Farmers and Landowners Partnering for Clean Water in the Great Lakes

Individual Stories from the Field

Nearly one third, or 284 million acres of U.S. land, are owned and rented out by landowners who do not farm. This dynamic can make the decision to implement conservation practices complicated for both farmers and landowners. In addition, USDA data indicates that women are inheriting more farmland. They are often the primary decision makers on farms and inclined towards conservation, but are underrepresented in USDA conservation programs.

With support from the Great Lakes Protection Fund, AFT is leading a team of local conservation districts, extension agents, the IPM Institute, and sociologists to create a coordinated, replicable model for increasing conservation practices on rented farmland. The project team is piloting this work in the Portage and Toussaint River Basins in northwestern Ohio, and the Genesee River Basin in western New York—where 22 to 49 percent of the farmland is leased.

Our Farmers & Landowners Partnering for Clean Water in the Great Lakes project is designed to engage three key groups:

1. Women landowners
2. Farmers who lease land
3. Agricultural retailers or consultants who provide support and advice to farmers

This series of farmer and landowner profiles highlights the stories of farmers and landowners working together to improve the stewardship of farmland in the Great Lakes. In this profile, Sue Zelter and Brendyn George discuss the importance of communication between landowner and tenant to help improve farming practices in the great lakes.
Sue Zelter & Brendyn George, Learning Circle Participant & Tenant in Bowling Green, Ohio

Sue Zelter, a generational farmer, and Brendyn George, tenant and long-time friend for Sue, showcase the importance of communicating and implementing conservation practices. “I own over 100 acres of farmland that was passed down in my family to me. My tenant, Brendyn, and I have always had great communication. We do a 50/50 crop share which has always worked for us,” Sue described.

A 50/50 crop share enables a farmer and the landowner to work together, making decisions that are best for the farm, all while taking on the same risks. Brendyn said, “You need to make your landlord your friend and always keep in good communication to build trust. Sue has attended workshops and educated herself on many farming aspects, she even looks at the paperwork!”

“I’m not the only woman in agriculture who wants to gain knowledge. I attended two women learning circles and found many other women who owned farmland. It’s important to be able to learn from other women and to gain a voice for what you want on your farmland,” Sue stated.

With most businesses, communication is a key component of success. Farms that involve a tenant and landowner relationship require communication as a key component towards the success of the operation. Brendyn and Sue have found that by educating themselves with different farming practices—they are able to communicate more efficiently.

Both have found resources through their communities to both educate themselves and to implement conservation practices on the land. Brendyn said, “Women who own land can find local groups and even go to their FSA office to gain knowledge. I became one of the first farmers in the area to implement filter strips thanks to the FSA office. It’s all about talking to your tenant and establishing a good relationship.”

Brendyn and Sue represent a model for farmers and landowners in the state of Ohio. Each landowner is unique in how they communicate as a whole. It is important to establish the best form of effective communication for your relationship.

The Great Lakes Protection Fund hopes to continue increasing landowner and farmer relationships alongside the use of conservation practices to improve soil health and reduce run-off from leased farmland.

We are grateful for the generous support of the Great Lakes Protection Fund to make this work possible. American Farmland Trust works in collaboration with a team of organizations to foster the adoption of agricultural conservation practices on rented farmland that can improve water quality of the Great Lakes: Wood and Ottawa Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Ohio; Cornell University Cooperative Extension NWNY Dairy, Livestock & Field Crops Team in New York; Utah State University; and IPM Institute of North America.