

Pennsylvania NRCS Conservation Update

April 2023 Northwest Region



Three Generations of Conservation on Happy Hill Farm

By Cheryl Panciera

Happy Hill Farm is a progressive beef farm in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, which runs 55 brood cows and 125 feeders a year. John Evans operates the family farm with his son, Mark. The father and son duo have worked on improving their operation since 2005, when they first worked with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop a grazing plan. At the time, they did not have any livestock on the farm, but they were interested in learning how to implement a rotational grazing system and how to avoid causing any environmental issues. They wanted to convert the fields to pasture, but they were highly erodible, showing signs of erosion and compaction from farming.

John and Mark farm over 100 acres of corn, soybeans, small grains, and hay. When they realized erosion and compaction became a concern in their crop fields, they decided to implement no-till in their fields. They received a 2006 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) no-till contract to help them get started on the crop fields and improve the soil health. Practicing no-till not only helped control and reduce any erosion issues in the field, it also helped build up organic matter in the soil and improve the overall soil health of the fields. At the same time, they were also working on getting a nutrient management plan (NMP) so they could manage their manure. They keep their NMP current and up to date.

In 2007, they brought beef cows to the farm and were able to convert cropland to pasture by installing fencing around the perimeter of the pasture, as well as interior fencing to divide the pasture into several paddocks. Water hydrants, a pipeline, animal trails, a stream crossing, and

seeding the fields was all done through an EQIP grazing plan. Warm-season grasses were planted in the pasture to improve soil health. They fenced out all the streams on the property, as well as a pond, leaving grass buffers along the edge to catch any potential runoff. By implementing this grazing system, they were able to keep the cows out of the stream and prevent sediment and nutrients from washing into the stream.

After implementing the rotational grazing system, John and Mark needed a place to put the cows during wet weather and over the winter. They also needed a place to store manure while the animals were confined. In 2014, they received an EQIP livestock contract and utilized the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program to install a roofed concrete heavy use area with gutters, downspouts, and underground outlets.

The Crawford County Conservation District and NRCS worked together to construct the roofed heavy use area and future manure storage facility closer to a water source. In 2019, they received another EQIP livestock contract to construct an access road, a manure storage facility, roof gutters, and downspouts.

John and Mark are always striving to further their education on grazing management by attending the annual Northwest Grazing Conference each year and other trainings that are offered locally. John serves as the President of the Ag Advisory Board for the Conneaut School District where he has helped proctor NOCTI tests in the last few years for ag seniors. Happy Hill Farm is continuously striving to be the best farm that they can be and is very deserving of Outstanding Conservation Farmer for the Year 2020 in Crawford County

NRCS Announced Sign Up for New Allegheny Plateau Habitat

In February, NRCS announced sign up for a new project that will focus on improving the health and resiliency of both public and private forest resources across the Allegheny Plateau. NRCS will provide more than \$330,000 in fiscal year 2023 to a partnership effort between Allegheny Forest Health Collaborative, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Forestry, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania Woodland Stewardship Innovation Partnership, Ruffed Grouse Society, and Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

Through the Allegheny Plateau Habitat Restoration project, habitat development treatments will be prioritized through collaborative management for two at-risk species: the ruffed grouse and cerulean warbler. In turn, this project will provide benefits to communities by maintaining healthy, resilient forests through sustainable management while ensuring a consistent supply of ecosystem services. Treatments will benefit rural and urban populations in the 10-county area that includes Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Elk, Forest, Jefferson, McKean, Potter, Venango, and Warren counties.

This funding is part of more than \$48.6 million provided this year through the Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership. It is one of 14 new projects selected across the U.S. bringing together agricultural producers, forest landowners, and National Forest System lands to improve forest health using available Farm Bill conservation programs and other authorities.

Through the new three-year projects, landowners will work with local USDA experts and partners to apply targeted forestry management practices on their land, such as thinning, hazardous fuel treatments, fire breaks, and other systems to meet unique forestry challenges in their area.

Applications were due **April 1, 2023** to be considered for funding.

NRCS Receives Additional Conservation Funding for Pennsylvania Producers

In February, NRCS announced that additional funding is available for agricultural producers and forest landowners nationwide to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided an additional \$19.5 billion over five years for climate smart agriculture through several of the conservation programs that NRCS implements. In Pennsylvania, NRCS is making available \$8.3 million in fiscal year 2023 for its oversubscribed conservation programs: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

"These funds will provide direct climate mitigation benefits and will expand access to financial and technical assistance for producers to advance conservation on their farm, or forest land through practices like cover cropping, conservation tillage, prescribed grazing, nutrient management, tree planting and more." Said Denise Coleman, State Conservationist.

The increased funding levels begin in fiscal year 2023 and rapidly build over four years. These additional investments are estimated to help farmers apply conservation to millions of acres of land across the U.S.

NRCS accepted applications until March 20, 2023 for the first ranking deadline. Funding is provided through a competitive process and will include an opportunity to address the unmet demand from producers who have previously sought funding for climate-smart conservation activities.

For more information, please visit us at <http://www.pa.nrcs.usda.gov>, or contact your local office, which can be found at www.farmers.gov/service-locator.

Farm Bill Programs

FY 2023 Programs Update

EQIP/AMA: Currently making selections and starting to obligate our initial FY23 allocations:

EQIP-General: \$24,009,000

EQIP-Golden Wing Warbler: \$425,200

EQIP-NWQI: \$1,000,000

AMA: \$200,000

RCPP and CSP applications are currently being evaluated for funding.

FY 2023 Entity Held Easements

FY2023 ALE Applications		
County (Qty)	No. of Acres	Allocation
Adams	301	478,000.00
Armstrong (2)	187	187,320.00
Centre	112.07	224,140.00
Cumberland (3)	351	544,895.00
Franklin	92	35,492.00
Lancaster	39.18	68,565.00
Perry	140	77,000.00
Schuylkill (5)	464	463,820.00
TOTALS	1686.25	2,079,232.00

FY2023 ALEs Closings		
County (Qty)	No. of Acres	Allocation
Adams (6)	1460	1,571,520.00
Blair	76.43	60,030.00
Cumberland	109.43	120,810.00
Lackawanna	53	62,358.00
Lancaster (3)	208	281,483.00
Perry	160.32	82,204.08
TOTALS	2067.18	2,178,405.08

NRCS Watershed Programs

In the 1950's through the 1980's, NRCS assisted with the design and construction of 80+ flood control dams across Pennsylvania through the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program Act (PL83-566). These dams currently protect the homes and public infrastructure below them. Since their construction, the dams have held detained millions of gallons of runoff that would otherwise contribute to downstream flooding. While built to be state-of-the-art at the time, rainfall amounts and dam safety criteria have changed since the construction of the dams. The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention was amended in 2000, to provide NRCS authorization to assist communities with rehabilitation of their aging dams.

The rehabilitation design for a dam in Crawford County, Mill Run PA-460 Rainbow Dam (owned by the City of Meadville) is underway. Thatcher Run PA-112 Conneautville Dam will begin construction in 2025.

While not located in the northwest part of the state, NRCS completed rehabilitation construction on Brandywine Creek PA-433, Beaver Creek Dam, in Chester County. NRCS also plans to begin rehabilitation construction of Greene-Dreher PA-439 Kintz Creek Dam in Pike County in 2025. Once complete, there will be five USDA-NRCS dams in Pennsylvania rehabilitated.

To learn more about either the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program or the Watershed Rehabilitation program and how NRCS provides technical and financial assistance in planning, designing, and implementing watershed projects, please contact Heather Smeltz at heather.smeltz@usda.gov or (717) 237-2214.

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