



Agricultural Enterprise Area

Preserve farmland. Protect the environment. Grow the economy.

SNAPSHOT

Bear Creek

County: Sauk
Acres: 30,691

Municipalities: Town of Bear Creek
AEA Designation: 2020

Sauk County Agriculture Economics*

- #2 for hogs and pigs in the state
- 1,412 farms
- 95% of farms are family-owned
- 4,312 jobs in agriculture
- \$743M contributed in economic activity

*University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension Sauk County agriculture impact report

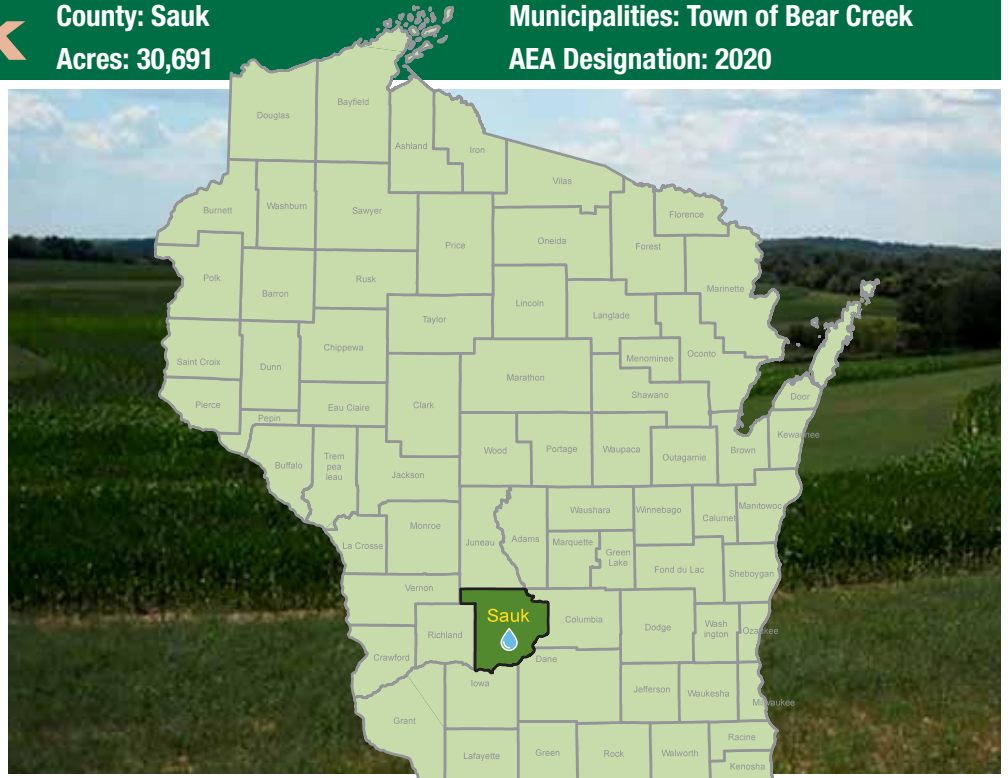
Background

The Bear Creek Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA) was designated in 2020 in response to a petition by landowners who were inspired to preserve the region's dedication to conservation and its agricultural identity. Located in the southwest portion of Sauk County, this rural landscape boasts a mix of cropland, wooded ridges, high slopes, and pastureland.

In an area without a farmland preservation zoning district, like the town of Bear Creek, a designated AEA provides landowners with the ability to participate in the farmland preservation program through farmland preservation agreements. An agreement is a 15-year voluntary contract that enrolls some or all of a landowner's farmland into the Farmland Preservation Program. During the agreement period the landowner must keep the land in agricultural use and maintain soil and water best management practices. In return, the landowner may claim an annual \$5 per acre tax credit. The [Farmland Preservation Program](#) is a partnership between local governments, landowners, farmers, and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

Local Support

Sue Marcquenski owns a 50-acre farm within the AEA and just north of Spring Green with tracts of corn and soybean rotation, a restored prairie, and areas for hay and grazing. Sue first learned of the Farmland Preservation Program while doing her taxes but thought she was ineligible as she rents her farm to another operator in the community. She learned that landowners who rent their agricultural land are eligible to participate in the Farmland Preservation Program and must use the gross receipts from their renter's agricultural use of the farm to meet the farm revenue requirement. Sue is working with her renters to develop a nutrient management plan, which is a requirement of participation in the program. "With nutrient management being one of the requirements, we are learning more about manure placement and doing what's best for the land. By keeping the soil, water, and air healthy, the whole system is healthy, including people," said Sue.



