

Tainter Creek

There's lots of excitement over watershed council's big five-year anniversary

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

This week's issue of the Crawford County Independent & Kickapoo Scout goes to press five years to the day from the flood that got the Tainter Creek Watershed Council started. That flash flood resulted from a heavy rainfall event that set up at the Vernon-Crawford county line, and dropped about eleven inches of water overnight between September 15 and 16, 2016.

In the aftermath of that flash flood, which heavily impacted both the Rush Creek and Tainter Creek watersheds, farmers in the Tainter Creek watershed began to get together to talk about what they could do to help mitigate the impacts of increasingly heavy rainfall.

The group has gone on to receive funding from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) 'Producer-Led Watershed Council' program four years in a row. They have increased acres planted in cover crops in the watershed by over 60 percent, resulting in about nine percent of corn and bean acres in the watershed having living roots growing year-round.

In addition, the group has attracted funding from the Wallace Center Pasture Project, for the conversion of cropland in the watershed to managed rotational grazing systems.

Despite the pandemic, work has proceeded steadily on the project, and several field days have been held to showcase projects. Ultimately, the Wallace Center will study the connection between increased acres in grass in the watershed and water quality in the creek.

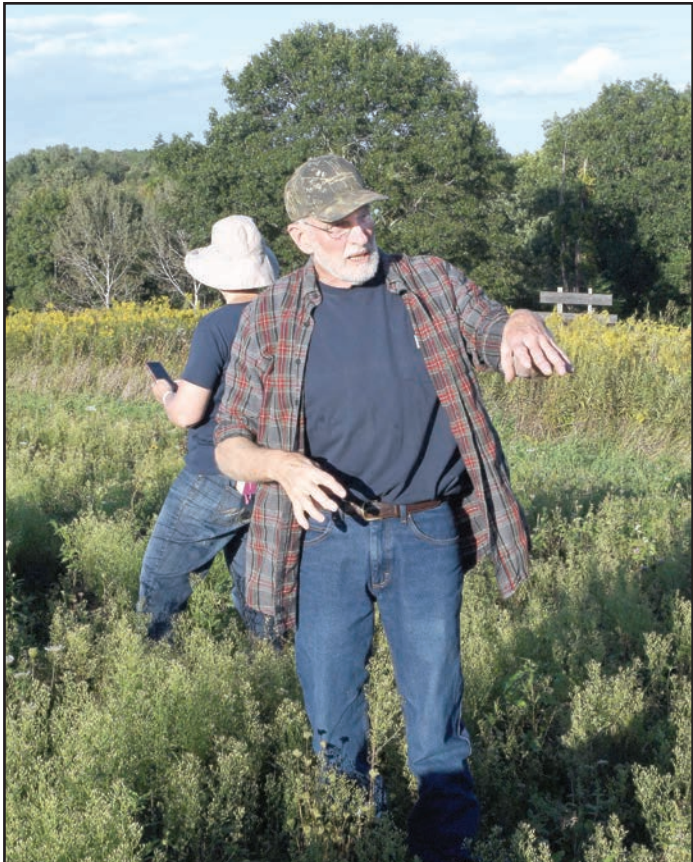
Blockbuster events, orchestrated by the group in 2018 and 2019 included renowned soil health experts Ray Archuleta and Gabe Brown. Last weekend, the group featured renowned Coon Creek soil erosion researcher, Dr. Stanley Trimble – more on that soon. Though COVID put a damper on events in 2020 and 2021, the group has continued to offer field days on member farms showcasing the good work being done.

Aero-Seeder demonstrated

Last week, the group returned to the farm of Brad Robson, in Hornby Hollow. At that meeting, they learned about soil health from a presentation provided by Carl Delafield of Prairie Creek Seeds, and were treated to a demonstration of the 'AeroSeeder' drone cover crop planter, developed by Tom Leitgen of Garnavillo, Iowa.

Carl Delafield of Prairie Creek Seeds was back for a second year in a row at the farm of Brad Robson.

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DAVE VANDYKE discusses his experiences with managing prairie strips on his farm. Here, VanDyke is seen standing in the second planting viewed on the tour, with the taller first planting viewed visible behind him.

Prairie strips are continuing to see growth in popularity

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

About a dozen people were on hand to tour the prairie strips planted by Valley Stewardship Network (VSN) on the farm of Dave and Betty VanDyke last Wednesday. The two own about 115 acres in the South Fork Bad Axe River Watershed, and have three acres planted in prairie.

Currently, VSN has planted and monitors more than 40 acres of prairie strips planted on 15 farms in the Driftless Region. VSN pays for the seed (about \$640 per acre), and provides technical support and planting. The landowner is responsible for preparing the land, and doing the maintenance after planting.

VSN's Dave Krier explained that they will typically start the process with a landowner a full year, before the prairie strip is planted. This is because weed suppression for a full year is essential to the process of getting a prairie strip to take. If this is not done, then the planting might fail because slower-growing prairie species can be shaded out by the faster-growing weed species.

The tour included one small area planted by VanDyke on his own, one planted by VSN four years ago, and two planted by VSN two years ago. The seed mixes planted are purchased from Shooting Star seeds in Minnesota, and contain a custom mix of grasses, forbs and shrubs.

