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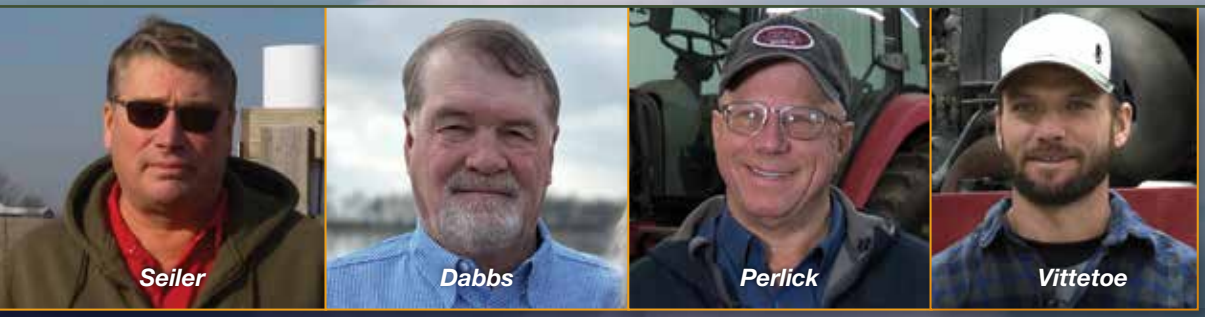
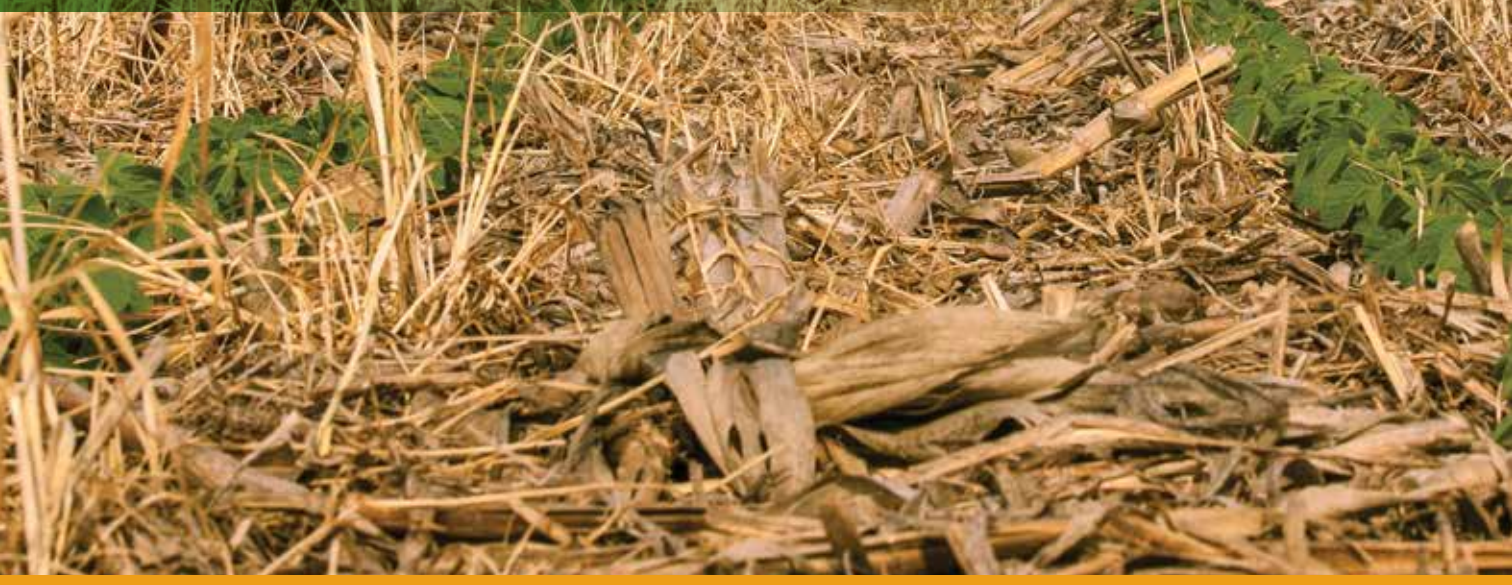


Conservation Legacy Awards

Honoring Farmer Achievements in Modern Agriculture that Enhance Sustainability



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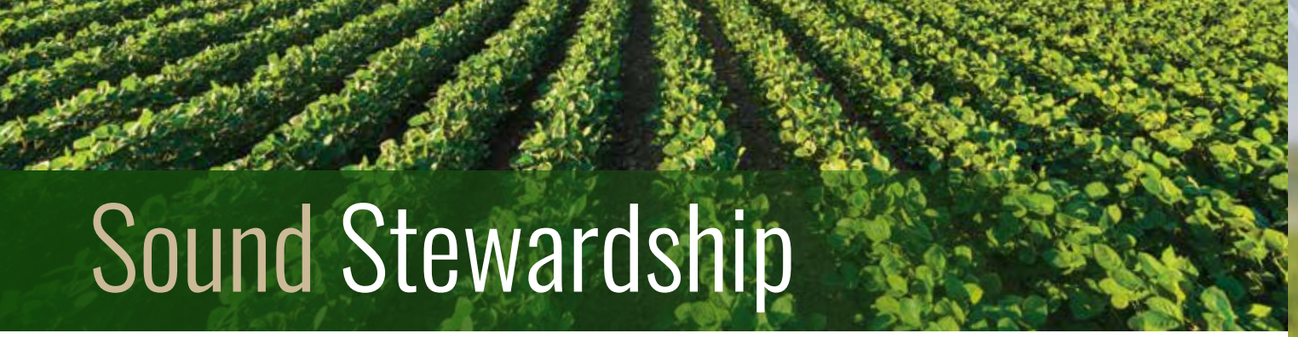


Sound Stewardship

Honoring four farm families for conservation achievements through the ASA Conservation Legacy Award program.

They are pioneers, trendsetters, innovators, leaders. They are true stewards of conservation, and their legacies embody a rich heritage in land and water sustainability. This year, we honor four growers with spirited legacies in agriculture. We congratulate four exceptional soybean farmers, each a regional winner of the American Soybean Association (ASA) 2023 Conservation Legacy Awards:

UPPER MIDWEST
Thomas Perlick, Wisconsin

MIDWEST
Michael Vittetoe, Iowa

NORTHEAST
Les Seiler, Ohio

SOUTH
Lori and Terry Dabbs, Arkansas

The conservation commitment and sponsorship support from the ASA, the United Soybean Board, BASF, Bayer, Valent, Nutrien, Farm Journal and Top Producer make this distinguished award program possible.

