

PRODUCER-LED WATERSHED PROTECTION GRANTS

Producer-Led Grant Requests for Year 2022 Totaled Nearly \$1.2 million

The latest round of Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants has been awarded to 36 farmer groups by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). Farmers will use the funds to work with conservation organizations to address soil and water issues specific to their local watersheds.

Seven of the groups are first-time recipients. Together, the 36 groups will receive the full \$1 million included in the state budget. Grants range from \$3,250 to \$40,000 for conservation practice incentives, education and outreach, on-farm demonstrations, and water quality testing and monitoring efforts.

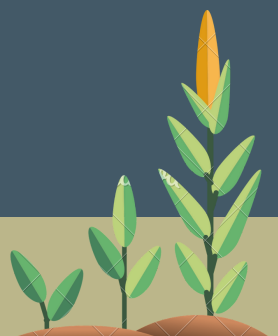
Farmers continue to find value in the program and by collaborating with other farmers on conservation solutions. This is the seventh round of grant awards since funding was first made available in the 2015-17 state budget. The 2021-23 budget authorized annual program funding totaling \$1 million. Grant requests for 2022 totaled nearly \$1.2 million.

More information about the farmer groups and their accomplishments, including a map of the projects, can be found at: https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Programs_Services/ProducerLedProjects.aspx.

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THE GRANT PROGRAM NOT ONLY HAS OPENED DOORS TO MORE COMMUNICATION ON COVER CROP PRACTICES AMONGST THE GROUP, BUT WITH OTHER GROUPS THROUGHOUT THE STATE. IT HAS PERSONALLY HELD ME ACCOUNTABLE, AND BECAUSE OF THIS PROGRAM OUR TEAM OF FARMERS HAS GONE ABOVE AND BEYOND.

Brian Malszewski, member of the Buffalo-Trempealeau Farmer Network





Producer-Led Annual Workshop Recap

The 2022 Producer-Led Grants Annual Workshop was held February 23rd in conjunction with the Wisconsin Cover Crops Conference in Rothschild, WI. The day focused on the profitability of conservation, reviewing the costs and benefits from various conservation systems throughout the state.

The workshop kicked off with our keynote speaker, Dean Sponheim, who is a conservation farmer in Iowa. Dean focused on not only the why behind using conservation practices but also the how. He shared financials of transitioning to no-till, adding cover crops to a system, the value of soil organic matter and how these practices can be profitable. He noted how there is a lot of learning that goes along with implementing soil health practices but to pick the practices that make sense for your operation and dedicate time to tweaking them for your needs.

That concept led to Dean's key message which rang true in the sessions and conversations throughout the day: "Commit and then figure it out", quoting professional rock climber, Jimmy Chen. Commit to a practice or set of practices and then figure out how to be successful with it. Figure out the financials, give it time for the practice to work in your system, and then reap the benefits.



WHY? REDUCED TILLAGE

- REDUCED LABOR
- WATER QUALITY
- ORGANIC MATTER
- SOIL HEALTH
- ECONOMICS
- SOIL TILTH
- FUEL
- RESIDUE
- COVER CROPS
- LANDLORD REQUIREMENTS
- WATER INFILTRATION
- FERTILITY EFFICIENCIES
- ACCESS TO MORE LAND
- EROSION
- SEEDBED
- EQUIPMENT
- TIME

WHY? COVER CROPS

- SEQUESTER NUTRIENTS AND CARBON
- IMPROVE SOIL HEALTH
- BUILDS SOIL ORGANIC MATTER
- INCREASES WATER HOLDING CAPABILITY & INFILTRATION
- IMPROVES SOIL TILTH
- INCREASE MICROBIAL ACTIVITY
- WEED SUPPRESSION/CONTROL
- BREAK UP COMPACTION
- REDUCE SOIL EROSION
- WATER
- WIND
- REDUCE LEACHING
- PROVIDE ADDITIONAL FORAGE
- INCREASES IN WILDLIFE POPULATIONS
- IMPROVE YIELDS



Producer-Led Annual Workshop: Farmer Panel on Profitability & Conservation



Three farmers joined us for the farm profitability panel: our keynote speaker, Dean; Jacob Brey with Brey Cycle Farms LLC and Brody Stapel with Double Dutch Dairy.

