# Leopold Conservation Award®

PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

## 2025 Award Recipients

2025 NEBRASKA LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD RECIPIENTS:
DIAMOND BAR RANCH
PHOTO BY ABBY DURHEIM

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 nearly 60 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 Leopold Conservation Award 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,

Sand County Foundation and our partners proudly share these stories of the Leopold Conservation Award Class of 2025.

You'll be struck, as I was, by how diverse these conservation success stories are. They affirm that conservation is a matter of heart, mind, humility, and no small dose of stubbornness. For example:

- A former Volkswagen repair shop manager who came to love farming, then founded a grain mill that supports other grain growers in his community.
- A landowner who took his conservation efforts to a higher level after a devastating hurricane.
- A couple who kept their professional day jobs until their conservation-focused ranch could sustain them and the wildlife that call it home.

Each one of these farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners demonstrates determination and innovation to carefully manage the land, build healthy soil, improve water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat.

Please also visit sandcountyfoundation.org to watch the videos that accompany these stories and learn more about how to become involved in the Leopold Conservation Award program. And don't miss out on the next 'Innovations on the Land' symposium to be held in 2027. More information will be coming your way this year.

Sincerely,

Kevin McAleese
President and CEO
Sand County Foundation

# CALIFORNIA STEMPLE CREEK RANCH

▶ Watch video of Stemple Creek Ranch

## Presented in Partnership with

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

Loren Poncia summarizes his story this way: Ranch kid gets bit by the agriculture bug. Kid works in corporate America. Kid comes back to the ranch to build something sustainable and profitable.

When Loren and his wife Lisa moved back to Marin County 20 years ago, their goal was to reinvent the family business by raising high quality grass-fed and finished meats. That would require a new spin on how to raise and market sheep and beef cattle.

During their first few years they both kept their day jobs while leasing 400 acres of his family's land. They bought beef cattle and focused on the infrastructure needed for rotational grazing. That meant investing in miles of movable fencing, dozens of permanent water troughs, and solar pumps that move water to holding tanks.

Today, the organic, grass-finished beef and lamb and pastured pork they raise is sold direct to consumers, grocery stores, restaurants, and butcher shops. However, establishing a niche product with its own brand, happened one step at a time.

Seventeen years ago, Loren and Lisa designed a logo, put up a simple website, and began selling beef and lamb directly to consumers. As a vendor at one of the largest farmers markets in the country (7 miles away from their home, and only 35 miles from the ranch) their product caught the eye of well-known chefs. Over the course of a decade, they went from selling 10 head of beef to more than 1,500 annually.

After purchasing a neighboring ranch, they rehabbed its buildings as ranch stays and turned an old hay barn into an event venue to host weddings, corporate events, and farm-to-table dinners. Loren's experience in ag business, and Lisa's as a practicing attorney, paid dividends as they built their business, which now encompasses a team of 20 employees and thousands of acres managed for grazing.

The 650 acres they own and much of what they lease has Marin Agricultural Land Trust agricultural conservation easements on them. This ensures that the land will be conserved as open space and in productive agricultural use in perpetuity. Their daughters, Avery and Julianna, and their nieces and nephews will be the fifth generation to steward the coastal hills of Marin County.

"We're trying to dance with Mother Nature within our fencelines," Loren says of his family's approach to conservation.

Loren's father Al began fencing off the creeks and riparian areas and planting trees to prevent erosion in the 1980s. Loren and Lisa continued what he started by adding over five miles of fencing and planting 10,000 trees. This restoration effort has created a habitat that attracts beavers, badgers, bobcats, black-tailed deer, jack rabbits, and grey and red foxes. Stemple Creek Ranch is also home to endangered species, including the California red-legged frog and the California freshwater shrimp.

The ranch was certified as bird-friendly by the Audubon Society in 2021 for its sustainable grazing practices. Several species of hawks, owls, and migrating birds seasonally call the ranch home. The Ponicas partner with Sola Bee Farms to host pollinating bee hives on the property.

As one of the first demonstration sites for the Marin Carbon Project, a groundbreaking 10-year study, it was one of the first ranches with an active carbon farm plan. They have hosted hundreds of tours to educate others about carbon positive practices, soil health, and rotational grazing.

Just as Loren strives to stimulate the soil and grassland at Stemple Creek Ranch, he's equally excited about helping others see what is possible when bridging the environmental and economic benefits of conservation.

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# CAROLINAS GRAYHOUSE FARMS

▶ Watch video of Grayhouse Farms

Jimmy Gray is a dairy farmer and avid outdoorsman. Whether at work or play, his conservation ethic knows no bounds, which he credits to his late father Reid.

"We heard Dad say many times, 'If we cannot keep this crop ground from washing away, I'm going to sew it all in grass,'" Jimmy recalls. "If there was a way to take better care of the land, Dad was willing to try."

Jimmy succeeded his father as a supervisor on the Iredell Soil and Water Conservation District. Over 34 years of service, both discovered practices that made environmental and economic sense for their farm.

Today, Jimmy and his brother Andy continue their father's legacy at Grayhouse Farms, conserving soil and water, improving milk quality, ensuring herd health and comfort for 1,200 cows, while going the extra mile for wildlife.

Grayhouse Farms is home to four conservation easements. They include two stream mitigation sites, 110 acres of cropland, and a timber track of 129 acres along the South Yadkin River. Reid diversified the farm's bottom line by investing in 500 acres of forestland.

Despite some skeptics, controlled burns have produced profitable timber stands of loblolly pine. Their bark tolerates fire while killing or damaging other types of trees that compete for nutrients, sunlight, and water. Fire turns leaf litter into fertilizer for the pines, and triggers lush vegetation on the forest floor for wildlife to eat.

Owning forestland coupled well with Jimmy's lifelong interest in wildlife and duck hunting. He was one of the first in the area to create waterfowl impounds and conduct other restorations of stream, riparian, and wetland areas to enhance water quality and wildlife habitat.

Jimmy strongly believes in providing others with access to farms and forests. For 23 years, he and his wife Amanda have hosted Youth Day during which speakers and activities introduce 50-180 kids to fishing, canoeing, archery, and how farming can help steward natural resources.

Grayhouse Farms' cropland is no-tilled to prevent erosion and to save the time and fuel used for conventional tillage. Cover crops of wheat, barley, winter peas, crimson clover, and tillage radish are grown to aerate and fertilize the soil.

After much research the Grays relocated their dairy in 2018. The herd rests on sand bedding in freestall barns. Increased cow comfort has led to higher milk production per cow and improved milk quality. Sand and water are recycled thanks to a sand separator and a four-lagoon waste system. A flush system uses recycled water to clean the barns before moving to a sand-settling basin where sand is reclaimed for repeated use. Each time water is moved to the next lagoon, solids are encouraged to stay behind. A dragline system moves the solids to distant fields to be utilizes as fertilizer, which adds more biodiversity to the soil.

Heifers are kept on 300 acres split into eight pastures, each with a roadside feed bunk for supplemental feeding and well water piped to water tanks. Fencing the cattle away from streams has improved water quality, and the herd now has fewer health problems and better growth rates from drinking well water.

Grayhouse Farms is a mix of modern agricultural and timber innovations, coupled with the Gray family's old-school commitment to their local community's people and landscape.

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Carolina Farm Trust

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. Department of Agriculture North Carolina

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. Department of Agriculture South Carolina

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# COLORADO WAGON WHEEL RANCH



▶ Watch video of Wagon Wheel 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

The Rogers family is the hub of the aptly named Wagon Wheel Ranch.

Kenny Rogers humbly acknowledges being the latest spoke in a long line of ranchers who have worked in concert with the landscape.

He likens the grit of his ancestors to early homesteaders who weathered storms, both literal and figurative, and were determined to remain on the land caring for cattle.

"Their stamp on the operation cannot be overlooked," Kenny said. "Enough credit may never be given to those early generations."

"It required years of trial and error, expansion when possible, and careful nurturing what assets, land, and animals we had, to arrive where we are today," he added.

When it was Kenny and his wife Jody's turn to take over Wagon Wheel Ranch's day-to-day operations from his parents, Francis and Mary Rogers, they were spread thin between raising crops and cattle. Considering the labor needs and soaring costs of inputs and equipment to grow irrigated crops, they opted to focus on raising purebred Angus cattle. Leasing their farmland allowed them to better manage their cattle and grassland.

Today, multiple herds are rotationally grazed on 6,440 acres cross-fenced into quarters and halves, depending on water source availability. On a state land lease, they have a series of 10 paddocks (ranging in size from 150 acres to 260 acres), with a corral and water tank at the center. Cattle walk less than a mile to get water from any location.

The Rogers family has long utilized a "take half, leave half" approach to grazing the fragile soils prevalent on their ranch. In 2023, they received assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve their grazing plan. The plan's rotational grazing system allows for proper distribution of cattle and ample rest time to aid the health and vigor of grasses.

An adaptive drought contingency plan considers plant height, and local rainfall and moisture levels, when making grazing management decisions.

Wagon Wheel Ranch's stocking rates have always been under the industry standard to maintain high quality forages. The significant amounts of grass left over after cattle have grazed a paddock is attributed to an increase in deer, pronghorn, and grassland and upland birds found on the ranch.

