

Hitting Pay Dirt in the Driftless Region

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

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<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/wi-driftless-region-s460.png>



With our strong history of soil conservation, Wisconsin has many opportunities to fund innovative approaches to soil health, yielding dividends for our communities while ensuring the bounty of our lands for generations to come.

BRUNSWICK, WI - Recently in northern and western Wisconsin, farmer-led watershed councils came up with an innovative way to measure the soil health of their lands: the “Soil Your Undies” challenge.

Farmers across the region buried pairs of tighty-whities in the spring and let the soil decompose them for a couple of months to determine the potent power of their dirt.

As with any science, the ecology of soil is dependent on a huge range of factors. Maximizing yield while maintaining future productivity has been a primary focus of farmers and agricultural experts since early settlers first converted wilderness to farmland.

The history of soil science in Wisconsin is, well, old as dirt. The first-ever soil map made in the United States was drawn of Wisconsin back in 1882 by geologist T.C. Chamberlin. That map and the many to follow reflected Wisconsin’s incredible geological diversity and agricultural potential.

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In the Driftless Region, the soil attracted farmers who saw the beauty and future in Wisconsin's varied topography. They cleared, flattened and plowed ridgetops, setting livestock to graze on steep land which could not be leveled for planting.

These modifications to the land had lasting consequences. Annual yields of crops meant regular tilling, which broke up root structures and reduced water absorption and filtration. Topsoil washed down slopes and filled local waterways with sediment, carving deep and narrow channels where wide rivers once meandered lazily.

Starting in the 1930s new generations of farmers and ecologists grew increasingly concerned by the stark changes agricultural practices brought to the region. Brand-new agencies like the Soil Erosion Service pioneered early soil and water conservation practices such as runoff management. Their success paved the way for similar interventions across the country.

Many of these took place on the state and local level. In 1977 the Wisconsin legislature created the Farmland Preservation Program. This program created local resources to aid farmers in preserving farmland and provided tax relief for farmers participating in agricultural conservation practices.

Soon the federal government also got involved. Just eight years later in 1985, Congress passed the Conservation Resource Program (CRP) which allowed farmers to enroll their land for 10-15 years at a time while receiving annual rental payments to restore highly erodible cropland to permanent vegetation.

These sustainable practices pay off years down the road. A recent example comes from the aforementioned "Soil Your Undies" challenge. In Pierce County, a pair of underwear buried in a field that had been in CRP for nearly forty years decomposed to nothing but waistband after just two months.

As these programs demonstrated their efficacy, many additional state, local and federal programs emerged to further incentivize farmers to use regenerative practices on their lands. Increasingly, farmers who participated in such programs realized their ongoing benefits, and

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these interventions were more and more widely used.



I see a lot of room for further innovation. Wisconsin is poised to be a shining example of how to continue pioneering soil conservation interventions. One of these opportunities to tackle ecological problems in a holistic way is putting more carbon into our soils.

Last legislative session I introduced Senate Bill 776, creating a grant program for farmers who use certain sustainable practices. These included developing conservation management plans for capturing carbon in our soils and providing concrete ways for farmers to implement these practices.

Wisconsin must continue its investments in soil health. By working in partnership with farmers, conservationists and the community at large, we will ensure our soil continues to support us and our beautiful ecosystems for years and generations to come. And you don't even have to bury your undies to appreciate it.