Goals of this panel:

1. Compare crop budgets for fields using conventional vs. conservation practices – tangible savings whether it's fewer field passes, less fuel costs, improved forage quality, time savings, etc.
2. Identify benefits, opportunities and limiting factors associated with common conservation approaches
3. Help farmers and their business partners better understand the financial dynamics of conservation practice adoption

Each farmer took us through costs and savings of transitioning to a more conservation based system. Jacob highlighted the costs and savings of their two management-intensive rotational grazing systems including a cropped system and their permanent cool season grass/legume pasture mix, showing how these improve the profitability of raising heifers compared to a traditional feedlot system due to the reduced feed costs.

Brody switched up his management to improve cow comfort and herd health as well as for increased soil structure, reduced soil compaction and harvest flexibility. He compared the costs of a cocktail forage mixture he now uses for feed to alfalfa in a corn rotation and how that has saved the farm money over time. Brody noted that he has not noticed any drop in milk production from this change in feed, and also saw noticeable increases in milk components which has positive effects on their milk checks. When asked about herd health, Brody added that he has had far less vet visits and health issues in his herd since switching to a higher quality feed. He has also noticed increased organic matter in his fields, which allows for easier manure management.

Ultimately, there are numerous potential benefits and cost savings by transitioning to a conservation system. It's important to track the costs and put value to the benefits so you can document short and long term changes as you implement the system. Having farmers like Jake, Dean and Brody share their farm economics and farm history is super helpful for helping other farmers decide whether or not to adopt conservation practices on their own farms. Through the Producer-Led program, we can continue to share successes and lessons learned by Wisconsin farmers to get more conservation on the ground.

Questions during the panel and for farmers to consider if wanting to try these systems:

- Has your system set up made manure application more efficient/valuable and how does relate to your profitability?
- How has improved soil health impacted the following areas of farm management and profitability?
 - Soil fertility (notable lower fertilizer bill costs?)
 - Weed management (lower herbicide applications?)
- How many years did it take for a return on investment into soil health, i.e. how long before you started backing off on applying chemicals?
- What are some of the increased costs associated with your system?
- What are the tangible benefits not already stated that outweigh those costs?
- Has your conservation system positively impacted your time related to farm management activities (i.e., less time doing passes with tillage equipment or for grazing- moving cattle relatively quick? More time for other things?)
- Has your feed quality improved and how has that impacted profitability of feed management?
- Did you have to invest in anything up front in order to get your system started?
- Short term- vs. long term benefits:
 - How has profitability changed in 3 years? Five years? Seven years?
 - What benefits have you seen after 3 years? Five years? Seven years?

Success in Supply Chain Sustainability Projects

At the workshop, representatives from Farmers for Sustainable Food (FSF), the Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance (LASA), The Nature Conservancy, Grande Cheese, Houston Engineering and Southwest Technical College discussed the development of a first-of-its-kind framework for sustainability projects that helps farmers determine what conservation practices are most effective for their individual farms, and document the environmental and financial effects. The framework is being applied as a pilot project in southwestern Wisconsin and included 12 LASA farmers for the first year.

Jamie Fischer started the presentation by giving an overview of FSF as the managing organization of this project. Then Jim Winn, president of the Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance (LASA) talked about the project from his perspective as a farmer. He noted the importance of engaging other parts of the supply chain in conservation efforts and how the partnerships through this project have helped LASA farmers better understand where their farms sit in relation to the multiple environmental and financial sustainability indicators.

Next, Greg Siegenthaler from Grande Cheese provided the processor's perspective, noting that the companies that buy whey and other products from them have a growing need to meet sustainability goals. He also discussed how processors like Grande can work with the farmers in their supply chain to understand and translate the opportunities and benefits provided by farm-level management practices that go into milk production.

Siegenthaler also talked about consumer interests and preferences for sustainably produced food and beverage products, linking those demands to the importance of the project.

Steve Richter from the Nature Conservancy added to this message by providing examples of other companies and corporations including Starbucks, Nestle and others looking to work with Wisconsin agriculture and beyond to address supply chain sustainability within their companies. Wisconsin stands uniquely poised to engage in projects like this given our widespread farmer-led model and strong farmer-driven conservation initiatives already occurring in areas throughout the state.

The presentation concluded with Doug Thomas of Houston Engineering and Kory Stalsberg from Southwest Wisconsin Technical College discussing the results from the first year of environmental and financial analysis. Year one results indicate that the project farms' management practices contribute to above-average sustainability metric scores. Results also showed a 28% decrease in sediment loss to streams in the project area.