Kenny and Jody ranch with their son Jace, son Jerrod Massey, his wife Hollie, and grandsons Mason and Carter.

The Rogers family enrolled highly erodible former crop fields and grasslands into the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The seed package they chose when planting grasses for CRP contained native plants that benefit wildlife. Although the CRP payment is less than potential income from crops, they say the net positive in terms of conservation is immeasurable.

To conserve water in the Ogallala aquifer, the Rogers family upgraded the nozzles on the center irrigation pivot they use to grow livestock forage. It led to a 15 percent reduction in their water usage.

The positive impacts of the Wagon Wheel Ranch stretch beyond the landscape and community of Yuma County. Kenny was a founding board member of the North American Weed Management Association, and past president of its Colorado affiliate.

Kenny's peers credit him with being a stalwart leader for the agriculture industry and having a knack for gently guiding young ranchers toward finding and incorporating their own best conservation practices.

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# ILLINOIS DAN SANDERSON


▶ Watch video of Dan Sanderson

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

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ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

Long before regenerative agriculture became a widely recognized concept, Dan Sanderson was quietly adopting many of its core principles.

As a young farmer in the 1980s he noticed land enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) produced environmental benefits of rejuvenated soils and reestablished pollinator habitat.

Since then, he's voluntarily integrated regenerative practices of rotational grazing, reduced pesticide use, minimal tillage, and diverse cover cropping across 3,200 acres managed by Dan's family in DeKalb County, and especially at his 160-acre homestead named Pasture Grazed Regenerative Farm.

Dan and his wife Hattie, their grown children Trent and Rosie, and their families, all play a role at Pasture Grazed Regenerative Farm where beef and pork is sold directly to consumers from an on-farm store. Conservation efforts to improve the land and direct marketing have made the farm more resilient to financial volatility and increasingly erratic weather.

Dan credits a Soil Health Academy workshop in 2017 with transforming the way he farms. He now closely observes how each cover crop responds to different soil types, moisture conditions, and grazing pressure, and adjusts as needed to optimize soil health and productivity.

Never afraid to change course when he sees a better path, Dan restructures the grazing rotation schedule if livestock overgraze. When field data showed that fertilizer applications were not returning a profit, he tailored application rates.

"He listens to the land, and it shows in every decision he makes," his daughter Rosie wrote in the nomination for the Leopold Conservation Award.

The Sandersons recently took a big step forward in how their pastures are managed. They began using virtual fencing technology to reduce the time and labor it takes to move cattle. GPS-enabled, solar-powered collars guide cattle without the need for physical fencing.

With the touch of a button, grazing areas are determined while adjusting for weather, forage conditions, and soil health goals in real time. Pastures regenerate faster with better-managed rest periods between grazings.

Cattle and sheep are rotationally grazed across pastures because they interact with the land differently. Cattle graze taller grasses while sheep prefer shorter plants and forbs. Their unique grazing behaviors help control weeds and encourage diverse forage regrowth. Their difference in manure and hoof action also produces environmental benefits. Hogs, which are good at digging, are strategically pastured in select areas to stir up and reset less-than-desirable soils. Keeping livestock away from ecologically sensitive areas supports water quality, soil structure, and biodiversity.

By prioritizing soil health, plant diversity, and animal integration, Dan is helping rebuild the region's ecosystems. His actions impact pollinators that travel to neighboring fields, water that flows to nearby creeks, and wildlife that cross invisible property boundaries.

Dan's farming model offers a counterpoint to conventional systems that rely heavily on synthetic inputs, plant monocultures, and livestock confinement. He shows that farming doesn't have to come at the expense of natural resources, but instead can restore them.

Not only is his farm a platform for teaching others with tours, but Dan also recently published a book, *Grounded: One Farmer's Journey to Regenerative Agriculture*, to encourage others to embrace conservation.

There is no rulebook or regulation that requires the level of care, observation, and adaptation that Dan brings to farming. His choices are guided by a land ethic that views land as not just a resource, but a living system that deserves respect and restoration.

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# IOWA LANDON AND ANNE PLAGGE

▶ Watch video of Landon and Anne Plagge

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

PRACTICAL FARMERS of Iowa

CDI CONSERVATION DISTRICTS OF IOWA

Landon and Anne Plagge build healthier spaces, on their farmland, in their local community, and within the regional ag economy.

The Plagges grow a rotation of corn, soybeans, and food-grade oats on 4,000 acres. For over a decade they have utilized no-till practices while growing a diverse crop rotation, and a mix of cover crops.

By keeping their soil surface covered, they improve soil biodiversity while preventing erosion. Building soil organic matter helps sequester carbon and boost crop yields without increasing inputs. Their improved soil structure allows for better water infiltration and retention.

To stimulate soil microbes, the Plagges fertilize their fields with a custom blend of local livestock manure, including waste from the 10,000 hogs they raise, to optimally and naturally balance the nitrogen, phosphorus, and other nutrients in the soil. By partnering with other farmers to have cattle graze their fields, they reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and herbicides, while controlling weeds.

Landon earned a degree in business administration, and Anne is an assistant professor of family services at the University of Northern Iowa and a former public health official. In 2020, they started Green Acres Seed Co., specializing in soil health consulting, diverse crop rotations, cover crop transition planning and seeding, and rural community preservation.

Their experience farming has taught them that improving soil health requires diversity from the traditional corn-soybean rotation. Adding oats as a third cash crop to their rotation has built drought resiliency and improved pollinator biodiversity.

However, when talking with other farmers, the Plagges noticed that many were hesitant to grow oats due to mistrust of the processing and pricing structure farmers face when selling small grains. Instead of accepting that oats aren't profitable, the Plagges decided to get creative and solve the problem.

After a few years of planning and securing financing with another 105 farmer-owners, construction is underway on a $55 million processing, storage, and distribution facility in southern Minnesota. When the oat milling facility opens in 2026, it will process 4 million bushels of oats grown on 60,000 acres within a 120-mile radius. The nutrient-dense, gluten-free oats will be made into branded flour, flakes, and steel-cut oats.

This huge undertaking provides an avenue for diversified cropping systems that allow soil health and carbon sequestration to take root. It also underscores the Plagges commitment to getting conservation practices on the ground.

The oat mill is not the first time the Plagges have worked to provide others with greater food options.

When Landon was a member of the Latimer City Council, the community's only grocery store closed. The Plagges didn't want Latimer to be without a place to congregate and buy food, so they and another farmer bought a building, remodeled it,  and re-opened a grocery store. They've since transitioned ownership of the store to a new board of community members, and redeveloped other properties that provide opportunities for others in their rural community.

The Plagges demonstrate a strong conservation ethic on and off the farm, serving on several conservation-focused committees and boards. Their passion for conservation is contagious as they explore how they can move the needle through education, data sharing, experimentation, curiosity, and teamwork.

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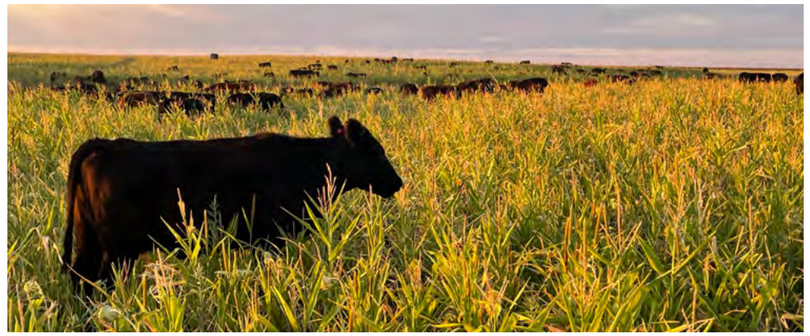
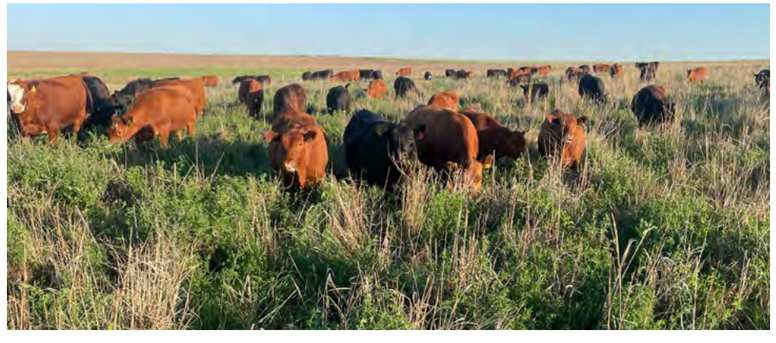
# KANSAS KEVIN WILTSE AND FAMILY



Watch video of Kevin Wiltse and Family



## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

OKACD Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Ranchland Trust of Kansas An affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association

Kansas Farm Bureau The Voice of Agriculture

Kevin Wiltse's conservation journey began on a bus.

He traveled with his father to Dakota Lakes in 1996 to learn about soil health. The day after returning home, they sold their tillage equipment and bought a no-till drill. But soil health success didn't come overnight, nor was it achieved relying solely on not tilling the soil.

