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Photo from the 2018 LASA field day. RTK demo with strip till and planter. Photo by Joanna Guza



THE
AG STEWARD
NEWS

OUR VISION: A community where farmers and friends of agriculture work together to protect and improve our water quality and environment.

Earning trust means taking action

By Mary Hookham for LASA

Don Niles posed a challenge to the 100 farmers and others gathered at the Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance's annual meeting Feb. 28 in Darlington, Wis.

"Take a leap of faith and admit some responsibility in environmental issues, and then take steps to fix it," he said.

Drawing from his own experience leading a farmer-led watershed conservation group in northeastern Wisconsin, Niles said the farming community needs to be transparent and proactive in order to maintain the trust of the general public.

"Earning trust does not mean only talking; it requires doing things and actually taking action," he said.

Niles, who was the keynote speaker at the LASA meeting, is a veterinarian and owner of Dairy Dreams farm in Kewaunee County. The fundamental purpose of his group, Peninsula Pride Farms, is similar to that of LASA – helping farmers continuously improve on practices that protect the environment. Ground water quality is a top priority for both groups.

Niles encouraged the LASA members to strive to keep well water safe and to reconnect

with customers who have lost touch with agriculture.

"Don't take for granted that people know what we're doing," he said. "Communicate. Be honest. Be willing to talk and own your share of the problems."

Then and now

Niles compared the automobile and agriculture industries of 50 years ago and today to illustrate how far technology has progressed. Safety and efficiency are top priorities in both industries, so methods and practices have evolved. But while the general

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public understands and accepts changes in automobiles, most people don't understand or accept why farming is changing.

LASA chairman Jim Winn got the point.

"I think his comparison of the automobile industry and agriculture ... was very much on point," Winn said. "Both have made huge advancements in efficiency and technology. We can't and shouldn't farm like we did 50 years ago any more than we should drive environmentally inferior transportation (from) 50 years ago."

The first wave of agriculture, Niles said, happened when immigrants arrived and brought cows with them. These people also carried with them pride in their cattle and animal husbandry techniques.

"They were very good cow people," Niles said.

In the 1980s, the second wave arrived when farmers were learning to be comfortable with machinery on their farms, and mechanization grew.

"Some of these people were probably more comfortable with machinery and equipment than they were with other people or their cows," Niles said.

The turn of the century marked the beginning stages of the third wave of agriculture, Niles said. Farmers at this time enjoyed hiring employees for farm work, which is also when concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) came into existence. Farms kept 800 or more cows on site.

Reconnecting with customers

Over the years, a disconnect between farmers and others grew. Today, the 1 percent of people who are still farming have mostly lost touch with the other 99 percent of the population.

So, the public struggles to trust farmers while farmers struggle to stay in business without that trust.

"As farmers, we need to reconnect with the people around us, understand their expectations of us and those we have for ourselves, and think about why we do what we do and how we do it," Niles said.

The public's perception of agriculture includes opinions about how farmers are pushing their cows too hard, but farmers have worked hard to improve genetics, breeding programs, cow comfort, ration-balancing, milking technology and the lifestyle of future



Don Niles speaking at LASA's annual meeting.
Photo by Joanna Guza

generations, Niles said.

Highly relatable farmers make up the current wave of agriculture, he said. These farmers engage with the non-farming public on various issues, such as ethics and farm responsibilities. They are willing to continuously look at their actions to assess how they are perceived by others and adjust as needed.

Winn said LASA is up to the challenge Niles posed.

"We need to continue to improve upon the environmentally friendly advancements agriculture has made," Winn said. "Together with our friends and neighbors in other industries, we can improve practices to ensure good quality water and a healthy environment."

LASA's 2018 results

By Paige Frautschy, The Nature Conservancy



Each year, LASA members complete a survey about conservation practices on their farms. Personal information is kept confidential, and an aggregate summary

is available to the public.

In 2018, members were asked about 14 practices, including cover crops, no till, reduced tillage and nutrient stewardship. Using Upper Mississippi River Basin data from the USDA's Conservation Effects Assessment Project, LASA members documented an estimated reduction of 42,648 pounds of phosphorous and 13,285 pounds of nitrogen. These figures include:

- 4,796 acres of cover crops, resulting in a reduction of 3,741 pounds of phosphorous and 13,285 pounds of nitrogen.
- 9,768 acres of conservation tillage (vertical till, strip till), resulting in a reduction of 8,694 pounds of phosphorous.
- 12,537 acres of no-till farming, resulting in a reduction of 30,214 pounds of phosphorous.