Here's what some of our sponsors have to say as they honor the conservation achievements and sustainability efforts of this year's recipients:

"The Conservation Legacy Award recipients are shining examples of how U.S. soybean farmers are dedicated and responsible stewards of the land," said ASA President Daryl Cates, a farmer from Columbia, Illinois. "U.S. farmers work hard to grow crops in a sustainable manner, with a focus on continuous improvement in their management practices. They want to protect their legacy and preserve the environment for future generations."

As a soybean farmer in Michigan, a United Soybean Board Executive Committee member and a farmer-leader, Laurie Isley knows first-hand the value and importance of sustainability practices. Isley explains, "Continuing to practice precision farming and efficient water usage has allowed us to become better stewards of our land. My husband and I are consumers as well, and our goal is to continue to protect and maintain our land in a progressive way that pushes the needle forward for everyone—our family, consumers across the globe and the soybean industry."

Senior Vice President of BASF Agricultural Solutions North America Paul Rea adds, "Preserving and cultivating the land to extract the bounty that the world's expanding population requires is an esteemed legacy, and one that BASF is honored to support. We are pleased to help recognize the ASA Conservation Legacy Award winners who meet the challenges of today, while balancing the needs of future generations. We share that passion and dedication for farming—the biggest job on Earth."

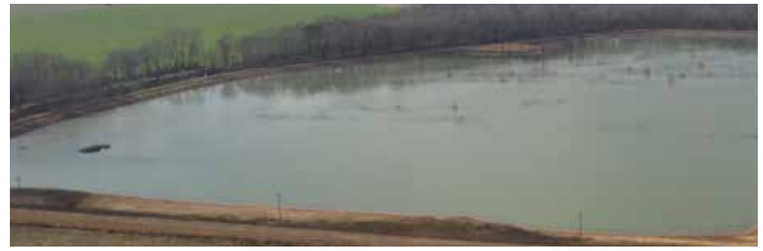
According to Martha Smith, head of industry affairs for Bayer, "We know that farmers are uniquely positioned to help feed, fuel and clothe our growing population while addressing climate change through how they manage land and natural resources. Through innovation and new opportunities for farmers, it's important that they benefit from the impactful work they're doing and that they are incentivized for not only what they produce, but how—and their positive impact on the environment."

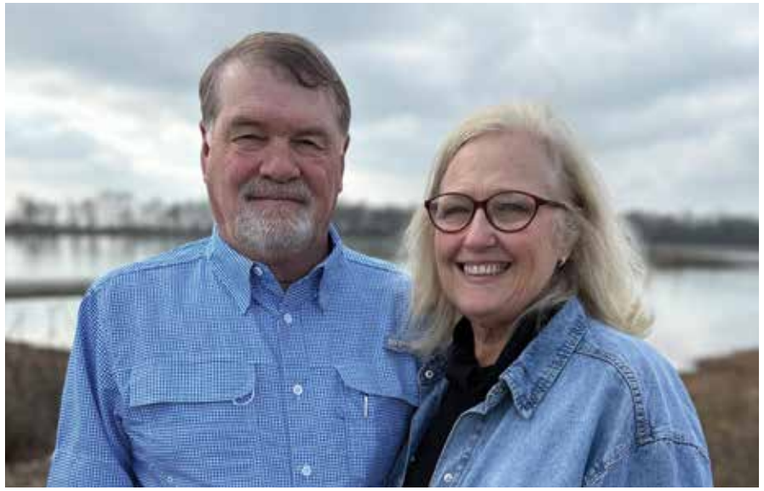
"Farmers continue to be the leaders on implementing sustainable practices to improve soil health, reduce environmental impacts from inputs and increase carbon sequestration to fight climate change, many times at their own cost," says BeckyJo Smith, associate director of sustainable solutions at Valent U.S.A. "Valent appreciates the opportunity to recognize this year's ASA Conservation Legacy Award winners who take those extra steps to build a lasting legacy at home and within their communities."

We appreciate the support of our sponsors who make the ASA 2023 Conservation Legacy Award program possible. Hats off, again, as we congratulate this year's regional award program winners.

"They [farmers] want to protect their legacy and preserve the environment for future generations." *— ASA President Daryl Cates*

Water First





Terry and Lori Dabbs cultivate a lifetime of water conservation in their farming legacy.

Water. It's their most treasured resource, yet their greatest challenge.

For Stuttgart, Arkansas farmers Terry and Lori Dabbs, their farming legacy solely focuses on water conservation.

"Water is the most important thing to our farm," Terry says simply.

Generations of Conservation

From a young age, Terry Dabbs knew he wanted to farm. Growing up on the farm, he followed his father and grandfather everywhere they went.

After college, Terry rented 160 acres of ground beside his dad's operation and worked in cooperation with him and an uncle until being able to purchase machinery to farm independently.

Lori also knew agriculture would be a part of her future as much of her youth was spent tagging along beside her father and grandfather as they farmed.

After Terry and Lori married in the early 1990s and began their farming operation, they gradually built their business before Lori's dad retired in 1998.

"When her dad decided to retire, we let go of some of the ground that we were farming so we could take over her family's farm operation," Terry says.

Both the Dabbs' LTD Farms and Lori's family operation, Hargrove Farms Inc., today focus on growing corn, soybeans and rice in a minimum till setting.

According to Lori, many of their stewardship practices are specific to the area because water quantity is a big concern, with irrigation efficiencies and water conservation a primary focus.

"One of our greatest challenges in our area is the availability and the competition for surface water," Lori explains. "The water conservation efforts on our farm really began before my grandparents ever purchased the farm."

Lori's grandfather purchased the 1,500-acre Hargrove Farms in the 1940s. Located on the Arkansas Grand Prairie, the farm is home to the area's second on-farm storage reservoir. It was built adjacent to a bayou, and water was pumped into the reservoir for irrigation purposes.

Lori says her grandfather and father put a conservation plan into place and began implementing water conservation measures considered to be before their time. The move was fortuitous because in the 1970s it became apparent that the aquifers in the area were declining, she adds. The Hargroves joined to bring in supplemental surface water from a nearby river.

When water from the alluvial aquifer disappeared in the early 1970s, the farm began using only surface water from the reservoir. Then in the 1980s, the Hargroves implemented a plan that leveled the ground to provide more efficient irrigation. The multi-year endeavor was about 65% complete when LTD Farms, owned by Terry and Lori and their son and daughter-in-law, Trent and Kristian Dabbs, took over the Hargrove operation at the time of Lori's dad's retirement.

With the purchase of an adjacent piece of land, conservation measures were implemented as Lori noted the property's main water source was a deep well pulling water from the Sparta aquifer. While the land was being leveled, poultry litter was added to the ground, and nutrients were restored to the soil.

Hargrove Farms today is a family-owned corporation that maintains ownership of the land and crop shares with LTD Farms, the primary operator.

"One hundred percent of the voting stock of Hargrove Farms is owned by women," Lori says. "As one of the operators of it today, I am proud of the foresightedness of my father and grandfather to have left us a legacy of stewardship and conservation."

