immersing themselves into the school of soil health, the Littles share what they have learned with friends, neighbors, and strangers.

TEXAS MT7 RANCH

Presented in Partnership with

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TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE

Lee and Ramona Bass

Mike and Mary Terry's passion for conservation, cattle ranching, and the outdoors led them to do something spectacular.

The Terrys invested in a weathered piece of land in 2008. Although the land had been overlooked for decades, they saw an opportunity to revive it to benefit the environment, wildlife, and people. With patience, hard work, expert care, and a mix of traditional and innovative agricultural practices, the landscape began to transform to its natural state and flourish.

After the purchase of 20 adjacent parcels, their MT7 Ranch now encompasses more than 19,300 acres of rolling plains, cropland, wetlands, and rangeland in north central Texas.

MT7 Ranch's approach to land stewardship is overseen by longtime ranch manager Ty Bartoskewitz. He employs a variety of habitat, grazing, crop, water retention, and wildlife population management practices.

Wheat, sorghum, and sunflowers are grown on cropland, but most of the ranch is devoted to restoration of rangeland for pastures and wildlife habitat. A prescribed burning schedule coupled with a rotational grazing system for MT7 Ranch's herd of Red Angus beef cattle encourages the revitalization of native, warm season grasses.

Thoughtful restoration of wetlands and riparian areas attracts a variety of wood ducks and other migratory waterfowl. More than 3,300 feral pigs have been removed to reduce potential damage to habitat. Such efforts earned MT7 Ranch the Texas Wildlife Association's Landowner of the Year Award in 2015.

Perhaps most notable has been the creation and maintenance of 55 quail management areas scattered across the ranch. They range in size from 10 to 100 acres and are situated within riparian corridors and ridges where mesquite and other shrubs could not be easily cleared in the past. Each area provides quail with cover and food sources of seeds and insects from a patchwork of disked strips planted annually with a mix of grains and forbs that mature at different times of the year.

The restoration of habitat for quail and Rio Grande turkeys is among a long list of topics studied at MT7 Ranch.

Whereas some landowners fear opening their land to others, the Terrys have taken the opposite approach. They use their ranch as an outdoor classroom for other ranchers, local school and civic groups, state and federal conservation agencies and nonprofits, and graduate students conducting research.

Because they want others to learn about sound land management practices, research requests are met with a "yes". They also want to foster a new generation of young professionals engaged in conservation, natural resources, and ranching.

MT7 Ranch has an active relationship with the local school district. It hosts an annual spring field day for fifth graders, and the ranch's daily activities are incorporated into the science curriculum. High school students are employed for summer jobs. An internship program was created in 2009 for college students interested in natural resources, ranch management and agribusiness careers. Since then, MT7 Ranch has employed more than 100 interns, several of whom have returned to the ranch after graduation to work full-time.

Mike credits his wife Mary, ranch manager Ty, and his father-in-law, all avid outdoors enthusiasts, with influencing his evolving land ethic. He is thrilled to have youth coming to the ranch to learn about conservation, catch their first fish, or see a cow up close for the first time. His MT7 Ranch shows what's possible by opening the beauty of rural Texas to the rest of the world.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
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UTAH FLYING M RANCH

▶ Watch video of Flying M Ranch

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While ranching and wildlife can be perceived as competing threats, that's not the case at Tim and Laurie Munns' Flying M Ranch.

For decades, the Munnses have understood that a healthy landscape is key to sustainable wildlife populations and a successful cattle ranch. They achieve this by employing conservation practices that benefit livestock, wildlife, crops, rangeland, and water resources in Utah's Hansel Valley.

The land ethic they share with their sons, Sonny and Bud, is grounded in science, technology, and wise management. The Munns family stays up to date on sustainability issues and techniques, and utilize the resources available to them through partnerships with conservation agencies and consultants.

Over the years, the Munnses converted many acres of dry cropland to perennial vegetation to prevent erosion and build soil health while enhancing biodiversity. Other parts of Flying M Ranch that were once grazed by sheep had become dominated by broom snakeweed and rabbit brush.

Tim and Laurie worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to remove invasive brush species and reseed the range to provide improved livestock forage and wildlife habitat. Populations of Sharp-tailed Grouse, Mourning Dove, Chukar, and Gray Partridge have since flourished.

The Munnses have enrolled 3,000 acres of their ranch in Utah's Walk-in Access program, allowing public access for upland game hunting. Likewise, biologists are welcomed to track migration patterns, survival rates, and health of mule deer, elk, and pronghorn.

Flying M Ranch had just one water trough when Tim and Laurie bought it in the 1970s. They've since installed 30 miles of water pipeline and 40 water troughs to distribute water to cattle and wildlife across thousands of acres. Cattle are grazed in Promontory in the winter, and spend their summers in nearby Caribou County, Idaho.

The land use and grazing management plan they created with the NRCS allowed them to increase their herd size while improving pasture conditions.

Advancements in crop irrigation technology allows the Munns family to conserve water and electricity. Precision nozzle tips reduce the amount of water lost to evaporation. Alfalfa fields are irrigated only at night during the off-peak power rate times, which reduces the demands on the electrical grid and lowers energy costs to the ranch.

Erosion control structures such as terraces, diversions, and debris basins have been installed at Flying M Ranch to manage water movement and prevent destructive erosion from rainstorms.

Tim and Laurie were early innovators in demonstrating the grazing benefits of forage kochia which was first introduced to the United States in 1960 as an ornamental plant. The Munnses found the semi-evergreen half shrub to be a highly nutritious late season grazing plant for cattle while providing cover for wildlife and upland game birds.

