LASA
Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance

Summer 2023
lafayetteagstewardship.org

Cover crops provide soil and feed savings on Cooper Family Farm

By Anne Moore for LASA

Farmers in Lafayette County have embraced cover crops, recognizing the many benefits they provide their businesses and the environment. Through community education and hands-on experimentation, these farmers are discovering the value of a practice that improves soil health, prevents erosion and enhances yields.

Bob Cooper Sr., Bob Cooper Jr. and Ben Cooper are three generations farming together on 320 acres. In 1979, Bob Sr. started milking cows in Wiota, moving from the flat land of his home farm in Illinois. Adjusting to the new landscape from flat land, he immediately implemented conservation practices like contour strips and grass waterways to protect the fields' soil. That legacy of sustainability continues with his son and grandson.

The farm transitioned from milking cows to raising beef in 2014. They have 50 beef cows and raise 300 calves from neighboring farms to feeder calves and finish to butcher. They started trying cover crops about five years ago, but with encouragement from a neighbor, the farm joined Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance to learn from other farmers experimenting with different species.

"We were already planting radishes, turnips and oats after our wheat harvest, but LASA introduced us to sorghum sudan and other crops besides rye," Bob Sr. said. "All our fields are green now in spring; we have about 75% in cover crops."

LASA members planted 13,251 acres of cover crops in 2022, the equivalent of nearly 10,000 football fields.

The Coopers are newer members of LASA, a farmer-led watershed conservation group in southwestern Wisconsin with 36 members. The seven-year-old group represents 63,428 acres and 40,537 dairy animals, beef cattle and pigs. The alliance collaborates with university researchers, environmental groups and community leaders.

The farm sees yield increases by using cover crops as they reduce inputs. The Coopers are still getting, on average, 250-bushel corn. Besides having healthier soil, Ben is seeing significant benefits of feeding the covers to

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LASA's 2023 cost-share

The LASA cost-share program is designed to be inclusive to help every member meet his/her soil and water conservation goals. To participate, each applicant should indicate which program(s) they would like to enroll in and the number of acres/samples they are enrolling.

LASA's cost share program will officially launch in September. It's intended to be a learning opportunity for members, so we ask that members be willing to share lessons learned from trying a new practice with the group. The practices offered for cost-share include cover crops, 4R nutrient stewardship, no-till, reduced/limited/strip till and planting green.

Final cost-share payments are dependent on available funds and will be distributed at the end of the year. If you are not yet a LASA member, please fill out the membership form (available at lafayetteagstewardship.org) and pay membership dues.

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their beef herd.

"Using cost-share from LASA, we planted sorghum sudan with berseem and red clover on 24 acres. We were able to harvest 75 bales off in fall that fed the beef cows through the winter, and our fields are green and growing again now," Ben said. "We only had labor costs into it and saved on feed costs."

Bob Sr. picked a clover the first week of April; the root was over 5 inches. Having a living root throughout the year helps keep soils and nutrients in the fields and out of local waterways.

In addition to the cover crops, LASA members practiced reduced soil tillage on 32,841 acres in 2022. Members also use soil sampling and nutrient management plans. Overall, the group has seen a 65% increase in acres with conservation practices since 2018.

According to modeling-based analysis, cover crops and other field practices adopted by LASA farmers significantly reduce the chance of harmful runoff into streams and lakes. The farmers in 2022 potentially prevented an estimated 184,109 pounds of phosphorus from leaving the fields and reduced 101,921 tons of sediment erosion along with reducing carbon dioxide equivalents by 14,937 tons, according to an analysis shared by Farmers for Sustainable Food; the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; and The Nature Conservancy.

For comparison, a mid-size dump truck can carry 10 tons of sediment, and 1 pound of phosphorus in a lake or stream has the potential to cause the growth of up to 500 pounds of algae, which can degrade water quality. The amount of reduced greenhouse gas emissions equals 2,920 cars driven annually.

The analysis estimated the potential impact of cover crops, low-disturbance manure application and reduced tillage compared to more conventional methods typical to the group's area.

The Nature Conservancy, a key supporter of LASA, helps bring new soil stewardship ideas to the group.

"Each time I talk with the farmer members of LASA, I am heartened to hear their stories from trying a new conservation practice on their fields," Steve Richter, TNC's director of agriculture strategies in Wisconsin, said. "LASA members are showing me that farmers can make a difference when they are given the funding and decision-making to use conservation practices that work right on their farm."