Water Comes First

When Terry and Lori took over the Hargrove Farms, they built another reservoir and continued installing an underground pipeline to expand water conservation and use efficiency. They're quick to credit son Trent for helping them stay on the cutting edge of technology and how it might benefit their operation.

Terry says the next phase focuses on new irrigation technology involving soil sensors to help identify when to water their crops.

"Our mindset is to leave things better than we found them," Lori says. "Always look for ways to improve and always look for ways to do things more efficiently."

As part of the Arkansas Discovery Farms Program, water sampling stations in several locations monitor the nutrients in surface runoff at the Hargrove farm. Lori says the program is one of the most helpful tools they have in determining nutrient efficiency. The Dabbs host tours for a variety of agricultural groups, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and others to demonstrate the operation's efficiency.

> "We are the ultimate stewards of the land, the ultimate conservationists, and without those things, there's not a future for our farm. Our whole intent is to leave the land better than we found it and to leave it in a position for our heirs to carry it on." *— Lori Dabbs, Stuttgart, Arkansas, soybean, corn, rice grower*

Terry and Lori Dabbs

The Dabbs' management plan includes grid sampling and variable rate fertilizer application on all acres.

"Our conservation efforts concentrate a lot on irrigation efficiencies and capturing runoff in tailwater ditches and return ditches," Lori explains. "We currently capture 100% of the water on our farm either from rainfall or from irrigation runoff that goes back into our return ditches and tailwater ditches to use again."

The conservation-conscious practice helps the Dabbs tackle water as their greatest challenge all at the same time.

"We actually ran out of water a couple of years ago and had to cease irrigation in August and couldn't finish some crops out," Terry explains. "That really got my attention when that happened. Building these extra reservoirs, learning these different practices was one of the most difficult things for me to overcome."

Lori adds that they must be proactive in knowing their water situation going into the crop year. During the region's rainy season—late fall, early winter—she says they do all they can to hold water on their fields for waterfowl habitat so that when the water is released from the field, it will go back into their on-farm storage reservoirs.

"Technology is available today that we know how many acre-feet of water we're going to be using on each field, on each crop," she says. "We pretty much know through newer methods that we have that water available in our on-farm storage to be able to enter the crop year in a good position from a water standpoint."

The Dabbs were recently awarded two Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) contracts to level 95 acres. Lori says the leveling provides a more efficient irrigation system in labor, water use and nutrient retention to avoid losses from runoff.

"We also have flow meters on all of our pumps as well as remote sensors and controls on our phones with Variable Frequency Drive (VFD) on the pumps to be able to speed up, slow down or turn on and off as needed," she says.

Diverse Sustainability Practices

While water is the focus of the Dabbs' conservation efforts, they recently added cover crops to their rotation plans. About 250 acres were planted to cover crops in 2022 with plans to add up to about 35% of their soybean acreage annually.

"We're just getting started trying to learn where we can use cover crops and where they're going to best fit in our operation," Lori explains. "The University of Arkansas has done a lot of testing and research with cover crops, and they came out and said it's very difficult to use a cover crop in a rice rotation, but there are ways to use it in our corn and soybean fields."

Terry and Lori strive to leave as much residue as possible over winter. Corn is planted following beans by only re-bedding and not working the field additional times. Other stewardship practices the Dabbs include in their management plan focus on wildlife plots, wetland protection and enhancement, in addition to pollinator and monarch habitat plots.

"From an environmental standpoint, we have native prairie grasses on about seven acres," Lori says. "The grasses are native to this Grand Prairie region of Arkansas, and we're incorporating those to wildlife habitat and buffer strips between our fields and our reservoir. We are always looking for ways to add environmental and conservation measures to our operation."

Legacy for Life

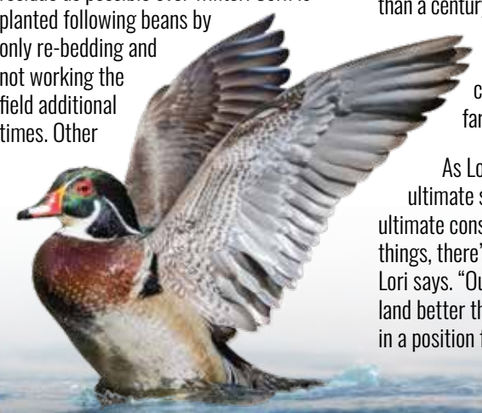
The Dabbs' agricultural heritage is as rich as the soil they farm.

For them, being named one of the American Soybean Association's Conservation Legacy Award winners is truly a credit to the family members who came before them, the ones who first crafted a love for the land and water and conserving it.

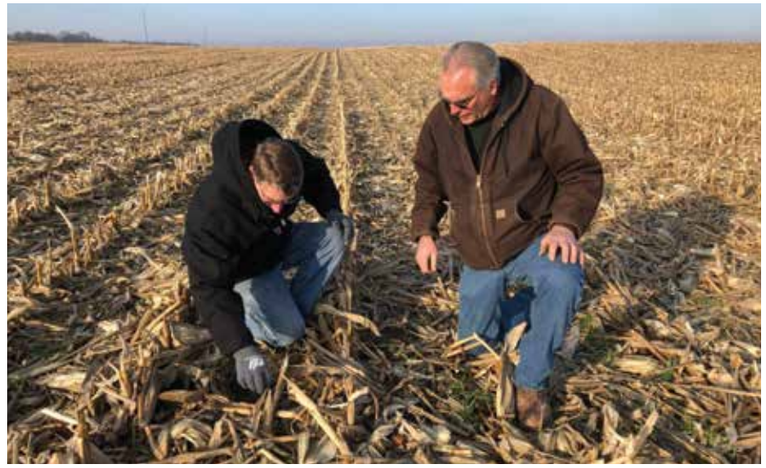
"Our whole family has been doing these practices, so we didn't just do this to win an award," Terry explains. "We did this to be sustainable and survive in our industry. It's an honor to win an award for something that you and your family worked so hard on and hopefully can continue doing."

While Lori's great-grandparents immigrated from Holland to the area, Terry's family has land that has been continuously owned for more than 110 years. Seeds sowed more than a century ago today have the Dabbs well-rooted for the future as their children and grandchildren continue cultivating the family's farming legacy.

As Lori concludes, "We are the ultimate stewards of the land, the ultimate conservationists, and without those things, there's not a future for our farm," Lori says. "Our whole intent is to leave the land better than we found it and to leave it in a position for our heirs to carry it on."



Les Seiler



A Conservation Advocate

Les Seiler's goal is sustainable crop production to preserve and improve the land for future generations.

Les Seiler cringes at the thought of soil and crop residue leaving the Ohio land he and his brother farm.

The veteran soybean grower knows he'll never get it back if that happens.

