Leopold Conservation Award®

PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

Watch the 2023 video.

2023 Award Recipients

2023 ILLINOIS LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD RECIPIENT, FREY FAMILY FARMS.

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

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

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

Today, with the support of dozens of partners and sponsors across the U.S., Sand County Foundation proudly presents the Leopold Conservation Award in 27 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 environmental improvement.

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

To learn more about all past LCA recipients visit www.sandcountyfoundation.org/LCARecipients. For questions about the award and sponsorship opportunities, contact Lance Irving at 608.729.1389, Lirving@sandcountyfoundation.org

Dear Friends,

Nearly 75 years after Aldo Leopold articulated his vision of a "land ethic", the number of farmers and ranchers making that vision a reality continues to grow. The following pages include some of the nation's very best land stewards - each demonstrating their unique ethical commitment to improving land health.

Sand County Foundation and our partners proudly share the stories of the Leopold Conservation Award's Class of 2023. These landowners use grit and ingenuity to enhance soils, plants, water, and wildlife habitat for the benefit of the natural world.

These stories also reveal a sense of responsibility to human communities. These award winners "show up" for neighbors, schools, and churches. They take on elected and other volunteer leadership roles and outreach opportunities. They form coalitions with hunters and birders. They seek out partnerships with academia, businesses, governments, and conservation groups. We can feel their sense of duty to future generations, notably among the many recipients who serve as mentors for historically underserved farmers and ranchers through Sand County Foundation's Land Ethic Mentorship program.

Every few years we have the unique honor of assembling Leopold Conservation Award recipients in one special place. This year, fittingly, we are hosting this gathering in June in Wisconsin where Aldo Leopold conceived of a land ethic three quarters of a century ago. Many of the farm and ranch families that carry on that commitment today will come together to inaugurate the next stages of their own conservation journeys.

Sincerely,

Kevin McAleese
President and CEO
Sand County Foundation

SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

Empowering Landowners
Advancing a Land Ethic

CALIFORNIA

PARK FARMING ORGANICS

▶ Watch video of Park Farming Organics

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Sustainable Conservation

California Farm Bureau

HARVEY L. AND MAUD C. SORENSEN FOUNDATION

Scott and Ulla Park placed their bets on regenerative farming practices long before they were trending.

They spent the 1980s conventionally growing processing tomatoes before deciding to switch to organic production. Fueled by their love for agriculture and nature, coupled with a healthy dose of skepticism and common sense, they embarked on journey of exploration and discovery.

In their effort to mimic the natural world, the Parks chose gentler tillage methods, grew a variety of cover crops, and adopted a thoughtful rotation of crops. Their use of fertility inputs produced naturally balanced soils that help grow disease and pest-free plants. They noticed their once sterile soils became rich in earthworms and microbial life.

The Park's farm, Park Farming Organics, grew to 1,350 acres, and is now run by their son Brian and his wife Jamie. What hasn't changed is the family's openness to experimentation and willingness to embrace new methods to adapt to changing consumer demands, market dynamics, environmental variability, and regulatory shifts.

Each year Park Farming Organics grows between 15-20 types of crops including rice, corn, wheat, sunflower, flax, alfalfa, barley, squash, cantaloupe, watermelons, cucumbers, and fresh market vegetables. It is governed by what the Parks call their "9 Cs of conservation": critter cover, compost, controlled traffic, crop rotation, cover crops, conservation tillage, crop residue, conserving inputs, and crew care.

Their use of cover crops, compost applications, and crop residue annually returns an average of 15 tons of organic biomass per acre back to the soil. Growing sunn hemp as a cover crop helps improve soil properties, reduce soil erosion, conserve soil moisture, and recycle plant nutrients. The Parks' unique border management of their fields includes growing diverse hedge rows that benefit wildlife and installing owl boxes to help control rodents.

Innovation and adaptability of farm equipment has been required to meet their production and conservation goals. Flotation tires on tractors help minimize compaction of rice fields. By modifying many core pieces of their farm equipment, the Parks have become leaders in developing specially adapted implements that other growers now rely on.

Exploring novel conservation practices has not been devoid of challenges and unexpected consequences. Scott and Brian participate in workshops, conferences, and fields days where they eloquently break down the challenges of organic and sustainable practices. Their expertise and willingness to share has made Park Farming Organics a go-to destination in northern California for students, scientists, journalists, and food sector professionals.

Collaborative partnerships with their local conservation district and universities have led to new innovations and provided regional context for adopting conservation practices. The impacts of their efforts to improve soil health are documented in a variety of peer-reviewed scientific journals. Promoting environmental stewardship among fellow farmers, educators, and environmental professionals is the purpose of the Parks' involvement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Education and Awareness Center.

Park Farming Organics' significant role in the regenerative agriculture scene is thanks to its owners' ability to share their vision, values, accomplishments, and obstacles with farm and consumer audiences. Through dedication, passion, and the ability to put their ideas into practice, the Parks have trailblazed a path for other farmers to begin their conservation journeys.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
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CAROLINAS

FOOTPRINTS IN THE GARDEN

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Carolina Farm Trust · Soil Regen · Trane Technologies · Wells Fargo

Erin Martin knows the importance of deep roots.

With help from her extended family, she manages farmland that her great-great-grandparents purchased in 1883. They grew tobacco, soybeans, and wheat. Erin grows red okra, Easter egg radish, and yellow flesh watermelons. What hasn't changed is a conservation ethic passed on to each generation.

Ancestorial roots of indigenous members of the Coharie Tribe and formerly enslaved African Americans ground the family's thoughts and cultural beliefs about land stewardship and traditional farming practices.

Erin's mother named the farm "Footprints in the Garden" in 2012. At that time, the Martins were growing herbs, kohlrabi, daikon radish, asparagus beans, and specialty cut greens for restaurants in the Raleigh area. They also hoped to inspire the next generation to take an active role in farming.

It worked. In 2018, Erin, who was in her early twenties, became the seventh generation to manage the farmland and forest at Footprints in the Garden. She's a millennial combining modern conservation practices with personal, historical, and cultural narratives of nature to connect others with the land.

Footprints in the Garden serves as a learning platform to educate other farmers, landowners, youth, and military veterans about conservation practices and land usage at more than 30 events annually.

As a high school student, Erin established a community garden located amid a food desert. Now she serves as an outreach coordinator for a grocery store cooperative where she communicates the importance of having access to locally grown food. She also promotes health benefits of eating nutrient-dense foods like kale, garlic, blueberries, and potatoes.

No matter the season, growing a continuous rotation of diverse plants at Footprints in the Garden is beneficial to the landscape and wildlife. Keeping the ground covered with vegetation and always having living roots underneath its surface are keys to enhancing soil health and preventing erosion.

Companion planting, mulching, and cover crops of buckwheat, clover, sunflower, and hairy vetch provide an armor for soils. They also assist with pest control, suppress weeds, and provide nutrients needed for successful fruit and vegetable production. Erin and her family follow a conservation plan that encourages planting native wildflowers for beneficial pollinator insects and managing forestland to provide wildlife habitat.

Erin sells produce ranging from watermelon radish to Parisian and rainbow carrots at farmers markets in five counties. With cost-share assistance from the federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), she erected a high tunnel system to grow during all four seasons.

Locally-sourced compost and wood chips suppress weeds and build topsoil in growing beds. Micro-irrigation drip tape in the high tunnel provides direct root base watering for plants and to conserve water. Instead of leaving the high tunnel empty during the summer, cover crops are planted in its growing beds to retain moisture and build soil nutrients.

Just as new crops emerge each season at Footprints in the Garden, there's now an eighth generation of family members who are quickly learning and growing a relationship with their land. It's just what would be expected on a farm where roots run deep.

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COLORADO

LEVALLEY RANCH

▶ Watch video of LeValley Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Colorado Cattlemen's Association · Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust · American AgCredit · CoBank · Farm Credit of Southern Colorado · Premier Farm Credit · USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

LeValley Ranch has always been managed with the long term in mind.