The first planting viewed by the group was planted by VanDyke without assistance from VSN. It consists of a small triangle of land above a more erodible field that always pre-

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THE AEROSEEDER drone cover crop seeding device is seen lifting off over the fields on Brad Robson's farm. Device inventor had farmer-members of the Tainter Creek Watershed Council present to view a demonstration of the device backed off to a safe distance as the whirring and buzzing device lifted off.

Up 2,000 acres this year

Black Sand Granary working out of four airports seed to cover crops

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

Black Sand Granary's Adam Kramer reports another successful season of the aerial seeding of cover crops in the Driftless Region.

"It took a lot to do it, in a little bit of time, including 18 people, three planes & pilots, two field loaders, four semis & trailers, and many other pieces of equipment," Kramer said. "It was a massive undertaking, and all these people and pieces of equipment were needed to get the job done."

Seeded in August

The aerial cover crop application endeavor was conducted Wednesday through Friday, August 25-27, when the operation was delayed by heavy rainfall impacting the area.

On Sunday, it was fairly windy and they didn't want to slam all that equipment into the Viroqua airport—Sundays are usually a busy day there. Kramer said that if wind hadn't been a factor, they might have pushed up to Viroqua on Saturday night, and tried to get in & out of there quickly. How-

ever, a combination of just knowing how much they 'clog things up' for other planes & people and the wind that day made them decide to take Sunday off, and finish Monday.

In total, they flew on just under 14,000 acres (approximately 700,000 pounds of seed) in four-and-one-half days of flying. Without the rain delay, they likely could have done it in four days.

The group was in Grant County the first two days, and had over 8,000 acres flown on. There were two 802 planes, and one 502 plane. The 802s could hold over 5,000 pounds of seed in one fill, with the 502 plane holding a lesser amount. From Monday through Wednesday last week alone, 14,000 acres were seeded.

Done with lots of help

Kramer extended his thanks to Platteville, Lancaster, Prairie du Chien, Boscobel, and Viroqua Municipal Airports for great facilities to work out of. In addition, he thanked Hullerman Trucking, Spaeth Trucking, Dairyland Aviation,

local Natural Resources Conservation Service staff, and the Black Sand Granary Team.

"Most of all, we want to thank the producers that support the practice," Kramer said. "We hope folks understand it takes extra management to make cover crops work, and the growers incorporating them are learning how to make this a useful tool. It's a real challenge and if you know a farmer that uses cover crops, let them know you see what they do."

Kramer explained that the work that producers using cover crops are doing is benefiting their farm, while at the same time, building better soil health for generations yet to come. He said it is also helping to clean the water we all share.

"No one touches the land more than a farmer. They are the answer to many of the world's problems," Kramer said. "Clean water and adequate nutrition have always been, and will continue to be, our burden to bear."



THE VIROQUA AIRPORT was a busy place at the end of August as staff from Black Sand Granary and Dairyland Aviation conducted their massive aerial application of cover crop seed initiative. In all, 14,000 acres were seeded, up from 12,003 in 2021.

In Soldiers Grove

Solar Meats plans party

BY EMILY SCENDEL

Over the past two years Solar Meats in Soldiers Grove has offered the community a variety of local meats and processing services. To celebrate that and their expansion, the local locker will be hosting their grand opening celebration, Saturday, Sept. 25.

The celebration had been put off, like many things, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as allowing them ample time to get their renovations at the locker in order.

Now that things are squared away, the owners and staff of the locker are excited to invite the community to come out and see what they have to offer.

Duane Johannes and Rich Sitarski started the locker in November of 2018, when the building, which was a former cheese factory in Soldiers Grove, came available for sale. After nearly a year of renovations, they opened their doors along with co-owner Scott Drabicki.

"Duane has been a butcher since high school," explained Sitarski. "He did on farm processing for approximately four years before we found this location. We had looked at several locations in Crawford County and when this building became available the location and footprint of it really fit our plans well. We also spoke with the board who surveyed the community and they welcomed the idea of the meat locker warmly."

Sitarski also noted that the central highway location has also served the locker well, allowing ease for trailers bringing livestock in addition to high visibility for retail customers.

The local community is highly valuable to Solar Meats, not only as their customer base processing meat, but also for their retail sales.

"About 99 percent of the meat we source is local and goes right from the hoof to the store," Sitarski shared.

Sitarski himself is also a producer for the retail end of the business. In 2003, he purchased an elk farm in Crawford County and Solar Meats offers the fresh elk meat from his farm in their retail freezers.

In addition to elk, the locker also offers all of the tried and true favorites that one would expect at their local meat market. Brats, hotdogs, bacon, fine steaks and more are all part of the lineup.

"One of our most popular items are probably the smoked pork chops," Sitarski shared. "We're always trying to keep those stocked."

Solar Meats, like many in the food industry, experienced the heavy boom of business during 2020, as folks weathering the pandemic sought local foods like never before.

"It was kind of an unpredicted perfect storm," Sitarski explained. "People were seeking out processing facilities like never before. Our flexibility during that time really helped us get through our first year."

Sitarski shared that Solar Locker is not limited in their processing by their carcass storage. Thanks to the newly built facility with a very large cooler, they're able to accommodate more hanging animals awaiting final processing. And that the schedule is more dictated by cutting and processing times.

He noted that they work to be flexible with farmers and producers to allow availability of more locker dates, with less of the frenzy that was seen during 2020.

"We still like to do everything over the phone," Sitarski explained. "Instead of having people log on to a website to get a locker date, we like to be able to talk with the farmers and figure out something that works. It's important for us to maintain that direct connection with the farmers and producers."

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