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LOCAL
GOVERNMENTS

3
AG CO-OPS &
BUSINESSES

7
PRODUCERS &
LANDOWNERS

Sue eventually plans to sell her farm after enrolling it in the Farmland Preservation Program. "I want to be sure that it remains as a farm," said Sue. "I don't want someone to buy it and suddenly make it a subdivision. I want to make sure for the next 15 years it will remain in agriculture and be protected. I want the next farmer to appreciate what it is and its potential in its natural state."

Bruce Marion is another landowner in the area with a 450-acre farm 10 miles north of Spring Green. He rents out 150 of the acres to a nearby dairy operation, and the rest is enrolled in the Farmland Preservation Program, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Managed Forest Law, and U.S. Department of Agriculture

This AEA is supported and surrounded by the following agriculture enterprises, businesses, non-profits, and institutions:

-  Milk producers
-  Dairy plant
-  Cheesemaker
-  Cow breeding
-  Local co-ops
-  Aquaculture
-  Trout Unlimited
-  Class I and II trout streams
-  Organic farming
-  CREP participation
-  Meat distributor
-  Meat production
-  Honey production
-  Maple syrup production
-  Food processing
-  Food warehouse

Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and Conservation Stewardship Program. He is also working with the Driftless Land Conservancy to put an easement on his farm. Inspired by his colleague Richard Barrows, who contributed to establishing Wisconsin's Farmland Preservation Program in the 1970's, Bruce helped lead the designation for the Bear Creek AEA. "I hope that the AEA designation will reduce the fragmentation on the farmland, like non-farm uses such as housing, and will allow family farmers to survive and be a viable part of the rural community here," said Bruce. "[Operators] have no control over their prices generally, like milk prices are always fluctuating. So the one thing they have to try to control is the cost of the operation. This is part of the costs. Farmland preservation reduces some of the financial pressure." The reduced economic pressure has allowed Bruce to keep renting his land out and plan for a future in agriculture.

County Support

Sauk County connects with landowners to communicate about farmland preservation and the benefits of nutrient management planning. Brian Sadler, Sauk County conservation technician, wants to make landowners aware of conservation practices that they can implement or advocate for renters to do. Sauk County's goals are to:

- Open up communication lines with landowners they may not have worked with in a while.
- Build stronger relationships through farm visits and face to face interaction.
- Help empower landowners to strive for conservation goals through education and networking with others in the community.
- Use nutrient management planning as a tool to improve conservation and to move toward long term solutions to holistically improve soil health.

The county hopes to partner with landowners in Bear Creek and Fairfield AEAs to further protect and support their farmland through farmland preservation agreements with an incentive program that started in 2021. Landowners who sign a new farmland preservation agreement for up to 200 acres receive a \$2,000 signing bonus, and agreements for more than 200 acres receive a \$3,000 signing bonus. A limited amount of funding is available for the incentive program and landowners interested in claiming the tax credit, meeting conservation goals, and protecting land from non-agricultural related uses should contact the [Sauk County Land Resources and Environment Department](http://www.saukcountywi.gov/land-resources) at (608) 355-4841, or email brian.sadler@saukcountywi.gov.

Future Growth

Over the last several years, there have been public, private, and non-profit entities lending time, talent, and financial support to preserve and enhance the fishery and surrounding habitat of Bear Creek. Sue started volunteering with a DNR and Water Action Volunteer partnership project to meet with friends and take trout stream samples to track and monitor water quality on Little Bear Creek. This has opened her eyes to how deeply agriculture and the natural environment are intertwined. Sue and others in the community hope the continued growth of the Farmland Preservation Program in the community will help preserve Bear Creeks' farmland and natural resources for generations to come.

Preserving Local Agriculture



Grow the mindset of regenerative agriculture



Promote balance:

- Quality of life
- Property values
- Environmental protection
- Economic opportunities through planning future land use



Educate agricultural landowners on conservation programs

Protecting Natural Resources



Protect the Bear Creek Fishery Area



Increase nutrient management and improve water quality



Promote innovative farming practices that preserve soil and water health

To find out if your land is located in the Bear Creek AEA and to sign a farmland preservation agreement, contact:

Brian Sadler, Conservation Technician
Sauk County Land Resource and Environment Dept.
Phone: (608) 355-4841 email: brian.sadler@saukcountywi.gov

To start or join a current AEA, contact your county land conservation department where your land is located.