Thomas LeValley homesteaded a piece of land in western Colorado's North Fork Valley in 1914. He was among the community members who created the Crawford Reservoir which held enough water to irrigate thousands of acres. Since then, his son Byron, and grandsons Mark, Hank, and Steve, have created a showcase of what can be achieved on a working cattle ranch.

Despite two decades of dry weather, the irrigation improvements and rangeland conservation practices adopted at LeValley Ranch have increased water efficiency and crop production, while enhancing rangeland biodiversity and wildlife habitat.

LeValley Ranch and the grazing land it leases from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the core habitat for the satellite Crawford population of the Gunnison sage-grouse. The LeValleys have worked cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), BLM, and a local working group since 1995 to address the needs of the threatened species. LeValley Ranch has modified its grazing rotations, reduced cattle numbers during extreme drought, and added watering areas for grouse.

The LeValleys have long known the key to maintaining their rangeland's health is to not over graze it. Pastures on their private land in Delta and Montrose counties are not grazed for more than two weeks annually, while leased BLM and USFWS lands are only grazed every other year. Their planned grazing rotation allows time for grasses to properly regrow, and maintains enough root mass intact to grow stronger grass and forbs when moisture becomes available.

To reach distant pastures, the LeValleys installed solar panels to power large pumps that feed waterlines and storage tanks supplying drinking water to livestock, numerous bird species, and big game. With assistance from the BLM Grazing Advisory Board, the LeValleys installed 17 miles of pipeline and water tanks to service the BLM allotment in 1992. Their maintenance and expense are LeValley Ranch's responsibility.

After taking over management of the ranch in 1987, Mark and Hank became early adopters of cooperative rangeland monitoring. An extensive testing system has documented an upward trend in range condition and species diversity at LeValley Ranch and on leased properties, including grazing land at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

A targeted grazing system helps reduce noxious fescue and bulbosa grasses. In their place, the LeValleys plant native grasses that are palatable for cattle, deer, and elk, and provide habitat for the ranch's game bird and big game hunting business. LeValley Ranch's cattle are only fed harvested forages from March to mid-May, which reduces costs and creates healthier soil.

To weather the ups and downs of the beef business, the LeValleys partner with five other ranches in operating a USDA-inspected custom meat packing plant and retail store. Not only does selling beef directly to consumers allow them to control the supply chain from the ranch gate to the food plate, but it also gives them the opportunity to inform others of the environmental benefits cattle ranching can have on the landscape.

Just as Thomas could have envisioned, his great-grandson Ross LeValley is stepping up to assist with the cattle, wildlife, and the working landscape at LeValley Ranch.

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ILLINOIS

FREY FAMILY FARMS

▶ Watch video of Frey Family Farms

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · ILCORN WWW.ILCORN.ORG · ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION · Sand County Foundation Coleman Family Fund

Back in 1975, Dennis and Jackie Frey were a couple of newlywed farm kids with modest goals of raising a family and making a living raising crops.

Frey Family Farms started with some land that has been in Dennis and Jackie's families for generations but has since grown to include acres they've purchased and rented as a married couple.

As corn and soybean growers, their initial conservation goals were modest too. Early on, they enrolled in programs available to farmers to help reduce soil loss and control water erosion, but this too would evolve over time.

Conservation practices and the technology and equipment to carry them out have become more sophisticated. So has the Frey's knowledge base about them.

After graduating with a degree in plant and soil science, Dennis farmed and worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's soil survey team identifying soil types and conducting soil mapping. As a resource conservationist for the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District he later offered training and outreach to fellow farmers.

Back on the farm, his use of minimum tillage across his 1,200 acres of cropland progressed to a no-till system. Dennis found coupling no-till practices with growing cover crops to be a conservation game changer. This combo helps reduce soil erosion, utilize excess nitrogen, sequester carbon, and minimize evaporation to allow crops to better access moisture held in the soil.

When reducing water runoff, cover crops prevent fertilizer and other nutrients from contaminating the water supply. No-till practices require fewer passes over a field with farm equipment, which reduces the use of fossil fuel while saving time.

Technological advancements have been embraced by the Freys to enhance their farm's productivity. Grid soil testing is completed on all cropland on a four-year rotation. Variable rates of application for fertilizer and lime are used to increase their effectiveness and reduce input costs.

About 240 acres of Frey Family Farms is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and has been planted with native prairie grasses and wildflowers. Their extensive root systems have increased microbial activity improving the soil's health and structure. The tall grasses also provide cover and nesting sites for deer, quail, and rabbits.

Dennis and Jackie's son-in-law, Brock Holston, is taking over management of the farm. His interest in hunting and fishing has brought an additional dimension to the farm's conservation efforts. He's established food plots and constructed ponds and wetlands designed to provide habitat to fish, waterfowl, and wildlife populations. Frey Family Farms has also planted more than 20,000 hardwood trees, and installed several miles of terraces, grassed waterways, and other erosion control structures.

In addition to what they've taught their daughters (Lara, Ashley, and Cameron) about conservation, the Freys feel an obligation to educate others in hopes they will understand the role they can play in protecting the environment. Frey Family Farms has hosted field days and tours with audiences ranging from local fourth graders to foreign visitors from Africa and Asia. Off the farm, Dennis has served in a variety of leadership roles in agriculture and conservation organizations.

Dennis and Jackie's farm has done more than provide for their family in the nearly 50 years since they started out. It has also fostered a conservation ethic in those who have called it home.

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IOWA

LORAN STEINLAGE

Presented in Partnership with

Loran Steinlage has the qualities that make a good land steward.

He's open-minded to innovation, yet patient with the process of trial and error. He welcomes researchers to measure the impact and efficacy of each conservation practice he adopts on his 900-acre farm in Fayette County.

Loran is most passionate about sharing what he's learned with others, from local youth to farmers from Iowa, Ukraine, or Australia. Whether participating in soil health field days or podcasts, he's helping forge a new path for modern agriculture.

Loran's the first to admit he wasn't always this way. He was once a "conventional" corn and soybean grower focused on yields and renting as much land as possible. When he and his wife Brenda learned their son was diagnosed with brain cancer, he scaled back his rented acreage to spend more time at home. He started looking differently at the land his parents had passed on to him.

While experimenting with cover crops and no-till practices, Loran saw an improvement in his soil's health. He realized the cover crops would be more robust and beneficial if they were planted sooner. This led him to explore ways to interseed cover crops into standing fields of corn and soybeans.

Before becoming a pioneer in the practice of relay cropping, Loran drew inspiration by connecting with farmers across the nation through social channels and peer groups. Among the farmer mentors he credits with advancing his conservation ethic was the late Dave Brandt of Ohio.

Through global travels and interactions, Loran recognized there's no room for complacency within mainstream agriculture in the face of environmental challenges ranging from climate change to water pollution. He believes it's up to farmers to not just be ahead of the curve but to drive the change.

In most cases, there was no blueprint for the changes Loran saw as important, nor did his practices fit within available conservation programs. Undaunted, he cobbled ideas together with his network of peers and brought them home.

Loran works with a variety of organizations to host field trials at his family's FLOLO Farms. The data collected is used to study the agronomics of conservation practices, water quality impacts, flood mitigation, crop insurance provisions, and market viability of alternative crops and methods.

After altering a row-crop combine to be able to harvest cereal grains in his relay-cropped fields, Loran saw the need to marry agribusiness with stewardship efforts. He works with an agricultural manufacturer to bridge a gap between farmers and the engineers designing farm machinery.

In 2021, when Loran welcomed Iowa's Department of Natural Resources to survey a stream that dissects his farm, they discovered it was full of trout. Without proper stewardship in the surrounding fields, this stream would not support fish that are extremely sensitive to contaminants in water.

Loran credits growing heritage varieties of corn for a nearby brewery with making his farm ecologically and economically resilient. However, it's not just an anecdotal success. He believes growing diverse crops, regenerating soil, and ensuring clean water, leads to increased farm profitability, environmental regeneration, and rural invigoration.