Ever since that fateful trip, Kevin's commitment to conservation has driven him to challenge conventional approaches and pursue untested methods of farming. The result has been a more profitable business, one less reliant on commercial inputs and subsidies, while balancing agricultural productivity with ecological integrity.

One of the most transformative aspects of his strategy has been successfully transitioning more than 500 acres of conventional cropland to native perennial grasses and forbs, without cost-share assistance. By fostering deep-rooted plants, he improves soil structure, enhances water retention, and mitigates the impact of drought.

Enhancing biodiversity while preventing erosion is why Kevin also began growing cover crops within his normal rotation of crops. The presence of continuous ground cover provided more options to graze beef cattle year-round.

Beyond individual farming techniques, Kevin's success lies in his mindset. He partners with nature rather than trying to control it. This philosophy drives experimentation with interseeding crops, biological amendments, and perennial cool-season planting. Each practice reinforces his farm's ability to withstand unpredictable weather and market conditions.

Kevin, and his wife Amanda and their three children farm with his mother. Wiltse Family Farms consists of native range and dryland cropland spread across three counties.

Kevin made sweeping changes to the farm's business model after attending the Ranching for Profit School in 2013 amid a three-year drought.

He decided to rely less on cash crops and more on grazing cattle.

The large, intact land base at Wiltse Family Farms has made grazing and moving livestock easier. The borders of farm fields, planted with diverse perennial vegetation, are fenced in to serve as travel lanes between pastures for cattle. These perennial borders attract beneficial pollinators and pheasants. About 30,000 feet of water lines were installed to distribute water to stock tanks. The only cash crops grown now are, milo, triticale and rye, all of which can double as forage for livestock and wildlife.

Kevin credits rotationally grazing livestock on cover crops and diverse perennial pastures with accelerated restoration of the soil. His pastures have remained green during recent periods of drought. More grass on the ground attracts more wildlife and insects, which Kevin considers a good indicator of success.

Kevin's impact extends beyond his own farm with speaking engagements and mentoring other landowners. Leading experts in regenerative agriculture seek his insights. Yet, he admits that 30 years ago as a Kansas State graduate, he was more concerned with crop yields than soil health and bird habitat.

"You need to be at your place and time to do this," he said.

Much like the bus tour he took years ago, he encourages others to visit farms and ranches that utilize conservation practices, and to then experiment on a few acres at home.

Peers and visitors are consistently inspired by Kevin's quiet and humble stewardship. His willingness to test and refine methods is pushing conservation agriculture forward, while establishing a model for future generations.

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# KENTUCKY JOHN AND RANDY SEYMOUR

▶ Watch video of John and Randy Seymour


Former tobacco fields, overgrown forests, and limestone outcroppings usually are not the makings of a conservation showplace. That is, unless you are talking about the father and son team of John and Randy Seymour.

Their original plan was to raise beef cattle, grow tobacco and row crops, and pursue timber production on land where others had struggled to make a living in remote northwest Hart County. The ravaged land was gullied and stripped of soil nutrients. Quality timber had been selectively stripped. Small, abandoned farms had been sold to others on speculation. Neglect had left the area ecologically damaged.

Undeterred, the Seymours spent four decades piecing together 28 parcels contoured with rolling hills, narrow valleys, and sandstone capped ridge tops into a 2,150-acre tract named Riders Mill Farms.

The Seymours dug 16 ponds to water cattle and protect the water quality of Roundstone Creek. Fences were built to protect the forest from cattle, and soil conditions were improved. The invested resources to control invasive species and repair severe erosion, and managed woodlands for timber production with the assistance of the Kentucky Division of Forestry.

Despite these conservation advancements, the Seymours were intrigued by protecting rare and threatened plants species and creating habitat for diverse and abundant wildlife populations. By prioritizing their farm's diverse flora and fauna they saw an opportunity to diversify their income stream.

Abundant remnants of native grass, legumes, and wildflowers indicated the site would be ideal for their production. A survey of the farm's flora found over 900 species. Each was collected, mounted, labeled, peer-reviewed, and included in an on-site herbarium for public study.

Roundstone Native Seed LLC (RNS) was established to specialize in growing seeds native to an ecologically distinct region.

With more than 340 species in their seed catalog, the business helps other landowners establish native plants that reduce erosion, build soil health, and improve water quality.

A large demand comes from agencies and organizations that collect seeds from their own properties and send them to RNS to be cleaned and conditioned. RNS coordinates with other area landowners to grow seed under contract. In addition to native seeds an average of 500 acres of soybeans and oats are grown each year.

Riders Mill Farms contains a cave that serves as a maternity site for 36,000 gray bats, a federally listed endangered species. The Seymours vigorously protect the cave, closing it to only biologists from April through October.

The Seymours have an agreement with Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife to provide public fishing access along a half mile of Roundstone Creek, which the agency stocks with trout. They also host long-term studies of reptiles and amphibians in collaboration with conservation organizations and universities.

More than 100 acres have been restored as oak savanna at the farm, which has served as a release site with habitat for Ruffed Grouse. The Seymours also partnered with neighbors to provide a 5,000-acre protection zone for turkey.

In 2024, they hosted an event with the University of Kentucky that attracted more than 100 forestland owners interested in conservation. It's proof that their willingness to share innovative native plant propagation methods has spread the Seymours land ethic far beyond their remote, but rejuvenated piece of Hart County.

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · KAC · Soil Conservation Districts of Kentucky

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# MARYLAND DAVE TRIBBETT

▶ **Watch video of Dave Tribbett**

## Presented in Partnership with

Dave Tribbett had already made his mark as a poultry industry innovator before he discovered the dual benefits of growing Giant miscanthus grass.

The son of an FFA advisor started out by leasing some farmland and chicken houses while still in high school. With hard work, strategic diversification, and a forward-thinking commitment to sustainability, he never looked back. Today, his Twin Maples Farms raises more than 1 million chickens annually in eight poultry houses, and 1,500 acres of crops, including corn, soybeans, and lima beans.

Dave's adaptability was evident when he pioneered the use of wooden trussed poultry barns. His 65-by-500-foot design improved construction efficiency, lowered costs, and became the regional industry standard.

In search of a better bedding for his chicken flocks, he began growing miscanthus, a sterile, non-invasive perennial grass. The cane-like plant reaches heights of 12 feet and produces up to 8-12 tons of biomass per acre. He planted the first 30 acres on areas that were erosion-prone, soils high in phosphorus, and otherwise unproductive cropland.

The harvested grass provides a clean, soft, dry, absorbent, dust-free bedding, that reduces flies, pests, and odors. Miscanthus fields stabilize soils, filter runoff, improve water retention, and enhance carbon sequestration, with no herbicides and minimal fertilizer inputs needed. By drying naturally in the field, no further drying is required. This reduces energy use when compared to wood shavings that require intense energy.

Within a few years, Dave expanded his miscanthus production to 1,000 acres, significantly reducing legacy phosphorus and nitrate which historically have contributed to pollution in the Chesapeake Bay estuary. Off the farm, he advocated for the crop as an added-value resource for poultry producers, and an environmental buffer for Maryland's waterways and ecosystems.

The long-term soil health benefits of miscanthus, including increasing soil organic matter and reducing nutrient runoff, are well-documented at Twin Maples Farms.

Data from 2020 showed a reduction in surface erosion by up to 97.7 percent on converted acres, along with a significant reduction in nitrate leaching and phosphorus runoff. In addition, nearly 600 tons of carbons are sequestered annually.

Twin Maples Farms farm serves as a living laboratory for research on miscanthus's role in nutrient reduction, erosion control, and buffer efficacy. David believes it's a new water infiltration tool with the ability to heal farmland damaged by hurricanes. He frequently hosts tours for students, farmers, policymakers, and community groups, to share his knowledge.

His leadership in environmental conservation didn't stop there.

He founded the Mid Atlantic Organic Resource Company (MAORC), which transforms agricultural by-products into high-quality organic compost. Marquis Roberts, the compost facility's farm manager is credited with helping Dave achieve a closed loop system where resources are recycled and reused within a continuous cycle.

Last year, MAORC diverted more than 19,360 tons of poultry and horse manure, hatchery and egg waste, and grain waste from landfills. These nutrient-rich agricultural by-products, coupled with miscanthus for carbon, helped MAORC produce 27,000 tons of organic compost sold to farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed as a sustainable alternative to synthetic fertilizers, promoting soil health and resource efficiency.

Dave, who self-funded all his major conservation initiatives, has proven that environmental stewardship and agricultural success are not mutually exclusive. His proactive approach is setting a regional standard for conservation-minded agriculture, fostering a community-wide shift toward environmentally responsible practices.

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# MINNESOTA TOM COTTER

▶ Watch video of Tom Cotter

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

MINNESOTA SOIL HEALTH coalition

SOIL REGEN

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

General Mills

Tom Cotter believes that when you do good things, other good things happen. He's seen it firsthand.

Thanks to a soil health discovery he and his father made in the late 1990s, his farm has become a testament to transformation. The pivotal moment happened shortly after his father, Mike, bought a tile plow. Four feet beneath the ground, areas that had been tilled for generations showed signs of poor soil quality, an unpleasant odor and a lack of earthworms.

