

We Are Water

This past winter and spring, people who farm in the upper reaches of the Minnesota River watershed were featured in a series of “We Are Water” online discussions. Through short video clips and interviews, they shared how they are using innovative production methods to make their land more resilient in the face of challenges such as climate change. They also talked about their relationship to water and the land.

The webinar series that resulted is a partnership involving the University of Minnesota-Morris Office of Sustainability, the Stevens County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Clean Up the River Environment, in cooperation with the Land Stewardship Project and with support from the Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership.

To view the webinars, see www.wearewaterwcmn.com/relationships-with-the-land. Some of the stories are also featured on LSP’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast (landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast): episodes 249, 250, 251, and 252.

These two pages feature excerpted comments from farmers who shared their stories through the We Are Water initiative. □

LSP Photo



Bryan Simon

Bryan and Jessie Simon farm a peninsula of land that sticks out into Cormorant Lake, in west-central Minnesota’s Grant County. They took corn and soybean ground and converted 160 acres to highly diverse native prairie, which they graze cattle and goats on.

Simon: “Farming has a bad rap in the environmental world, and the environmental world has a bad reputation in the agriculture world. They don’t really get along. It is my hope to merge those two worlds to show that you can have wildlife and clean water and healthy soil, all that, and produce good, healthy food at the same time. It’s been a big reason why I got into agriculture.” □



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Mark Erickson

After repeatedly running into problems with fields too wet to raise a decent crop on, Mark Erickson convinced his four landlords that it would be better for the land, as well as his bottom line, if he converted their acres from row crops to rotationally grazed pastures. The operation, which is in west-central Minnesota’s Stevens County, now produces grass-fed beef using high-density mob grazing.

Erickson: “So now, we’re getting pretty comfortable with where the land is at. The water’s not pooling anymore. Even with heavy rains, it sits for a very short time. We don’t have any drowned-out spots on the farm at all anymore, and there’s no runoff so we’re able to harvest all the water.

“You put equal weight on what happens to the land, and what happens to the people, and what happens to the economy. You put equal weight on all the things that are happening around you, not just on what’s happening on your farm.” □



LSP Photo

Jessica Blair

Jessica Blair’s family has converted most of their 550 acres in west-central Minnesota’s Pope County from row crops to rotationally grazed pastures.

Blair: “For us, on our farm, soil health is number one. It’s the foundation of everything we do. It’s what’s going to allow us to pass our land onto our children. When we have these big weather events and other things, it makes us resilient to have healthy soil.

“It’s been really eye-opening to me to see how water can change the landscape....we’re always thinking about what’s coming off our land. That directs the decisions we make to ensure the water that’s coming off our land is just as clean or cleaner than when we came to the farm.” □

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LSP Photo

Carrie Redden

Carrie Redden, along with her husband, Derek, produces organic milk on a pasture-based farm in west-central Minnesota's Stevens County. The farm has been in Derek's family for over 100 years, and although they did not grow up farming, the couple started the dairy from scratch after taking the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings course.

Redden: "The biggest advantage to rotational grazing is that it builds healthy soil — we try to keep a permanent vegetative cover on the land as much as possible. We use perennial crops when we can and then use the animals to harvest the crop and to distribute the fertilizer. We're looking at increasing the organic matter in the soil so the soil is going to be able to retain water better to reduce runoff and make the land less dramatically affected by extreme rainfall events, but also to make it more drought tolerant.

"I am confident that prioritizing stewardship of the land and water is what is going to allow this farm to continue. There's absolutely no doubt that we have to prioritize responsible management of the land, and especially the water, just for the vitality and the sustainability of the farm and the land itself." □

Ella Robertson & Eric Wana

Ella Robertson and Eric Wana are on a mission (*see page 15*) to reclaim their connection to the land as members of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate in northeastern South Dakota. Specifically, they are unearthing how their people have traditionally connected to the land through farming. And at the core of this is the role clean water plays in assuring the food they produce is healthy.

Robertson: "As Native Americans, as a Dakota family, we look at things holistically, and because of that connection with Mother Earth, we know that if our water is poisoned, or the land has too many chemicals on it, some of our medicines aren't going to grow, some of our foods aren't going to be able to grow."

Wana: "So what happens now, the way we use our waters, what goes into our ground, what goes into our aquifers, what trickles into our streams, affects all of America, not just what's happening right here. If you back out, back out, back out, and look at all of America, what's happening here in our little piece of the world is affecting our entire nation. It's nationwide, it's not just what we're doing. It's everything." □



LSP Photo

Abbey Dickhudt

Abbey Dickhudt is a recent graduate of the University of Minnesota-Morris and has worked on various farms, including Prairie Drifter Farm, a Community Supported Agriculture vegetable operation near Litchfield in west-central Minnesota. Dickhudt is interested in making farming a career as a way to steward the water and land, but sees access to acres as a daunting challenge.

Dickhudt: "Just because of that burden of finding land and affording it, I know that if I keep farming, it's going to be in partnership with others. I'm curious what it looks like when it's more collective ownership of land or it's a more regionally based system. And as a young queer farmer, having one family unit is going to look really different. I want to learn about different relationships to farming — seeing when do I need to own land versus when is renting good.

"In general, my relationship to the land, not just ownership, but my relationship to it, is something I really value. And I know that relationship doesn't have to be an extractive one, that it can be reciprocal. It can almost not be a choice about whether you take care of the Earth. It should have never been a choice.

"I know I say, 'I don't know a lot,' but I'm intentional about that because I think it's important to admit I have a lot to learn and that I have a lot to learn from people from different backgrounds, and different places." □



LSP Photo