As Loran grows his 38th crop of corn this year, he's as committed as ever to helping others see how conservation advances will impact future crops.

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KANSAS

RAY AND SUSAN FLICKNER

▶ Watch video of Ray and Susan Flickner

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

KACD Kansas Association of Conservation Districts

Ranchland Trust of Kansas
An affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association

Ray and Susan Flickner compare agricultural conservation to a long road, but it's a journey they've resolved to travel.

The Flickners are lifelong learners with master's degrees. They have channeled their education and experience into innovation on their Kansas farmland, and see conservation as critical to its environmental and economic resilience.

Ray has shared his knowledge as a speaker at the governor's conference on the future of water in Kansas, and before a U.S. Senate agriculture subcommittee on making conservation programs user-friendly for farmers.

Amid the 1980s farm crisis, the Flickners bought farmland that has been in Ray's family since the 1870s. They've added another 630 acres, and it's now known as Flickner Innovation Farm where more than a dozen university, industry, and agency partners explore new methods to improve soil health and conserve water.

Modern irrigation technology tested at the farm helps make good use of every drop of water in a drought-prone region. Switching from a flood irrigation system to sub-surface drip irrigation showed 40 percent less water use over a decade, compared to the county average. Real-time feedback on how much water will benefit every slice of a field is provided by plant-based water sensors and a ground-penetrating radar mounted to a center pivot irrigation system.

Crop yields have improved thanks to irrigation technology and the grid soil sampling the Flickners conduct every four years. The sampling shows where to apply nutrients and lime at varying rates to adjust the soil's pH level. Cover crops are grown to suppress weeds and improve soil health. These conservation practices have increased their soil's organic matter over time.

Water and soil conservation has long been a priority at Flickner Farms. Ray and Susan recently rehabilitated shelter belts and windbreaks that his ancestors planted in the 1930s to prevent erosion. Ray credits his father with stopping the use of anhydrous ammonia fertilizer in the 1960s and switching from traditional to minimum and conservation tillage in the 1980s.

Over the years, Ray and Susan bought more farmland, where annual rainfall and topographies vary widely. They have created pollinator habitat in areas not suitable for row crop farming, constructed miles of terraces, and built acres of grass waterways. A marginal five-acre tract was taken out of crop production and reseeded with grass to improve water quality and provide wildlife habitat. Other fields have benefited from using the Kansas Forest Service's conservation tree program to build windbreaks.

With assistance from their county conservation district, intermittent streams have been reshaped and seeded to brome grass. Grass waterways previously under an irrigation center pivot were relocated to field edges.

Ray and Susan have turned their conservation ethic to 320 acres of Hodgeman County farmland that Susan acquired from her father's estate. In addition to redesigning its terraces, the farm features two playas. The Flickners are coordinating with the Natural Resources Conservation Service on how to best rehabilitate these important High Plains aquifer features as part of a constantly evolving journey to improve water resources in Kansas.

In memory of Susan Flickner
12.18.53 - 12.16.23

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KENTUCKY

VEATCH FARMS

Presented in Partnership with

Ever since his mother helped him win a conservation district's essay contest, Donald Veatch has been quick to share the credit for his conservation successes.

As a boy, he came to appreciate the uniqueness of central Kentucky's farmland thanks to his grandparents, Gilbert and Exie Shively. They farmed in a region nicknamed "the lagoon" for its river bottoms and prehistoric beginnings as a lake.

Donald says the public debate over erecting a dam that would have returned his family's farmland into a lake made an impression on him. So did this simple rule from his father who farmed and worked as a county conservationist: "Never allow a gulley on the farm."

Donald and his son Josh still grow corn, wheat, and soybeans, and raise beef cattle in the lagoon. Veatch Farms is dissected by a creek with topography ranging from wet bottomland to steep hillsides. Donald has implemented a variety of conservation practices to prevent soil erosion, improve water quality, and increase the amount of organic matter in his soil.

More than 30 years ago during a drought, Donald first experimented with no-till practices to increase his soil's capacity to infiltrate water. He later began growing cover crops of wheat, grasses, radishes, and sweet clover. He quickly saw the benefits of not disturbing the soil and keeping fields continuously green and growing.

The cropland at Veatch Farms has developed the dual resilience of retaining water during dry spells and withstanding heavy rains with little or no erosion. Likewise, the soil's health has improved thanks to an integrated pest management system and annual soil tests that monitor soil nutrient levels.

Timber is treated like a crop at Veatch Farms. The use of timberland stand improvement practices on woodland acres restricts the growth of invasive species. This allows more desirable species such as oak, walnut, and maple to have a larger share of the forest canopy.

Donald sees trees as a renewable resource with economic and environmental benefits. He's planted trees along the curves of his farm's creek to stabilize soil and mitigate flooding. The trees compliment the wide grass buffer strips he's established. Portions of the farm are also enrolled in the federal Conservation Stewardship Program to create habitat for wildlife, birds, and insect pollinators.

Beef cattle at Veatch Farms are not allowed access to its ponds, creeks, and forests. By rotationally grazing the herd, grass is allowed to grow taller, which helps slow water runoff.

Donald has a passion for sharing his conservation ethic and knowledge with those who want to learn how to care for their own land. He's a longtime member of Marion County's Agriculture Development, Farm Bureau, and Conservation District boards. His peers say his willingness to voice his opinion on conservation comes from knowledge and wisdom.

Veatch Farms regularly employs students enrolled in a school-to-work program. The instructor of the course was so inspired after reading Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* that they asked Donald for assistance in developing a high school conservation class. At the time, neither the teacher nor Donald realized he had been nominated for an award named in honor of Leopold.

The boy from Kentucky's lagoon has come a long way since winning a conservation essay contest.

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MARYLAND

DAVID AND BELINDA BURRIER

Presented in Partnership with

This is a story of a farm bisected by a creek, and a farming career bisected by an injury.

Growing up on a dairy farm along a Chesapeake Bay tributary named Linganore Creek, David Burrier always knew he wanted to be a farmer.

His father divided the farm's large crop fields into narrow contour strips to prevent soil erosion. The steeper the slope the narrower the strip. When his father told him that a shovel of soil lost to erosion could not be replaced in a lifetime, those words left an impact.

David began farming on his own in 1976 by renting farmland and doing custom work for neighbors. After considering the labor and equipment required for conventional tillage, he grew his first crop of corn with no-till practices. Being an early adopter of conservation practices often requires innovation. David devised his own 11-row no-till soybean planter by combining two corn planters in the 1980s.

With each growing season he saw less erosion and more nutrients staying in place, but no-till was not a silver bullet for efficient crop production. David addressed soil compaction next. He learned not to plant or harvest when it was too wet. Whether entering or exiting a field, or loading a truck, he always chose a different location, and he never turned around in a field. Just as his father did, David installed grass waterways on his leased farmland to collect sediment and protect water quality.

Tragedy struck in 1985 when David suffered a severe back injury. He was partially paralyzed following two unsuccessful surgeries, and by 1993 he was totally immobile. It was then his farming career came to a halt. He stopped renting farmland, and with some initial apprehension went to work for a fertilizer company.

For nearly a decade, David, a detail-oriented agronomist and self-described "numbers guy" took pride in helping dairy farmers up their agronomic game by knowing the nutrient needs of his clients' 30,000 acres.

Life soon took another unexpected turn. David calls it a miracle that a surgeon was found who could repair his back. Decades after he had begun farming on his own, David and his wife Belinda purchased the 109-acre farm he grew up on in 2004. After renting some more farmland, David left his job and followed his passion to farm again in 2007.

They both took on leadership roles in a variety of agricultural organizations, cooperatives, and foundations, including Belinda's tenure on the executive committee of the United Soybean Board.

David didn't miss a beat in his management of 900 acres of hay, corn, soybeans, and wheat. The use of cover crops and other conservation practices doubled the amount of organic matter on his fields, which improves water infiltration, improves soil health, and naturally suppresses weeds.

