



Fostering Farmer-led Groups for Water Quality Improvement



A promising trend in agriculture is the growing enthusiasm of farmers to creatively address conservation challenges. Within some watersheds farmers are self-organizing into formal groups to improve water quality.

Farmer-led groups consist of five or more farmers and a partnering conservation organization (operating as the administrator) that provide peer-to-peer education and incentives for farmers to adopt regenerative farming practices that improve water quality.

These groups can generate interest among farmers who might not participate in traditional conservation programs, and who will respond to positive examples from their neighboring farmer peers.

Sand County Foundation is leading a USDA-NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)-funded project to develop and fund farmer-led groups. In addition to supporting several existing farmer-led groups in Wisconsin, we are helping establish new farmer-led watershed groups in Illinois and strengthening the Dubuque County Farmer-to-Farmer effort in Iowa.

The funding will provide incentives and technical assistance for a variety of farm conservation practices. All groups will prioritize water quality

through improved soil health, continuous living cover, and reducing erosion.

Sand County Foundation's work is inspired by the successful Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection "Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant" program to farmer groups within specific watershed boundaries. The farmers and partners design financial incentives and outreach/education activities based on local needs. This helps motivate farmers who may not otherwise participate in traditional conservation programs.

By working with farmer-led groups, Sand County Foundation aims to advance regenerative farming practices across more acres by streamlining the enrollment and planning process.

In 2025, we worked with 125 farmers in Dubuque County, Iowa to drone-seed cover crops onto nearly 16,000 acres.

Through our approach, the farmers did not need to hire their own drone-applicator or purchase their own seed.

It was coordinated through one agreement with the farmer-led group.





PROJECT GOALS

At least **15 farmer-led groups** will utilize RCPP funds for technical and financial assistance to members of their farmer networks. Sand County Foundation announced a first round of **grants to nine Wisconsin farmer-led groups** in mid 2025.

At least **600 farmers** will install soil health and continuous living cover practices on at least **60,000 acres over five years**.

We will impact farmers across Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa (Dubuque County).

MEASURING OUTCOMES

Using models to estimate environmental baseline conditions under farm management prior to the use of RCPP funds, **Sand County Foundation will quantify reductions in the loss of nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment as well as net reductions equivalent tons of carbon dioxide emissions.**



PROJECT PARTNERS:



Natural Resources
Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



This project is supported by Sand County Foundation with funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Supplemental Agreement #2971.



Sand County Foundation is a national nonprofit conservation organization that inspires and empowers farmers, ranchers, and other landowners to ethically care for water, soil, and wildlife.

www.sandcountyfoundation.org