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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, KC Writz and David Suber discuss the importance of trust between landowner and tenant to help improve farming practices in the great lakes.

KC Writz and David Suber, Learning Circle Participant & Tenant in Ohio

In 2017, KC Writz inherited 34 acres of prime farmland. Ten days after she inherited it, her tenant farmer passed away. KC knew she needed to find a new tenant who cared about the land and loved farming.

The search, initially, was not easy. Her first tenant prospect approached her at her house and was someone she didn't even know or trusted. He blatantly told her that "now that your tenant is gone, I will farm this land and this is how I am going to do it." Not knowing what she was going to do for the growing season, she was able to foster an arrangement with her childhood and trusted friend, David Suber.

The lease between David and KC is a verbal, crop share agreement. "We have known each other our whole lives, and we know neither one is going to break that trust," stated David. David farms about 1,000 acres in total of farmland and rents from four individuals, including three women.

KC was determined to be more involved in the farming aspect and have a voice in its' operation. "I remember the first time I talked to the local seed dealer about cover crops—I was without words and couldn't keep up. I felt like I had no voice," stated KC. Coincidentally, a week after that event, a postcard came in the mail to her mother who recently passed. It was an advertisement for an AFT Women's Learning Circle on soil health.



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.

"Getting a man to listen is the hardest battle women will have to face in farming. Many of the ladies at these learning circles are experiencing an issue with trying to get their needs and wants across to others. These circles are a great opportunity to share our stories and experiences. We have done soil testing and even water sampling at these learning circles which has opened my eyes to how certain crops work in the field. I have been very impressed with cover crops and what it can do with the soil—and not dirt. I have finally found my voice," expressed KC.



Both KC and her tenant, David, have mutually benefited from these learning circles through their trusted and open communication. "When KC started attending these learning circles, she would come back from them and talk with me for hours about all of these different farming practices and programs. KC applied and received funding from the AFT grant to help with the cost of implementing cover crops—which have been a success," stated David. Surveys show that many women who attend these learning circles implement some conservation practice.

The key to a successful farming operation is finding a successful means of communicating openly. KC and David share their trust based on a long-term friendship and have found success with their farming operation through good communication. David is hopeful for the future stating, "Try to fix the land instead of patching the land. I only hope that, like me and KC, individuals can find good landowners they can foster good partnerships with."

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.

