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LASA sees soil health improve with no-till

Jason Rowe switched to no-till almost four years ago to improve soil health

By Steven Schauer for LASA

Jason Rowe decided to implement no-till on his farming acres because the soil health needed improvement and it was economically beneficial.

"I work full time, so I don't have a lot of time to sit in a tractor and drive across the field all day," Rowe said standing in his soybean field. "My other farms are rough enough, where if you don't want to pick up rocks for two weeks, you have to start no-tilling."

A Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance field day, held on May 21, had two dozen farmers looking at and discussing the benefits of no-

till and cover crops. Josh Kamps, University of Wisconsin-Extension agriculture educator, provided insight into why implementing the two practices together improves soil health.

Rowe had two different plots in his field – one no-till and the other with a rye cover crop and no-till. Kamps dug two soil samples and explained why field days give farmers an opportunity to see conservation practices in action.

"With the increased practices comes a little more risk, a little more management for the farmer," Kamps said. "I think it's really neat to see what the outcome is and then

the farmers can go back and look at the decision-making side of it and see if they can implement that on their farms."

Rowe's soybean field is in its second year of no-till. He has noticed improved soil health when cover crops were also planted.

"The cover crops fit into the no-till system," Rowe, a member of LASA, said. "I have a lot of ground that is tougher soil types, and over the year's it's been abused and isn't as healthy as it should be. I started doing cover crops and no-till to start improving soil health."

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LASA has given farmers in the southwestern part of Wisconsin the opportunity to implement conservation practices through its cost-share program. Members can receive \$20 per acre up to 50 acres if they try a new practice like cover crops, 4-R Nutrient Stewardship or no-till/reduced tillage.

Kamps said farmers should work toward being sustainable and set conservation goals. He also said the idea of planting through leftover crop residue does not have to be

feared with the correct equipment.

"I think we have to start with the end in mind," Kamps said. "So, the goal is to have ideal soil conditions and get good seed placement. Farmers can no-till plant with some of the precision planters, and by having the equipment set up right, Jason was able to plant into this no-till setting."

At the end of the field day, two soil samples were shown, one that had been in a no-till system for two years and the other

for over five years. Dan Smith, researcher in the Nutrient and Pest Management Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explained why no-till is better for the soil.

"Certainly, the longer the soil is in a no-till system the better the soil conditions typically improve because of the less disturbance," Smith said.

Join us at our next field day set for July 30. Watch your email and our social media platforms for more information coming soon.



LASA members and other field day attendees had the chance to learn about soil health and no-till practices during a field day May 21.

Millers: Cost-share changes mindset

Curt and Debbie Miller took a leap of faith and planted their first cover crop last fall after receiving cost-share funds from LASA. Curt wrote this letter after connecting with Josh Kamps at the UW-Extension to learn more before trying the conservation practice for the first time.

Good Morning!

3/14/21

I am introducing myself as a lifelong resident of Kendall Township in Lafayette Co. (S.E. of Belmont Wi). Myself and my wife Debbie have operated our farm since 1971. This farm was purchased by my parents in 1963. Being a fertile farm & quite a level laying acreage it has curb appeal, as city folks say. Being of that description it is at the forefront of an operator to maintain that quality. Percentage of slopes can't be changed, but conservation practices can be implemented to increase production, longevity & land value. Being a livestock producer for most of my past there was always a need for alfalfa & corn production. Changes come about as we now have our land rented to a dairy producer. Once seeing the operation is now more important, because his needs include cutting corn silage & removal corn stalks from other fields. That brings about a reason to make some practice changes to protect from natural environmental harm. The location of the farm is on a high altitude thus wind erosion is a concern as well as water runoff. Farmers learn best by watching other alike operations. That's when our operation was introduced to the Lafayette Co. organization known as LASA by our County Ag. instructor Josh Kamps.

