

Coon Creek Community

Watershed Council releases its first annual report detailing accomplishments

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

The Coon Creek Community Watershed Council's (CCCWC) first annual report, 'Making Running Water Walk,' was released on January 4. CCCWC's president Nancy Wedwick presented the report that day to both watershed council members as well as the Monroe County Climate Change Task Force (CCTF).

In her presentation to the CCTF, Wedwick explained that she had come to be elected president of the group by volunteering to send some e-mails. She joked that Coon Creek Watershed grassfed dairy farmer Tucker Gretebek, had come to be elected vice president when he missed the meeting where the vote was held.

"I really have no background in conservation, but became involved in the group through my work with the Coon Valley Business Association," Wedwick explained. "My background is in education and work in local government, and I am trained as an attorney."

Wedwick told CCTF members that the problems with erosion and flooding had started in the Coon Creek Watershed after settlers from Northern Europe had tried to practice the same agricultural techniques here that they had used in their homeland. She said that those settlers were not familiar with the kinds of rain events common in the watershed.

"The solutions that inspired the world began when H.R. Davis at the experimental station in LaCrosse partnered with Hugh Hammond Bennett of the Soil Erosion Service and Aldo Leopold from UW-Madison on the nation's first watershed project in the 1930s. The three submitted an application for the project to Washington D.C. and modern soil conservation was born.

"When our watershed council got started, we learned that there had been a previous Coon Creek Watershed Council," Wedwick said. "The work of those watershed councils had resulted in the building of the PL-566 flood control dams."

Wedwick said that their group got started after the catastrophic floods of 2018 and 2020, when members of the Coon Valley Business Association had gotten together to ask, "what can we do to help with this situation?"

"Vernon County Conservationist Ben Wojahn encouraged the formation of a watershed council, and we applied for and received funding from DATCP's Producer Led Watershed Council

grant program in 2022," Wedwick said. "While the movement started in 2020, COVID restrictions meant the group didn't hold its first meeting until July 2021."

Wedwick said that at that meeting, a decision was made not to limit the group to farmers only, but rather to open membership up to all members of the community who wanted to help make a difference.

"We recognized that the issues around flooding and soil erosion are broader than just the farming community," Wedwick said. "And we knew that it was going to take all of us to grapple with the problems we're facing in the watershed."

Wedwick said that the inspiration for their group had come from comments made by Ernest Haugen, a teenager in the watershed in the 1930s. When his teacher asked him to describe the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps on his family's farm, Haugen had replied, "they're trying to make running water walk."

The report

CCCWC's first annual report, spanning the time between July of 2021 and December of 2022, details the groups vision and mission. Their vision: a watershed nurtured, cherished and flourishing. Their mission: to continue the historic legacy of conservation leadership through improving and restoring our soil, water and air as stewards of the Coon Creek Watershed.

In the spring of 2022, CCCWC engaged in a strategic

planning process and decided that their best path forward would be to become a nonprofit organization. Following approval of the nonprofit applications by state and federal agencies, the group elected their first board of directors in May of 2022. Directors serve 1-3 year terms, and meet monthly.

The annual report lists the group's accomplishments in their first year:

- volunteers donated 1,000+ hours of time
- hosted 18 events
- awarded DATCP grant funding for the installation of cover crops in the watershed
- built 12 partnerships and collaborations
- created a website and e-mail, and social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram.

In the 'Ways we are learning to make running water walk' section of the report, they list conservation practices, collaborations and outreach.

Conservation practices deployed or educated around include: no-till farming, cover crops, prairie strips, grassed waterways, contour strips, crop rotation, rotational/managed grazing, silvopasture, drone seeding, grade stabilization structures and healthy forest management.

Collaborations include with the Land Conservation Departments of LaCrosse, Monroe and Vernon counties, with sister watershed councils from the Tainter Creek, Bad Axe River and Rush Creek watersheds, Valley Stewardship Network, Coon

Valley Conservation Club, Coon Valley Business Association, Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center, and UW-Madison and UW-LaCrosse.

