

# Farming and Conservation: Together Again?



By Curt Meine

Since the Farming and Conservation Together program was established in 2000, its partners have been exploring opportunities to bring agricultural and conservation practices into closer harmony on one small corner of Wisconsin's, and America's, landscape. In the broad scheme of things, the FACT study area involves only a modest acreage, and those participating in FACT represent just a handful of the state's farmers and private landowners. Such numbers, however, do not reflect the significance of the FACT story, or of the larger challenge that FACT seeks to address.

In his book *Citizenship Papers* (2003), writer, farmer, and conservationist Wendell Berry observes, "The most tragic conflict in the history of conservation is that between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers. It is tragic because it is unnecessary." For those who care about land stewardship and the future of agriculture, Berry's observation is a painful reminder that we are far from achieving—or even defining—a shared vision of land health and community well-being. Rather, we remain a society at odds with itself over the value, meaning, and use of land, and over the proper relationship between the rights and responsibilities of individuals and communities.

For Aldo Leopold, of course, the "community" included not only people, but the "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." He saw the human community embedded within the land community, and understood that their histories and destinies were bound together in complex ways. The exercise of individual rights, and the recognition of responsibilities, are reflected in the health of

the soils, the flow of the waters, the diversity and dynamics of plant and animal populations. The state of the land, in turn, influences the durability and health of the human communities that depend upon it.

In Leopold's day these relationships played out dramatically in the agricultural arena. By the 1930s the rural landscapes of Wisconsin and the nation reflected the hard use that they had endured since European settlement: broad swaths of deforestation and overgrazing, widespread soil erosion, polluted and sediment-choked waterways, unchecked drainage of wetlands, depleted wildlife populations, faltering rural communities. Leopold and his contemporaries in the conservation movement labored to find new ways to treat not just the symptoms of dysfunction, but the root causes. In particular, this entailed new approaches to conservation on the nation's private lands.

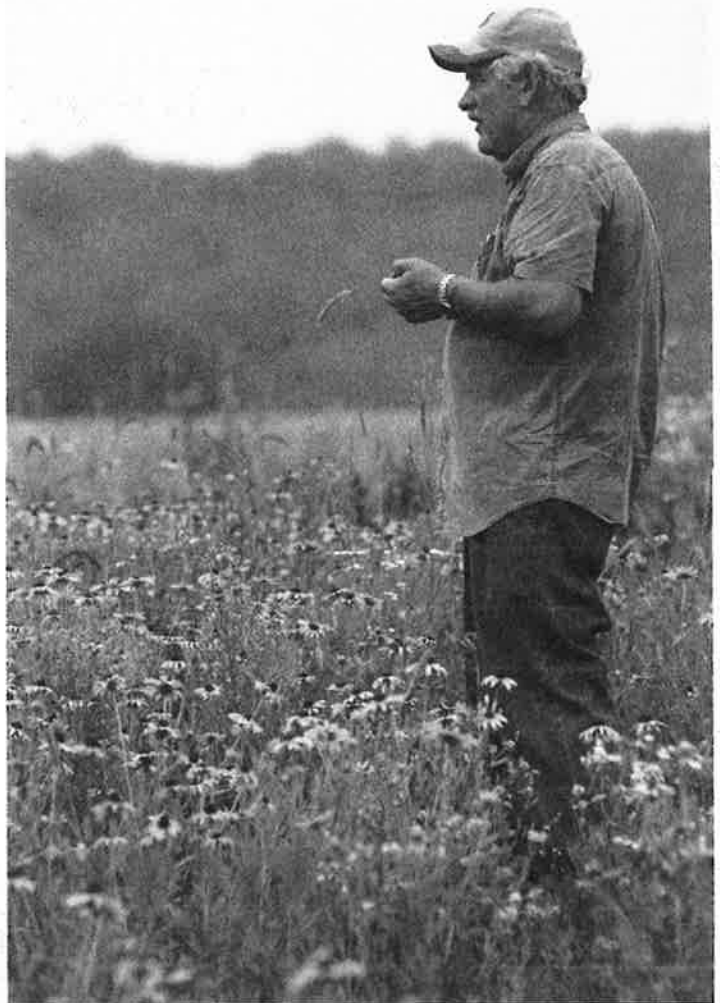


Photo by Ed Pembleton



In a visionary 1939 essay entitled "The Farmer as a Conservationist," Leopold defined the challenge that farmers and conservationists together faced: "It is the individual farmer who must weave the greater part of the rug on which America stands. Shall he weave into it only the sober yarns which warm the feet, or also some of the colors which warm the heart and eye? Granted that there may be a question which returns him the most profit as an individual, can there be any question which is best for his community? This raises the question: is the individual farmer capable of dedicating private land to uses which profit the community, even though they may not so clearly profit him? We may be over-hasty in assuming that he is not." During those years of economic and ecological crisis, a paramount goal of conservationists was to develop new techniques, programs, and policies through which landowners could protect "the public interest in private land." And everyone had a stake in that goal.

