

# Farmers for Sustainable Food: Farmer proves it's never too late to learn new practices

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SHEBOYGAN FALLS, Wis. — Many farmers may feel it is too late in the game for them to change the way they have been farming, but a Sheboygan Falls farmer Chuck Born takes a different view: “You’re never too old to try something new.”



Born and his wife, Jenny, are third-generation farmers practicing conservation on their farm. Born purchased the farm from his father in 1975 and continued milking cows until 2005. When he sold the milking cows, he started planting no-till soybeans and wheat. Now, Born manages 270 acres and rotationally grazes nearly 30 British White Park cattle on interseeded grasses and clovers.

“Since I started farming, I’ve always been interested in sustainable agriculture. It didn’t always work out, but that’s always been how I farm,” Born said.

Conservation isn’t new for Born. In 1980, he received the Outstanding Cooperator Award from the Sheboygan County Soil and Water Conservation Department. However, as more practices arise, such as cover cropping, he has faced challenges in purchasing equipment necessary to implement those practices.

A neighbor approached Born, offering to do custom work on his acres to get cover crops established and continue no-tilling. Through this partnership, Born became a member of Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers, a farmer-led conservation group helping connect farmers to try more soil health practices and protect the local watershed.

“Talking to these young neighboring farmers like SRPF board president Brody Stapel, who are so enthused about sustainability, inspires me to make the effort to make these practices work,” Born said. “It takes a while to change us old guys, but we are coming around because we see that it works.”

Soil stewardship takes time. These local farms are building soil, earthworm populations and root systems. Born sees the benefits of cover cropping and no-tilling by breaking up field compaction, carrying farm equipment better and stopping erosion. He encourages others to come to SRPF field days and talk with other farmer members because the best learning comes from someone who has already experimented.

SRPF’s 37 members represent 25,021 acres and approximately 12,635 dairy cows and beef cattle. The group collaborates with university researchers, environmental groups and community leaders to promote and implement innovative farming practices.

### **Action drives results**

In 2022, members planted 7,630 acres of cover crops and 15,222 acres using strip-tillage and no-tillage. In all, conservation practices increased by 10% from the previous year. From 2018 to 2022, the use of cover crops increased by 165%, and four times the number of acres planted using no-till practices. Some farmers incorporate multiple practices on the same fields.

All that work significantly reduces the chance of harmful runoff into streams and lakes.

Last year, the farmers potentially prevented an estimated 50,983 pounds of phosphorus from leaving the fields, decreased sediment erosion by 40,262 tons and reduced CO2 equivalents by 7,113 tons, according to an analysis shared by Farmers for Sustainable Food; the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; and The Nature Conservancy. For comparison, a mid-size

dump truck can carry 10 tons of sediment. One 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 tons of CO2 reduction by SRPF members equal the greenhouse gas emissions from 1,533 cars driven for a year.

The modeling-based analysis calculated an estimate of the potential impact of cover crops, strip-tillage and no-tillage compared to more conventional methods typical to SRPF's area.



Born knows conventional agriculture needs to change. He feels that as a country and world, farms can't sustain high input, high fertilizer, high tillage and high erosion. Diesel fuel and tillage equipment aren't getting any cheaper.

"We can't watch our soil run down the river. It's all about keeping people on the land sustainably," Born said. "It's important to me to show others that conservation can be done anywhere."

As the director of agriculture strategies for TNC in Wisconsin, Steve Richter works closely with SRPF to introduce new ideas and provide support. He sees how farmers are learning from each other and gaining confidence across the watershed by staying connected.

"I am impressed by the growth in enthusiasm and interest in conservation practices by the SRPF farmers," Richter said. "The SRPF board members continue to put the effort in to hold events, offer cost-share programs and offer help to the farmer members. It's this effort that I believe makes membership in SRPF enjoyable and rewarding to farmers. They are working and learning together, climbing for new goals."

## **BY THE NUMBERS**

Number of acres covered by conservation practices among Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers members:

- 2018 — 20,427
- 2019 — 72,947
- 2020 — 89,080
- 2021 — 86,294
- 2022 — 96,920

*\*Multiple conservation practices can be used on a farm field*

Potential impact of conservation practices in 2022:

- Phosphorus runoff reduction — 50,983 pounds
- Sediment erosion reduction — 40,262 tons