For the next decade, the Cotters had successes and failures when growing cereal rye as a cover crop. While he now mentors other farmers looking to control erosion and increase soil biodiversity by planting cover crops, Tom says there was little guidance on the practice back then.

By 2015, Tom embraced reduced tillage and began finding like-minded farmers committed to a comprehensive approach to soil health and sustainable farming. The following year, Cotter Farms became the first in Mower County to be certified as a Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Farm for implementing conservation practices that far exceed regulatory requirements.

Tom's transition to no-till was a considerable risk in Minnesota's colder, wetter soils, requiring equipment modifications and adjustment of planting dates. He says combining cover crops with no-till and livestock grazing was the game changer for his farm.

He's become a vocal advocate for conservation practices that can enhance biodiversity, improve water quality, increase carbon sequestration, boost farm resiliency, ensure financial viability, and revitalize rural communities.

Successfully controlling weeds with cover crops convinced Tom to transition about 40 percent of his acreage to organic production. Regenerative practices are followed on the rest of the farm where a rotation of corn, soybeans, sweet corn, sunflowers, peas, oats, and alfalfa are grown.

Tom grows diverse cover crop mixes not typically used in Minnesota. Leveraging this expertise, he produces and sells cover crop seed mixes, creating an additional revenue stream from his conservation knowledge. He has invested in specialized equipment to interseed cover crops into standing cash crops to extend the growing season for cover crops. He's also a pioneer in using roller-crimpers to terminate cover crops without herbicides.

Tom transitioned from raising beef cattle in a feed lot to grazing cow-calf pairs across all 850 acres of his farm. He says this type of farming tugs at his heart and stimulates his mind.

Despite a complex regulatory landscape, Tom further diversified his farm to become an early adopter of hemp cultivation in Minnesota. Investment in on-farm processing equipment to produce CBD oil captures more of the value chain. He also participated in a multi-year demonstration of how soil sensors providing data on soil temperature and water infiltration rates can inform farmers' day-to-day decision making.

Despite all his innovations, some say what truly sets Tom apart is his commitment to sharing. He has hosted thousands of visitors on his farm -- farmers, students, researchers, agency staff, and food company executives -- so they can see what it looks like when land and livelihood are in harmony.

"Tom doesn't just practice conservation, he builds community around it," said Dr. Liz Haney, who nominated Tom for the Leopold Conservation Award. "He lifts up others with his knowledge, humor, and lived example. His work embodies Aldo Leopold's land ethic and inspires the kind of stewardship this award was meant to honor."

Further proof that when you do good things, good things happen.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

# MISSISSIPPI JIM CURRIE

▶ **Watch video of Jim Currie**

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

FARM BUREAU MISSISSIPPI

Jim Currie's conservation journey evolved amid the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Category 5 storm that washed away his coastal home, made landfall about 20 miles south of Woodland Cottage Farms, the forest and farmland he purchased in Hancock County a few years prior.

Before the hurricane ravaged his land, Jim and his wife Laura had spent thousands of dollars and un-totaled hours eradicating native understory plants to reestablish longleaf pine. Jim then had an epiphany. It was the soil and groundcover, not the mangled trees, that were the true long-term occupiers of the site.

He was inspired to take his conservation efforts to a higher level.

Following a 20-year career in Belize, Jim came home and purchased the first of 17 parcels in 2000. His 1,175 acres range from old dairy pastures to former paper company forests, high ground and lowlands, overgrown forests and areas that were clear cut.

Jim was inspired by Reed Noss' *Forgotten Grasslands of the South.* With the help of the farm's caretaker, Craig Saucier, they utilize prescribed fire to manage a pine-grassland ecosystem. Prescribed fire during the winter and growing season reestablishes a diverse understory of grasses that supports a wide array of wildlife.

Fire-maintained longleaf pine ecosystems once dominated the Southeast, but declined to just 3.4 million acres due to deforestation, forest fragmentation, and fire exclusion. That figure has rebounded to 5.2 million acres thanks to the efforts of landowners like Jim, who has served on the Mississippi Prescribed Fire Council and formed a local prescribed fire mentoring program.

Jim's commitment to conservation includes investing in the purchase of a Flail Vac seed harvester. The hydraulically powered rotary brush collects native seeds that are used to reseed other areas with degraded understories.

In his book, *Game Management*, Aldo Leopold wrote, "game can be restored by the creative use of the same tools which have heretofore destroyed it – axe, plow, cow, fire and gun." Jim routinely uses each of these to enhance wildlife habitats on his property.

In 2018 he began grazing a herd of Mississippi Pineywoods cattle to mimic the soil disturbance once created by bison. This heritage cattle breed known for its foraging skills is believed to have grazed this region since the 1500s. Although still relatively rare, the breed of cattle is gaining popularity for its ability to help restore longleaf pine ecosystems.

Jim sells heifer calves as breeding stock, and sells steers to a local processor. The combination of timber and cattle sales as a business model was once common across Mississippi's coastal plain. Wood poles, pulpwood, sawtimber, and pine straw are sold from the forests. Each of these revenue streams fund the land management activities at Woodland Cottage Farms.

Today, Jim lives in Pass Christian, and regularly educates and inspires others by hosting workshops and field days. His farm attracts a diverse mix of wildlife, including rare crayfish species and threatened gopher tortoises. It also hosts ponds where the endangered dusky gopher frog has been released as part of a relocation effort led by the Memphis Zoo and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jim was featured in the Southeast Emmy Award-winning documentary, *It's a Journey*, discussing the linkage of land conservation practices to the Gulf of Mexico's water quality.

Casey Anderson of the Mississippi Forestry Association said, "Very few landowners personify the land ethic that Aldo Leopold sought to instill more fully than Jim Currie."

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

# MONTANA THOMAS HEREFORDS

▶ Watch video of Thomas Herefords

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

I ♥ RANGE

Bruce Thomas is as passionate about conservation as he is about Hereford beef cattle, and that's saying a lot.

Bruce grew up showing and fitting world-class Hereford cattle on the ranch his parents Richard and Shirley Thomas established in 1957.

His career as a sawmill's environmental manager proved to be influential. Interacting with governmental agencies and becoming well-versed with environmental regulations led him to see how doing things differently could make the ranch environmentally and economically resilient.

"I wanted to demonstrate to both the agricultural and environmental communities that a win-win solution could be achieved," Bruce said.

Bruce and his wife Tammy prioritized conservation practices that could improve biodiversity and water quality, leading to healthier cattle, fish, and wildlife. Their vision was set into motion in the early 2000s by enrolling land into an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract and collaborating with several public agencies and private non-profits.

Gold Creek is a Clark Fork River tributary that runs through the ranch. Like other ranchers, ancestors built their first corrals next to the creek to easily water their cattle. Overgrazed riparian areas led to soil compaction and degradation, and creek contamination. Loss of riparian vegetation led to warmer water, impacting native fish populations and reducing wildlife habitat.

With EQIP's financial and technical assistance new cattle pens were designed to direct runoff into filtration areas on the ranch's uplands. Grazing was ceased along the creek's riparian area for five years to allow native vegetation to recover. As a result, the creek was cleaner thanks to a reduction in runoff of manure nitrates. The herd's daily weight gain also improved from a new watering system.

Converting from flood irrigation to pivot irrigation also benefitted Gold Creek by diverting 50 percent less water. Other environmental benefits like enhanced in-stream flow, cooler water temperatures, and drought mitigation are regularly studied at Thomas Herefords.

Located in western Montana's Flint Creek Mountain Range, the ranch sits at 4,250 feet, with summer pastures up to 6,500 feet in elevation. Replacing woven and barbed wire with three-wire electric high-tension fencing is wildlife-friendly while proving a more secure fence for cattle.

Rotational grazing has improved the quality and quantity of grasses. Likewise, investment in rangeland water development has helped triple the carrying capacity of the ranch's pastures.

The Thomases prioritize soil health principles by utilizing annual soil analysis, reducing chemical fertilizer use, and managing for drought by building organic matter to improve moisture retention.

While the Thomases are best known as a renowned international seedstock producer of red and white Hereford cattle, their holistic approach to ranching is just as noteworthy.

Bruce's mother Shirley recalls a time when she would go to a hilltop overlooking the ranch and privately wonder how she was going to pay the next month's bills. Bruce says embracing his conservation ethic is why those fears no longer exist.

As for the future, Bruce and Tammy are proud their children, Kurt, Amber, Heather, and their families, are involved in the ranch and own cattle. Along with the kids, the ranch's succession plan includes a continuation of the conservation ideals that have brought them this far.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
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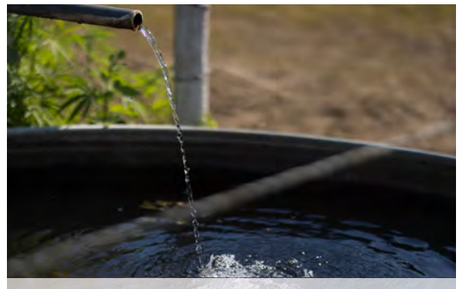
# NEBRASKA DIAMOND BAR RANCH



▶ Watch video of Diamond Bar Ranch

The Nebraska Sandhills is one of the last intact grassland ecosystems in North America, and the largest sand dune formation in the Western Hemisphere.

