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# 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.

*More than 80 people attended LASA's Conference & Annual Meeting Feb. 25.*

## **Progress & goals:** Shared learning drives LASA forward on water quality

By Mary Hookham for LASA

The power of water and soil conservation comes from connecting with others who have the same goals. That's the message Jim Winn, president of Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance, hopes to continue sharing.

"I can see, down the road, a lot of collaboration going on with other watershed groups," Winn said. "And that's where we're going to get the real value."

Winn, along with his members and supporters, is proud of the accomplishments of the farmer-led watershed conservation group in southwestern Wisconsin. He highlighted some of LASA's progress on Feb. 25 at its an-

nual meeting:

- Membership increase from 19 to 24 farms.
- Hosting of a field and annual meeting.
- Expansion of the cost-share program to include no-till/reduced tillage and 4-R nutrient stewardship in addition to cover crops.
- Completion of the group's second annual member conservation practice survey.
- Increased communication with members and the public.
- Continued partnerships and col-

laboration on the Southwest Wisconsin Groundwater and Geology (SWIGG) study and with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection on a local Resource Conservation Partnership Program.

Dr. Charles Steiner, director of University of Wisconsin-Platteville's Pioneer Farm, also sees opportunities in the partnership between LASA and the UW System. UW-Platteville is working to add a research technician, ruminant nutritionist, and agriculture and biological engineering position to the staff at the farm.

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LASA member farmers represent 1,930 pigs, 2,608 head of beef, 17,967 head of dairy animals and 44,074 crop acres. Seventeen farms participated in LASA's cost-share program in 2019.

"I am proud to say we had over 5,000 acres of cover crops planted this last year, which is phenomenal," Winn said.

Members are regularly practicing more conservation techniques, including basic soil sampling, plant tissue sampling, nitrogen stabilization, nutrient management plans,

planting cover crops, using no-till and planting harvestable buffer strips.

The group is analyzing data from the 2019 member conservation practice surveys. Winn said he was proud of the numbers from 2018.

As LASA looks to the future, the group's goals are to:

- Increase membership and community engagement.
- Host more educational events, including another field day.

- Increase participation in cost-share programs.
- Continue member conservation practice surveys and share results.
- Continue to support research initiatives and maintain partnerships.

Collaboration will remain the most critical factor to success, Winn said. An expanding number of farmer-led conservation groups around the state provides ample opportunity.

"The power comes from working together because we learn from each other."



LASA members, partners and community members heard from a variety of speakers and got updates on LASA's progress at the Conference & Annual Meeting in February.

## Green on the surface means living roots beneath

By Josh Kamps, agriculture educator, UW-Extension Lafayette County

What is the value of living roots in the soil on your farm? Consider the following list of important soil functions living roots enhance:

1. aggregate stability
2. percent organic matter
3. water infiltration
4. production of soil microbe food
5. nutrient retention

The green life we can easily see on the soil surface is an indicator of the living roots working hard below!

During mid-March 2020, two cover crop plots were planted in Lafayette Co. Three main questions were posed for this study looking at establishing cover crops in early spring ahead of grain production.

1. What is the final grain yield?
2. What is the result of soil and water quality?
3. What is the level of pest pressure?

The financial implications of adopting all

new farming practices must be carefully researched and examined along with the interactions to the cropping system.

The cover crops began growing once the seeds germinated on March 30. These seedling plants were fully emerged by April 15. Just 50 days following planting, Plot 1 and Plot 2 were well established and all crops were growing.

Regular scouting and monitoring the weather forecast will assist with the decision of when to terminate the cover crops through a post-emergent herbicide application. The plots will be monitored monthly throughout the growing season and grain yield and quality measurements will be collected at harvest. Science-based answers are the foundation of Extension outreach and the support and partnership between Extension and LASA will assure relevant research continues in Lafayette Co. and throughout



**Plot 1**  
**No-till corn/soybean rotation**  
1- 112# winter cereal rye  
2- No cover crop



**Plot 2**  
**Strip-till continuous corn**  
1- 56# winter cereal rye  
2- 32# oats and 6# radish  
3- 56# rye and 10# red clover  
4- No cover crop

the state.