It was brought forth that there was money available to implement different or new (to our operation) practices relative to our needs. The money that was allotted for our operation was to implement using rye fall seeded on ground where silage was removed. Seeded at a time so it could reach the green-up stage before frost. The second part of the plan is to seed in alfalfa as early as possible in the spring without disturbing the established rye to any extent. A quality feed can be harvested multiple times throughout the summer growing season. Alfalfa being the sole survivor for years to follow. At the date of this writing things look ~~very~~ very acceptable.

It would be my hope that LASA can continue to aid those in many ways to persevere conservation practices for long term family farms. Their generosity concerning our operation from their hands to our hands is much appreciated.

Farmers are always in competition with them selves to get better as time moves on. The "old saying" is there's always next year - we hope?

Let's work together
Curt & Debbie Miller

Exciting times ahead for LASA in 2021

By Jim Winn, LASA president



Hello fellow dedicated soil conservation enthusiasts,

As I write this letter I sit here in my office and am thinking about going to turn my furnace on because I'm

freezing and for good reason. I look at my thermoeter, it says 42 degrees. Then I think back two days ago when we were finishing our first crop of hay and it was a balmy 85 degrees and sunny. I was thinking: finally it's the end of May and summer is finally here.

Oh well, looking at the forecast we'll be back to a little more normal weather in a couple days. We can't complain too much because we had an exceptional spring as crops were planted in record times and the weather was outstanding all spring.

I would like to get everyone up to speed on what is happening in the world of LASA. We have been busy to say the least and it looks like we are going to have a busy summer ahead of us.

Jason Rowe, one of our LASA members, hosted our first in-person field day in late May and we had roughly two dozen farmers attend. Hats off to Jason for his willingness to host. I think everyone left with more knowledge on no-till and the work Jason is doing. You can read more on his efforts in our cover story.

Jay and Jean Stauffacher hosted our Lafayette County Dairy Breakfast in mid-June at their beautiful Highway Dairy Farm in rural Darlington. We thank everyone for attending the breakfast and to the Stauffacher's for showcasing their great dairy operation for all to see.

At our July board meeting we will host Doug Thomas from Houston Engineering who will be sharing results from year one of our Pilot Project with those who participated. If you remember, Doug is helping us with our Pilot

Project with Grande Cheese and others, which is in its second year. We are eager to keep this project moving throughout the summer. It is an honor to receive the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy national award for "Outstanding Supply Chain Collaboration." It just goes to show the dedication and forward thinking our members have to make our soil healthier and water cleaner.

Another project we are working on is a member equipment directory. This directory will showcase certain members who may want to rent their equipment or to find fellow farmers to hire for custom work.

Lastly, we are putting plans together for a field day on July 30 and a picnic on August 6. Our trusted friend and UW-Extension agricultural education specialist Josh Kamps, who is also a LASA member, is working hard with our field day committee to finalize plans.

We are very proud of the work we have done here in Lafayette County and I believe we are seeing the fruits of our labor as we have gained nine new members since early last year. Our future looks very bright.

Shoutout to The Nature Conservancy and Steve Richter for the extra effort on their part to offer additional funding for our cost-share program last year, which helped us gain some of our new members. Thank you to Steve and everyone at TNC.

Also, many thanks to Tim Trotter and his staff at Dairy Business Association, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative and Farmers for Sustainable Food for all the help we receive from them for our group. I also want to thank our members for your dedication to make LASA what it is today. Everyone have a great summer and keep on the lookout for more exciting news about LASA.

Sincerely, Jim

What is FSF?

An alliance created five years ago to support and promote farmers in their conservation efforts has reached a new level, with a broader focus, more innovative projects and an increasingly diverse set of partners.

The group, formed in 2016 as the Dairy Strong Sustainability Alliance, announced its transformation into Farmers for Sustainable Food, a non-profit organization that provides resources, advocacy, support and empowerment for farmers who are innovating and demonstrating sustainable farming practices.