Formed by glacial meltwater carrying sand and silt from the Rocky Mountains, the Sandhills are defined by rolling grass-covered dunes, fragile soil, and a delicate hydrological system. Prairie grasses stabilize nearly 20,000 square miles of sand dunes in western Nebraska. This rangeland was never tilled on a large scale but makes ideal grazing for livestock when managed responsibly.

Deeply rooted in this region is Robert and Susanne Jones' Diamond Bar Ranch. For generations the Jones family has understood their success is tied to the health of the Sandhills, and they've worked to protect this unique environment. As they ranch with their grown children: Natalie, Shaylee, Grant, and Lance, their conservation ethic is centered around responsible grazing, water stewardship, soil preservation, and wildlife habitat management.

Diamond Bar Ranch's rotational grazing system follows time-tested Sandhills principles, designed to mimic the natural movement of bison herds that once roamed the region. By resting one-third of the ranch each year from grazing, native grasses like Little Bluestem and Prairie Sandreed are regenerated. While working cattle, horses are utilized rather than motorized vehicles to minimize soil disturbance in the sandy terrain.

The Jones family's adaptive grazing strategy takes into account rainfall variability, forage availability, and soil conditions. Cross-fencing allows for improved grazing distribution, while GPS tracking and aerial monitoring technology assists in pasture management.

Since 2000, the Jones family has planted more than 31,000 trees and shrubs to reduce wind erosion and improve wildlife habitat. Strategically planted windbreaks offer protection for livestock during windy winters.

With assistance from the NRCS and Sandhills Task Force, the Jones family has mechanically removed invasive eastern red cedar trees.

With access to the Ogallala Aquifer, natural springs, ponds, and the South Loup River, Diamond Bar Ranch employs 56 windmills and solar wells to provide drought-prone water sources for crop irrigation and drinking water for livestock and wildlife. Wet meadows are an ecologically significant part of the ranch. These lush, moisture-rich grasslands remain productive even in dry years, providing a valuable forage source. Wet meadows are also essential habitats for migratory birds, amphibians, and native fish species.

To reduce dependence on external feed sources, the ranch produces its own high-quality forage, including irrigated corn, alfalfa, and wet meadow hay, to produce nutrient-dense beef from its cattle.

Diamond Bar Ranch's pastures support populations of prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and antelope, all of which depend on the same healthy grasslands that sustain livestock. The Jones family follows wildlife-friendly haying practices, allowing ground-nesting birds to flush and escape during harvest.

The Jones family shares their conservation knowledge with other ranchers, policymakers, and the public. Their ranch hosted the National Grazing Lands Coalition Tour in 2022 to provide a hands-on opportunity for ranchers and conservationists. They are longtime supporters of the Nebraska Youth Ranch Camp, where students learn about range management and leadership.

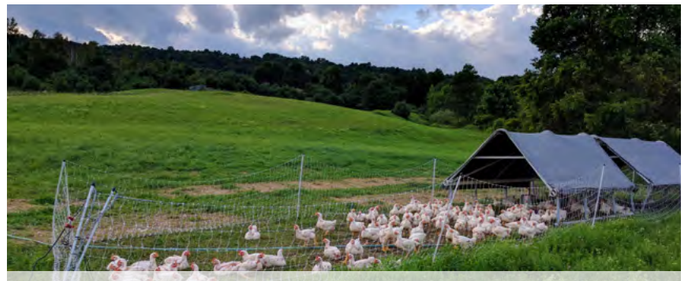
As pressure mounts in agriculture to balance production with sustainability, the Diamond Bar Ranch shows how these two priorities can coexist. The Jones family's conservation-minded land management has produced economic success and ecological resilience.

**Presented in Partnership with**

American Farmland Trust · Nebraska Environmental Trust · Cargill · Nebraska Cattlemen

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

# NEW ENGLAND SWEETLAND FARM

▶ Watch video of Sweetland Farm

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

NEW ENGLAND FORESTRY FOUNDATION

FARM CREDIT EAST

Every decision Norah Lake makes at Sweetland Farm is done with careful consideration of how it impacts the productivity of her business and the landscape. That's why she calls it a "thinking farm."

Norah is on a mission to sustainably feed her community by choosing the conservation practices that make the most sense across 210 acres of orchards, forests, pastures, vegetable and hay fields.

Norah's strong land ethic was instilled in her by working alongside her nature-loving parents. As an environmental studies and sustainability student at Dartmouth College she helped start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for the school farm. She gained five years of experience in farm management before purchasing the core acreage of Sweetland Farm from the Vermont Land Trust with husband Chris in 2012.

Norah spent the next decade converting portions of the farm and conserving additional field and forest: transitioning steep hills to fruit orchards, expanding riparian buffers, restoring wetlands, strategically establishing wildlife corridors, restoring soil organic matter to a reclaimed gravel pit, and cleaning up an old farm dump.

It's Norah's mix of big-picture thinking and attention to detail that has nearly allowed her to cross what once seemed like an impossible item off the farm's to-do list; more than 99 percent of the perennial invasive species have been eradicated from the forest. What was once an overgrown thicket of invasive species was replaced with more than 10,000 Elm, Chestnut, Ash, and Hemlock trees.

Her soil health plan involves the use of cover cropping, and rotating livestock across pastures and vegetable fields. To protect water quality and prevent erosion, she eliminated livestock crossings of streams. Extensive wildlife corridors were considered in the thoughtful layout of all pasture fencing and vegetable fields, the largest of which is just three acres.

Despite the presence of streams, ponds were built to supply water for Sweetland Farm's drip and micro-sprinkler irrigation systems. This protects native fish by eliminating the need to draw water from natural streams during times of low flow.

In addition to nesting boxes for bats, songbirds, raptors, and ducks, more than eight acres of mast producing trees and shrubs have been planted for wildlife along the farm's river banks and throughout the forest. Sweetland Farm also protects areas where threatened wood turtles and orchids have been identified.

Norah pledged to reduce the farm's fossil carbon emissions by 90 percent over a decade. Now in the seventh year of this mission, she has realized a 73 percent drop in emissions. In addition to multiple roof-top solar arrays, five greenhouses now run on biomass-based heat, old refrigeration equipment was replaced with super-efficient models, and irrigation pumps and delivery vehicles run on electricity rather than gas.

Sweetland Farm is known for its bountiful farm store and 350-member vegetable and fruit CSA. The diversity of the farm enables Norah to work with the patchworked New England landscape to utilize fields, forests, streams, and hillsides to their best potential. She has worked with local land trusts to place and uphold conservation easements on her land that will permanently protect its resources and ensure affordability to farmers in perpetuity.

Sweetland Farm is a conservation ethic at work. Its owner's thoughtful approach to farming is a refreshing look at how to work with a landscape rather than against it.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

# NEW MEXICO VIRAMONTES FARMS

Watch video of Viramontes Farms

## Presented in Partnership with

Father and son, Ray and Cole Viramontes, admit they stumbled upon the importance of soil health.

Verticillium wilt, a disease prevalent in chile pepper fields across southern New Mexico, was reducing their yields by 20 to 25 percent. Crop loss coupled with constantly rising input costs meant Viramontes Farms would need to stop growing green and red chiles.

Desperate for a solution, they began hosting research trials with New Mexico State University that examined their soil's biology. While experimenting with bacteria and fungi products, they were introduced to applying brewed compost teas enriched by worms and molasses.

This holistic approach to feeding their soil's biology cut crop losses by half the first year. Verticillium wilt now impacts just 1 to 2 percent of their chile peppers.

Ray and Cole gained an appreciation for how what happens beneath the ground impacts everything above it. They also took a more holistic approach to growing crops of onions, wheat, cotton, pecans, alfalfa, milo, and pumpkins.

After the Viramonteses replaced acidic fertilizers with biological applications, they found their crops required fewer insecticides and fungicides. These changes, coupled with a regular crop rotation, have reduced their environmental impacts while improving their bottom line.

Cover crops grown between cash crops are beneficial to the soil's biodiversity while their shade moderates the soil's temperature. Cover crops also help suppress aphids and reduce wind and water erosion amid the 22 acres of pecan orchards at Viramontes Farms.

In a region that receives just 12 inches of rain annually, irrigation is mandatory to grow crops. Viramontes Farms has been at the forefront of efficient drip irrigation technology since the 1990s.

Ray, who began farming on rented land in 1983, sought to diversify his farm's income by getting into the chile pepper business. After convincing a contractor and cannery to buy his product, he began by growing less cotton and more green and red peppers. Ray's wife Courtney manages their Homegrown Market, which sells chiles and other locally grown produce and meats.

Cole says farmers practice growing crops much like surgeons practice medicine. He researched which of his crops could benefit from micro-nutrients. This prevents overapplying essential nutrients like phosphates and nitrogen. Excessive amounts are both costly and cause water pollution.

"I've got big shoes to fill," said Cole, who began farming with his father in 2010. "I want to leave it in a better place."