Additional study materials and updated information for this study will be posted at [lafayette.extension.wisc.edu/](http://lafayette.extension.wisc.edu/). Please direct questions to [joshua.kamps@wisc.edu](mailto:joshua.kamps@wisc.edu) or call the Lafayette Co. Extension Office at (608)732-6717.

# LASA forging ahead through 2020

By Jim Winn, LASA president



Hello friends of LASA,

I hope everyone is staying healthy and safe. Little did we know in a few

short days after our successful LASA annual meeting in late February that our worlds would be turned upside down. The last couple of months have been a real struggle for all of us with the fear of the virus, farm prices dropping drastically, plus the overall financial burden it has put on our country and our farms.

As hard as it is to forget the last couple of months I think it's time to set our sights on the rest of 2020 and see how we can add more value to our members through opportunities to be engaged with LASA.

After a couple of dismal springs, we were blessed with great weather this spring for applying nutrients to our fields, getting seeding and corn planting done in a timely matter. As I write this, first crop hay is being harvested and our growing crops are looking fantastic, so let's hope we have a great growing season too.

We got some bittersweet news a few weeks ago that Paige Frautschy was leaving to go back home to Iowa and continue working for The Nature Conservancy. Paige was extremely valuable to our group and we are going to miss her terribly.

Now let's get to what's new for LASA. We are hoping to meet face to face for our June board meeting

to plan activities for the rest of the year. We have very exciting news: We have started a pilot project with Grande Cheese, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College and other partners that will be a huge benefit for our group in tracking sustainability from an environmental and financial perspective. See the back page of the newsletter for more details.

We are also eagerly awaiting the results of our member surveys. See the side column on this page for a summary of our results, but we will have more details on the impact of our practices soon.

Of course, our big event for the summer is always our field day, but with the pandemic and questions about public events, we will have to see how June and July turn out. We are hopeful we can hold some type of an event in August.

Also, the SWIGG study is also winding down and we are awaiting final results. As you know, we have a vested interest in this study.

Despite the pandemic, we have lots of good projects continuing and we look forward to keeping them on track no matter what challenges we face.

I hope everyone stays safe and healthy this summer and I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Jim

## Annual conservation practice survey: A look at the numbers

By Steve Richter, agricultural strategies director, The Nature Conservancy



Members of Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance complete a survey each winter to gauge interest in soil health practices. It's an annual recap of the number of farmers using conservation practices on their

fields and a tally of total acres of each practice. In this article, I'll share some highlights from 2019. In your next newsletter, I will talk more specifically about how the practices farmers are using are keeping soil and phosphorus from entering our waters.

I first want to say that it was great to see the progress that member farmers made in 2019 trying new practices and increasing the acres of other conservation practices, as well as the robust attendance figures seen at field days and winter meetings. Congrats to all of you who hosted or attended an event and/or used conservation practices in 2019! One take-away I had from reviewing the numbers is that more farmers are using conservation practices, and the total number of acres increased.

Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance farmers had 15,085 acres of fields planted with no till in 2019, an increase of 2,547 acres from the 2018 survey. Nineteen of the 24 farmers who filled out the survey are using no till. Add to this 8,455 acres planted with strip/conservation tillage. And, 5,305 acres of cover crops were planted in 2019 by 17 of the 24 farmers. One practice that attracted greater attention in 2019 was manure management as low disturbance manure injection was used on 4,000 acres. There were 22,377 acres under nutrient management plans, an addition of 3,400 acres from 2018. Of note, 22 of the 24 farmers completing the survey used grass waterways, and harvestable buffer acres jumped from 60 to 400 acres

It's great to see so many farmers completing the annual survey. The numbers demonstrate the effort farmers are making to improve soil health and reduce soil and nutrients leaving fields.

*Watch for 2020 survey information coming soon!*

# What is the Dairy Strong Sustainability Alliance?

By Lauren Brey, director of strategic partnerships & sustainability, Dairy Business Association & Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative



The Dairy Strong Sustainability Alliance (DSSA) is a collaborative, industry supported, effort to promote and support farmer-led solutions to

today's environmental challenges, taking into account business viability and community engagement. It was established in 2016 driven primarily by the Dairy Business Association, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative and The Nature Conservancy.