"Our vision is a sustainable food system in which farmers, their communities and the environment thrive," said Todd Doornink, president of Farmers for Sustainable Food and a dairy farmer in northwestern Wisconsin. "Our focus is on uniting stakeholders to collaborate across organizational lines, inspiring farmers to be leaders of change and empowering our partners to meet their goals."

The Dairy Business Association, Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative and The Nature Conservancy originally organized the alliance in Wisconsin around the goal of helping dairy farmers make tangible improvements to the environment and other aspects of their farms. Since then, additional partners have come aboard representing various parts of the food supply chain, from individual farms and agricultural groups to food processors and food companies. And the group is facilitating greater opportunities to achieve environmental goals and promote progress in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the Upper Midwest.

Visit FarmersForSustainableFood.com.

Targeted decision-making

By Josh Kamps, University of Wisconsin-Extension agriculture educator

Lafayette County has a rich history of promoting conservation efforts for many years. Since 1977, the Land Conservation Department has recognized nearly 300 farmers, educators, business leaders and non-profit organizations for their outcomes of improving soil and water quality in the county. Many targeted soil and water quality decisions are necessary to achieve these conservation outcomes.

The 2021 Lafayette County "Conservation Farmer of the Year" is Highway Dairy Farms, the Jay and Jean Stauffacher families. Highway Dairy implements best management practices, which meet the economic, environmental and socially acceptable requirements necessary for their dairy farm to remain viable. These best management practices are a series of targeted decisions to assist with reaching a specific end goal.

Highway Dairy Farms receives the benefit of a valuable cover crop from a retired alfalfa stand. The alfalfa grows back following the final harvest in the fall and remains alive until shortly ahead of corn planting the next spring. The living alfalfa plants hold the soil with its roots, produce available N for subsequent crops and provide a reliable food source for soil microorganisms. As the stand slowly breaks down following termination, it meets a majority of the soil fertility needs of the growing corn crop. The covered soil between the rows of corn by alfalfa residue serves to reduce raindrop impact and lessen the risk of soil erosion. The residue also serves as a temperature moderator to cool the soil surface and increase soil microorganism activity. The residue also reduces the rate of weed seed germination and aids with maintaining soil moisture. The top photo on the right is an example of the results of this cropping decision.

The Stauffacher's maintain many established field conservation practices while

adding new practices. Crop rotation, contour strip cropping and grazed pastures are conservation practices from decades ago that remain on the farm today. With the addition of precision ag, no-till planters, nutrient management and cover crop adoption, the farm adds to the impact of practices from the past with targeted decision-making for the future. Grazed pastures are a management decision which remain despite not utilizing the feed for the farm's own dairy. The pasture ground has a financial return through rent received from a local cow/calf farmer. The pasture ground also has an environmental and social return by reducing the risk of nutrient and soil loss and sharing opportunities with area farmers. The middle photo on the right is an example of the many conservation practices implemented by the farm.

Highway Dairy Farms collects and stores the dairy manure produced within their milk production system. The manure nutrients are field applied according to crop production goals and soil test levels. While the many structures on the farm improve animal comfort, feed quality and nutrient retention, they also aid with improving soil and water quality. Rainwater from the cattle barn roofs and feed storage areas enter an engineered water collection system. Manure nutrients are lab analyzed, measured and entered into a SnapPlus nutrient management plan to identify the precise fields, application rate and application timing. Fall seeded cover crops like winter cereal grains, tillage radish and legumes have many soil and water quality benefits. Cover crops aid with nutrient retention, enhance soil structure with living roots and protect the soil surface from erosion. The photo on the bottom right is an example of the many farmstead conservation practices utilized by the farm.

Adding conservation practices in the future to conservation practices of the past



No-till corn planted into spring-terminated alfalfa.



Land managed with crop rotation, contour strips and grazed pasture.



Highway Dairy Farms

has allowed Highway Dairy Farms to remain economically, environmentally and socially viable in the dairy industry. With targeted decision-making, farmers are able to achieve soil and water quality goals through conservation practice adoption.

