Sheboygan River Sentinel

The newsletter of Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers

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Members and partners gathered for a field day at Loehr Dairy on Aug. 28.

Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers dig into interseeding at field day

By Steven Schauer for SRPF

Over an inch of rain fell hours before a Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers (SRPF) field day opened to sunny skies for committed farmers to join in a discussion about interseeding soybeans into corn as a cover crop.

Brothers Joe and Mark Loehr, who are charter members of the farmer-led watershed conservation group, hosted the Aug. 28 event in one of their fields for 16 attendees, including farmers and ag business professionals.

"We have a big challenge as dairy farms to help the soil and grow the most productive crops," said Joe Loehr, whose farm, Loehr Dairy, milks 500 cows. "The crops also need to have a certain nutrient profile for the cows to make high-quality milk. Digestibility of the plant and how we store it makes a difference in the end and that is why we go with the longer, more mature soybean so the plant isn't drying out when we need to harvest the corn for silage."

The Loehrs explained how in past years their corn silage tested poorer than this year.

"We look at the digestibility of the corn silage for our herd and we noticed this year's corn silage was two percentage points higher in protein content and two points higher in total digestibility

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compared to last year," Joe Loehr said. "In different years we tested our corn silage with and without soybeans as a cover crop, and we found the soybeans make our corn silage better."

Along with making the corn silage more nutritious for the cows, the added benefit of having a soybean cover crop is the root structure, which leads to healthier soil and keeps the soil and nutrients in place. Parts of the Loehr's fields have lower elevation and are susceptible to runoff. Among other benefits, cover crops also help prevent nutrients from leaching into groundwater. An important part of SRPF's mission is to use innovative practices that protect the environment.

The soybean cover crop mix has cow peas, chickpeas, forest peas, crimson clover, rape seed, sunflowers and soybeans. Mark Loehr said the research they did before choosing the mix is paying off.

"We found we were having to apply more and more nitrogen because our (nearly 1,000) acres have a lot of corn because we need the silage," Mark Loehr said. "We wanted the benefits of the soybeans and the nitrogen it provides."

Last year, the brothers tried planting cereal rye as a cover crop with their corn but noticed that with 22-inch rows the canopy of the corn hurt the rye, which at harvest time was yellow and burnt from not getting enough sunlight and moisture.

"We have combined the corn with the soybeans as a cover crop and haven't had any issues," Mark Loehr said.

The Loehrs planted 20-25 pounds of soybean cover crop mix per acre and they plan to continue to expand the number of acres.

Real-time proof: Heavy rains prove value of cover crops

By Steven Schauer for SRPF

It took less than 24 hours for 4 inches of rain to fall on Clint Hodorff's wheat field, and the timing could have been bad. The monsoon came just prior to a field day he was to host as a member of SRPF.

Hodorff's intent was to show area farmers the general positive impact of his multi-species of cover crops. Instead, the owner of Second Look Holsteins ended up with the opportunity for a lesson in real time. The cover crops had kept runoff to a minimum. The soil Hodorff dug into as a demonstration showed the value of the root structure and worm activity.

"Even after 4 inches of rain, I thought the soil would be tacky. The soil just fell apart in my hands because of what the cover crops and worms were doing," he said after the Oct. 23 field day.

Hodorff started his journey into cover crops by contacting several people he knew who were planting cover crops, did his own research and came up with an eight-seed mix of barley, crimson clover, rapeseed, cereal rye, sunflower, tillage radish, wheat and winter pea.

"I wanted a cover crop mix that would help with water infiltration, soil structure and also keeping the nutrients in the upper level of the soil," he said. "One of the things we like about using cover crops is planting into green in the spring, helping with erosion and, being a dairy farm, helping keep the nutrients from manure application in the soil where it needs to be and not running off."

Cover crops are becoming widely used for their ability to hold the soil in place, creating a healthy biomass below the surface and keeping nutrients in place for the crops. Numerous members of SRPF, a farmer-led watershed conservation group, are adopting cover crops to improve soil health, increase farming efficiency, sustain profitability and lessen the impact on the environment.

"I'm always surprised by how nature works," said Zach Laughlin, watershed outreach coordinator for the Fond du Lac County Land & Water Conservation Department. "Many farmers testify to this reality once they start implementing cover crops."

