

Wabasha County Farmer Profile, part 5 of a series of 6: White Barn Acres Article
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 the county.

The fifth farm family that we are highlighting for their efforts to improve and maintain their soil health are the Tentis' at White Barn Acres in Kellogg. I had the opportunity to sit down with Matt Tentis and discuss some of things they are doing to move towards regenerative agriculture practices [definition of regenerative agriculture: conservation and rehabilitation approach to food and farming systems. It focuses on topsoil regeneration, increasing biodiversity, improving the water cycle, enhancing ecosystem services, supporting biosequestration, increasing resilience to climate change, and strengthening the health and vitality of farm soil]. Matt, his brother, Seth and mother, Kathy operate their third generation (founded by Matt and Seth's grandfather in the 1930s) farm recently branded as White Barn Acres, LLC in 2017. The farm has had a range of enterprises since it was founded by their Matt and Seth's grandfather in the 1930s that have included pigs, turkeys, cattle, corn, soybeans, small grains, and alfalfa. The farm was a dairy farm up until 2003, and then shifted to row crops and beef cattle. The farm was operated by the boys' father, Tony, and uncle, Larry, until 2016 when they transitioned to Matt and Seth to continue the family's farming legacy. Matt explained, "our focus now is to move towards more regenerative and economical agricultural practices raising crops and beef cattle to sell into local and regional markets and building something wonderful to pass on to our children."

Unlike some of the other farmers we have highlighted, soil health is a relatively new focus for the Tentis family. They really started to research and learn about soil health when they saw the transition approach. Matt said, "It was apparent to us that we couldn't farm the exact same way our dad, uncle, and grandfather had farmed. What they did worked well for them and we carry many of the lessons they taught us, but our lifestyles are just vastly different." For example, raising beef cattle has simply worked better with Matt and Seth's off farm jobs. With that came different farming techniques. In 2016, the farm had 60 acres of pasture for their cattle, but this last year they began rotationally grazing and fencing in crop land to increase grazing acres. This has increased grazing acres to 150 consisting of pasture and tillable fenced to graze crop residue and cover crops. We used NRCS EQIP programs to turn some tillable land into pasture, erect perimeter fencing and put in place water infrastructure. In addition, programs associated with the SWCD and the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification were used for related projects.

They noticed significant differences when they switched to rotational grazing. "My brother and I noticed a lot more consistent forage growth throughout the year. In prior years the forage was very short, almost bare by the fall, but this year it still had significant length. My uncle up the road said our pasture was the best he's ever seen it, and that comment really reinforced that we're doing something right." They plan to continue to expand and refine their grazing techniques in the years to come.

They have also focused on habitat and environmental improvements. Some of their pastureland has creeks and ponds in it. Fences were built around these bodies of water to create a riparian buffer. By doing this, they have helped to curb the erosion along the water's edges and preserved and built animal habitat. These areas are grazed occasionally, but much less frequently. Wooded ground has also been

approached differently, both by addressing invasive tree species and by implementing managed grazing practices designed specifically for wooded ground, called silvopasturing.

On the cropping end of the Tentis' soil health journey, they have been working towards a completely no-till practice and better utilization of cover crops. "We are reducing tillage incrementally with the intent to be no-till eventually. Part of the process is building our soil structure to the point it can provide an optimal environment without tillage." Currently, they use a no till drill to plant cover crops, and they have tried no-till planting beans with some success. Next year they would like to try to no-till corn into a living cover crop as a test run. Every year they like to make a change to continue to move the farm towards more regenerative practices. This also includes more diversity, beyond field corn and soybeans. Something new they did this year was incorporating sweet corn into their crop rotation, planted on fields recently fenced in. Sweet corn harvested much earlier than field corn allows for a grazing cover crop to be planted in August after harvest. The cover crop grew nicely in the summer heat and was grazed well into November. "We've never been able to effectively graze cattle into November before and it saved us probably two weeks of feeding more expensive stored feed." This approach saves feed and it also allows the cows to spread manure freely on the ground without equipment or labor costs. Their goal is to have their acres fenced in and to replicate similar systems across the entire property, allowing them to grow the cattle herd and improve soil health through crop diversity, green cover and cattle.

One documented benefit of regenerative practices and improving soil health is gaining the ability to reduce chemical and synthetic fertilizer use. They don't intend to go organic, but they want to reduce their use of synthetics for environmental and economic reasons. This is better fine-tuned through a thought-out soil testing program, which they implemented in 2016. In years to come, they would like to manipulate their application of chemicals and fertilizers to see how production responds. "We think we can adjust both fertilizer and chemical applications with the right cover crop program and crop and cattle rotation to increase our profit per acre", Matt stated, "after all, regenerative practices are great, but the dollars have to balance out as well."

It doesn't matter if you just started farming or have been doing it for years, it is never too late to start thinking about soil health. The Tentis family is just getting their soil health journey started, but they have already made huge strides and plan to continue to improve their soil health in the years to come. I think Matt said it best, "Bottom line, without healthy soils that provide the right nutrients, have massive water holding capacity, and are resilient year after year, our small farm won't survive. That is how we look at it. Healthy soil, healthy animals, healthy crops, healthy family."

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, Terri Peters, District Manager, phone 651-560-2044, email terri.peters@mn.nacdn.net or stop in the office at 611 Broadway Ave, Ste 10 in Wabasha.