Cole follows in his father's footsteps by helping his community and industry through serving on the New Mexico Chile Commission, and the Farm Service Agency's State Technical Committee. Cole's wife Jamie serves on the board of the New Mexico State Farm & Livestock Bureau.

Cole freely shares his agricultural conservation successes and missteps with others. He agreed to speak at New Mexico's first-ever soil health conference in 2024.

"I called him, and he agreed, though he said it would be his first such presentation to ever give," said Katie Crayton of the New Mexico Department of Agriculture's Healthy Soil Program. "You'd never guess Cole was a newbie at the podium."

Among the positive comments from conference attendees: "The chile farmer was by far the best presentation."

It's proof that Cole's soil health journey has firmly taken root.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

# NEW YORK OECHSNER FARMS

▶ Watch video of Oechsner 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

Thor Oechsner brought his skills as a diesel mechanic to a career in farming. With his knowledge of fixing things and a toolbox of conservation practices, this expert troubleshooter has diagnosed how to build his soil's health while growing crops.

Thor grows hundreds of acres of certified organic grains with a dedicated team, but it didn't start that way. He purchased a 15-acre farmstead in 1991 when he ran a Volkswagen repair shop and taught diesel mechanics. He grew his first crops in 1998 on 44 acres of rented land. While gaining farm experience and equipment, he also rented more acreage.

He first approached owners of worn-out parcels of farmland. Later, others sought him out because they wanted their land farmed organically. By cultivating positive relations with neighbors and stewarding rented land as if it were his own, he quit his day jobs by 2005 to farm full time with 400 acres in production.

Today, Oechsner Farms consists of 1,200 acres of corn, winter and spring wheat, buckwheat, rye, soybeans, oats, einkorn, and hay. With his wife Rachel Lodder, and also Dan Gladstone and Rye Lyczak, they process, clean, and ship food-grade grains to bakeries, flour mills, tortilla manufacturers, malt houses, and distilleries throughout the Northeast. Locally, Thor partnered to establish Wide Awake Bakery, and Farmer Ground Flour, a self-proclaimed "micro-mill" that supports local organic grain growers.

Prioritizing soil health has been a key ingredient in the farm's success. As an active participant in New York's Agricultural Environmental Management program, Oechsner Farms is a conservation showcase in Tompkins County.

By practicing conservation tillage, Oechsner Farms has minimized soil disturbance and maintained crop residue on crop fields. This reduces erosion and enhances soil's capacity to build organic matter. Improved soil structure and porosity allows for greater water holding capacity and root structure development, making crops more resilient to storms and drought.

A seven-year crop rotation also supports crop vitality while controlling pests and diseases.

Cover crops of peas, turnips, radish, and crimson clover are grown year-round for ground cover, minimizing the potential for soil erosion, and increasing carbon sequestration capabilities.

Oechsner Farms also plants grassed filter strips and pollinator habitats in cooperation with local honey farmers as a mutual crop and pollinator business venture. Filter strips along fields and roadways protect water quality by slowing down runoff from heavy rains. They also provide habitat for beneficial insects which boosts biodiversity.

Areas that are typically too wet to farm have been planted to permanent pasture grasses to provide wildlife habitat. Thor also decided to rest about 200 acres of long-time leased crop land that he believed needed a break from grain production. He worked with a grass-fed beef farm to plant and graze perennial grasses, which provides the benefits of continuous living cover on the landscape while supporting a fellow farmer.

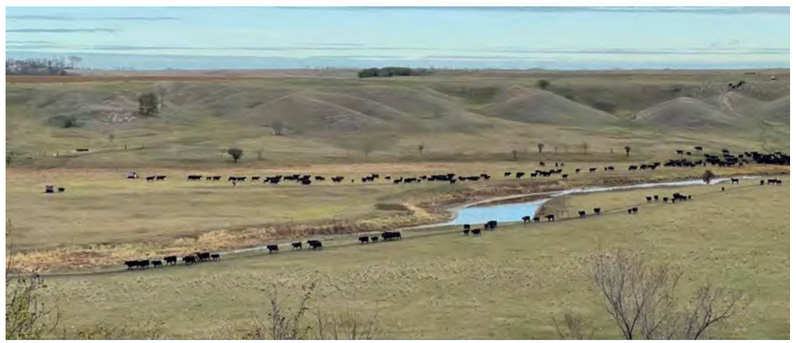
Oechsner Farms has partnered with Audubon New York for the Bobolink Project, which protects grassland nesting birds. By delaying the hay mowing schedule on 50 acres, birds have more time to nest and successfully raise their young.

Thor's curiosity drives his farm's continual improvement. The former mechanic's commitment to sustainable agriculture has Oechsner Farms running like a finely tuned engine.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

# NORTH DAKOTA BRIAN AND VICKI MADDOCK

▶ **Watch video of Brian and Vicki Maddock**



## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition

North Dakota Stockmen's Association

North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts

Aldo Leopold wrote that the oldest task in human history was to live on a piece of land without spoiling it. Throughout their ranching career, Brian and Vicki Maddock have demonstrated this ethic by choosing to restore rather than abandon or exploit in the face of adversity.

The Maddock family's 4,000-acre ranch is in the heart of the Drift Prairie physiographic region of northeastern North Dakota. It's one of North America's most important rangelands and depressional prairie pothole wetlands.

In the early 1990s, Brian and Vicki first ranched with his father, Miles, on land now submerged under Devils Lake because of flooding. Forced to abandon a significant portion of the land, they pivoted to holistic grazing practices on the remaining grassland.

With assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, they installed cross-fencing and water developments to rotationally graze cattle in more than 20 paddocks. Raising more cattle per acre with better management helped them save their business by increasing productivity and sustainability. Conservation practices also safeguarded the ranch against future droughts in the region.

Over time, Brian refined his approach by adopting intensively managed grazing systems that prioritize soil health, forage diversity, and long-term ecological stability. This adaptive mindset reflects Aldo Leopold's view that resilience is born from a deep understanding of natural systems and a willingness to work in harmony with them.

After Brian seeded cropland back to grass, he noticed hilltops remained barren. Recognizing the need to rebuild soil fertility, he started feeding large round bales to cattle on hilltops to add nutrients to the soil. Within a year, vibrant rings of green grass began to emerge. He quickly embraced bale grazing as an important tool to rebuild soils and restore balance to the ecosystem.

"The Maddocks have been conservationists when conservation was not cool," said Kevin Sedivec, a range specialist for North Dakota State University Extension.

"They knew implementing grazing systems would increase their bottom line while creating habitat for wildlife. They knew farming marginal lands was not good for the soil and would rarely be profitable," he added. "They take what they learn – both good and bad – and tell their story to help others succeed."

Brian and Vicki have instilled conservation values in their six children and 21 grandchildren, creating a multi-generational ripple of influence in the agricultural community. All their children work in the cattle and beef business, including three sons who ranch with their parents.

Together, the Maddocks have planted 10,000 feet of trees, seeded over 900 acres of grass, installed more than 100,000 feet of fencing to create more than 100 grazing paddocks. By installing miles of fencing along rivers and coulees, they have protected fragile riparian areas, prevented livestock from eroding streambanks and reduced sedimentation in waterways.

By growing full season cover crops they have enriched habitat and provided valuable food sources for wildlife, while improving soil health and reducing erosion. Expanding water infrastructure with 14 miles of pipeline and 40 water tanks ensures sustainable water distribution for livestock and wildlife while minimizing environmental impact.

By embracing regenerative agriculture, the Maddocks have sustained their livelihood and safeguarded the critical landscape they call home. Their stewardship of soil, water, plants, and animals demonstrates that conservation is a way of life, not just a practice.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

# OKLAHOMA BILL CLARK


Bill Clark wanted to be a rancher ever since he was tall enough to feed calves at his grandfather's dairy farm. He met the love of his life, a rancher's daughter named Betty, in the sixth grade. Over the course of their 55-year love affair, Bill and Betty's dreams took root at Rising Sun Ranch.

In each other they had found someone equally committed to leaving their land and livestock better than they found them. Their ranch grew to about 5,800 acres of native rangelands with the help of their sons, Will and Garrett.

Bill has been lauded as an innovator for adopting prescribed burning and rotational grazing practices while providing leadership to conservation organizations. However, he says none of it would have been possible without Betty, who died tragically in 2024.

The Rising Sun Ranch's welcome sign matches its cattle brand, four rays atop a rising sun: one each for Betty, Bill, and their boys.

It was 20 years ago that Bill came to appreciate how fire could rejuvenate native grasses. A friend who was an experienced practitioner of prescribed fire wrestled the drip torch from Bill's hesitant hand and ignited the prairie at Rising Sun Ranch. Ever since, Bill has been a proponent of preserving prairie by setting it ablaze every few years. He has hosted workshops and field days for conservation professionals and fellow ranchers through his involvement with the Pontotoc Ridge Prescribed Burning Association.

Following a spring burn, Bill uses a retrofitted Great Plains drill to seed Eastern Gamagrass. The "ice cream grass", as it's known, is a nutritious, highly palatable forage for grazing livestock and wildlife. Its deep root system improves soil health, retain moistures, and supports beneficial fungi. It also provides crucial habitat and food for birds and insects. In recent years Bill has documented the repopulation of Texas horned lizards, quail, and turkeys to Rising Sun Ranch.