Conservationists in the 1930s experimented with a diverse array of arrangements that allowed individual landowners to coordinate their conservation actions for mutual benefit. Leopold's own activities in Wisconsin provide some sense of the ferment. At Coon Valley, in the steep-ridged coulee country along the upper Mississippi, hundreds of farmers signed up as voluntary participants in the nation's first watershed-scale soil conservation demonstration area. Leopold advised on the project. At Riley, a railroad crossing west of Madison, Leopold and his hunting friends from town worked in partnership with a dozen farmers to enhance game and wildlife habitat conditions. Along the Wisconsin River north of Madison, Leopold and his students conducted long-

term studies in wildlife population ecology through close cooperation with the area's farm families. At Faville Grove, half-way between Milwaukee and Madison, other students carried out pioneering research on wildlife management and prairie ecology on some of Wisconsin's most progressive dairy farms.

Such projects were representative of efforts nationwide that brought farmers, ranchers, and conservationists together to address both immediate ecological problems and long-term land stewardship needs. This surge of innovation was a response to crisis, opportunity, and new ecological understanding, as the dire conditions of the 1930s evoked commitment and creativity from all parties (today, we would call them "partners" or "stakeholders"! ). It was during this time of change that the USDA's Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was created, with the sole aim of working with the nation's private landowners. In a 1936 address reviewing these experiments in private land conservation, Leopold wrote: "I still get a letter a week asking for a copy of 'the best' way to organize farmers. I no longer worry much about mechanisms—they will come when the farmer is as proud of his prairie chickens as he is of his silo. It may well be said that the search today is for 'the best' way to change the land philosophy of America."

Fast forward, from the 1930s to Wendell Berry and the "tragic conflict...between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers." The history of that conflict has yet to be written. When it is, it will record the wilting of the tender shoots of cooperative conservation effort that Leopold and his generation nurtured. It will explore how two



generations of population growth, easy mobility, intensified resource management, academic specialization, land development and fragmentation, increasing wealth and consumption, and hard environmental politics undermined the emerging pre-war consensus. It will examine the changing economics of land use and agriculture after World War II; the advent of new agricultural technologies; shifting demographics and the growing tensions between rural and urban America; the flight from the cities and spread of suburbia; the growing chasm between producers and consumers of agricultural products; and the fraying fabric of community life across the



American landscape.

But this to-be-written history would conclude, hopefully, with an account of the key role that agriculture has played in the recent renaissance of community-based conservation. Since the early 1990s these initiatives have flowered in profusion. They go by many names: ecosystem management, watershed councils, land trusts, cooperative conservation.... They have varied aims: protecting significant natural features, restoring

native plant and animal communities and ecological processes, co-managing large landscapes, securing open space, preserving farmland and rangelands, improving urban neighborhoods, rehabilitating waterways. What they have in common is a commitment to involving people directly, in new ways, at the local level, in the stewardship of their home places.

Increasingly these diverse "mechanisms" recognize and build upon the conservation value—actual and potential—of the agricultural part of the landscape. Private land conservation has re-emerged after being in eclipse during the rise of environmentalism. This has happened as other factors have begun to reshape agriculture as we have known it, including the dramatic increase in demand for locally and organically produced food; the meeting of that demand through local farmer's markets, community-supported agriculture, and other alternative means of connecting producers and consumers; growing concern over childhood obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-related public health issues; increasing appreciation of farms not simply as a food factories, but as dynamic agroecosystems; profound uncertainties connected to the future availability, use, and sources of energy and the world's changing climate; and the far-reaching impacts of international trade agreements and policies. Once again, agriculture is the arena in which large social, political, economic, and environmental forces will play out, where the relationship between public and private interests will be negotiated, and where the fate of the land will be forged.

FACT, along with all the other ongoing experiments in cooperative conservation, is a work-in-progress. It is a test of our ability to bring farming

and conservation back together, to show that we can pick up the trail that Leopold and his generation blazed, but that we lost along the way. It is a standing challenge to us as citizens inhabiting a shared landscape: to revitalize conservation, work through differences, rebuild community, and



reclaim the common good.

Wendell Berry followed his observation with a cautiously realistic prognosis: that the conflict between farming and conservation was not in fact insurmountable, but that it "can be resolved only on the basis of a common understanding of good practices." On landscapes across Wisconsin and beyond, farmers, ranchers, and conservationists seek to work out those "good practices," and the policies to support them. In doing so, we try again to achieve conservation as Leopold once defined it, as a state of harmony between people and land. In his wisdom, Leopold wrote: "Let's admit at the outset that harmony between man and land, like harmony between neighbors, is an ideal—and one we shall never obtain.... But any man who respects himself and his land can try." In bringing agriculture and conservation together—again—we demonstrate our respect, and we try.