As for Linganore Creek that bisects the farm, the Burriers kept a former cattle pasture in permanent grass as a buffer between the creek and crop fields. They had an independent lab take monthly water samples at both ends of the farm. The water was cleaner when it left the Burrier farm than when it entered it. Eventually the lab recommended discontinuing testing because all levels of nutrients were too low to measure.

It's an example of how those with the patience and ethic for conservation can eventually see amazing results. It's a lesson David knows well.

MISSOURI

COPE GRASS FARM

▶ **Watch video of Cope Grass Farm**

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Missouri Farmers Care Foundation

Missouri Soybeans

MissouriCorn Merchandising Council

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

A recent audit by the National Audubon Society documented more than 100 species of birds at Cope Grass Farms. Among them is the Henslow's Sparrow, which is notable because their population is in decline as fewer farms and ranches offer the tall grass and dense thatch they need for nesting.

As one of just seven Missouri farms to receive Audubon's "Bird Friendly Beef" certification, the audit at Cope Grass Farms showed a 30 percent increase in bird species in just three years. Harry Cope sees this as a reflection of his farm's ecological health and part of what it means to steward the land.

Harry established Cope Grass Farms in 1990 to rotationally graze beef cattle, sheep, and hogs. He planted 350 acres of pastureland with a mix of native grasses and forbs. Innovative grazing practices coupled with deep-rooted vegetation keep pastures lush even during drought.

While others might call them weeds, Harry knows the diverse mix of forbs on his farm also yield more pollinators, wildlife, and biodiversity. Multiple species of milkweed provide a sanctuary for beneficial insect pollinators and Monarch butterflies.

Livestock are also grazed on fields of milo and cover crops. Grazing on fields of standing milo during the winter cuts down on labor and the equipment costs of hay production. As one of the principles of soil health, incorporating livestock into cropland benefits both the animal and the next crop to be planted.

Another innovative alternative to growing hay that Harry has perfected is growing nutritious micro-greens for beef cattle. Barley seeds are placed in six-foot trays and watered for three minutes every hour. After six days, the tray looks like a piece of vibrant green turf. Loaded with nutritious minerals, sugars, and carbohydrates, the cattle love it, and its less taxing on the land than harvesting hay.

No-till practices help prevent soil erosion on their fields and have extended the life span of drainage tile. Cover crops of sunflowers, turnips, buckwheat, oats, and barley help improve the soil's ability to cycle nutrients and infiltrate water.

The health and vitality of the 500 acres of woodlands at Cope Grass Farms is also important to Harry. Acorns provide a sustainable feed source for pigs. They are allowed to rotationally graze in the woods but are fitted with nose rings to prevent them from damaging the forest floor. Thinning out certain trees by a certified forester improves the timber stand and creates better habitat for wildlife and bats.

Harry consults with young and beginning farmers on how to manage their grazing systems. He has hosted several field days to promote grazing and is a member of the Missouri Forage and Grassland Council Board.

As a highly effective communicator and educator, Harry is considered by some to be one of Missouri's best conservation ambassadors. His uncommon ability to engage people from all walks of life allows him to show others how agriculture and conservation can be compatible.

He maintains close relationships with those he rents farmland from by showing them how conservation practices benefit their land. As margins narrowed for beef producers, Harry made the decision to sell beef directly to consumers and show them how their food is raised. He says this type of interaction is how people will come to understand that cattle can thrive in the same fields as quail, meadowlarks, and the Henslow's Sparrow.

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MONTANA

KURT AND PJ MYLLYMAKI

▶ Watch video of Kurt ad PJ Myllymaki

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

Montana Rangeland Resources Committee

Sibanye Stillwater

Wind has been called an "untamed beast."

It's something farmers Kurt and PJ Myllymaki know all too well. The Myllymakis raise crops and cattle on central Montana's brittle, drought-prone landscape. An uptick in high and sustained winds convinced them to change their farming and grazing practices to save their soil from erosion.

Winds still blow, but soil erosion has been eliminated by keeping a continuously-growing cover on their grazing and cropland. Cover crops are just one of the conservation practices the Myllymakis have adopted in the past few years to make their farm more environmentally and economically resilient.

They adhere to the five principles of soil health on their 5,300 acres of cropland: keep soil covered, increase plant species diversity, keep a living root in the soil as long as possible, minimize soil disturbance and integrate livestock.

No matter the season, their fields continuously grow oats, barley, chickpeas, flax, lentils, winter and spring wheat, yellow and green peas, or a mixture of cover crops. The crop rotation's diversity reduces the potential for crop diseases, improves the exchange of nutrients in the soil's biology, and attracts beneficial insects and pollinators. As a result, the Myllymakis have also been able to decrease their use of synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides, without harming crop yields.

By striving to mimic natural processes, the Myllymakis are seeing a variety of environmental benefits. Wildlife populations, from antelope to pheasants, have increased thanks to the improved habitat and winter cover. Since switching to a no-till system on their crop fields, the Myllymakis have noticed more worms and dung beetles, which help cycle nutrients in the soil. Dung beetles and other insects are also no longer harmed by an insecticide product the Myllymakis stopped using on their cattle to control flies.

One of the first changes the Myllymakis made was moving their calving dates for their 250 cows from February to mid-May. The move benefitted the herd's health and reduced the need for supplemental hay. A switch to a regenerative grazing system across 3,300 acres has led to healthier grasslands with greater species diversity and higher plant populations.

While windy, their region receives little snow, which allowed a switch to a year-round grazing system in 2016. Eliminating costs and labor associated with hay production made economic sense. Limiting their cattle's access to the riparian area along the Wolf Creek has resulted in the regeneration of willow trees and greater wildlife habitat.

The Myllymakis have increased their farm's resiliency to drought thanks to conservation practices. Diversifying their soil's biology increases its ability to infiltrate water. Now valuable moisture seeps into their soil, while it runs off of fields elsewhere.

Kurt and PJ are quick to credit a Ranching for Profit workshop and technical assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service for their farm's turnaround. They also are thankful for the role family has played. Kurt's father Bruce has always been open to trying new things. Their children, Kameron and Kady, are developing their own conservation ethic when moving cattle and checking crop and soil conditions.

No longer fighting the winds of change, the Myllymakis are a model for others to emulate. They admit the transition wasn't easy, but they tamed the beast.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

NEBRASKA

TRUMLER RANCH

▶ Watch video of Trumler Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

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

Chris Trumler traces his conservation ethic to his grandfather and father.

Chris' grandfather grew up loving the outdoors on a farm near Munich, Germany. Following World War II, hunting was prohibited, and fishing was costly, so he moved his family to Nebraska in 1950 in search of a better life. By the 1970s, Chris' father was a German and industrial arts teacher who dreamed of raising cattle and owning a place to hunt and fish.

After purchasing an overgrazed piece of the Sandhills range, his father improved areas where erosion had formed "blow outs" by fencing them off and planting trees to stabilize the sandy soils. Chris carried countless jugs of water to those trees as a child. He passion for wildlife conservation took root after noticing the trees were attracting deer, quail, and grouse.

Chris is still planting trees today on Trumler Ranch's 930 acres of native grasslands and wetlands. To create shelter belts for cattle and wildlife, he planted enough trees to stretch more than one mile.

Although a full-time cattle rancher, Chris says he also sees himself as a wildlife manager after working as a conservation technician for Nebraska Games and Parks' wildlife and fisheries divisions. He rotationally grazes his cattle herd using wildlife-friendly cross fencing.

A "deferred grazing" system of not grazing part of the ranch until July allows it to reach "climax vegetation." This provides excellent conditions for deer to fawn, and for upland birds to nest. By timing their calving season for summer, this system matches the cows' nutritional needs to when the pasture is at its highest nutritional stage.

