

Annual conservation practices survey: A look at the numbers  
*by Steve Richter, agricultural strategies director, The Nature Conservancy*

Members of Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers complete a survey each winter to gauge interest in soil health practices. It's an annual recap of the number of farmers using conservation practices on their fields and a tally of total acres of each practice. In this article, I'll share some highlights from 2019. In your next newsletter, I will talk more specifically about how the practices farmers are using are keeping soil and phosphorus from entering our waters.

I first want to say that it was great to see the progress that member farmers made in 2019 trying new practices and increasing the acres of other conservation practices, as well as the robust attendance figures seen at field days and winter meetings. Congrats to all of you who hosted or attended an event and/or used conservation practices in 2019! One take-away I had from reviewing the numbers is that more farmers are using conservation practices, and the total number of acres increased.

Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers saw a 2,050-acre increase in no till planting from 2018 to 2019. In total, more than 7,200 acres were planted this way. Add to this, 4,287 acres planted with strip/conservation tillage. Members of the group planted more than 4,500 acres of cover crops in 2019, a 2,200-acre increase from 2018. A highlight is that all 33 members of the group that filled out the survey used cover crops and all but one member used no till planting. There are 20,363 acres under nutrient management plans.

It's great to see so many farmers completing the annual survey. The numbers demonstrate the effort farmers are making to improve soil health and reduce soil and nutrients leaving fields.

Some farmers are also finding that using new conservation practices or increasing the acres of other practices is benefitting their farm operations. Clint Hodorff, who manages his family's fifth generation farm near Fond du Lac, is a member of the Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers. He said conservation practices can improve and maintain soil health, which in turn, can do a better job of withstanding extreme weather events. Clint is convinced the practices he adopted made last year's wet season better than it could have been.