That's why Seiler says keeping the residue in place by having a crop growing on the land through the winter months is especially important in helping to build the soil.

Near Fayette, Ohio, Seiler Farms, Inc. makes its home not far from the Ohio-Michigan line. The operation includes Les, his brother Jerry, son Nathan, and Jerry's son, Jerad. While Jerry, Nathan and Jerad work off the farm, Seiler says they, along with their families, provide an extended support system that is key to making the family business successful.

Seiler Farms is part of the Western Lake Erie Basin where Les says farming practices need to be improved to help mitigate losses. He adds the Maumee River itself is one of the biggest contributors to the algal bloom issues of Lake Erie.

"We have so much soil erosion because we have a lot of poor soil health, and we can't infiltrate water on the land anymore," Seiler says. "We've seen the need to do something different besides the conventional farming practices of moldboard plowing and a lot of tillage."

Thinking Outside the Box

Faced with erosion problems, in 1986, the multi-generational operation turned to no-till to help keep the farm's soil in place.

In a world where change is often met with resistance, the Seiler's land stewardship journey has been led by their reliance on no-till followed by installing grass waterways, filter strips, subsurface drainage tile and a two-stage ditch on one farm.

But their quest for conservation hasn't come without challenges.

Seiler recalls when their strip-tilling experience in the mid-1990s was met by an arduous fall.

"I knew that somehow we had to get into cover crops," he says, "and all the time we were still continuous no-till. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how we could make cover crops work in our situation."

Seiler eventually discovered how to integrate cover crops into the farm's management plan. Today, the land is 100% cover cropped in addition to winter cereal species as part of the rotation. Traditional crops grown include soybeans, corn, wheat, barley for malt and alfalfa is also harvested for a nearby alfalfa mill.

"Every acre we farm has something growing on it, or we attempt to do something to get a cover growing, so we have got a living plant growing through the winter months," Seiler explains.

Proof in the Pudding

Three decades of thinking outside the box with the area's traditional farming methods have proved beneficial to Seiler's soil composition.

"Soils have changed dramatically over the years of using no-till and covers," he explains. "Infiltration rates have increased, erosion and runoff are reduced and nutrient inputs, especially phosphorus and potash, have been drastically reduced or eliminated. Organic matter content on the soils has increased."

Still, soil composition hasn't been the only change in the Seiler operation.

"We haven't strip-tilled anything for a long time, and we've been cutting back on our commercial fertilizer usage a lot," he says. "We're trying to cut back on herbicides to make this more of a regenerative farming operation by improving our soil health and what's going on in the soil."

The result, he says, has been an increase in soil organic matter as well as an expansion in crop diversity.

"We're seeing some pretty awesome results by doing that," he says.

Seiler's conservation efforts have also helped reduce soil erosion and promote water absorption.

Waterways are used where needed in the Seiler operation. The practice involves 15- to 30-foot-wide buffer strips on all fields and along streams. The most visible is what Seiler calls a "massive two-stage ditch in one of their major drainage channels." The venture was a cooperative effort with The Nature Conservancy.

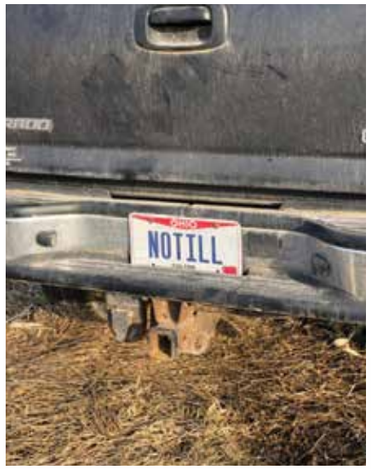
"The water moves very quickly, and before it was a waterway, it caused washouts and gullies that we were constantly needing to fill in," Seiler explained in an article for Ohio Ag Net and Ohio's Country Journal.

He said the two-stage ditch has multiple functions, including increasing vegetation on the banks, slowing the water that moves through the farm and removing less sediment and nutrients. The project also fosters diverse plant species and pollinators.

"We want to hold that water and keep using it to feed the crops," he explains. "By doing things differently, the way we can absorb water on the land is huge. That's where this whole soil health thing is so important."

Conservation Advocate

Seiler's goal is to sustainably produce crops with the least amount of environmental impact while preserving and improving the land for future generations. In addition, he unselfishly wants to share his knowledge with others.



The farm actively hosts field days in conjunction with area soil and water conservation districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and The Nature Conservancy. They also have an Ohio State University water quality monitoring site on the farm. Seiler has shared his soil health knowledge at conferences and through videos and webinars. Additionally, he and his brother communicate with their landlords to maintain good relations and assist with snow plowing, mowing and maintaining buffers around their fields.

"Our dad did the best job he could with the tools he had to work with," Seiler explains. "I feel like we must carry the torch a little farther because of what we can work with, too. You get so many years to do this, and you hope when you're finished, you've done as good a job as you possibly could have."

Seiler's conservation journey hasn't been an easy one, though.

When he started farming in the early 1980s, the agriculture economy itself was struggling, and many farmers tried no-till only to return to conventional farming methods.

"They said if they kept going [with no-till], they were going to go broke, but we've never seen that as an issue," Seiler says. "We always thought it was the best fit for us economically."

The progress Seiler has seen in soil test results over the years proves he's on the right track.

A no-till proponent, Seiler isn't afraid to step outside his comfort zone regarding other management strategies. 2022 was his eighth corn harvest without phosphorus application—a decision he says no farmer wants to make.

Many years of soil testing led Seiler to the decision, he says, knowing it was the right thing to do for the problematic geographical area in which he farms.

"I had started using calcium in my in-furrow mix," Seiler explains. "Calcium and phosphorus can't go together, or they'll solidify, so we had to drop one of them. I worked with a guy that was very good at helping us get started at this."

Seiler discovered that the farm's in-furrow treatments needed micronutrients and calcium, a blend he mixes himself, to help the plants get a jump start early in the growing season. The shift in thinking sent the veteran farmer to do what he calls "move toward ways that our crop is telling us what we need to change."

Cutting herbicide use is among other goals Seiler has for the operation. He hopes to continue to find cover crops that can be grown, which will further supply more of the nitrogen his corn crop requires. He's optimistic the roller crimper he recently purchased with a neighbor will help him achieve that goal.

Beyond Yield

While yield is the way to profitability for many of today's farmers, for Les Seiler, dollars and cents have come through his steadfast journey in land stewardship.