Being a member of LASA has helped the Cooper family learn new ideas and tweak practices to accomplish their conservation goals. They are constantly looking for ways to support all three generations, so keeping the land they own sustainable and profitable is extremely important. Comparing notes with other farmers trying the same thing is highly valued.

The Coopers have their sights set on what is ahead. The farm recently purchased a drone with plans to spray and plant covers.

"Now that we have this drone, it opens up many new opportunities for our farm, including trying biologicals," Bob Jr. said.

BY THE NUMBERS

Number of acres covered by conservation practices among Lafayette Ag Stewardship Alliance members:

- 2018 — 75,946
- 2019 — 107,421
- 2020 — 144,105
- 2021 — 165,851
- 2022 — 218,969

*Multiple conservation practices can be used on a farm field

Potential impact of conservation practices in 2022:

- Phosphorus runoff reduction — 184,109 pounds
- Sediment erosion reduction — 101,921 tons

Hello friends of LASA

By Jim Winn, LASA president

As I write this in early May, if feels more like early March! Good old Wisconsin weather, right? Here in southern Wisconsin, we had a week of extremely warm weather, which got our farmers in the field to get their alfalfa seeding in; plus, there were lots of soybeans planted and many started planting corn. The weather forecast for the next couple of weeks looks like we are going to get spring back on track, with 60's and 70's predicted to get the growing season started.

Let's talk about where we have been so far this year and where we are going. We had another great annual meeting with UW Extension specialists Werle, Renz, Arneson, Smith and our very own Josh Kamps, discussing pest management with conservation. It was very well attended, and everyone took home something to use on their farms. We wrapped up another year of our pilot sustainability project and anxiously await year four's results. This has been a very worthwhile project for us since its inception. Thanks to all who have helped us throughout this project.

Recently, we received exciting news that LASA has received funding for the 2023 Nitrogen Optimization Pilot Program field study. This will enable farmers to determine the optimum nitrogen rate for planting corn for grain production in cereal rye cover crops following soybean production year. We will keep you updated with the results. Mark Lenz and Dan Smith from UW Madison are also conducting a field trial with a couple of our member farms using alfalfa as a cover crop for corn. This will be interesting to follow. Everyone wonders how the alfalfa will withstand the rigors of a corn silage chopping season, especially if we have a wet fall.

A couple of our farmer members recently hosted a tour of college students from UW-Green Bay, UW-Madison, UW-River Falls UW-Stevens Point, and along with some UW Extension folks. The tour was made possible by the Wisconsin Freshwater Collaborative program. Students toured a couple of larger farms and stopped at some field trials in southern Wisconsin. The students enjoyed their day and were treated to a great lunch at the General Store.

We have scheduled our Summer Picnic for July 20. We will also have our monthly board meeting and a visit from Doug Thomas from Houston Engineering, who was instrumental in our pilot project. The picnic will start later in the afternoon. It should be a fun afternoon and evening.

We are starting to plan some field day events for the summer and fall. Keep an eye on our website for dates and times. And speaking of our website, I encourage everyone to review LASA'S conservation practice progress report. It shows the strength of our group and all the good that comes from our efforts, and demonstrates great progress that we are all proud of. I hope everyone has a safe, prosperous and fun summer. Hope to see you at our Summer Picnic.

Wisconsin Ag-Water Nexus Network Field Experience

By Josh Kamps, UW Extension Crops and Soils Educator

In April, 16 college students representing UW-Platteville, UW-Green Bay, UW-River Falls, and UW-Stevens Point participated in a three-day field experience learning about agriculture production and water quality factors in southwestern Wisconsin.

The field experience was a practical hands-on opportunity for the students enrolled in a cross-campus online course to apply their knowledge of agricultural water quality management within agricultural production.

LASA farmer members participated in a discussion of the water quality outcomes the farmer-led watershed group has achieved through on-farm changes.

Thank you to the following farms throughout Lafayette County for collaborating with Ag-Water Nexus course instructors to transform on-farm demonstrations into engaging learning experiences: Wilson Organic Farms, Lafayette Acres, Gleason Cattle Company, Russell Family Farms, Cottonwood Dairy, Steinhoff Acres and Pioneer Farm.

Pictures to the left of students touring farms.

Dairy Feed in Focus

Collaborative effort with the farm industry to improve farm's environment impact

By Cate Harrington and Steve Richter, The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin

It might surprise some to learn that farming has a significant footprint on the American landscape, from the land it takes to raise animals and crops, to the impacts on water quality and a changing climate. With impact, however, comes opportunity. Farmers across Wisconsin have a long-standing commitment to sustainability.