Limiting his cattle herd's access to natural waterways has also produced conservation benefits. Wetlands and former stock ponds offer habitat for migratory and shore birds. During dry years, these areas support prairie chicken, grouse, and quail. Fencing cattle away from streambanks has improved water quality by reducing erosion. Chris is experimenting with hinge-cutting trees along streambanks to slow the water and provide habitat for fish and invertebrates.

Cold, clean drinking water is delivered to cattle tanks through a series of pipelines fed by solar wells and windmills. The tanks have corrugated escape ramps for wildlife that fall in the tank.

Although the harvesting of hay is timed to avoid nesting and fawning seasons, Chris takes extra precautions to protect wildlife by attaching a flush bar to his hay mower. He also provides an escape route for rabbits and birds by not initially cutting a hayfield's perimeter. This allows wildlife the option of not crossing barren cut areas to reach cover or adjacent uncut fields.

Crop rotations, no-till practices, and cover crops are used on Trumler Ranch's irrigated and dryland crop fields. Cover crops of rye and turnips are grown each fall to build the soil's organic matter. This practice also reduces the need for commercial fertilizers and prevents nitrates from leaching into groundwater. Regular soil sampling of each field also prevents over-application of fertilizer.

Chris reduced his ranch's water usage and eliminated runoff concerns by updating to a pivot and sub-surface drip irrigation system. He planted the corners of his pivot irrigated field with pollinator-friendly vegetation. In addition to helping pollinators, the additional ground cover and prevalence of insects provides more quality bird habitat.

Among his many volunteer and outreach activities, Chris mentors youth pheasant hunters on the value of having a conservation ethic. On and off the ranch, Chris is living the better life that his immigrant grandfather envisioned decades ago.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

NEW ENGLAND

JONES FAMILY FARMS AND WINERY

▶ Watch video of Jones Family Farms and Winery

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

NEW ENGLAND FORESTRY FOUNDATION

FARM CREDIT EAST

Like the four generations who have worked its fields and forests before him, Terry Jones has a deep respect for the landscape of Jones Family Farms and Winery.

Terry credits his conservation ethic to working alongside his father and grandfather as a child. An avid gardener in his teens, he sold vegetables on a card table to families coming to their farm to buy raw milk. The proceeds from his produce sales helped pay for his tuition at the University of New Hampshire, where he met his wife, Jean.

Over the next 54 years, they grew the former dairy farm to more than 500 acres. Pumpkins, strawberries, blueberries, vegetables, and Christmas trees took the place of cows. Twenty years ago, their son Jamie developed an award-winning vineyard and winery on the farm. This scenic spot in rural Fairfield County provides a "micro-Vermont" getaway for the one million residents who live within a 20-mile radius.

The farm's motto, "Be good to the land and the land will be good to you," is attributed to Terry's great-great grandfather, Philip James Jones. Terry has spent his life honoring this credo by adopting conservation practices that have produced higher-quality crops while benefitting the environment. He says better yields are just a dividend of properly caring for the land.

Conservation leadership has run in the family. Terry's grandfather encouraged his father to fence off steep slopes and rocky pastures to plant trees. These areas have since produced more than five rotations of Christmas trees, while others are in timber production of Tulip Poplar and Eastern White Pine. Terry's father also experimented with erosion control by interseeding a cover crop of winter rye into unharvested corn fields 75 years ago.

Other steep, rocky slopes where mowing is unsafe were treated with low rates of herbicides to suppress weeds. The result was a diverse mix of herbaceous flowering plants that provide habitat for pollinators and other beneficial insects, while stabilizing soils. Native wildflowers flourish in the soils among the pines, and along old stone walls, to encourage bee and butterfly populations.

Another example of adopting the best available science to improve ecological sustainability was their early adoption of crop rotation and cover crops to replace soil fumigation where strawberries are grown. Soil health improved, common root diseases were suppressed, and strawberry plants lasted longer. Thousands of tons of wood chips are composted to amend the soils around berries and Christmas trees.

The Jones family also found success in planting pumpkin seeds into rye straw. A winter cover crop of rye grows to about six feet high in the spring. After crimping the rye with a roller, pumpkins are seeded directly into the flattened rye straw versus a tilled field. The pumpkin roots feed organically from the decaying straw, which also protects the topsoil from erosion from heavy rains and keeps the pumpkins clean.

Each generation of the Jones family has, as Terry says, "tried to leave the wood pile a little higher than they found it." Jones Family Farms is a frequent host of school tours and research trials. Terry has advocated for farmland preservation and environmental causes by chairing Connecticut's Working Lands Alliance, a project of American Farmland Trust. He also led local efforts that protected over 1,000 acres of farmland and forests, and secured 30 miles of public recreational paths throughout Shelton.

Since childhood, Terry has felt proud that his family was presented a National Gimbel Award from Eleanor Roosevelt in 1942. He hopes the 2023 Leopold Conservation Award will inspire and instill pride in future generations of the family.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

NEW MEXICO

TOM AND MIMI SIDWELL

▶ Watch video of Tom and Mimi Sidwell

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts

NMCEWL

QUIVIRA COALITION

NEW MEXICO FARM & LIVESTOCK BUREAU

One statistic encapsulates Tom and Mimi Sidwell's conservation success: It used to take 58 acres of grass to annually feed a cow at JX Ranch, but now takes just 27 acres. It's the result of a willingness to manage land differently with rotational grazing practices.

Over the course of 20 years, the Sidwells transformed an arid landscape at JX Ranch that was over-grazed and over-run by invasive species. They first bulldozed mesquite trees and juniper shrubs, and later installed fencing and water distribution to create 30 pastures.

When cattle only graze a pasture for three to five days, the grass is then given more time to recover between each grazing. Rather than reseeding their pastures, natural grasses began regrowing on once bare soils. More ground cover led to better water infiltration, less erosion, and improved soil health and forage production.

Rotational grazing created a resilient ecosystem that is better able to retain moisture and mitigate drought in a region that typically receives less than 16 inches of annual rainfall. More living plants on the ground pull more carbon from the atmosphere and stores three to four tons of carbon per acre.

Although the Sidwells graze their cattle year-round, the forage assessments they conduct each fall allow them to rate each pasture's production and estimate the next year's stocking rates.

The ability to graze far-flung corners of JX Ranch's 7,000 acres is made possible by a series of six wells that pump drinking water for cattle. Solar pumps move water through 10 miles of pipeline, and storage tanks can hold about 100,000 gallons of water. Water evaporation is prevented by covering storage tanks and placing black plastic shade balls in drinking tanks.

Improved forage and water resources for cattle also provide unmeasured benefits for wildlife including quail, turkey, antelope, and elk.

JX Ranch in Quay County sits between 4,300 to 5,000 feet in elevation. The Caprock escarpment found in eastern New Mexico features rolling terrain and steep canyons. The Sidwells chose a breed of cattle to fit these rugged conditions. They breed Angus with Spanish Creole cattle known for being tough and healthy, but smaller in stature.

A guest ranching enterprise and direct marketing their beef to customers provide buffers against sometimes volatile beef prices. This allows the Sidwells to maximize income earned from the ranch so they don't have to raise more cattle to the detriment of the land.

Tom Sidwell grew up on a small ranch and began ranching on his own elsewhere in New Mexico and Nebraska, before buying JX Ranch. He's dedicated his life to improving the health of the land and has served in numerous civic and governmental roles. JX Ranch often hosts research trials and tours, and Tom regularly shares his knowledge and experience with other ranchers.

Tom is willing to share them with others to show how conservation leads to improved profitability. If financial statements and stocking rates don't convince you, satellite imagery shows JX Ranch's healthy land conditions in dramatic contrast to neighboring landscapes.

LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD®
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

NEW YORK

DYGERT FARMS

▶ Watch video of Dygert 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

There's a rich heritage of sustainability deeply rooted in the soil at Dygert Farms.

Like 12 generations before him, Robby Dygert farms with an eye to the future. He celebrates the farm's tricentennial this year with his wife Shannon, and their children: Dylan, Olivia, Tucker, and Cassidy.