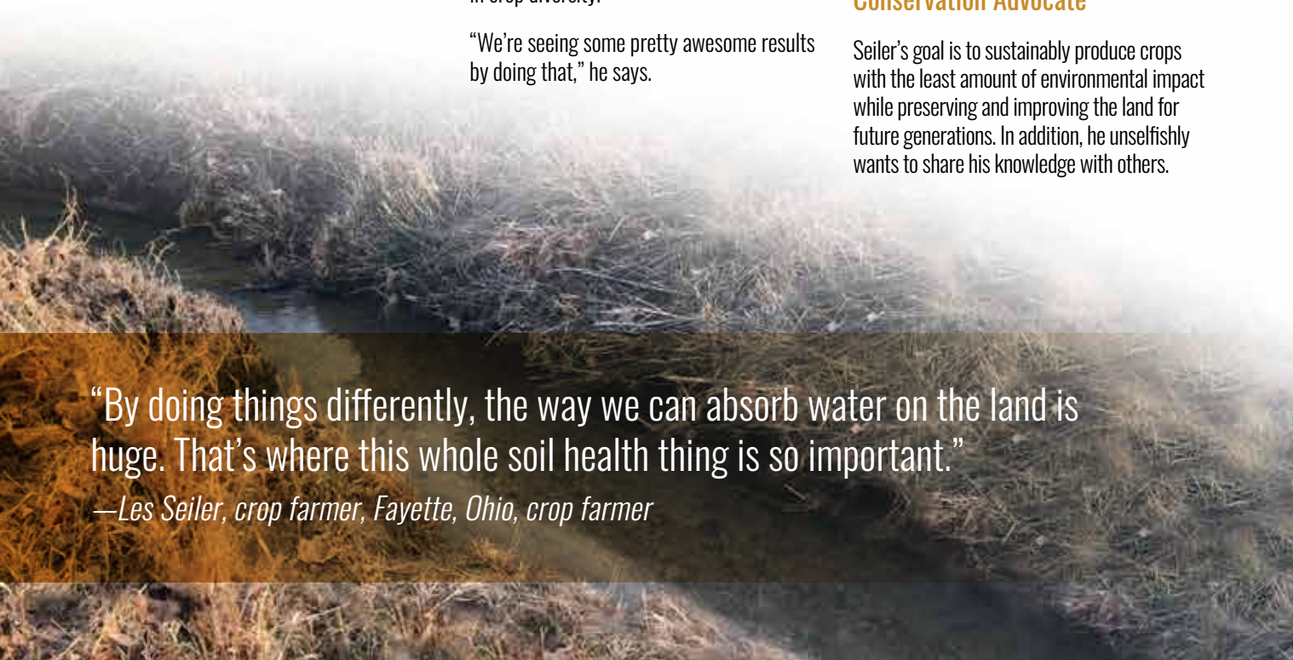
Still, he's quick to point out that his dad was always a believer in planting cereal rye, although he and his brother never knew the benefits of him planting it. Those efforts helped Seiler form a foundation to enhance soil health.

"It's made us way more profitable," Seiler says of the conservation practices he uses today. "Everybody thinks they must farm for yield. I know we're saving soil. I know we're not spending as much money on nutrients. That's something I really feel good about."

As one of the American Soybean Association's Conservation Legacy Award winners, Seiler says he's been blessed by the people he's connected with along this journey. Soil and water are among his passions.

He recalls the Toledo water crisis of 2014, in which several people had no access to water for a couple of days because of the algal blooms on Lake Erie. He realized during the event that he didn't want to be any part of causing people to be without water because it was contaminated.

"I don't think there should be anybody, anywhere in the world, that wonders where their next glass of water is coming from, or that water is going to be an issue," Seiler says. "I hope someday that somebody says, 'Well, I hope that that guy made a difference.' I don't want to be the one who didn't realize the importance of that."



"By doing things differently, the way we can absorb water on the land is huge. That's where this whole soil health thing is so important."

—Les Seiler, crop farmer, Fayette, Ohio, crop farmer

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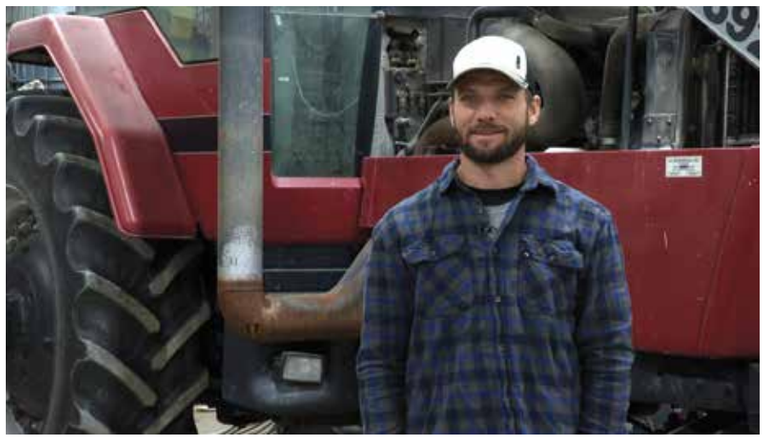


Michael Vittetoe's conservation efforts work to synchronize production agriculture with a vibrant ecosystem to produce nutritious food.

To say conservation is in Michael Vittetoe's blood would be an understatement.

The Washington, Iowa, soybean and corn farmer joined the family operation in 2014 after working off the farm as an engineer for five years.

"We have long strived to be good stewards of the land by taking action to reduce soil erosion and improve water quality," Vittetoe says.

In fact, Vittetoe's grandfather was an early adopter of reduced tillage in the area, moving away from the use of the moldboard plow. Waterways, terraces and filter strips have also been an integral part of the operation for decades.

"Going way back, [conservation] has been a part of our operation essentially since its inception," Vittetoe explains. "My dad was big on no-till back in the '80s when it was first starting to be a thing. The farm has been essentially no-till ever since."

The family's rich history in soil preservation is matched by its efforts to protect water quality through cover crops, waterways, terraces and filter strips.

"The goal is to keep all the soil here and as many of the nutrients here as we can so we can grow the best crop possible," Vittetoe says.

Today, the Vittetoe operation, Long Creek Pastures & Janden Ltd., includes 50 head of cattle in addition to row crops, cover crops and pasture. Vittetoe's grandfather, Leo, and father, Dennis, have a vast history in pork production, operating a farrow-to-finish hog enterprise for many decades before transitioning to the current contract grower arrangement.

Vittetoe's sister, Anne, also returned to the family farm a few years ago.

The southeast Iowa family business is nestled amid a county home to abundant hog operations. With strong demand for feed, most of the farm's corn is marketed to local mills, and soybeans are grown for Stine Seed Company and conventional use.

Crediting Cover

After more than a decade of using cover crops to help mitigate soil erosion on hilly fields, Vittetoe says they've used the practice on 100% of their row crop acres for the last two years.

"Over time, we began experimenting with cover crops on our flat, heavy clay soils to actively manage excess moisture in the spring, especially ahead of soybeans," he explains. "As we gained more experience with cover crops, we observed lower weed pressure in fields with living rye."

Vittetoe adds that, in many instances, no weeds were present. By integrating cover crops in their management plan, he says they've reduced chemical herbicide requirements by 60% to 70% in both corn and soybeans.