On the financial side, project farms showed a higher gross return for corn silage when compared to other Wisconsin farms, according to [FINBIN](#) data. The project will continue, expanding on the baselines set in year one to measure continuous improvement. To learn more, visit: [Projects & Resources - Farmers for Sustainable Food](#)

"Farm the Best"



Scott Stipetich with Pheasants Forever and Joe Bragger, farmer and member of the Buffalo Trempealeau Farmer Network, discussed how to improve sub-field profitability through precision ag & conservation. Shockingly, regardless of size or location twenty percent of farm acres lose money according to Dr. Michael Swanson, Wells Fargo Chief Ag. Economist. This is where farming the best comes in - not all acres are profitable and/or not all acres are as profitable as they could be - so take land that isn't profitable and make it so.

Yield monitors collect individual years of data that can be overlaid and summarized to view trends in yield on individual farm fields over time. Scott and Joe explained how after reviewing Joe's yield maps they decided to add a field border where the field was not profitable, taking approximately 5 ac out of production that Joe was able to spend \$1,930 less to make \$5.28/ac more. They also showed how by taking out an unprofitable portion of a field and converting it into CRP land that Joe was able to spend \$3,065 less to make \$36.21/ac more.

Pheasants Forever can help analyze yield maps and determine the best suitability for unprofitable fields or sections of fields and can recommend alternative, more profitable options for those areas that are better for farm economics and the environment.

For more information or to contact Pheasants Forever regarding their services, contact Scott at Sstipetich@pheasantsforever.org or by phone: 715-209-4846.



TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Unlimited technical support in analyzing data using your preferred data platform.



SOLUTIONS

Voluntary solutions for marginal acres that make economic and agronomic sense, while also furthering the mission of PF/QF.



FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

A trusted resource in navigating all available land programs. Potential access to exclusive funding opportunities.



NO-COST SERVICES

Services provided at no cost to producer. All programs are voluntary.



**PRECISION
AG & CONSERVATION**



Conservation Farmer Mentors Can Help!

Have you ever:

- Wanted to try something new on the farm but didn't know where to start?
- Tried a new practice but it didn't quite work out the way you hoped?
- Wanted to bounce an idea off someone but wasn't sure who to reach out to?

The Conservation Farmer Mentor Service is a newly developed initiative that is part of the Producer-Led Watershed Protection program. Thanks to funding received through the National Wildlife Federation Conservation Champions program, DATCP has established a group of Conservation Farmer Mentors that all meet the following criteria:

- Actively involved in a DATCP producer-led watershed group for at least 3 years.
- Has experience trialing, demonstrating and implementing a diverse set of conservation practices on their own farm.
- Recognized within the WI PLWPG community as a leader in conservation innovation.
- Proven experience and skills giving presentations at conservation outreach events, troubleshooting one-on-one with farmers in need of conservation technical assistance, and a demonstrated passion for promoting conservation and soil health to farmers in their community.

Conservation Farmer Mentors support and advise other farmers on conservation and soil health questions. They are a resource for farmers to turn to when challenges arise on the farm and can serve as a sounding board for an idea or approach a farmer is thinking through.

For more information on this new program visit: [DATCP Home Conservation Farmer Mentor Service \(wi.gov\)](https://www.datcp.wisconsin.gov/conservation-farmer-mentor-service).

