

DATCP: Shining a light on conservation success: New Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Annual Report

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MADISON - A civic-minded farmer's conservation efforts, washouts from a 2016 deluge in northern Wisconsin, and an unlikely alliance between farmers and lakeside homeowners highlight efforts to protect Wisconsin's land and waters, detailed in the 2017 Land and Water Conservation Annual Report.

Land and water conservation staff in the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection presented the report to the Land and Water Conservation Board at its June meeting in Madison. It is available online at <https://datcp.wi.gov> under the Publications menu.

Conservation efforts in Wisconsin depend on county land conservation departments and landowners working with DATCP, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. Often private non-profit environmental groups are also part of the cooperative effort. All told, conservation spending in Wisconsin in 2017 totaled more than \$87 million. Of that, about \$18 million was state funds, mostly distributed to county land and water conservation departments, and about \$59 million came from federal funds. Local governments kicked in more than \$8 million, and almost \$2 million came from private organizations and other sources.

The annual report is required by Wisconsin law. The report used to be mostly lists of

conservation practices installed and dollars spent, but in recent years, it is used as an opportunity to shine a spotlight on success stories in the conservation world.

Counties featured in this year's report:

Bayfield County - That July 2016 deluge accelerated erosion along Whittlesey Creek, which flows through a national wildlife refuge into Lake Superior. Overnight, the streambank washed away up to a bridge on a town road and within five feet of a power pole. The end result was a stabilized streambank and improved habitat for the coaster brook trout, a native trout that spawns in the creek and spends its adult life in the lake. (p. 23)

Chippewa County - The July 2016 rainstorms eroded a gully that was 22 feet deep and the length of a football field on a Chippewa Falls farm. Unable to secure federal disaster relief, the landowner turned to Chippewa County Department of Land Conservation and Forest Management for help designing and building a system of berm, buffers and dams to prevent further land loss. (p. 15)

Columbia County - A notice of violation that took an old-school young farmer by surprise led to a project to control runoff from a feedlot, shore up stream banks, establish rotational grazing, add watering stations, and keep cattle out of the stream. Another, happier surprise came out of all that when calf health improved in his beef herd, because the calves could easily get to clean water. (p. 6)

Florence County - The Lakes and Rivers Association inventoried stream crossings in the county, helping prioritize conservation work and funding. In 2017, two undersized culverts on Wood Creek, the county's highest quality trout stream, were slated for replacement, along with a culvert on an unnamed stream that was damaged in the heavy rains of 2017. WE Energies funding was key, along with both the county and the Town of Florence. (p. 25)

Fond du Lac County - Fond du Lac County's agronomist decided to take the farmers-teaching-farmers approach into the classroom, bringing in two producers and nutrient management advocates into her annual nutrient management training. One had flatlands, the other had steep hills and valleys, one had 220 head of dairy and beef combined, the other was a 950-head CAFO. But they were both open to data-driven decision-making and had credibility with farmers. (p. 9)

Pepin County - Concern about high nitrate levels in drinking water brought the land conservation and management departments together with the county health department and UW-Extension to develop the ThinkWater School. It offers tools and skills for effective adult

and community water education and outreach. (p. 20)

Pierce County - It borders the Mississippi, but erosion control efforts here focus on the small watersheds that eventually drain to the big river. The county land conservation department encourages experimentation among farmers to increase rainfall infiltration and decrease cropland erosion, offers the incentive of tax credits through Farmland Preservation Program participation that requires conservation compliance, and rents a no-till drill so farmers can try the technology before they buy. (p. 13)

Sheboygan - The Elkhart Lake community, worried about toxic algae blooms, formed a collaboration among the lake improvement association, county planning and conservation, and Sheboygan River Basin Partnership to investigate where the phosphorus originated that was feeding those blooms. The result was installation of a new technology - a phosphorus-reducing iron filtration bed on the edge of land volunteered by a farmer. (p. 21)

Vernon County - The county's land and water conservation department shares a hands-on, multisensory watershed project with local school kids. Last year, students in the project entered 630 posters in the state and national Conservation Poster Contest. (p. 20)

Vilas County - A livestock operation in this tourism-driven county needed help with the annual problem of spring thaw that turned a shed and a watering area into a muddy mess for cattle and horses, compacting soil and leading to runoff. County technical help and cost sharing helped the owners build an access road, concrete slabs and gravel to solve the problem and help save the lakes that are the county's economic backbone. (p. 24)

Waukesha County - A partnership among the county, School District of Waukesha and Carroll University has revitalized environmental education in the county, connecting the community with UW-Extension resources, the Retzer Nature Center, professional development opportunities and recycling programs. In addition, teachers have access to a land conservation tour and Project WET, offering water education training. (p. 20)