

The Watering Hole

LOCAL FARMERS FIND SOLUTIONS IN CONSERVATION

Extreme weather made this past year one of the toughest on record for local farmers, destroying many farmers' hopes of a successful crop and leaving fields in less than desirable conditions. Despite the bleak outlook, farmers are finding ways to be more resilient than ever in the face of these challenging times.

Farmers are starting to see the benefits of conservation practices to help protect their soil and set them up for successfully combating adverse weather and the resulting field conditions. Many farmers made the best of a bad planting year with the help of the USDA disaster relief program, which paid farmers to put un-planted acres into cover crops. Forward-thinking farmers in the area also made the most of the rough season by getting projects done in the fields that normally couldn't have been done if they were planted. An added benefit of more farmers adopting best management practices on their farms is the boost they give to clean water.

One local family is a shining example of progressive thinking and action to improve their ground and make it more resilient to extreme weather events.

Max and Bill Wilson have been partnering with the Barry Conservation District and The Natural Resource Conservation Service for many years now. From helping to educate their neighbors by hosting field days to doing their research and coming up with innovative solutions to problems on their farms, the Wilson's are exemplary when it comes to their willingness to learn, adapt and overcome.

Over the past two years, the Wilsons have engaged in planting cover crops on thousands of acres of ground they farm,

which has led to numerous benefits such as the increase in soil health and the ability to get on fields sooner in the spring.

Another area where the Wilsons have been proactive is installing grassed waterways on their ground.

"We kept having gullies and wash outs and it got to the point where it didn't make sense to keep filling them back in every spring." During the installation, Max mentioned how this project would benefit him by freeing up time in the spring repairing washouts, allowing him to easily access the back part of the field and help to "get that water off his field faster." From the environmental standpoint, this project helped reduce sediment and nutrients entering our surface water, accomplishing the Conservation District's goal of helping impact water quality in Mud Creek and the whole Thornapple River Watershed.

After talking with both Bill and Max at length over the last couple years and multiple projects, they are pleased with how things have gone. They are seeing the benefits firsthand on their farms and have no intentions of stopping cover cropping. One of the best compliments we can get at the Conservation District is repeat customers, and the Wilson's have both expressed the desire to partner with us to tackle more conservation issues on their land in the upcoming year, including two more grassed waterway projects.

It has long been said that farmers are the ultimate stewards of the land, and as such they have the potential to have huge impacts on our water quality across the Great Lakes basin. To truly be successful in farming while being good stewards of our natural resources, it takes adaptability and a willingness to take action and the Wilson's have that pretty well figured out.



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