MEET OUR FARMER MENTORS

Greg Friendshuh

Friendshuh Farms
Western Wisconsin Conservation Council

Jeff Endres

Endres Berryridge Farm
Yahara Pride Farms

Jacob Brey

Brey Cycle Farm, LLC
Peninsula Pride Farms

Matt Winker

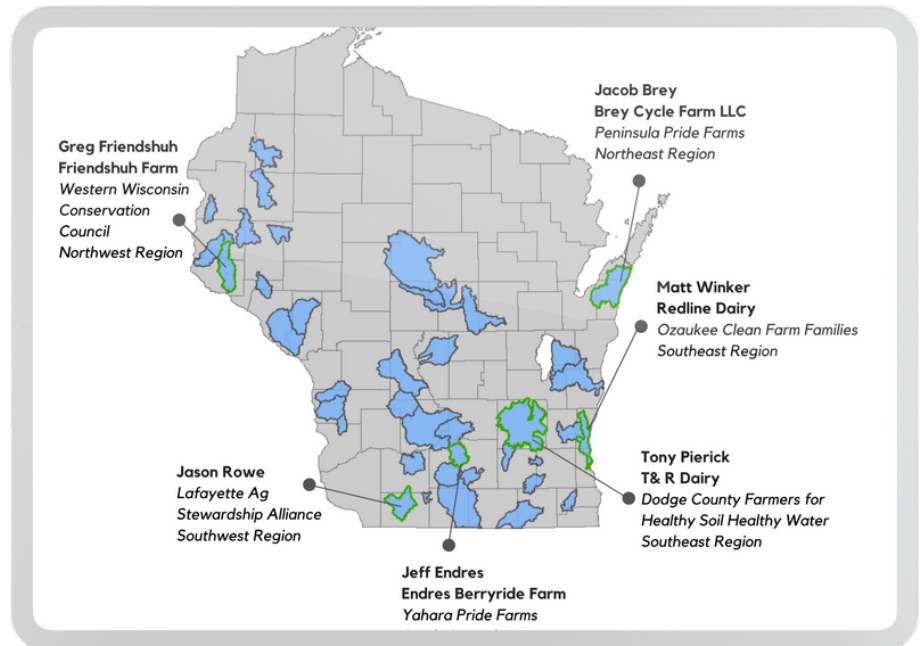
Redline Dairy
Ozaukee Clean Farm Families

Tony Peirick

T&R Dairy
Dodge County Farmers for Healthy Soil Healthy Water

Jason Rowe

Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance



On-Farm Research and Demonstrations for Producer-Led Groups

Chelsea Zegler and Jamie Patton with UW-Madison Division of Extension discussed an important topic related to the work of producer-led groups... is it demonstration or is it research??

This is key in determining how to move forward on a project idea within your watershed. Demonstration highlights results of a proven practice and increases familiarity with a new practice whereas research generates answers to a new question and validates an emerging practice.

Consider the four steps they've outlined before beginning your research or demonstration project to see which is a better fit for your farm and your producer-led group.

Demonstration

- Plot set-up and design provide sound comparison of practices in a visually accessible manner
- Data collected over a single year in a single field and/or specific production circumstances
- Data is used for educational purposes, only applicable to field of interest or general location
- Proof of concept; goal is education and encouragement

Research

- Plot set-up follows specific protocols for research design and data collection
- Data is collected over a number of years and/or sites
- Data is used to provide specific management recommendations over a broad geographic region and/or variety of cropping systems
- Independent research: Responsible for protocol design through data interpretation
- Collaborative research: Partner with researcher on large scale project; follow established protocol

What are you trying to achieve?

Step 1



Do you have the necessary resources - financial, land, labor, equipment, etc?

Step 3



Do you want to contribute to a collaborative project?
Or do you want to have control start to finish?

Step 2



Step 4

Are you willing and able to accept the crop production risk?



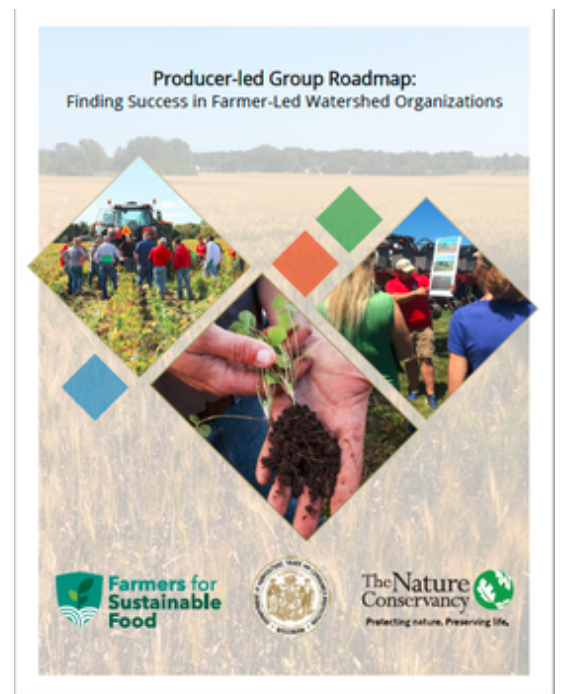
Our day concluded with a facilitated feedback session where attendees broke into four groups to discuss program and policy questions as well as various topics related to participating in a producer-led group. Attendees were able to discuss and learn from each other on topics such as how to have a successful field day, how to get more farmers involved within projects or most effective outreach methods. These discussions as well as the workshop survey will help guide future policy decisions for the Producer-Led program.

To view recordings and PowerPoints for the workshop, click here.

Thank you to our sponsor The Nature Conservancy, to all our attendees, speakers and facilitators for a great event this year!

NEW PRODUEER-LED GROUP?

CHECK OUT OUR ROADMAP!



Contact us!

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