Drilling wells and installing about 30 watering facilities allowed the Clarks to divide their ranch into 60-100-acre paddocks. Cattle and sheep are rotated to a fresh paddock twice weekly during the growing season, and once per week during the dormant season.

Instead of applying herbicide to control weeds, Bill has found the grazing sheep and cattle works as a tag team against invasive species.

Another way the Clarks use livestock to work with the natural ecosystem has been by breeding their cows with Lowline American Aberdeen bulls. Their moderate framed and maternally focused offspring require less grass and feed.

Bill knows that his efforts to rejuvenate grasslands look inefficient to some, but he sees agricultural conservation as the pathway to returning the landscape to how it was "before county roads, barbed wire, and rural fire departments."

Others have taken notice of how Bill has navigated increasingly volatile weather, embraced new ways of grazing livestock and controlling invasive species.

In its nomination of Bill for the Leopold Conservation Award, the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts wrote, "Bill's pursuit of knowledge about the living world around him and willingness to try new practices is unwavering."

Rising Sun Ranch is more than an oasis of lush green prairie and pastures in south central Oklahoma. It's the living embodiment of one couple's dream.

## 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)

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

# PENNSYLVANIA JIM HERSHEY

▶ Watch video of Jim Hershey

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Heinz Endowments
Howard Heinz Endowment
Vira I. Heinz Endowment

Farm Credit Horizon

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

The farm crisis of the 1980s led to something positive for Jim and Shirl Hershey.

After purchasing her parents' dairy farm in the late 1970s, they soon faced high debt and soaring interest rates. Unable to afford hired help, they tried to do it all. Something had to give.

That's when their conservation journey began.

Jim tried no-till farming practices to reduce fuel costs and time spent plowing, without giving much thought to the potential environmental benefits. He jokes that farmers didn't widely discuss soil biology back then.

A decade later, when he began growing rye as a cover crop, he noticed that water no longer pooled in his fields. The combination of no-till with a cover crop was improving the soil's ability to infiltrate moisture.

With a roller crimper mounted to his planter, he became an early adopter of planting corn and soybeans into fields of living cover crops. This practice is better known today as "planting green." He noticed early on that any soil compaction issues were alleviated and soil structure improved. Leaving crop residue on his fields has increased organic material and biodiversity in the soil while reducing erosion and weeds.

With each growing season, Jim has adopted conservation practices to increase productivity and profitability while preventing soil erosion and water runoff, and reducing the need to apply costly nutrients and herbicides.

Jim and Shirl farm with their son Marc and daughter-in-law, Crystal, who have operated an event venue, Harvest View Barn, since 2014. Together, they grow 500 acres of corn, soybeans, wheat, and barley, and raise about 6,000 pigs and 1.7 million chickens annually. Their manure is incorporated into soil to maximize the efficiency of the nutrients, control odor, and prevent runoff.

Penn State University researchers have long had an open door to the Hershey farm to conduct research trials on the impact of planting green and cover crops on nitrogen efficiency, weed control, and soil temperature. Jim has also partnered with 4R Alliance and Pasa Sustainable Agriculture to analyze soil health and water infiltration.

To share his experience with other farmers, Jim co-founded the Pennsylvania No-Till Alliance in 2005. He has served as president of the farmer-led organization that promotes no-till practices for 15 years. He also leads the Pennsylvania Regenerative Ag Research Foundation, and serves on the State Conservation Commission Board.

In 2019, Jim and Shirl traveled to Zambia to establish an agriculture sustainability program for farmers who grow maize and other vegetable crops. They continue to mentor a farm family they met there.

On their own farm, the Hersheys established 13-acres of buffer strip along a stream with 3,200 trees. An NRCS Forestry Management Plan on another 27 forested acres controls invasive species.

Jim's drive to keep his farm's landscape green through as many days of the year as he can has led him to innovate. He designed and built a cover crop interseeder that has been sold to other farmers.

His expanded cover crop production now includes crimson clover, tillage radish, Hairy vetch, and winter peas. The multi-species mix is attracting more butterflies and bees to his farm, which serves as inspiration for a conservation leader who is still excited to learn.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

# SOUTH DAKOTA STOMPRUD ANGUS RANCH


▶ Watch video of Stomprud Angus Ranch

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

South Dakota Grassland Coalition

South Dakota Farmers Union

Whether its ranch management or military strategy, Larry Stomprud has always seen the importance in planning.

He draws inspiration from former U.S. President and military commander, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who famously said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

Larry has taken those words to heart throughout a ranching career where he's thoughtfully considered the needs of cattle and the landscape under his stewardship.

Although Larry has always had a deep affinity for ranching and conservation, upon graduating from South Dakota State University in 1971, returning to his family's ranch wasn't financially feasible. Instead, he chose to hone his leadership skills by serving in the South Dakota Army National Guard.

He also pursued a Master's degree in big game management at Montana State University where he was introduced to planned grazing, an approach advocated by Allan Savory for regenerating land and improving soil health. This exposure deeply influenced Larry's future conservation efforts.

Upon retiring from the military in 1995, Larry remained driven by his land ethic. He and his wife Eileen seized the opportunity to become the next generation of stewards at Stomprud Angus Ranch. With his military pension, they bought his uncle's interest in the ranch and invested in neighboring properties. Providing contiguous habitat and pasture was a strategy that would benefit wildlife and the ranch's financial resilience.

Today, Larry and Eileen manage Stomprud Angus Ranch's 6,600 acres with their son Jay, his wife Jennifer, and their three grandchildren: Elijah, Kaira, and Joshua. Aside from 700 acres of hay production, they rotationally graze registered seedstock Angus and commercial cows on the ranch's rangeland.

With financial and technical assistance from state and federal agencies, the Stompruds transformed 1,000-acre pastures into more than 30 smaller pastures ranging from 100 to 400 acres in size.

Investments were made in four miles of cross-fencing, 10 miles of water pipelines, and 24 stock tanks.

To conserve grassland in a semi-arid region, their herd's size fluctuates between 220 and 300 heifers and cow-calf pairs depending on range conditions. Most pastures are not grazed for more than 20 days during the growing season. This supports range plant health by facilitating leaf regrowth and maintaining healthy root reserves for the next growing season.

In an ecosystem that averages just 17 inches of rain annually, Stomprud Angus Ranch's drought management strategy works to prevent over-grazing and sustain ecological balance.

In 2005, Larry collaborated with a neighboring rancher to drill a deep well. "That investment has been the lifeblood of our operation," Larry notes. "Without it, there probably wouldn't be a cow on this place."

Also providing essential water sources for cattle and wildlife are the 18 dams and dugouts that were established by Larry's father Calvin and grandfather Ollie.

Ample sightings of other wildlife like whitetail deer, Bald eagles, sharp-tailed grouse, partridges, and nesting grassland birds underscore the richness of the ranch's biodiversity. Smooth-wire cross fences powered by solar batteries ensure safe passage of pronghorn antelope and mule deer that migrate through pastures.

Larry and Jay have planted 5,000 trees to create cattle shelterbelts that provide shelter for livestock and wildlife from winter winds.

On and off the ranch, the Stompruds have worked with agriculture and conservation organizations, ranging from the Meade County Farm Bureau to the World Wildlife Fund.

Throughout its 114-year history, resilience is a cornerstone of the Stomprud Angus Ranch. Each generation faced and overcame challenges with military precision.

Leopold Conservation Award®
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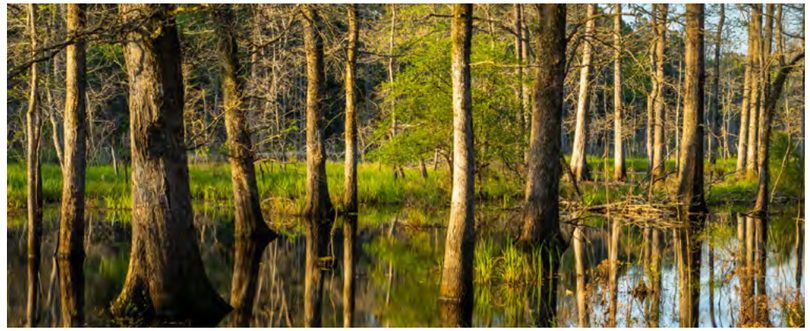
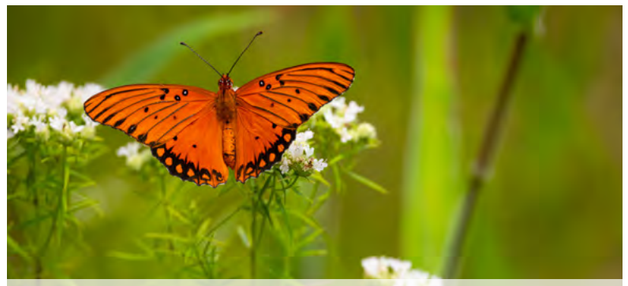
# TEXAS BOGGY SLOUGH CONSERVATION AREA





▶ Watch video of Boggy Slough Conservation Area

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE

**Lee and Ramona Bass**

The 416-mile Neches River is often called the last wild river in East Texas.