Well-suited for dry rangeland conditions, forage kochia competes well against aggressive annual weeds like cheatgrass. The plant is a valuable fire deterrent when used in green strips in high-risk fire areas. Tim and Laurie developed a successful business of planting, harvesting, processing, and selling certified forage kochia seed. Most seed sales are to government agencies planting it to prevent the spread of wildfires.

Off the ranch, the Munnses have served in a variety of leadership positions that advance conservation practices. Laurie has served as president of the Utah Cattlewomen's Association and Tim is a long-time board member of the National Grazing Lands Coalition.

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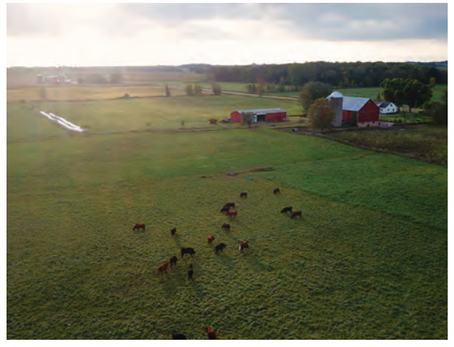
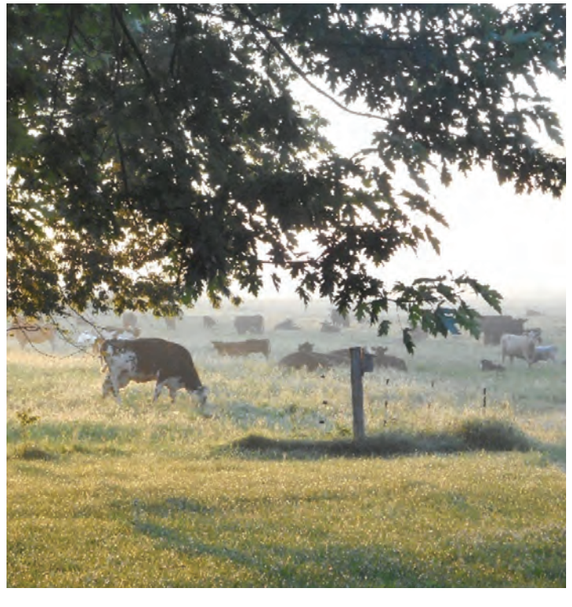
WISCONSIN THE ADAMSKI FAMILY



▶ Watch video of The Adamski Family



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"We bank our wealth in the soil and the nutrients stored there," Valerie Dantoin says of her family's approach to farming.

Their 240-acre Shawano County farm is covered with a green, protective blanket year-round thanks to the managed grazing system that she and husband Rick Adamski have established.

Soil tests routinely show their pastures' organic matter is two percent higher than neighboring tilled corn and soybean fields. It is estimated that every one percent increase in organic matter helps hold 20,000 gallons more water per acre, which helps withstand deluges and droughts.

In addition to improving soil's organic matter levels and ability to infiltrate water, permanently covered pastures also help sequester carbon. Rick and Valerie have followed the guidelines for biodiversity, soil, and water conservation to maintain their farm's organic certification since the 1990s.

"If we could not farm in an environmentally friendly way, we wouldn't farm at all," Valerie said.

That sentiment means making sure their cattle herd size matches the carrying capacity of their land. Since retiring from milking dairy cows in 2014, they rotationally graze a herd of 100 beef cattle. For 25 years they have composted all their cattle's winter manure.

At Rick and Valerie's aptly named Full Circle Farm, their son Andrew and his partner Heather Toman are helping usher in its next life stage, a return to a diversified farm. They manage about 60 pigs and a flock of laying hens on pasture, raise 10 acres of vegetables, and have established a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) business.

Full Circle Farm feeds about 1,000 people weekly through its 150 CSA shares and sales at farmers markets. Andrew experiments with bio-char and vertical tillage on vegetable crops as part of his master's degree study on soil health.

Rick and Valerie have founded two farm cooperatives focused on fair prices for sustainably produced food and ensuring that other conservation-minded farms have access to mid-sized markets.

Full Circle Farm regularly hosts field days, including events targeted to female landowners who want to learn about establishing pollinator habitat and riparian buffers. Valerie co-founded the Wisconsin Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program and is a conservation coach for Wisconsin Women in Conservation. She previously led GrassWorks, a statewide organization that promotes grazing's conservation benefits. Rick served as president of Wisconsin Farmers Union and has been a consultant for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

The Adamski family has planted several hundred shrubs, and oak and cedar trees. Riparian buffers along a waterway were expanded to 30 feet. Fence lines and hedgerows border Full Circle Farm's 25 fields. These areas and a farm pond provide habitat and migration corridors for badger, fox, pheasants, green heron, Sandhill cranes, and Hungarian partridge.

"It is ethical to leave a corner of the farm as wetlands for frogs and migrating waterfowl," Valerie recently wrote regarding her land ethic.

"The ethical thing to do is to care for the land, soil, and water as if our children's children are the ones who will farm after we are gone," she continued. "It is ethical to enjoy the sunset and see the fruits of your labors, to revel in the richness of the land all around you, and to never once wonder what it's worth."

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Wisconsin Corn Growers Association
Wisconsin Corn Promotion Board
Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association
Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association






"Conservation can accomplish its objectives only when it springs from an impelling conviction on the part of private landowners."

– Aldo Leopold

Conservationist, landowner and author of *A Sand County Almanac*

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