

# The Daily Cardinal

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## **IN-DEPTH**

## **Dane County conservation program connects farmers, UW-Madison researchers**

*Dane Demo Farms links county and farmer interests with UW researchers to promote environmentally-friendly farm practices.*

By **Jake Kilander**

October 23, 2025 | 5:00am CDT

Thirty minutes north of Madison, Jeff Endres is amid his annual fall harvest. Timely rains and a droughtless summer this year led to a successful growing season for the Endres family, who have operated Endres Berryridge Farms in Waunakee for over a century.

Fourth generation farmer Endres took a break from applying manure to his soil to tell The Daily Cardinal about his operation. An operation that has been pushing the needle on conservation practices for over a decade. He's been seeing the benefits, but hasn't been able to quantify them on his own.

"A lot of times there isn't data out there yet to understand [them]," Endres said. He now gets that data from Dane Demo Farms.

The Endres Dairy farm is one of five participants in Dane Demo Farms, a Dane County program helping farmers implement conservation practices and techniques on their farms. The program mirrors a number of demonstration farms in Northeast Wisconsin, but is the first of its kind in the southern part of the state.

Francisco Arriaga, an associate professor in UW-Madison's Department of Soil Science, and Connor Schoelzel, his graduate research assistant, collaborate with Dane Demo Farms to collect samples, conduct research and produce data for farmers to use in furthering their conservation interests. Arriaga said he was brought into the program to be the "scientific liaison."

Early conversations between Arriaga and farmers began with initial conservation concerns, developing into land management strategies both parties wanted to experiment with.

Strategies vary from farm to farm. Several farms in the program have implemented components like cover crops and no-till farming, two practices designed to reduce erosion, improve soil health and limit toxic materials seeping into the water supply. Some farms in the program have been using these strategies for decades, while others are just getting started. Part of the program is addressing concerns those farmers have about changing their approach.

"The number one concern farmers have is nitrogen," said Kim Meyer, a county agronomist and the program manager for Dane Demo Farms. Meyer communicates with farmers frequently as a liaison between them and the county. Nitrogen concerns come from planting cover crops — a practice currently implemented at all five demo farms.

"There's the concern of nutrients, specifically nitrogen, being tied up by that cover crop and then not [being] released in time for their intended crop, like corn," Meyer said. "It's kind of a learning curve."

Meyer said Dane County also provides funding to help farmers get started. Farms are encouraged to go at their own pace with these changes, and the program's leaders say there is mutual interest between the county and the farm to implement these conservation efforts.

"Sometimes where we see some environmental issues, it's not that they're doing it on purpose," Arriaga said. "It's maybe [a] lack of understanding or lack of other knowledge that they may not have."

"If you change something so fundamental to your system, there are cascading effects," Schoelzel said. Schoelzel and Meyer are the two main collectors of samples for Dane Demo Farms research. Endres said both are very responsive to the farmers they work with.

"They're here almost weekly in the summer," Endres said. "They like to try to make it more comfortable for the farmers to make the changes."

### **Seeds of an idea**

Meyer said the original interest in the program came to Dane County after the success of demonstration farms in Northeast Wisconsin. The county took advantage of UW-Madison's research capabilities, providing a component other programs lack. Research in Dane Demo Farms is supported by a five-year grant from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Meyer said the program was always designed with the farmers' interests in mind. Dane Demo Farms began by reaching out to existing farmer groups to gauge interest. Endres was one of those farmers, serving as the chair of the Yahara Pride Farms, a network of farmers with similar conservation interests, since 2011.

"What Dane Demo Farms does is track and quantify the data to help see if practices are making a difference or not," Endres said.

Those practices are beneficial to Madison, Dane County's largest urban center. According to Arriaga, 75% of water in the state comes from groundwater, water affected by nitrogen runoff from farms. Nitrates seep into lakes, causing an increase in algae blooms and ecological dead zones. Healthy soil holds that nitrogen in the farmland, ready for crops to use.

"If the farmers can improve soil health on their farms, that helps their farm and their crops, but it also helps water quality," Meyer said.

### **Meeting farmers where they're at**

One of the main goals of the Dane Demo Farms project is to make conservation look more viable to other farms in the county. Meyer said their outreach strategy involves speaking to farmer groups, tabling at events and distributing their quarterly newsletter to 460 farms across Dane County.

"[The newsletter] is a way to get to a lot of the farmers that are not even involved with the farmer groups. There's a large subset of them," Meyer said. The newsletter contains information about upcoming field days, where farms can showcase conservation practices they've implemented to other farmers, data coming from Dane Demo Farms and any news or relevant expert articles.

Once the five-year grant from NRCS expires, Meyer said the program will look to renew the grant, obtain additional funding and add more farms.

"The one thing we're always trying to do is find projects that meet the farmer's needs," Meyer said. Meyer and Arriaga said other farmers are interested in the results coming out of the demonstration farms and hope interest will further grow the program.

"I see it going well beyond the five years," Arriaga said. "Because the interest is there, the impacts will be seen too."

Arriaga and Schoelzel have enjoyed seeing the effects of their research in the real-world. "Both my parents grew up on farms," Schoelzel said. "As I've been working with these farmers through the Dane Demo Farms, it reminds me a lot of my aunts, uncles and family."

"Seeing the farmers implement [our research] and use that and [for it to] have an impact," Arriaga said. "That's what's going to make me at peace, knowing that I have helped, in some little way, leave the world a little bit better for the future."

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