The river's slow-moving water and its pine and bottomland hardwood forests have been part of eastern Texas's history and culture, since Native Americans and European settlers depended on them for food and shelter.

The Neches River's corridor remains one of the state's least discovered natural resources, but the Temple family has stewarded parts of this special area for over a century.

T.L.L. Temple, founder of the Southern Pine Lumber Company, bought a portion of what became known as Boggy Slough in 1902. Its 13,500 acres of timberland and 5,500 acres of wetland forests along 18 miles of river frontage were some of the first land he acquired outside of northeast Texas and Arkansas.

In the 1940s, the Temples began to shift the management of Boggy Slough toward wildlife and forest management research and demonstration. The land became a corporate asset of three Temple-owned businesses in the 1960s. By the 1980s, Boggy Slough had been divided into northern and southern management areas, each with its own hunting leases to control deer populations, as it remains today.

In 2012, ownership of Boggy Slough was transferred to International Paper through a corporate sale. Recognizing the land's significance, the T.L.L. Temple Foundation, led by Board Chairman Arthur (Buddy) Temple,III, acquired the property in 2013. In 2015, an agreement was negotiated with The Conservation Fund to place a conservation easement over the property ensuring it will be protected and managed sustainably as a working forest in perpetuity. The easement was transferred to the Texas Land Conservancy in 2019.

Through the decades, the Boggy Slough Conservation Area has become known for its ecological research, stewardship of natural resources, and outreach to promote conservation.

Its landscape provides a unique mix of wet bottomland hardwood ecosystems, wet and dry transitional forests, and upland pine forests on the western edge of the Southeastern U.S. pine region.

Because quail, eastern wild turkey, and many plants need more sunlight than a closed canopy of pine provides, a focus at Boggy Slough has been providing open-canopy habitat within a working forest. Healthy forestland provides key habitat for white-tailed deer, migratory birds, songbirds, fish, and native plants.

Boggy Slough hosts seven clusters of the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and a rare native wildflower, Texas prairie dawn. Its swamps and oxbows are also home to the Neches River Rose-mallow, an endangered plant that can grow up to eight feet tall and produces hundreds of flowers that provide nectar for bees and other pollinating species.

The rich history and biodiversity of the Boggy Slough Conservation Area is underscored with the presence of two Texas State Champion Trees (the largest documented of their species): Longleaf pine and the White fringetree.

A cornerstone of the conservation success found at Boggy Slough is the role it has played for decades as an outdoor research laboratory for graduate students and other research collaborators studying issues of regional concern.

Boggy Slough Conservation Area Executive Director, Steve Jack, and Forest and Wildlife Manager, Robert Sanders, have enhanced the property's reputation for ecological research, natural resource stewardship, and public outreach. Through active management and collaboration, they have promoted a strong land ethic.

The land management practices at Boggy Slough Conservation Area build on the Temple family's legacy of conservation, stewardship, and philanthropy.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
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# UTAH PEARSON RANCH

▶ Watch video of Pearson Ranch

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Utah Farm Bureau Federation

Western AgCredit

Utah Cattlemen's Association – Heart of the West

The Pearson Ranch's story is one marked by resiliency.

The resiliency it takes to grow crops and graze cattle in an arid environment, coupled with a ranch family's resiliency to repeatedly rise above volatile markets and personal loss.

Ralph and June Pearson, who began dairy farming and ranching in the 1940s, had four children. Hit hard by the post nuclear weapons testing era, the Pearsons and their sons Raul, Scott, and Shaun died from related illness between 1996 and 2016. Today the ranch is run by their daughter Jetta Robinson, her son Seth, and Shaun's wife Tammy.

The conservation of water has long been the focal point of the Pearson Ranch's strong commitment to land stewardship and agricultural innovation. It dates to when Ralph Pearson served as president of the Twin M Conservation District and the Minersville Irrigation Company.

Under his leadership, a pipeline system replaced a series of open canals that fed irrigated fields in the 1970s. Ever since, the Pearsons have upgraded their irrigation systems with technology that reduces water usage while increasing yields on their 600 acres of alfalfa.

Since 2007, Utah's Grazing Improvement Program has provided assistance to livestock producers to enhance grazing systems on private and public lands. This helped the Pearsons replace aging windmills with efficient solar pumping systems and upgrade old wells powered by gas generators with energy-efficient solar technology.

Installing extensive water lines to distribute water across their 8,000 acres of pastures has improved grazing utilization and distribution of their 600 head of Hereford and Angus beef cattle. The herd is rotationally grazed to maintain healthy forage and to provide ideal habitat for prairie dogs and sage grouse. Other investments include multiple 30-foot ring tanks for water storage, both on their ranch and on 129,000 acres of public land used for grazing. All water troughs are equipped with rescue ramps for birds and small wildlife.

Natural springs have been developed at Pearson Ranch to supply livestock and wildlife with drinking water. Springs and riparian areas damaged by wild horses and burros have been rehabilitated.

Despite wild horses and burros being a politically polarizing issue, Tammy Pearson is credited with being a driving force behind reaching consensus on the Path Forward Coalition, a diverse group that included the Humane Society and Farm Bureau.

"Simply put, Tammy is involved at every level – from her local county to the state and national stages, in all things public lands and agriculture," said Redge B. Johnson, Director of Utah's Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office. "When it comes to advocating for our lands and the agricultural community, she is the go-to person."

Watershed restoration is another arena where Tammy Pearson has excelled. Her local leadership in a stewardship project for the Beaver River watershed led to successfully treating thousands of acres of overgrown forests. This effort created a healthier and vibrant ecosystem for grazing livestock and wildlife habitats, while significantly decreasing the risk of wildfires.

State officials often bring visiting dignitaries to the Beaver River watershed to demonstrate how active management is critical to forest health. Efforts to replicate this work across Utah are benefiting the ranchers and wildlife that rely on rejuvenated public lands.

The land ethic of the resilient Pearson family is expressed through the conservation practices they employ on their ranch, and through advocacy and outreach that provides for ranchers across the West.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

# WISCONSIN MICHAEL E. BERG

▶ Watch video of Michael E. Berg

## Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin

Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation

Michael Berg views conservation through a long lens.

His life's work has taken place at Berg Family Farm. The farm's scenic and dramatic topography is typical in the hilly, ecologically unique Driftless Area of southwest Wisconsin.

The Berg family has long sought to prevent their limited topsoil from reaching the flood-prone Pecatonica River, a meandering snake of a waterway that weaves through their 540 acres of cropland, pastures, and forests.

Michael's father, Byron Berg, installed contour strips to prevent erosion in 1952, a practice followed to this day. He often told his children, "We don't really own the land. We're just taking care of it for the next generation."

Those words stuck with Michael, who wears a commitment to conservation like a badge of honor.

He recalls his father supporting local conservation efforts as chairman of the Lafayette County Board and hosting the state soil judging contest in 1962. To maintain topsoil atop rocky limestone hills, the Bergs began no-till farming in the 1970s. By the 1980s, they were hosting field days to show other farmers that crop yields weren't dependent on plowed fields.

The Bergs worked closely with Natural Resource Conservation Service staff on a detailed assessment of how their land drains. With that information they developed two miles of terraces to divert water from rapidly flowing downhill. These areas host native grasses and wildflowers that provide a food source for bees and other pollinators.

Over time, Michael and his wife Diane planted more than 25,000 pine and walnut trees on about 75 acres of marginal farmland. While others scoffed at taking land out of crop production, these woodlands provide income from timber sales, and habitat for deer, bobcat, and bear.

Before retiring from dairy farming in 2002, the Bergs built two manure storage areas to prevent the loss of nutrients and protect water quality. After dairying, Michael and his son Taylor transitioned to rotationally grazing Red Angus beef cattle. They seeded pastures with Birdsfoot trefoil, a clover-like plant that produces quality forage while preventing erosion.

The centerpiece of Michael's conservation efforts has been restoring almost a mile of riverbank with riprap in 2020. More than 200 loads of specialized breaker rock were laid, then covered with dirt and re-seeded. The riprap slows the infiltration of silt into the river during heavy rains, keeping the river cleaner.

To provide a natural transition from the river to its floodplain, grassland buffers are maintained at least 16 feet in width along each side of the river. To minimize streambank erosion, the height of the banks was reduced in some areas. Large tree root balls were buried in the river to deflect currents and prevent erosion while creating fish habitat.

Michael says that conservation measures like the riprap project are possible because his farm is profitable. In turn, conservation activities enhance profitability. His was the first farm in Lafayette County to participate in a phosphorus-water quality trading experiment with the nearby village of Argyle.

Michael is a founder of the Pecatonica Pride Watershed Association, which brings together outdoors enthusiasts, farmers, landowners, business owners, and others to improve the river and inspire others to embrace conservation practices.

By seeking new ways to fortify the soil, keep the water clean, and provide wildlife habitat while farming, Michael is strengthening his family's legacy of land stewardship.

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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*

Sand County Foundation is a 501(c)(3) national nonprofit organization inspiring and empowering farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners to ethically care for the land.

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