Oral narratives

An exciting development has been the launch of an oral narrative project with staff and students from UW-Madison. Greener Pastures partners Dr. Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke and Dr. Anna Andrzejewski applied on the watershed council's behalf for grants to fund the project. The purpose of the project is to capture the history and experiences of people in the Coon Creek Watershed. The goal is to use the lesson learned from those narratives to guide future actions of the CCCWC.

The project began in earnest in September of 2022, and to date, 37 interviews have been recorded. Those interviews will be archived at the UW-LaCrosse Oral History Project. Throughout 2023, the watershed council will receive projects created by the students about the Coon Creek Watershed and the CCCWC. By mid-2023, the students will have transcribed the interviews, drawing out the themes and lessons to share with the watershed council.

Grant applications

In 2022, the watershed council submitted applications for four grants, and also submitted a pre-application proposal. Those applications are as follows:

- DATCP Producer-Led Watershed Protection Grant – they requested \$40,000, and

were awarded \$30,800

- DNR Surface Water Grant – they have requested \$10,000 to develop a nine-element watershed plan to identify watershed stakeholders, compile watershed research, set goals and develop plans to restore and improve the watershed

- Wisconsin Idea Collaboration Grant – in partnership with UW-Madison, they submitted a request for \$60,000 to collaborate with the university and their sister watershed councils to build organizational capacity, advance leadership opportunities and skills, and to fund the first steps in developing a watershed plan

- Advancing Climate Readiness and Rural Economic Opportunity – Vernon and Monroe County Pilot Project – in partnership with Monroe County, they applied for funding to provide technical assistance for on-the-ground projects in the watershed, and funding for continued promotion, education, outreach and website development

- Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Grant Pre-Application Proposal – in partnership with UW-Madison, they submitted a pre-application proposal to apply for \$120,000 to continue the oral narrative project, develop public-facing educational materials including a podcast, and further develop their website. The pre-application proposal was accepted, and they have been invited to apply.

Past funding

In 2022, DATCP awarded CCCWC \$20,105. \$5,000 of which was spent on administrative support by the Vernon County Land Conservation Department.

Using this funding, six farmers took advantage of

the cover crop program for a total of \$2,850 in payments; a total of \$2,000 was paid directly to producers in speaker honorariums; education funds were spent to purchase copies of Stanley Trimble's book 'Historical Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the Upper Mississippi Valley Hill Country,' and given away to attendees at CCCWC's first anniversary celebration; and they are carrying over \$3,972 for perennial cover crops, general supplies and dinners at monthly meetings.

In 2022, CCCWC was also awarded \$40,000 from Vernon County's Ho-Chunk funding, with Vernon County as the fiscal manager. These funds were used in part to help with startup costs to become a 501(c)3 nonprofit, general liability and director and officer liability insurance, and a website domain purchase. The funds also paid for food at meetings and events, and initial oral narrative expenses. The group will carry over \$34,584 into 2023.

The group included a section in the report, 'With Gratitude to the Ho-Chunk Nation.' That section reads: "When the first Europeans arrived in the Coon Creek Watershed, they found a beautiful and bountiful land. We acknowledge this area is the ancestral homelands of the Ho-Chunk Nation. It is to them we give our respect, thanks and gratitude for our place here today. The harmony in which they live with nature is why the Northern European immigrants found such rich soils, clear streams and abundant wildlife. We also thank them for funding the work of the CCCWC in the spirit of involving community and improving the environment. Our gratitude and thankfulness run deep."

Making Running Water Walk

Annual Report

July 2021 - December 2022



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who are accomplishing great things!

We want to identify female role models within Southwest Wisconsin who can inspire others with their story, as well as encourage the future generation of female professionals to be brave and reach their full potential.

This is not an 'award', but recognition for an individual's contribution to a profession and/or society. There will be no 'winners' or 'losers'.

HOW THIS WORKS:

We are asking you to nominate women in Southwest Wisconsin that you know are accomplishing great things and feature them in our **SHE SPECIAL SECTION**.

Nominations will be assessed by the local Morris Newspapers team and will be considered as a feature in our 2023 SHE.

HOW TO NOMINATE:

Please email heraldads@tds.net your nomination and include name, address, contact info and why they should be recognized. Also, include any volunteer work or organizations they belong to.

*Not all nominees will be featured.



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