DSSA provides support for farmer-led conservation groups, including LASA, and helps connect individuals, organizations and companies wishing to support their efforts.

Through the partnership of a farmer-led conservation group with the DSSA, mutual goals of both organizations can be achieved.

With services outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), there is the opportunity for the farmer-led group to achieve increased membership, revenue and community engagement.

Collaborating with the DSSA is intended to make more efficient use of time for both farmers and group collaborators. Additionally, services provided will help the group maintain a professional image and assist the group in realizing goals.

DSSA serves as an incubator and support system for LASA and other groups. The alliance offers various services that each group can choose from depending on its individual needs. Examples include administrative support, communications, strategic services and connections with experts. DSSA also serves as a conduit between the farmer

organizations, experts and other entities that can add value and help in achieving their goals and amplifying their stories.

Additionally, DSSA can help groups secure funds for research projects or other initiatives they may not otherwise have funding for.

Besides LASA, DSSA supports Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers, Peninsula Pride Farms, Western Wisconsin Conservation Council and Yahara Pride Farms.

Learn more at [dairystrong.org/sustainability](http://dairystrong.org/sustainability) or contact me at [lbrey@voiceofmilk.com](mailto:lbrey@voiceofmilk.com).



**DAIRY STRONG**  
SUSTAINABILITY ALLIANCE

## Sign up to watch and report weather conditions in your area!

From UW-Extension

How heavy was the rainfall overnight? How much snow fell during the latest snowstorm? How bad is the drought this year?

Join over 500 fellow volunteers across Wisconsin who report precipitation online to ensure measurements of snow, rain and hail is available for your area.

The Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow Network or CoCoRaHS is recruiting volunteer weather observers to help the National Weather Service and others determine the impact and severity of each storm.

Everyone can participate – young, old, and in-between. The only requirements are an enthusiasm for watching and reporting weather conditions and a desire to learn more

about how weather can impact our lives.

All you need to do is sign-up, attend an online training, and then you are ready to start measuring weather in your own backyard. Volunteers can measure:

- snow using a yardstick or homemade snowboard
- rainfall and the water content of snow using a 4" diameter rain gauge
- hail using a ruler or homemade hail pad
- ice accretion using a ruler

You'll be amazed at what you learn as you become more aware of the variable weather that impacts you, your neighbors, your state and our entire country. Plus, you'll help ground truth weather events, providing valuable information for improving weather

forecasting models. The data you provide will help shape forecasts of river stages and flood levels on local rivers and can help inform the National Weather Service thunderstorm or flash flood warnings just to name a few examples.

Join your fellow Wisconsinites who report rainfall, snow fall and weather facts. Register today at <https://www.cocorahs.org/application.aspx>.

**For more information, contact:**

Kevin Erb, UW-Madison Extension  
920-391-4652, [kevin.erb@wisc.edu](mailto:kevin.erb@wisc.edu)



# “The soil just comes to life” LASA members keep eyes on conservation practices

By Mary Hookham for LASA

Twenty-four farmers in southwestern Wisconsin are laser-focused on building healthier soils and improving water quality by implementing sustainability practices that will make a long-term difference.

Several of those farmers, who are members of Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance (LASA), shared their knowledge and the lessons they are learning on Feb. 25 during the farmer-led watershed conservation group’s annual meeting.

Mike Berget, a crop and hog farmer, started strip-tilling in 2012 and, despite ongoing weather challenges, persisted and is seeing improvements every year. He does mostly no-till on his corn-on-corn acreage and is pleased with the seed bed this creates.

“We’re able to leave 60 to 70 percent of the residue after we plant,” Berget said. “Our goal is always to reduce soil erosion and increase water filtration.”

Reducing soil erosion is important to organic farmer Keith Wilson. He started using cover crops several years ago as a way to keep soil on his farm. His go-to cover crop is rye and then he plants corn or soybeans each spring. By adding gypsum to the soil, he achieved a sponge-like consistency to help hold in moisture before the last few years of

heavy rains.