An in-row roller crimper was added to the operation in 2022 to terminate cereal rye in emerged soybeans. Vittetoe says the tool has great potential to help continue to reduce the chemical load on the farmland in the future.

"I see an opportunity to eliminate chemical herbicides in our soybeans in the near future as we continue to learn and gain experience with the system," Vittetoe says.

Cereal rye is the primary cover, seeded on all of Vittetoe's corn and soybean row crop acres.

"We've got a really good comfort level with cereal rye, and we know how to make it work," Vittetoe says. "It's really good at erosion control and weed control, as well as a number of other factors."

For the last four years, Vittetoe has also grown cereal rye for seed production. And, he says they have found it beneficial to use the cover in what he calls "relay cropping."

"We seed the rye in the fall like we normally would, and then we plant soybeans into it in the early spring and let them grow together for the first half of the growing season," Vittetoe explains. "When the rye is mature, we harvest it over the top of the soybeans, and then the soybeans take over the second half of the growing season with a normal harvest."

Vittetoe adds that the relay cropping helps them get two crops in one year, noting that traditional double cropping doesn't work in their area because the growing season is too short.

"It's a lot more complicated than just going out and growing straight rye or straight soybeans," Vittetoe says. "There are a lot of variables at play, but it's interesting, and I think it has very big potential to do really good things not only for profitability but for the ecosystem as well."

Sowing Seeds

While the primary focus of the Vittetoe operation is on row crop production, conservation practices have also found a place in the farm's forage and livestock entities.

According to Vittetoe, to help transition from row crops to perennial grasses in pastures, annual forages are being established in a setting like cover crops. He's focused on using a diverse mix, which might include three to as many as 15 or 20 different species. Examples include clovers, peas, annual ryegrass, sorghum Sudangrass, millet and other warm-season varieties.

"It's really interesting to see how some of those mixes work," Vittetoe says. "I would like to get some of those other species into our row crop and cover crop rotation as well. You can use a lot of different crops when you have an entire growing season to work with."

A believer in managing the ecosystem using regenerative grazing, Vittetoe provides habitat for every aspect of the soil

> "I believe there can be a future where production agriculture operates in sync with nature to produce nutritious food and healthy ecosystems across vast landscapes." *—Michael Vittetoe, Washington, Iowa, soybean and corn grower*

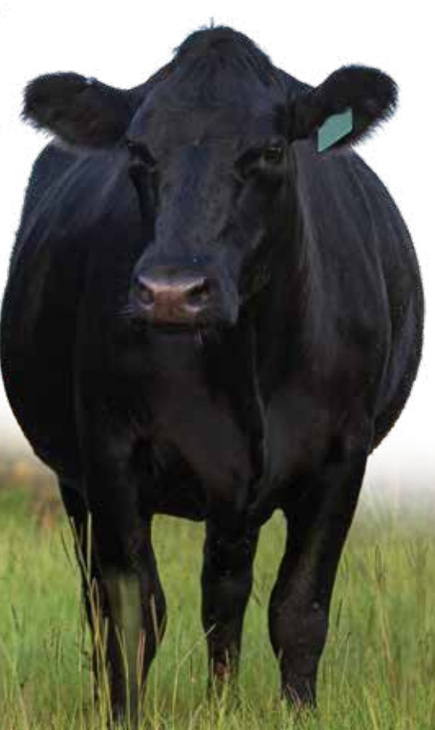
Michael Vittetoe

food web, from soil microbes to insects to birds and mammals.

“The amount of life being sustained on those acres is exponentially higher than even our best-managed row crop acres,” he notes.

While Vittetoe recognizes the conservation efforts already in place on their operation, he knows change must continue for the farm to be more sustainable in the long term.

“I think there can be a future where production agriculture operates in sync with nature to create healthy ecosystems across vast landscapes,” Vittetoe explains. “There is a lot of biology in livestock that can benefit the soil ecosystem when it is deposited directly on the land. This helps stimulate the system to grow healthy crops, resulting in healthy food and hopefully, healthy humans.”



Living Legacy

As a third-generation conservationist, Vittetoe says the management practices first put into use by his father and grandfather helped set the stage for him and his sister to carry on the family legacy.

“Having those baby steps in place from one generation to the next makes it that much easier to transition into some of the new [management practices],” Vittetoe says. “Some of the things we’re doing now have allowed us to transition without it being such a massive leap.”

Still, conservation is a work in progress as some strategies prove fruitful while others can be a bit more challenging, like determining what species work best under certain growing conditions.

Vittetoe says now that the operation has cover crops and no-till in place, they have been able to leverage those for erosion and weed control—both of which help add value to the operation’s bottom line. His sights are set on moving to a chemical-free system in the future. Once that is accomplished, Vittetoe says it will be possible to transition some acres to organic or another system to help secure a premium for the crops being grown.

A conservation advocate, Vittetoe participates in media interviews about the operation’s stewardship practices, including the YouTube series Iowa’s Front Forty for the Iowa Soybean Association, which celebrates the state’s conservation champions. He hopes the opportunities he’s been afforded encourage others to implement conservation practices on their acres.

“I believe in a future where production agriculture operates in sync with nature to create a vibrant ecosystem, healthy livestock, nutritious food and thriving humans,” Vittetoe explains. “We cannot successfully manage the food production system until we are able to grow healthy food to feed humans, while also feeding everything else that is a part of the natural ecosystem on production acres.”

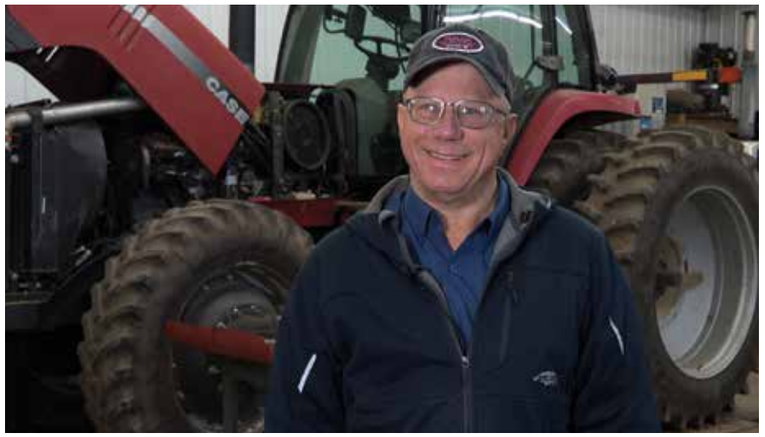
Vittetoe’s stewardship efforts extend to the community by planting steam bank buffer strips to protect soil loss and prevent nutrients, including animal waste material, from escaping into neighboring water.

“We only get so much topsoil, and we only have the resources that we have,” Vittetoe says. “Once those get washed away, we can’t get that topsoil back. We need to do more than just conserve it. We need to get it healthy.”