The couple purchased his family's farm and their first 65 Holstein cows shortly after getting married in 2009. The farm has since grown to a milking herd of 240 cows and 650 acres of owned and rented land.

Robby and Shannon are the latest in a long line of Dygerts who protect this dairy farm's soil and water. When Dygert Farms' first conservation plan was written in 1962 it provided a blueprint for crop rotations, contour strips, tile drainage, and pasture renovation. More recently, Robby and Shannon sought the support of the Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District to protect water quality with modern improvements to the farm's infrastructure.

Through participation in New York's Agricultural Environmental Management program, the Dygerts received financial assistance to construct a manure storage facility and covered laneway between their barnyards.

They also installed a system that collects leachate from their silage bunk silos. While most of leachate is applied to crop fields, a vegetative filter strip captures any that spills over during heavy rains. Likewise, a grassed diversion ditch is situated uphill from the barnyard to divert clean water away during rains.

Dygert Farms works with a team of professionals to manage their soil, water, and livestock manure to maximize crop yields while protecting ground water supplies. A custom manure applicator applies the manure's nutrients to crop fields in accordance with the farm's Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan. A planner helps the Dygerts regularly update the plan to reflect the changes in crop rotations, livestock numbers, planned new practices, and seasonal weather conditions. All wash water from their milkhouse and milking parlor is collected and stored to be later applied to fields.

Strip-cropping, which acts as a filter strip within fields, has been a staple at Dygert Farms for decades. Five years of hay, followed by four years of corn is their preferred crop rotation. Minimal tillage is used on a few fields, but the majority are managed with a no-till system to increase soil fertility, retain moisture, and prevent runoff. To achieve similar conservation goals, the Dygerts are growing cover crops of rye on 50 acres.

Sometimes sustainability in agriculture can mean simple economic survival. The Dygerts could have given up dairy farming when they lost a supplier to sell their milk to. Instead, they adapted to dairy's ever-fluctuating market and business climate by retooling in a non-conventional way. They made the move to make, process, and sell their own dairy products.

Dygert Farms Creamery's processing plant opened in 2021. Their milk is sold in both plastic packaging and glass bottles in grocery stores and delivered to the front doors of area homes. It's a modern approach to dairy farming with a vintage twist.

A unique mix of new and old is to be expected at Dygert Farms. Its farmhouse sits on the original 50 acres that was deeded to the Dygert family back in 1723 from the Queen of England. Its owners are young farmers using conservation practices to benefit the environment and their bottom line.

Leopold Conservation Award® Presented by Sand County Foundation

NORTH DAKOTA

BARTHOLOMAY KATTLE KOMPANY

▶ Watch video of Bartholomay Kattle Kompany

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

North Dakota Grazing Lands Coalition

North Dakota Stockmen's Association

North Dakota Association of Soil Conservation Districts

For more than a century, farming and ranching atop an aquifer has provided unique benefits and challenges for the Bartholomay family.

They raise cattle and grow crops in the wet and sandy Sheyenne Delta of the Red River Valley, where a high water table provides favorable soil conditions even when the rest of North Dakota is suffering from drought. However, the water table's proximity to the Bartholomay's fields and pastures means they take extra precaution to prevent runoff that could pollute the aquifer below.

Bartholomay Kattle Kompany is a partnership formed in 2019 between Keith and Sandi Bartholomay, their son Karl and his wife Becca. Prior to that, Keith and his brother Kent owned K&K Bartholomay Farms, a continuation of the farm their parents Joe and Marian started.

The Bartholomays manage more than 4,000 acres of cropland, native range, river bottoms, and pastures at multiple locations. They grow corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, and sunflowers, and raise a herd of 280 cow-calf pairs.

For decades the Bartholomays have looked for ways to improve the resilience of their landscape and bottom line. Chief among them has been using no-till farming practices on most of their cropland to enhance the soil's productivity and manage its moisture level. An increased amount of organic matter in the soil improves its ability to infiltrate water.

They interseed their cornfields with a cover crop mix of barley rye, triticale, turnips, radishes, kale, field peas, and crimson clover, to reduce erosion and improve soil health. Cover crops and crop residue are used for cattle grazing during the fall and winter, which recycles the nutrients from manure on their fields.

The management of nutrients and manure was key factor in the Bartholomays decision to construct a hoop barn. When their cattle are not out on pasture, they need a place to house them. An open feedlot would be too wet and muddy to manage run-off. The hoop barn's design diverts rainwater and stores manure until it can be applied as fertilizer on cropland. The manure's nutrient levels are tested so they know exactly what they are applying to their soil prior to seeding crops. This system has saved thousands in fertilizer expenses, and keeps sandy soils in place during times of high winds.

The Bartholomays employ a rotational grazing system in which their cows are split into four herds and rotated to fresh pasture every week to 10 days. All pastures receive at least 100 days of rest after being grazed. Grazing and the stomping of cattle hooves also help manage invasive Leafy spurge, Canada thistle, and Russian olive and cottonwood trees.

Miles of tree rows have been planted to provide cattle with protection from harsh weather conditions. The trees also refresh the air quality while serving as habitat and a food source for wildlife. The nearly 300 acres of restored tall grass prairie at Bartholomay Kattle Kompany has reestablished habitat for deer, fox, gamebirds, and beneficial insects and pollinators.

While the name on their farm sign has changed over time, the conservation ethic of its owners has not. Through innovation and persistence, the Bartholomays have adopted conservation practices that benefit the land, water, and wildlife on a unique North Dakota landscape.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

OKLAHOMA

MARTY WILLIAMS

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust · Noble Research Institute · Oklahoma Department of Agriculture · ITC A Fortis Company · USDA United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service · Oklahoma Conservation Commission Our Land • Our Heritage • Our Future

Marty Williams' journey has long been intertwined with his land ethic.

Growing up in Noble County, his father instilled in him the importance of sustainable agriculture. Marty's academic pursuits in plant and soil science at Oklahoma State University further fueled his desire to make a difference as a sixth-generation farmer. His upbringing and education taught him that soil rich in biodiversity is good for both crops and a balanced ecosystem.

Upon graduating, Marty and his wife Crystal rented land and equipment from his father and formed Frontier Farms. Early on, Marty made the bold and strategic choice to embrace no-till farming practices while growing a rotation of wheat, corn, soybeans, and grain sorghum.

The traditional practice of tilling soil disrupts soil structure, exposes it to erosion, and releases carbon. Over time he coupled no-till with growing cover crops to further revitalize the soil. Instead of leaving the soil bare between traditional cash crops, the presence of cover crops like cow peas, oats, and canola provides a protective blanket to the soil that retains moisture and prevents erosion, while enriching it with organic matter.

Marty's commitment to enhancing soil health goes beyond traditional measures. His envisions a future where soil teems with life, from the largest worms to the smallest microbes each playing its role in a nutrient cycle. This belief has led him to convert marginal farmland back to its indigenous grassy state.

Beef cattle are grazed at Frontier Farms. After Crystal saw an opportunity to begin selling beef directly to customers, she headed up that effort and grew it into an important diversified revenue stream - further proof that innovation and adaptability are more than just buzzwords for the Williamses.

One achievement that stands out at Frontier Farms is the conversion of 320 acres of farmland into a protected wetland. By collaborating with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to reestablish native flora, the wetland provides habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife. This transformation reveals Marty's understanding that conservation is not just about preserving, but regenerating nature to its most functional form.

Marty's integration of state-of-the-art precision agriculture technology allows him to assess plant health in real time and apply nutrients with incredible accuracy, ensuring that crops receive just what they need and nothing more. His farming practices and strategies have piqued the interest of agricultural experts from as far away as China.

From the start of his career in agriculture, Marty's leadership was evident. He has served notable stints with the Noble County Conseravation District Board and the Oklahoma Farm Bureau. He donates his land, equipment, and time to research with Oklahoma State University's Department of Soil Sciences where he mentors the next generation of agriculturalists.