Two points were discussed in detail during the field day – Hodorff's decision to use rapeseed and to not chop the cover crop for forage. Rapeseed is an alternative to radishes because they offer similar benefits and are cheaper.

Many farmers are seeing the benefits of cover crops, but the conservation practice still has some trial-and-error results.

"It was also interesting to hear how Clint believes in leaving the organic matter in the field and extending the growth as long as possible," Laughlin said. "I'd like to say that cover crops are the 'one thing that will change the many.' It's not so much that they are the silver bullet solution, but that in adopting cover crops and seeing soil health improvements, farmers tend to become open to thinking about their operation in new ways."

2020 in review

By Joe Wagner, SRPF president

Greetings SRPF members and partners,

Just a few thoughts as we enter 2021 and after looking at this past year overall, I think it was a pretty good year.

Our three field days were of the "quick and easy" type, and although they didn't have huge crowds, they were still a huge success with the knowledge that was shared. Thanks to those who hosted and attended. If you missed them, check out our website and social media channels for recap articles and videos.

As far as SRPF goes, we had another successful year. We picked up a few new members and as you drive around, there are a lot more acres of cover crops and no-till fields in our community. We went through cost-share applicants and at this time it looks like we will come really close to what we have in our account to what we will pay out.

By the time you get this newsletter you should have your cost-share checks. As of now we will not be having our annual meeting in February. We hope we can have one later this spring or early summer and we will keep you informed on what is decided. Watch your email and SRPF social media for updates.

I hope everyone has a great 2021!

Joe

Scholarships available from SRPF

Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers is offering $500 scholarships to graduating high school seniors and current college students that will be enrolled in a four-year university or technical college during the 2021-22 academic year. SRPF offers this scholarship to encourage young people to continue their education in agriculture, as they are the future of the agriculture community.

Applicants must be pursuing an agriculture or environmental science related degree, be a past or present 4-H or FFA member and a resident of the SRPF membership area. The scholarship application deadline is April 1. Please submit an application by email to srpfamers17@gmail.com. Visit our website, srpfarmers.com, for more details.

Snapshots from the October field day hosted by Second Look Holsteins.

Analysis: Farmers' efforts benefit Sheboygan River Basin water quality

Field practices reduce potential phosphorus runoff, soil erosion

By Steven Schauer for SRPF

A conservation movement is growing in the Sheboygan River Basin, and a new analysis shows that modern farming practices are on the right track for reducing harmful runoff into streams and lakes.

Innovative practices adopted by members of the Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers (SRPF) are significantly reducing the chances of phosphorus and soil leaving the fields, according to an analysis shared by the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and The Nature Conservancy.

Using survey data about farming practices among the farmer-led watershed conservation group's members, the analysis estimated the potential impact of various practices compared to more conventional methods on typical crop and livestock operations in Sheboygan and Fond du Lac counties. The findings show, for example, that farmers using strip-tillage and no-tillage potentially reduce phosphorus runoff from farm fields by 43 percent and soil erosion by 42 percent.

Stopping phosphorus and soil sediment from leaving the fields improves water quality. For example, every pound of phosphorus that reaches a stream or lake can potentially cause the growth of up to 500 pounds of algae, degrading the waterway.

"It is great to see some of the good things our SRPF members are doing to protect the land and water in our farming communities," Joe Wagner, a crop farmer who leads the group, said.

The five-year-old nonprofit group has grown to 30 farmer-members, who represent 20,671 acres and 7,486 dairy, beef and swine animals. The group collaborates with university researchers, environmental groups and community leaders, and they hold field days to demonstrate various practices.

"I was impressed that, even in the midst of a pandemic, Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers members found creative, safe ways to hold field days to share the conservation practices they were trying and what they were learning," Steve Richter, agricultural strategies director at The Nature Conservancy, said. "I believe the increases in the number of members and acres in conservation practices from one year to the next can be attributed to the willingness of the SRPF members to share the benefits."

SRPF members are regularly practicing other conservation techniques as well, like soil sampling, nutrient management plans and splitting the application of nitrogen fertilizer to times when the crops are growing and can best utilize it. Through the years, cover crops and no-till planting have been adopted by nearly every member of the group. This illustrates how members are helping each other find ways to make conservation practices work within their operations.

"The percent reductions in phosphorus and soil loss we are seeing in this survey are significant," Richter said. "The water quality challenge we face is substantial, but the efforts of Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers' members, and the efforts of all the farmer-led groups in Wisconsin, are making a positive impact."