With children of his own, Vittetoe says his goal is to help develop systems that will be functional not only now, but for generations into the future.

“It’s nice to be recognized for our efforts,” Vittetoe says, “but that’s not the reason we’re out here doing this. Hopefully, others can see what we’re doing so that it gives them ideas for things they can do on their operations to help create a healthy ecosystem.”

Changing Attitudes



Wisconsin farmer Tom Perlick blazes a conservation trail when others said it couldn't be done.

They said he couldn't. He knew he could.

Tom Perlick's conservation journey is all about changing attitudes.

From coming back to the family farm after his father's untimely death to charting his own course in unexplored management techniques, the now veteran farmer is a pioneer in the northwest Wisconsin conservation frontier.

Facing Adversity

Perlick's family has farmed in Beaver Brook Township, Washburn County, Wisconsin, since 1920. His parents purchased the farm he now lives on in 1958. Though dairying was long in his heritage, Perlick opted to sell the cows to a cousin after his father unexpectedly passed away in 1994.

"It was very important for me to keep the farm in the family," Perlick explains.

At the time, Perlick owned a crop consulting company in Minnesota. For the first three years, he drove 100 miles each way to plant and harvest crops. A member of the Army National Guard, Perlick was charged with balancing military duties with farming, crop consulting and family. After a few busy years, he moved to the farm in 1998 and retired from the National Guard to concentrate on farming, crop consulting and family.

During the first year of farming, Perlick grew 30 acres of spring wheat and 25 acres of corn. Acres were added until the operation capped at 3,000 acres in 2018. When he turned 60, Perlick downsized the operation to its present 1,800 acres.

Following in his father's footsteps, Perlick took to the fields with the same moldboard plow.

But Perlick recalls thinking there had to be a better way to prepare the soil for the growing season. He turned to a Rawson Zone-Till System, started by Michigan farmer Ray Rawson, where the planter is hooked behind an attachment that runs three fluted coulters/row to make a strip. Perlick now uses a strip-till system with a Montag air cart and RTK GPS to make the strips before planting. When he first started with the Rawson system, he says the neighbors kept asking when he was going to plant.

Rocks became a limiting factor in the success of the Rawson Zone-Till System. Perlick says he needed a system that was a better fit for the type of soil in the region. That's when he says he really got serious about no-till.

"For soybeans and small grains, I bought a CrustBuster no-till drill and planted with that," Perlick explains.

With Roundup Ready crops not yet on the market, Perlick says weed control was challenging.

"It was such a challenge because nobody else was doing it, and everybody said it [no-till] couldn't be done," Perlick notes.

Still, the veteran farmer recognized that no-till was better for the soil and less labor-intensive than conventional tillage practices.

"We have really fragile soils here," Perlick says. "We don't have a lot of topsoil. We've got sand, silt loam and loamy sands. And we've got a lot of lakes and rivers and streams; there are at least 20 lakes within a 4-mile radius of the farm. It was very important to me to conserve the quality of our environment here in the county."

Charting Course

Perlick's first experience growing cover crops was anything but a huge success. In fact, the self-professed "epic fail" sent the conservationist to dig deep into what he had done wrong.

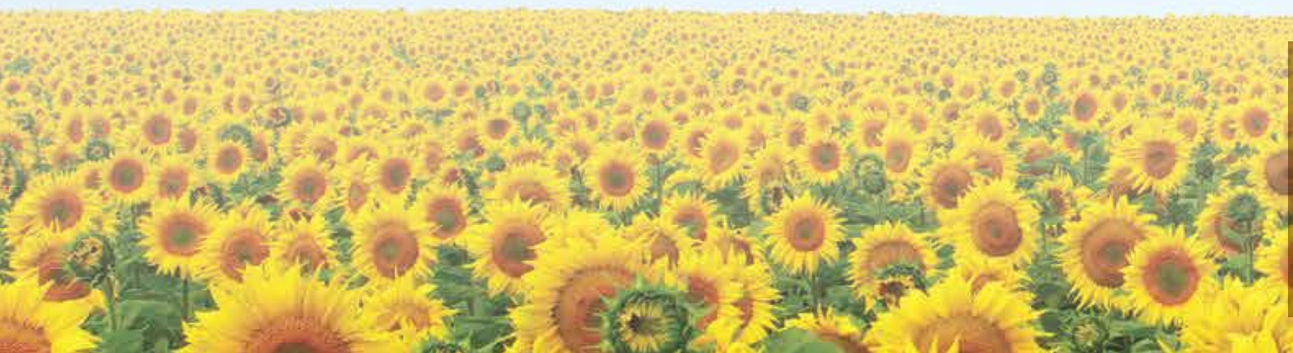
"Cover crops were just getting started," Perlick explains. "I had no idea what I was doing. I'd heard a little bit about them, and I didn't get them terminated in time."

Perlick took a time out from cover crops to research, study and learn about what the practice could bring to his operation. His second run at growing cover crops, though, would prove more successful, and since has expanded to include about 500 acres of cover crops in his rotation.

"We never stop learning, and what we think works now, five years from now, we might find a much better way," Perlick says.

Corn, soybeans and small grains are no-tilled with a cover crop sowed behind the small grains. Perlick says using tillage radishes, oats and barley as a cover crop has improved soil health, soil porosity and reduced erosion.

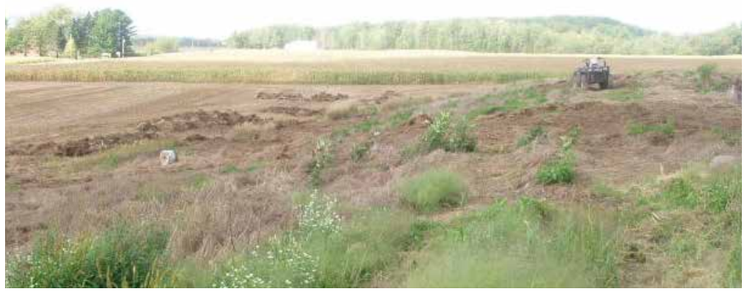
Learning what cover crops could bring to his operation has been amazing, Perlick says, as



"We're learning so much more about how the mycorrhizal fungi, different bacteria and living organisms that are in the soil make our soil more productive and healthier. We reduce erosion or minimize the erosion to the maximum amount that we can."

— Tom Perlick, Beaver Brook Township, Washburn County, Wisconsin, row crop farmer

Tom Perlick



the number of earthworms alone on his farm have grown exponentially.

“Soil health is what I think it’s really brought to us,” he explains. “We’re learning so much more about how the mycorrhizal fungi, different bacteria and living organisms that are in the soil make our soil more productive and healthier. We minimize erosion to the maximum amount that we can.”

Charging Forward

While land stewardship is foremost in Perlick’s management regime, turning a profit is the bottom line.