Marty also serves as a strategic advisor for the Gulch Foundation's Rainmaker Farm, which documents the benefits of implementing regenerative practices on 160 acres of diverse crops, rotationally grazed pastures, and pollinator gardens.

Perhaps what's most telling about his true nature is the unique support group he helped form for fellow farmers and ranchers dealing with the fiscal and mental struggles caused by turbulent commodity markets and unpredictable weather.

Marty admits his own path has not been without challenges, yet he has positively shaped the contours of Oklahoma's landscape with his farming practices while touching countless lives through his teachings, guidance, and a commitment to better his community.

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PENNSYLVANIA

MYERS FAMILY FARM

▶ Watch video of Myers Family Farm

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

The Heinz Endowments
Howard Heinz Endowment
Vira I. Heinz Endowment

Farm Credit Horizon

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Joel Myers has a passion for agricultural conservation, an ability to bring people together, and a willingness to teach by example.

As the driving force behind the creation of the Pennsylvania No-Till Alliance he was adamant that it be a farmer-led organization committed to promoting soil health practices. He even hosted its first meeting in a church next to Myers Family Farm.

Just as the Alliance remains a thriving force in the Keystone State, Joel is a highly respected authority and strong advocate for conservation practices, including no-till, cover cropping, and planting green.

Some credit Joel's practical experience and outreach efforts as a major reason for the increased use of conservation practices in Pennsylvania. The amount of farmland acres managed with no-till rose from 20 percent in 2000 to about 70 percent today. Likewise, cover crops are now grown on 40 percent of planted acres.

Joel credits his success as a conservation practitioner and proponent to what he learned decades ago. As a boy he witnessed washouts and gullies plaguing the fields on the farm his father bought in 1946. With his brother Don, he still owns and operates Myers Family Farm where he planted 75 acres of oats and soybeans last spring.

After earning bachelor's and master's degrees in agronomy, he began his career as a soil conservationist in 1967 by writing conservation plans and providing other technical assistance to farmers. He rose through the ranks to district conservationist before being named Pennsylvania's State Agronomist in the 1980s.

He gained credibility among farmers by putting emerging conservation practices to work on his own farmland. In the 1960s and 70s he experimented with contour farming, field borders, reduced tillage, and crop rotations aimed at preventing soil erosion, improving water quality, and sequestering carbon.

In the 1980s Joel was intrigued that some dairy farmers were on the cutting edge of no-till practices. He knew he had to get onboard, so he bought a no-till planter at an auction and made modifications to it. Eventually he had five different no-till planters and drills which gave him an opportunity to learn, and later demonstrate, their differences to other farmers both one-on-one and at field events.

Retirement from his day job didn't slow down Joel's educational and outreach efforts. Myers Family Farm still hosts many research trials, workshops, and field days for farmers, conservation professionals, research scientists, local FFA members, Penn State University students, and international groups.

What farm visitors see is how a no-till system coupled with extensive use of cover crops and sound crop rotations can greatly reduce soil losses, even on slopes up to 10 percent. Myers Family Farm's rolling topography features deep soils in some areas, and ridge tops with exposed rock outcrops in others. This showcase of conservation practices extends beyond the cropland to include forest and stream habitat restorations that improve wildlife and fish habitat.

Joel predicts 2024 will be the last year he plants crops at Myers Family Farm before renting the land to a similarly conservation-minded farmer. One thing is certain. Before a single seed is planted this spring, Joel's years of stewardship will be felt across his land and beyond.

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SOUTH DAKOTA

SLOVEK RANCH

▶ **Watch video of Slovek Ranch**

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

South Dakota Cattlemen's Association

South Dakota Grassland Coalition

Bill Slovek inherited more than some rolling acres of prairie from his father Earl. He also inherited his legacy of careful land stewardship.

Today, Bill is the primary land manager of Slovek Ranch's nearly 26,000 acres of grazing lands alongside his wife, Pennie, and the families of their adult children: Bo, Brock, and Belinda.

Bill considers himself fortunate to manage land that was not worn out by his predecessors. Although his father didn't have today's water and infrastructure resources at his disposal, he did have the foresight to not overgraze the ranch.

His father also kept an open mind after Bill graduated from college, moved home, and began buying land, developing water infrastructure, and tearing out old fencing.

By 2001 Bill was installing cross fencing to divide pastures and experiment with rotational grazing. He kept a close eye on the changes that longer rest times and more pasture rotations brought the grass and soil. Slowly but surely, he noticed better infiltration of rainwater, less erosion, and healthier grasslands.

After seeing the initial results of his new grazing strategy, Bill developed more pastures and water infrastructure. Slovek Ranch now has 60 pastures and three herds moving across it, so at any given time 57 of their pastures are at rest.

A more intensive grazing rotation has resulted in pounds of forage continuing to increase on every pasture. Those gains are achieved by having adequate water distribution on the landscape to evenly spread out grazing and decrease unnecessary land disturbance. With assistance from the NRCS, the Sloveks installed almost 30 miles of water pipelines and 120 tire tanks.

Leaving behind enough of this year's grass growth provides the necessary shade, protection, and moisture to give next year's grass growth an advantage. Slovek Ranch's grazing system has produced an increase in the diversity of plant species across the landscape. Not overgrazing also provides feed and habitat for wildlife and threatened grassland birds and pollinators.

Over the years, the intrinsic value and uniqueness of intact grasslands motivated Bill to become a dedicated student of the land in tandem with growing his family's cattle business. To make room for the next generation, the Sloveks recently purchased a second ranch near Kadoka, where Brock and his wife, Ashley, raise 400 beef cows. The new ranch also features intact native grasslands, interspersed with badlands.

Slovek Ranch is a regular host of tours centered around grazing management, and its efforts have earned several conservation and beef industry accolades. Much of this is thanks to Bill's ability to pay close attention to what worked, and maybe more importantly what didn't. Bill has evolved into a conservationist whose years of careful observation, mimic an approach resembling Aldo Leopold's own way of studying soil, plants, wildlife, and people's role on the landscape.

Bill's ability to adapt and innovate has produced an improved landscape and conservation ethic that he can hand down to his children.

Leopold Conservation Award®
Presented by Sand County Foundation

TEXAS

BROWN RANCH

▶ Watch video of Brown Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

Lee and Ramona Bass

Mark and Cheryl Brown looked at land as an investment before they became invested in their land. Restoring native prairie has become a labor of love for the Browns, who purchased 80 acres of worn-out hay fields and overgrazed pastures in 2000.

Located in Fayette County, the restored Blackland Prairie found on Brown Ranch has nearly disappeared in Texas. The ranch is located between Houston, San Antonio, and Austin, where a growing human population leads to shrinking parcel sizes and greater fragmentation of ecosystems.

The Browns saw the opportunity to do something special with their land. Grazing was temporarily ceased to let the pastures rest. They began the long and difficult processes of removing invasive Eastern Red Cedars and reseeding clay soils with native tallgrasses and wildflowers. Deep-rooted warm-season grasses sequester carbon in their root mass, while increasing water infiltration and reducing soil erosion. The flowering forbs provide nectar to butterflies on their annual southern migration.

The Browns periodically till areas to promote forb growth. A prescribed burning program removes undesirable grasses while stimulating growth of native milkweed critical for Monarch butterflies.

Seeing the impact of their stewardship inspired the Browns to buy another 120 acres to protect, restore and enhance the diversity and health of the native plant community. They leased nearby parcels that they were unable to purchase. Surveys conducted by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department have documented more than 250 species of native plants on parcels owned by the Browns.

Brown Ranch became an example of what's possible in a rapidly fragmenting state when landowners utilize the local, state, and federal tools available to them. Mike and Cheryl's conservation efforts earned them a Lone Star Land Steward Ecoregion Award (representing the Blackland Prairie ecoregion) in 2017.

Since then, their impact has only grown. They experiment with rotational and patch burn grazing strategies, provide supplemental feed to white-tailed deer, and maintain bluebird houses.

