

Sand County Foundation: New program links conservation award recipients with underserved farmers & ranchers

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MADISON, Wis. – Award-winning, conservation-minded landowners will soon be sharing their knowledge by serving as mentors for historically underserved farmers and ranchers.

Since 2003, the Sand County Foundation's [Leopold Conservation Award](#) has recognized nearly 150 farmers, ranchers and forestland owners nationwide for their efforts to improve soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat.

A \$250,000 Conservation Collaboration Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will fund Sand County Foundation's two-year pilot project to promote conservation outreach by its award recipients.

"Leopold Conservation Award recipients are ambassadors who regularly discuss the importance of agricultural conservation with their peers and the general public. This project will empower our network of award recipients to share a range of knowledge, from how to apply for an NRCS conservation program to technical assistance, with an important audience," said Dr. Heidi Peterson, Sand County Foundation's Vice President of Agricultural Research and Conservation.

"Research shows that awareness of conservation programs is one of three key challenges for historically underserved producers, along with access to land for expansion and available credit," Peterson said. "Networking and knowledge-sharing

about conservation practices is a significant predictor of conservation practice adoption.”

“While there is no need to create new programs, there is a need to transfer program knowledge to others. Sand County Foundation’s method is a great way to transfer this knowledge to underserved groups,” said Denise Coleman, Pennsylvania State Conservationist for the USDA NRCS.

“Historically underserved farmers and ranchers face many challenges. Knowing someone to ask about a conservation practice can build confidence and have a lasting impact,” said Dick Cates, a Wisconsin farmer who received the Leopold Conservation Award in 2013. “I look forward to participating as a mentor.”

“We all benefit when farmers and ranchers discuss how their farms impact soil health and water quality. We are optimistic this important work will continue beyond its two-year pilot phase,” said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation’s President and Chief Executive Officer.

The project’s title, “Empowering Landowners by Advancing a Land Ethic,” is a nod to renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold. In his influential 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold called for an ethical relationship between people and the land. He inspired landowners to adopt what he called “a land ethic”: a moral responsibility to treat land, water and wildlife with respect.

[Sand County Foundation](#) is a national non-profit that works at the intersection of agriculture and environmental improvement. For more than 50 years, Sand County Foundation has evaluated and demonstrated conservation practices with farmers, ranchers, foresters and businesses. These efforts produce clean water, healthy soil, abundant wildlife habitat and opportunities for outdoor recreation.

For more information about sponsoring or participating in the program, contact Dr. Heidi Peterson at hpeterson@sandcountyfoundation.org.

For more information about the Leopold Conservation Award, contact Lance Irving at lirving@sandcountyfoundation.org.