Wilson uses plenty of forages on his farm, including about 20 pounds of corn silage in his dairy ration, and produces 120 acres of corn silage each season. He works manure into acreage with tillage radishes and yellow peas.

“In our type of farming, you have to keep an open mind,” Wilson said. “We’ve increased our organic matter in a lot of those fields. The health of the soil really helps to hold in water and nutrients.”

Brian Larson, partner in Cottonwood Dairy, agrees with Wilson when it comes to keeping an open mind. Larson is willing to try almost any new sustainability practice, and he focuses on the bigger picture of water quality and soil health.

“We just keep experimenting,” Larson said. “If we could find a way to no-till every acre of alfalfa and corn, we’d do it. And we would use low-disturbance manure application. If we could achieve those things, we’d have a good plan.”

Jim Winn, president of LASA who is also a partner in Cottonwood Dairy, wholeheartedly believes in using cover crops. His dairy uses rye, oats and barley.

“I think we have the cover crops down to

a science, even though these last three years have been a struggle,” he said.

Soil health is crucial to farmer Dan Kamps. He started using contour strips to decrease erosion and is seeing positive results. Strip-tilling is also showing positive results. Microbe activity continues to increase. Additionally, he is using less fertilizer every year but getting better crop yields.

“We’ve noticed more earthworms since we started strip-tilling,” Kamps said. “The soil just comes to life. And you know the water will soak down into that medium a lot better than a medium that’s like asphalt.”

Josh Kamps, agriculture agent with University of Wisconsin-Extension in Lafayette County, has been studying cover crop usage in the area and is finding soil conditions are considerably better than just a few years ago. He’s looking at the effects of nitrogen rates on corn yields and harvesting rye as forage and then how it’s being used in the dairy community.

“The microbe activity in soil is increasing,” he said. “Microbes like to travel, get a bite to eat and then go back down in the soil.”

## LASA cost-share program grew in 2019

By Jamie Fisher, farmer-led conservation group coordinator, Dairy Strong Sustainability Alliance



In 2019, LASA had 18 members participated in the cost-share program, with three additional members participating compared to the previous year.

The 2018 cost-share program only included an incentive for cover crops. In 2019 the program added no till/reduced till, and 4-R nutrient stewardship as other options. These additional incentives increased participation from 3,526 acres signed up in 2018 to 33,074.25 acres signed up in 2019.

This is a nine-fold increase in acres in one year!

Additionally, there was an increase in cost-share dollars paid out to participants from \$15,000 in 2018 to \$27,000 in 2019.

LASA continues to empower members to improve and try new farming techniques through the cost-share program. Watch the website and member emails for more information about the 2020 program coming soon!



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# LASA embarks on pilot project to measure sustainability

By Lauren Brey for LASA

Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance is participating in a pilot milkshed sustainability project with the Dairy Strong Sustainability Alliance (DSSA), Grande cheese and other key partners.

The “milkshed” concept engages farmers and a processor in a specific area, plus supporting partners, in documenting and quantifying sustainability efforts from farm to end user.

This project will help LASA and project stakeholders document and understand the impacts of conservation practices used by LASA members and communicate the sustainability of farming practices to other farmers, customers, the local community,

the agricultural supply chain and regulatory agencies.

This is like the conservation practice survey we have done in the past but in more detail and using a nationally recognized platform for on-farm sustainability.

DSSA, LASA and all project partners recognize the need for farmers to better understand modern conservation techniques that enhance the environment and production on the farm. That is why this project consists of both a financial and environmental component. Several LASA members will participate in both the financial and environmental analysis. The environmental portion of the project is

open to all LASA members.

Other key stakeholders include an international food brand, The Nature Conservancy, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Lafayette Land Conservation Department, Ross Soil Service, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, UW-Platteville, GPS Dairy Consulting and UW-Madison SnapPlus. Houston Engineering Inc. (HEI) has been engaged as the consulting firm for the project.

Watch for more information on this project over the next year in our newsletter, on the website and via email.