The Browns developed a management plan more than 15 years ago to attract grassland birds whose breeding populations have been declining due to habitat loss. Annual songbird surveys frequently observe birds taking cover in the tallgrass prairie.

While Brown Ranch might have started as a passion project, its owners have stretched their conservation ethic far beyond their ranch gates. The Browns are leaders in the Fayette Prairie Chapter of the Native Prairie Association of Texas and the South Central Texas Prescribed Burn Cooperative.

The diversity of Brown Ranch's soil types and plant communities is matched by the diversity of outreach events the Browns have helped plan and host. They include webinars and field days on brush control, grazing management, pollinators, prescribed burning techniques, and cost share incentive programs. The Browns realize cooperative efforts among owners of relatively small parcels of land is the key to achieving landscape-scale conservation.

By restoring the native ecosystem on their land, providing technical guidance to their peers, and becoming regional conservation leaders, the Browns are doing their part to protect one of the most imperiled ecosystems, the grasslands of North America. They are achieving all of this with the methods that Aldo Leopold considered the basics of wildlife management: the axe, cow, plow, and fire.

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UTAH

BENNION RANCH

▶ Watch video of Bennion Ranch

Presented in Partnership with

American Farmland Trust

Utah Farm Bureau Federation

Western AgCredit

Utah Cattlemen's Association — Heart of the West

For Elizabeth Mitchell, the land at Bennion Ranch is an extension of herself. The fifth-generation cattle rancher spent her youth on her family's ranch located along the Vernon Creek in Utah's West Desert.

When Elizabeth and Alan, and their five children, took the reins of the 2080-acre ranch in 2001 they wanted to improve its cattle pastures and wildlife habitat.

The Mitchell's first task was rebuilding worn out fencing. Without control of their cattle's movements, any conservation efforts would be stymied. They reconstructed 14 miles of fencing during their first five years, and have since doubled that amount. The early years also included installing two miles of waterlines and troughs with wildlife-friendly ramps.

The Mitchells have allotments to graze their cattle on thousands of acres of U.S. Forest Service lands that surround Bennion Ranch. They began their rangeland rejuvenation there in 2007 by removing Pinyon-juniper trees, thinning sagebrush, and reseeding 300 acres of pastures with multi-species of native grasses. This initial effort led to more than a dozen subsequent habitat improvement projects covering more than 18,000 acres, including all their private land.

Although Pinyon-juniper trees notoriously compete with grass for moisture, some groves of the trees were allowed to remain to provide shelter for cattle and wildlife. The Mitchells continue to interseed drought-resistant native grasses into their pastures.

When the Mitchells got involved with a local group working to conserve habitat for the greater sage-grouse, they brought thoughtful landowner and cattle rancher perspectives to the effort. With financial and technical assistance from a variety of organizations who rallied around the Sage Grouse Initiative, the Mitchells implemented a wildlife and livestock habitat conservation plan over a five-year span.

The Mitchell family helped identify leks of the elusive birds that are native to the area around the Sheeprock Mountains. To protect the birds from mowing equipment, Alan built a hydraulic flushing bar system that mounts to a tractor's front-end loader.

The Mitchells have improved water quality and wildlife habitat with help from Beaver Dam Analogues, man-made structures that mimic the form and function of natural beaver dams. Located at various spots along Vernon Creek, which runs through Bennion Ranch, the structures filter silt from the water and create small ponds for migrating ducks.

To improve soil health and feed efficiency, the Mitchells grow cover crops within a crop rotation system on their alfalfa fields. A mix of grain, clover, radish, turnip, collards, and kale provides forage while naturally suppressing weeds and reducing the need for commercial fertilizers. Each fall the hay fields are part of the ranch's rotational grazing system. The Mitchells raise crossbred Wagyu/Angus cattle and direct market their beef to customers.

Alan has served on the boards of the Rush Valley Water Conservancy District, Vernon Irrigation District, and Utah Crop Improvement Association. Elizabeth organized a cooperative project between ranchers and the U.S. Forest Service that improved water and grazing distribution.

Bennion Ranch hosts a variety of projects and events that bring guests to its remote location, including the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources' Dedicated Hunter Program. This service-based hunting program provides hunters with opportunities to contribute time to wildlife-related service projects. They also learn about the conservation ethic that drives landowners like the Mitchells.

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NOLL'S DAIRY FARM

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Aldo Leopold must have had Noll's Dairy Farm in mind when he wrote "the landscape of any farm is the owner's portrait of himself." Perched high above the Mississippi River on Wisconsin's western bank, it's a masterpiece for all to admire.

Mark, Curtis, and Scott Noll and their families have long appreciated and enjoyed the natural resources in their care. Their farm consists of 400 acres of contoured corn, soybean, and hay fields managed in concert with 450 acres of adjacent forests, oak savannas, and prairies that provide timber production and wildlife habitat.

Nothing showcases their commitment to conservation like their restoration of a dry bluff prairie remnant. These ecologically rare landforms, nicknamed goat prairies, are sparsely found along the Mississippi River bluffs of western Wisconsin. The Nolls were inspired to act after learning of their significance in the 1990s.

With sweat equity from family and friends, and little monetary assistance from state or federal programs, they removed undesirable trees and brush, and conducted prescribed burns. Today they actively manage one of the largest dry bluff prairie remnants in Buffalo County.

Through this process they also restored oak savannas, which is notable because prairies and oak savannas are among the most threatened natural communities in Wisconsin, currently occupying less than one percent of their historic range. Noll's Dairy Farm is located along a winding road that leads to a popular overlook of the Mississippi River. A roadside sign informs motorists of the rare ecosystem that was brought back from the brink.

Also noticeable from the road is the contour strip cropping system that divides the farm into 119 fields. This scenic yet practical configuration, coupled with a no-till system, helps prevent soil erosion. The Nolls also plant winter rye, turnips, and tillage radishes as cover crops to improve soil health and prevent erosion.

Given their location hundreds of feet above the Mississippi River, the Nolls understand the importance of keeping soils in place and away from surface and ground waters. Since 1969 they have installed more than 20 earthen dams and erosion control structures to prevent the formation of gullies. Manure from the Noll's dairy cows is kept in a storage facility before its nutrients can be spread as fertilizer on fields.

Construction of the manure storage was largely financed with revenues from selectively harvesting mature timber on the farm. Since drafting their first timber harvest management plan in 1997 the Nolls have continuously improved timber stands for future generations, and enhanced wildlife and pollinator habitat.

The Nolls enrolled 735 acres in a cooperative effort with Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources in 2014 that manages deer populations at levels that support hunting and regeneration of woodlands. The Nolls have since attributed a reduction in crop damage to giving deer a choice of habitats due to dozens of different forestry projects underway.

The family annually hosts a hunter education course to ensure a conservation ethic is instilled into youth. By hosting tours for schools and conservation organizations, the Nolls show others what dry bluff prairies, oak savannas, and a strong land ethic look like.

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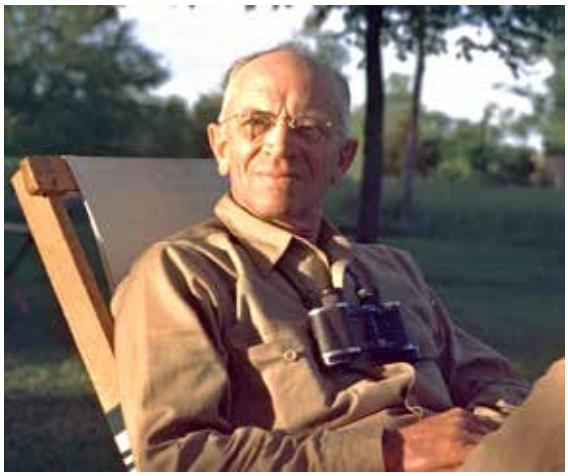

"Conservation can accomplish its objectives only when it springs from an impelling conviction on the part of private landowners."

– 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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