

**Wabasha County Farmer Profile, Part 4 of a series of 6: Jack and Marge Warthesen**  
**Interview conducted and transcribed by Melendy Miller**

Soil health is all the buzz in the ag world. The Wabasha Soil and Water Conservation District and the Izaak Walton League of America, Wapashaw Chapter (Ikes) have partnered on a project to learn what progressive farmers in Wabasha County are doing to improve soil health. With funding provided by the Ikes' Upper Mississippi River Initiative, we have been conducting interviews with 30 farmers from throughout Wabasha County.

The fourth family that we are featuring for their commitment to soil health is Jack and Marge Warthesen. Jack and Marge were the Wabasha County Conservation Farm Family of the year in 2014, so this isn't the first time they have been recognized for their efforts to farm sustainably. Although Jack and Marge farm together, they both contribute to maximizing the farming operation in different ways. Jack focuses on the beef cows. The farm has 120 acres of pasture, 60 of those acres are used for a rotational grazing system for the cows. Rotational grazing is moving livestock from one paddock of pasture to another to avoid overgrazing. Rotational grazing is great for soil health because the vegetation doesn't get eaten completely leaving lots of roots and materials for soil biology. This also helps reduce soil erosion. Paddocks in a rotational grazing system require fewer inputs, so it can be economically friendly as well. He's also noticed that the cows seem healthier out on pasture. Since the cows are on pasture, there is less manure to worry about during the summer months. In the fall, he has some fields that he lets the cows and calves run and eat on. They can spread the manure freely and work up the soil slightly with all the walking. Jack hauls the manure from the winter on the ground that he took corn stalk bales or silage off of so that he is putting back the organic matter that he took off. "We used to try and get it all out during the spring, but it's just mud during the spring. In the fall, we have more time to spread."

Marge may not have a herd of beef cows, but she has plenty of things to keep her busy. She has a small herd of sheep that she raises and sells the meat directly to customers. The biggest things she does is her garden. She has four acres of garden. She grows perennials like berries and asparagus, and annuals like broccoli and carrots. She takes her produce to the farmers markets in Wabasha and Rochester. She treats her garden plot like a field that needs to be cared for. She makes sure the soil is healthy, so she can grow strong and healthy plants that provide delicious fruits and veggies. She realizes that soil health is just as important for her garden as it is for the rest of the farm. "I believe in good food. I believe in food that is nutrient dense. I believe in feeding the people that live by me. That makes me want to pay attention to the land and soil. I firmly believe that because our soils are so rich and well taken care of that they will feed us." Marge is looking for the same quality in her garden soils that Jack is looking for in his field soils. They both want to see soil that is soft, crumbly, and full of life. One acre of soil can contain as much as 40 tons of life. There are some ways to tell if a soil is healthy by the way it looks. Generally, soil that is darker has more organic matter which means it's healthier. When you pull up a plant, the soil should fall away, and the plants roots should be well-spread out. Their goals are to farm sustainably and increase the diversity on their land. Diverse lands are more resilient to weather events, pests, diseases and raise healthier crops and livestock.

Jack and Marge are using cover crops. Marge has been using them in her gardens a lot longer than Jack has been using them on the crop land. "I've been using them in my garden for 35 years because it's a smaller plot and easier to intensely manage." Unlike a corn or hay field, Marge has lots of different crops growing on her four acres. She finds it useful to use different cover crops depending on what the soil may need like using radishes to break up hard soil. Jack has been using cover crops for about five

years. In the spring, Jack has some choices to make when it comes to what he wants to do with his cover crop. “Usually I just work them down to get more organic matter into the soil, but now that I’m running low on feed, I’m thinking about harvesting it. I’d like to start grazing it since that’s easier.” Some farmers harvest the cover crop as a way to stretch their feed inventory if they are running low. Some farmers work the cover crop into the soil as a way to add organic matter and nutrients for the next crop that is planted. Some farmers let their cows out on the fields to graze the cover crop. However a farmer decides to utilize their cover crop, they can feel good knowing that the cover crop helped to keep their soil in place over the winter.

To learn more about soil health, activities relating to this project and other conservation programs in Wabasha County please contact Jen Wahls, Ecological Technician with Wabasha SWCD by phone 651-560-2051, email [jennifer.wahls@mn.nacdnet.net](mailto:jennifer.wahls@mn.nacdnet.net) , Terri Peters, District Manager, phone 651-560-2044, email [terri.peters@mn.nacdnet.net](mailto:terri.peters@mn.nacdnet.net) or stop in the office at 611 Broadway Ave, Ste 10 in Wabasha.