

Interview conducted and transcribed by Melendy Miller

Wabasha County Farmer Profile, Part 1 of a series of 6: Richard and Carolyn Young

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. One of these farm families is Richard and Carolyn Young. Richard and Carolyn have been farming together since 1991 outside of Plainview. They became an organic dairy farm in 2010, but soil health has been something that has always been important to them. "We've been thinking about soil health from the very beginning. When we started farming, we didn't have any equipment, so we started grazing. We really saw the benefits of grazing when we rotated those pastures into a row crop. That is usually the best corn with no diseases, no pests, very little inputs, and very little weeds." Rotational grazing is when cattle are moved to different pastures to give the eaten down pasture time to rest and regrow. Richard and Carolyn move their cows to different paddocks daily or even twice a day. "The cows are some of the most important players when it comes to soil health. There's something about the cattle grazing that is so beneficial for the soil." They are always looking to improve their soil health because they live by the philosophy that if "you're good to your soil, it will be good to you."

Since going organic, they've had to make some changes on how they grow their crops. Organic farms are not allowed to use any pesticides or herbicides, so growing crops without weed or insect pressure can be tricky. They know that a healthy soil means more vigorous crops more adept to overcome weed and insect pressure. "We look at insect and weed pressure because that

is a big indicator of soil health. Insects are designed to go after the weaker plants, so if you have strong soil health, your plants are stronger and healthier, and the insects are less likely to bother them.” They are very proud of their corn crop this year, and how few weeds they had in their corn. When the corn comes off, the ground will be bare, but not for long. Many farmers, including Richard and Carolyn, are using cover crops whenever possible, as a means to keep something growing year-round to prevent erosion and add nutrients back into the soil. Richard and Carolyn have been using cover crops for about 10 years. They’ve seen the benefits in using cover crops and they’ve improved their methods for planting them to ensure there is maximum growth during the fall. In the spring, they won’t harvest the cover crop. They will till it into the soil. “In the spring, we do shallow incorporation of the cover crops because the top two or three inches of the soil is what we want to feed.”

Richard and Carolyn realize that a healthy soil is full of life. They know that a healthier soil means their crops will be more nutrient dense. The crops they grow are used to feed their cattle. The cattle on Richard and Carolyn’s farm are happy and healthy, and that can be contributed to the high-quality feed they receive from the healthy soil on cropland and pasture. “The cows seem so peaceful and stress free out in the pasture, and I think that has a huge impact on the overall herd health.”

The cows also provide nutrients for the soil through their manure. It’s a never-ending cycle of growing crops, feeding the cows, and the manure going back to the soil. The manure adds the nutrients that the crop uses, back into the soil. Richard and Carolyn have a manure storage facility, so they are able to control when they add manure to the fields. This way they can protect the soil by not adding manure when conditions are less than ideal. They apply most of the manure in the fall and late summer. The manure gets injected into the soil, so there is some

light incorporation. Injecting manure also greatly reduces manure runoff due to heavy rains, so the manure and nutrients stay in the soil.

Like a lot of farms, Richard and Carolyn are soil testing every three years to make sure they are improving the soil. “We check for everything: micronutrients, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, pH, and organic matter. We want an extensive test to see what the micronutrients are doing. We want to be able to address what is on the low end of things.” Soil tests are a great way for farmers to look at their management and what should be addressed to see an improvement on the future crops and pastures. Although Richard and Carolyn don’t necessarily have goals for their soil tests, they are focused on improving the organic matter of their soil. Improved organic matter means erosion and compaction go down drastically, and they won’t have to add as many nutrients to the soil because organic matter serves as a reservoir of nutrients.

Even though Richard and Carolyn have been farming for 28 years, they are always learning and trying new things. They have family and friends that also farm, so they enjoy talking to others and sharing ideas about how they can farm more sustainably. Over their years of farming, they’ve changed their way of thinking too. “Sustainable isn’t always enough. It’s like saying your marriage is sustainable, but you want it to be better than that. We would like to improve the soil and leave it better than we found it.” Richard and Carolyn are doing great things to ensure their organic dairy is improving and preserving the soil for generations to come.

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.nacdn.net or stop in the office at 611 Broadway Ave, Ste 10 in Wabasha.