Contact a LASA farmer, County Land Conservation, Natural Resources Conservation Service or County Extension for further assistance.

LASA sustainability initiative earns national award

From Farmers for Sustainable Food

A project spearheaded by LASA and partners in the supply chain has earned national praise from the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy.

LASA, Farmers for Sustainable Food and Grande Cheese Company were recognized in June with an “Outstanding Supply Chain Collaboration” award. Together with support from The Nature Conservancy and a host of others, they created and are testing a framework for conservation projects that protect soil and water quality, keep farms financially viable and demonstrate a commitment to sustainability to communities, customers and regulators.

The first-of-its-kind framework is being used in a pilot project involving a dozen LASA farms.

The Framework for Farm-Level Sustainability Projects is a handbook to help farmers determine what conservation practices are most useful for their individual farms, document the environmental and financial effects and showcase the value of sustainability throughout the supply chain.

LASA President Jim Winn, whose dairy is involved in the project, said the framework and pilot project are well suited for LASA.

“This effort builds on our members’ commitment to environmental stewardship, collaboration and transparency,” Winn said. “The framework gives us a tool to prove to ourselves, our neighbors and those who buy our products that there’s value in being innovative in the field.”

“Having our processor and others in the supply chain behind us, pulling in the same direction, is pretty powerful,” he said.

That’s where true success lies for sustainability, said Greg Siegenthaler, vice president of milk marketing and supply chain at Grande.

“As with this project, true sustainability efforts will only be realized if the work is done in partnership across our industry and throughout the supply chain,” Siegenthaler said. “In order to really move the needle and see ongoing success around sustainability, we must continue to engage all partners in the process, from farmer-led initiatives that result in greater results for both environmental sustainability and farm financial viability, to an ongoing commitment from processors and food manufacturers to engage in the conversation and partner on long-term solutions.”

The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy each year recognizes exceptional farms, businesses and partnerships for their socially responsible, economically viable and environmentally sound practices and technologies that have a broad and positive impact. The awards are judged by an independent panel of dairy and conservation experts who consider innovation, scalability and replicability when choosing winners.

The pilot project follows the model of a “milkshed,” which represents the farms and various businesses in a region that furnish dairy foods to customers. The framework is flexible in its design so it can be replicated for projects in other regions, and LASA and its partners are encouraging others to use it, at no cost.

Interest already is growing for similar initiatives, said Lauren Brey, managing director of Farmers for Sustainable Food, a nonprofit organization of food system partners that supports LASA and other farmer-led watershed conservation groups. Brey said one of the projects is with an individual farm and on-site cheese plant in Wisconsin, one is with another farmer-led conservation group in the state and one is with a dairy processor

in South Dakota.

“Customers want assurances that the food they buy is being produced in a way that’s sensitive to the environment,” Brey said. “Demonstrating this starts at the farm but also has implications for businesses throughout the dairy supply chain.”

The Nature Conservancy, which closely supports farmer-led conservation projects in the state, helped author the framework.

“The work that LASA farmers have been doing since 2017 to implement soil health practices and track their outcomes shows that agriculture can be part of the solution to some of our biggest challenges, from water quality to climate change,” said Steve Richter, agriculture strategies director for The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin. “Through this pilot project, they are building on those efforts to leverage their learning beyond their county to the rest of the state. We’re excited to support this collaborative effort to give more farmers the tools they need to protect our waters, capture carbon and keep their farms profitable.”

The pilot project wrapped up its first year in 2020, collecting and analyzing farm data from the previous year. Brey expects that the results will be released in a report in July. Current funding for the assessment work will carry the project through 2022.



Greg Siegenthaler, Grande Cheese, and Jim Winn, LASA president.



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Upcoming events

Mark your calendar and plan to join us at these events.
Watch your email for more information.

- July 30 – LASA Field Day, 11-1pm at the USDA-FSA Service Center, Lafayette County
- August 6 - LASA picnic - The General Store, Gratiot
- August 13 – Soil Health Field Day