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

SRPF farmers have made noticeable changes to their practices. The most recent numbers (2019):

- 12,719 acres of conservation tillage practices (either strip-till or no-till planting)
- 20,363 acres covered by nutrient management plans
- 5,499 acres of cover crops
- 5,975 acres of low-disturbance manure injection

MORE ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

The analysis was completed as part of a conservation benefits tracking project initiated by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to evaluate effects of the state's Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants Program. The initiative was developed in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Soil Science and The Nature Conservancy. Wisconsin's SnapPlus nutrient management planning software was used to calculate the potential annual phosphorus loss and soil erosion on fields when farms include practices such as cover crops and reduced-tillage.

While not every conservation practice provided significant reductions for each scenario, below are examples of the amount of phosphorus loss and soil erosion that can be avoided with the adoption of practices on agricultural landscapes in Sheboygan and Fond du Lac counties. Acreages of practices are based on the average number of acres implemented on SRPF member farms in 2019.

It is important to note that the calculations below are based on comparisons of generalized systems, not actual farms,

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Producer-led webinar series: Planting new ideas, growing conservation

By Erica Gentry, UW-Madison Division of Extension Discovery Farms Program

Are you interested in learning what other farmer-led watershed groups are doing around the state? The Producer-Led Webinar Series: Planting new ideas, growing conservation, was started in March 2020 with the goal to facilitate farmer exchange to problem solve, try new things and innovate. It also provides a space for farmers and partners of their watershed groups to share conservation success stories and answer questions. Since March, there have been 10 webinars, occurring on the second Tuesday of each month. Webinars last about one hour each.

These are the topics we covered so far with plenty more to come:

- Interseeding rye into standing soybeans
- Planting corn into standing rye
- Alternative forages
- Increasing profitability with precision agriculture
- Hosting virtual events and other planning tools
- No-tilling into heavy red clays
- Nitrogen management, N crediting from irrigation and cover crops
- No-till, 60-inch corn, and grazing covers
- Fall and winter grazing techniques
- Soil Health Partnership

The idea for these webinars came about pre-pandemic and it has turned out to be an excellent resource for farmers and watershed groups to share their efforts with a large audience, especially now when in-person gatherings are limited. The webinars are hosted by the DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grants Program, the UW-Madison Division of Extension Natural Resources Institute and the Discovery Farms Program.

"Hearing a farmer perspective helps us know what results are in field conditions in our areas. Large conferences tend to bring speakers from southern latitudes, where the dates and condition have little correlation for us," was a comment made by a webinar participant. The webinars have provided honest learning opportunities for Wisconsin farmers and conservation professionals. Practice specifics, planter setup, economics and challenges are addressed. No questions are off limits during these webinars.

All webinars are recorded and posted on the UW Discovery Farms YouTube channel. Watch them at YouTube.com and search UW Discovery Farms.

If you have a topic idea or would like to be involved in the Producer-Led Webinar Series, contact rachel.rushmann@wisconsin.gov. To participate in the live webinars, register at https://forms.gle/zZ8mf6ZNyxtPgcnA9. Webinars are also live streamed on the Discovery Farms Facebook page.

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and do not take into account the other watershed variables that impact how sediment and phosphorus make their way into a stream or lake.

For comparison, a mid-size dump truck can carry 10 tons of sediment, and 1 pound of phosphorous in a waterway has the potential to cause the growth of up to 500 pounds of algae.

Dairy farm with a corn silage, soybean and alfalfa rotation adopting 170 acres of small grain cover crops following corn silage and soybeans

- Phosphorus loss reduction: 182 pounds
- Soil erosion reduction: 213 tons

Corn/soybean farm adopting 165 acres of strip-tillage

- Phosphorus loss reduction: 322 pounds
- Soil erosion reduction: 330 tons

Corn/soybean/winter wheat farm adopting 264 acres of no-tillage

- Phosphorus loss reduction: 378 pounds
- Soil erosion reduction: 401 tons

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Coming soon: Field signs from SRPF

SRPF members will soon be able to promote their conservation practices in a new way. The organization has ordered field signs for members to mark where they are implementing conservation practices to help promote our efforts. More information about where to get your signs will be coming soon - watch your email and our Facebook page for details.