

# SOIL HEALTH IS TAKING OFF IN THE RAT RIVER AND FARMERS ARE WORKING TOGETHER

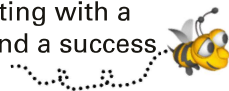
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"How did we get to the Rat River" is the question that came up as a circle of producers and a few agency staff stood together on the outer edge of a field that had recently been planted to a multispecies cover crop mix. Although the area has only been a focus for a couple of years, a lot has been accomplished and the success only continues to grow!



The Town of Dale-Rat River Watershed is the highest phosphorus-loading HUC 12 watershed in Winnebago County. In 2021, the Great Lakes Sediment and Nutrient Reduction Program (GLSNRP) grant was received by Fox-Wolf Watershed Alliance (Fox-Wolf), in partnership with the Winnebago County Land and Water Conservation Department (LWCD). This grant was dedicated to work towards soil health adoption in the Rat River Watershed. The GLSNRP grant allowed the LWCD to partner with three producers in order to transition a total of 272 acres into cover crops and no-till for a three-year period. Shortly after, the LWCD received an additional grant for the implementation of soil health practices. This grant came from Fox-Wolf funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). Winnebago County LWCD decided to use these funds towards an additional two producers in the Rat River Watershed to implement cover crops and no-till on a total of 100 acres for a two-year period.

As part of the GLSNRP grant, the LWCD agreed to do multiple forms of outreach to spread the concept of soil health. Our first approach included looking through aerial maps for fields with possible erosion concerns. Once a concern was located, outreach to the landowners was initiated by sending them a map of the site, along with a letter suggesting soil health practices that could potentially benefit that particular field. After being contacted by a few upset producers who did not appreciate "being told how to farm," I realized we might need to find a new method of outreach that would communicate our intent more clearly. Thankfully one of our initial letters led to meeting with a particular farmer, where ideas were shared, and a success story was just beginning.



The farmer shared that he had been hearing a lot about the "Producer-Led Groups" that have been popping up all around the state. He talked about traveling to attend other group meetings, but that he had a passion for starting one in his area. As he spoke about his ideas and what he was learning, I began to think about a new outreach approach for the LWCD. How impactful could it be to support producers like this farmer who want to work with other producers to learn about soil health practices from each other?

Two months later in August, the LWCD collaborated with the farmer to assist in hosting his first field day to bring together local farmers. At this field day, soil health as well as the benefits and struggles that come along with it were discussed. Before the event ended, the idea of starting a Producer-Led Group was brought up. This field day sparked a lot of interest in forming a group. As the summer led into fall, a few more field days were held and it seemed as though there was a persistent core group of farmers who always showed up, including four of the five producers who are part of the GLSNRP and NFWF grants.



*To improve water quality and soil structure through the implementation of soil health principles and conservation practices, along with providing outreach and education to farmers and the general public.*

Their first official Producer-Led Group meeting was held in February of 2023, and they named themselves the "Muddy Bottom Farmers." The group's mission is to improve water quality and soil structure through the implementation of soil health principles and conservation practices, along with providing outreach and education to farmers and the general public. Although the majority of the members are currently producers in the Rat River Watershed, this group expands throughout the Lake Poygan HUC 10 watershed. The LWCD's outreach efforts in the Rat River Watershed now focus on supporting the Muddy Bottom Farmers through partnering in identifying conservation projects, encouraging innovative projects, and assisting in the education of rural and non-rural neighbors.