The change in acres and practices over time will be used to show LASA's progress.

Paige Frautschy works for the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and assists LASA through funding from Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative.

LASA member survey

LASA requests members take a brief survey to understand what conservation practices are being done on the land. This survey will help LASA get a better idea of what metrics can best capture desired conservation outcomes. The 2019 survey will be launched in August, and we will be calling, texting and bothering you until we are at 100 percent.

To complete the survey, go to lafayetteagstewardship.org/about.

If you have any questions, email lafayetteagstewardship@gmail.com.

LASA supports scientific well study

By Jim Winn, LASA chairman



Science and farming go hand in hand.

Science helps keep the cows healthy, the soil

fertile and the food we produce safe.

Science also measures a farm's impact on the natural resources entrusted to us. We define how we are doing and how we can continuously improve.

This is why farmers in southwestern Wisconsin support a study of groundwater quality in our rural communities. The research, which began in November with well sampling, aims to define the scope of water quality issues, sources and risks in Grant, Iowa and Lafayette counties.

LASA has been involved in what's

called the Southwest Wisconsin Groundwater and Geology (SWIGG) study from its early stages. LASA is contributing \$7,000, about half of Lafayette County's portion of funding.

Ensuring water quality is a shared community responsibility. Farmers, of course, play an important role given our presence on the land. The existence of LASA, including our support of the study, demonstrate agriculture's commitment.

LASA's work is grounded in science, innovation and collaboration. We are identifying and promoting practices that are sustainable environmentally and economically.

We look forward to taking science-grounded guidance from the water study as we move forward.

Sincerely, Jim

Southwestern Wisconsin Groundwater Geology study results

Researchers are studying the quality of drinking water in wells in Grant, Iowa and Lafayette counties.

Nov. 9-10 samples from 301 randomly sampled wells:

42% considered unsafe due to nitrate, total coliform and/or E. coli:

- 34% total coliform
- 4% E. coli
- 16% nitrates above the health standard

April 12-13 samples from 539 randomly selected wells:

27% considered unsafe due to nitrate, total coliform and/or E. coli

- 16% total coliform
- 2% E. coli
- 15% nitrates above health standard

What's next?

The next steps will include additional biological testing of selected wells to distinguish human vs. livestock microorganisms. The research team will also carry out geologic studies and analyze well construction practices, with the goal of determining correlations between water quality, geology and well construction.

Cost-share program; Enroll by Nov. 15

Cover crops are grasses, brassicas, legumes, small grains or other crops grown between regular grain crop production periods for the purpose of protecting and improving the soil.

In this region of Wisconsin, a significant amount of the tillable acres have sufficient slope and runoff potential to be at risk for erosion if not adequately protected. Eroding soil particles not only fill in wetlands and streams, but they also carry soil bound phosphorus to surface water.

Cover crops have a high potential to reduce phosphorus loss on fields being harvested as corn silage with manure incorporated in the late summer or fall. Research has shown that fields with winter cover incorporated in the spring have 55 percent less water runoff and 50 percent less soil loss annually than fields with no winter cover.

LASA is proud to offer farmers in Lafayette County an incentive program to encourage conservation:

- Farmer must be a LASA member
- Cover Crops - \$20 per acre up to 50-acre maximum
- 4-R Nutrient Stewardship - Up to \$20/acre, 50 acres max, \$200 max for manure and tissue sampling
- No-till/Reduced Tillage - \$20 per acre up to 50 acres, increases in second and third year
- All type and size farms are encouraged to enroll
- Enroll no later than Nov. 15

Download the enrollment form at

lafayetteagstewardship.org/cost-share

Field Day - Aug. 15

Our summer field day is fast approaching! It will be from 11:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. at UW-Platteville's Pioneer Farm.

- Soil pit and soil health discussions
- LASA member updates
- Assessing management impacts on surface run-off: Rainfall simulator demo and on-farm trial results
- Ground water 101: Monitoring and infrastructure



5741 Springbrook Rd
South Wayne, WI 53587

LASA shares our mission at public meetings

One way for LASA to engage government and the public is by participating in government hearings and meetings. While it can be daunting to speak in this setting, sharing information about our work gives lawmakers input from the very people their decisions impact. LASA gave presentations at the following events:

- April 23: Joint Committee on Agriculture, Revenue and Financial Institutions hearing at the state Capitol
- May 8: Water Task Force at the Grant County Fairgrounds
- June 25: Wisconsin Natural Resources Board in Barneveld