“We can have all the best intentions in the world and want to do all the right things we can, but if you’re not making money in your operation, you’re never going to be able to do those things,” Perlick explains.

Because the river market and other end users are 70 miles or more from the Perlick operation, transportation costs have shifted Perlick’s thinking to value-added opportunities for the crops he grows.

More than 20 years ago, the Wisconsin farmer started growing sunflowers. Initially it was to produce biodiesel, in 2006 and 2007 he operated the entire farm on the biodiesel produced from the sunflowers grown on the farm. Now the sunflowers are cleaned, bagged and sold as birdseed throughout northwest Wisconsin both on the farm and through retailers. About 25% of the corn Perlick produces is sold in 50-pound bags as shell corn for recreational feeders or hunters.

“I can add value right here on our farm and not have the cost of transportation eating away at margins,” Perlick explains. “The other thing that’s good about that is I can set my own price versus having to rely only on a commodity price. We’re trying to be a price maker.”

Perlick’s operation further adds value to its crops through an on-farm distillery, which opened in 2014 when Perlick’s son returned to the farm after serving in the Air Force, then college and law school.

The move has helped the farm develop an alternative market for the small grains it grows. Perlick initially converted a two-story dairy barn into the distillery and tasting room. As that segment of the operation grew, another building was remodeled to accommodate the needs of the distillery and tasting room. Two additional expansions have since been made to accommodate customers.

“We make all the distilled spirits out of barley and wheat grown on the farm and water from the well,” Perlick explains. “So, everything that comes out of the distillery is made from what we grow here on the farm. We are one of the very few estate distilleries.”

Living Legacy

Tom Perlick’s roots run deep in Beaver Brook Township; his great-grandfather, Edward Perlick, immigrated to the area from Germany. He purchased land initially in 1919, bought more and moved there to begin dairy farming in 1920.

While Perlick chose crop farming over carrying on his family’s dairy legacy, the veteran farmer has blazed a trail all his own when it comes to conservation and land stewardship.

In the infancy of his farm business, Perlick had his sights on keeping the farm in the family. He also hoped to one day pass the heritage onto his children and enable them to experience farming if they chose.

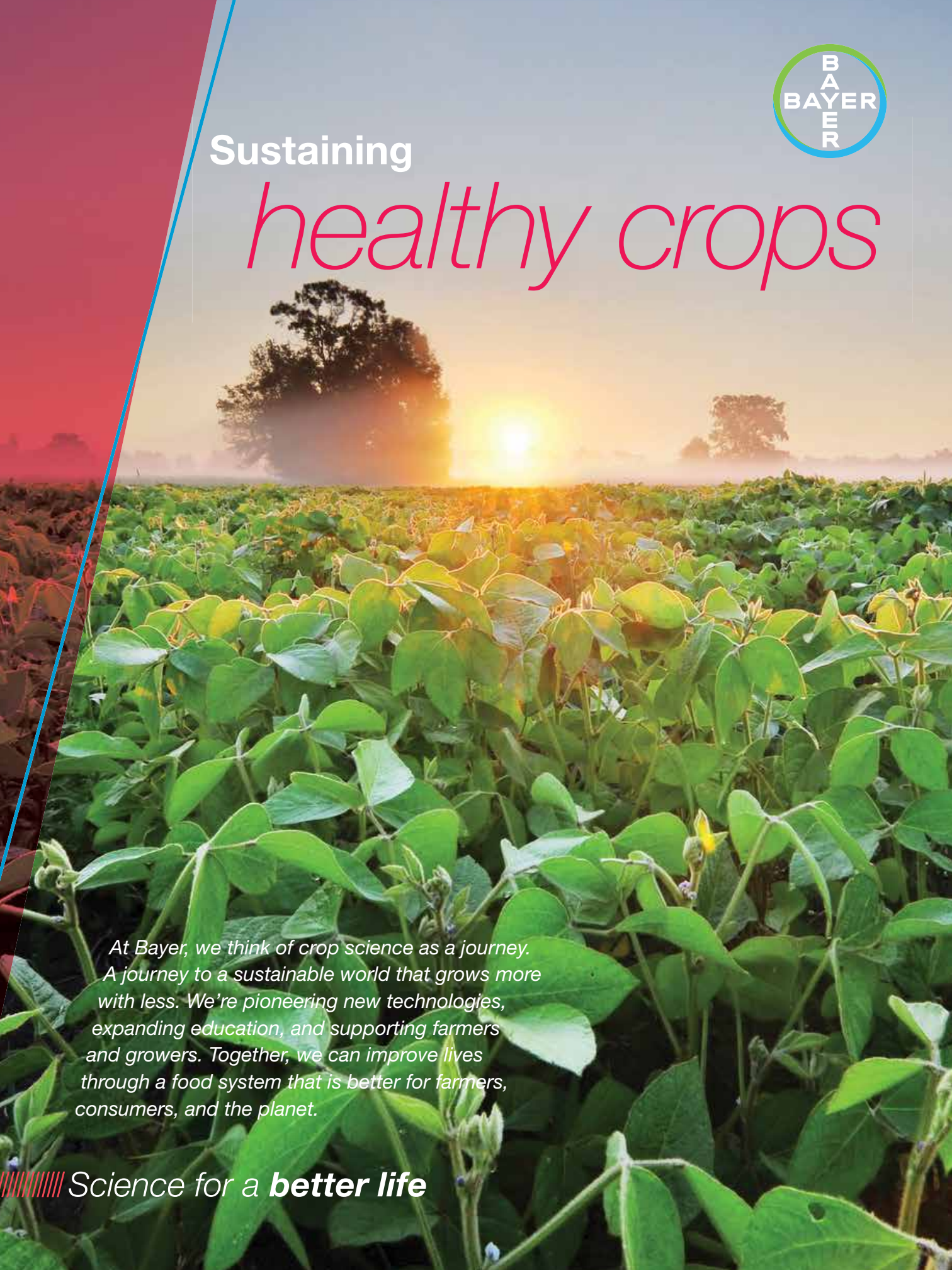
All the while, the steward focuses on sharing his agriculture story with others.

“I get a chance to talk to a lot of people about agriculture, about farming, what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, how we’re doing it, why it’s important for me to take care of my land and be a good steward,” Perlick explains.

“We have to make sure we have good, healthy soils in order to grow good, profitable crops,” he says. “They go hand in hand.”

During his tenure, Perlick has far exceeded no-till and cover crops. From wetlands restoration to forestry management, pollinator plots and critical area seeding to manure pit remediation, nitrogen rate studies, grassed waterways and beyond, Perlick’s conservation legacy is all about changing attitudes. When others said he couldn’t succeed, he proved them wrong.

“There’s really only one thing in our entire lives that we have control over,” Perlick concludes. “It’s our attitude. Everything else is out of our control.”



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