An example of this work is a sustainability project in Wisconsin and Michigan, called Dairy Feed in Focus. It is a collaboration among the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, The Nature Conservancy and Syngenta to incentivize farmers to implement best practices in feed and forage production and feed efficiency. Nestlé USA provides up to $10,000 per year to each farmer participating as a cost share incentive, similar to the cost share program a farmer-led group has for their members.

In Wisconsin, TNC works with dairy farmers who sell their milk to Foremost Farms USA dairy cooperative. TNC agronomist Ricardo Costa supports 16 farmers' efforts to adopt soil health, grazing and feed and manure management practices that are expected to deliver climate, soil and water quality benefits on their farms.

"There is risk involved in trying something new," Costa said. "The partners connect farmers with technical support and financial incentives provided by Nestlé USA to mitigate some of that risk and help them try new practices."

Farmers like Theo Scholze—a fourth generation dairy farmer near Humbird, Wis.—are ready to do their part. Scholze operates

Ricardo Costa of TNC (left) and Theo Scholze of Scholze Family Farms

Scholze Family Farms with his brother Will. They milk 550 dairy cows and farm about 2,000 acres.

"Just about every decision we make on our farm, there is a financial side to it," he said. "But if I can make changes to help the overall global environment, I feel it is my responsibility to do that.

"Growing Italian rye grass is the most exciting change we've made. It doesn't require commercial fertilizer or pesticides. We use it as a feed for one year and then leave it in place as a cover crop. It's a very digestible plant that cows can use more efficiently. If my cow is more efficient, she's producing less methane."

When the program originated in 2022, it had 13 farmers — 10 who were members of Wisconsin's Foremost Farms dairy cooperative, and three who were members of Michigan Milk Producers Association cooperative. As of 2023, there are 13 more farmers participating in Michigan and seven more in Wisconsin. The goal for 2024 is to have 30 farmers, who supply milk to Foremost Farms USA, participate.

There's a big opportunity for corporations that create products from the crops, like Nestlé USA; or create products from milk produced on a farm, like the Feed in Focus project; to contribute funds that reward dairy farms utilizing environmentally conscious practices.

"If we all contribute a little bit, we can move in a direction that is positive for the environment and positive for our industry," Scholze said.

See the Wisconsin Climate Action web page at nature.org/WIClimateAction for a link to a video about the Dairy Feed in Focus project.

LASA receives grant for $100,582

By Josh Kamps, UW Extension Crops and Soils Educator

In early 2023 on behalf of LASA, an on-farm research grant application was proposed for funding through Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. The grant program, Commercial Nitrogen Optimization Pilot Program, or NOPP, was created under 2021 Wisconsin Act 223 to provide the necessary financial tools for farmers to study commercial N application on their farms.

LASA was awarded a research project grant along with 19 other applicants from across the state totaling $1.6 million. The project is designed to answer the following question; "What is the optimal N application rate for corn grain production when planting into a green cereal rye cover crops?"

In other words, what is the best or most favorable application rate of N for corn grain production with no-till and cover crops? The project is scheduled to begin during the fall of 2023 and continue over two growing seasons.

The project is being replicated on four farms across Lafayette County. In addition to the collaboration of local farmers, the project has the support of a research technician, data consultant, agronomic consultant and a team leader. Other supporting partners include Farmers for Sustainable Food, The Nature Conservancy, UW-Division of Extension, UW-Nutrient and Pest Management Program and Nutrien Ag Solutions.

Along with collecting on-farm data, field day opportunities and program updates will be shared during the project. If on-farm research is of interest to you, contact a LASA member farmer or local Extension educator to learn more about upcoming opportunities.

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Upcoming events

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

- June 9 - Planting green field day (Miller Promised Land Farm)
- June 26 - Manure composting field day (Pleasant View Farm)
- July 12-16 - Cover crops educational booth (Lafayette County Fair)
- July 20 – 3-5 p.m. Pilot sustainablity project farmer-to-farmer workshop, The General Store
- July 20 - 5:30 p.m. **All LASA member meeting and picnic** - The General Store, Gratiot
- August 21-22 - Soil Health Field Symposium (TBD)
- August TBD - Manure application on cover crops field day (Berget Family Farms)
- August - 2023 member conservation survey released
- September - 2023 cost-share program launches