



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:



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. Gina Skelly and Mary Traxler, two sisters and Learning Circle Participants in New York share their story as landowners partnering with their farmer, Tom Corcoron to implement conservation practices that help the great lakes.

Gina Skelly & Mary Traxler, Learning Circle Participants in New York

Sisters Mary Traxler and Gina Skelly grew up in the city of Rochester, New York, for most of their childhood. Summers were spent on the family farm southwest of the city in Caledonia when they were young teenagers. Mary and Gina fondly recall learning to drive tractors before getting their licenses and working on the land during those summers. “It was an interesting time for us to learn about farming,” Gina says. “I don’t think we appreciated what we had at the time, like most kids don’t. But now looking back, I’m glad I had the opportunity to be a stewardess, a custodian of the family jewel.”

Mary and Gina’s father continued to run the farm, which had been operated by the family since 1884, renting it to local farmers who grew corn, soybeans, and wheat. When he passed, Mary and Gina each received a piece of the farm—and with it, the responsibility of managing the land and its farmer tenants.

Two years ago, Gina received a postcard inviting her to a local women’s Learning Circle for farmland owners, hosted by American Farmland Trust and Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Northwest Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team. Intrigued, Gina signed up and attended the first Learning Circle, and Mary joined for the following one. “The first one was on soil conservation,” Gina says. “That was an eye-opener for me, and Mary had some background on that to begin with. The next one was on estate planning—it really took off from there.” Mary wanted to avoid division of the farm, to keep the land whole.



American Farmland Trust’s national Women for the Land initiative addresses the obstacles women landowners face in accessing conservation programs and resources by hosting “learning circles”. There are now nearly one million women farm operators and over a half million additional women landowners who lease their land to farmers.



“Based on information I obtained from these women’s learning circles, I was emboldened to put my farm into a trust for my children, which gives me a good feeling,” Mary says. “I have six children, so it would have been virtually impossible to make plans that would have divided the property, and my children were really supportive of an instrument that allowed us to keep this piece of land intact as a farm.” While the sisters are planning for the future, they haven’t lost sight of the present. Mary and Gina have spent time learning about their farmer tenants’ conservation practices and how they manage the land and have partnered with them to make improvements that benefit both parties.

Crop farmer Tom Corcoron recently started leasing land from the sisters. After attending the Learning Circles, Gina set up an arrangement that incentivizes Tom to plant cover crops each fall with a 25% discount on his annual lease. “This year we kept 20% of our wheat crop back to use as a cover crop,” Tom says. “Gina is willing to share in the expense if we are going to do a good job of taking care of her land like we treat our own land.”

Since attending women’s Learning Circles, Mary and Gina talk to their farmer tenants several times throughout the year to keep informed on how the land is being managed, with a keen eye towards conservation and using soil health practices to improve drainage and other issues on their farm. “I think that was the biggest take-away, that we can improve the soil,” Gina says. “That we can make it better for the next generation, as opposed to getting our yield out of it now and moving on to let somebody else deal with it.”

To read more stories and learn about the project visit:
<https://farmland.org/greatlakes>

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 NWN Dairy, Livestock & Field Crops Team in New York; Utah State University; and IPM Institute of North America.



Great Lakes
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