



FOX DEMO FARMS IMPACT EVALUATION REPORT

AMULYA RAO AND WHITNEY PRESTBY
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON DIVISION OF EXTENSION

APRIL 2022

CONTENTS

03

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

06

INTRODUCTION

07

METHODOLOGY

RESULTS FROM FARMER INTERVIEWS

08 Value added by Fox Demo Farms

11 Changes observed in the watershed

13 Farmers' motivations for adopting and maintaining conservation practices

16 Observed benefits of adopting conservation practices

18 Challenges to adopting conservation practices

21 Farmers' recommendations to promote conservation practices

RESULTS FROM PARTNER FOCUS GROUPS

22 Value added by Fox Demo Farms

27 Changes observed in the watershed

32 Factors that lead to the adoption of conservation practices

35 Factors that inhibit the adoption of conservation practices

36 Partners' recommendations for the Fox Demo Farms

37

CONCLUSION

38

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

39

APPENDICES

Executive Summary

The Fox Demo Farms began in 2014 and was the first project of its kind in the Great Lakes Basin. The evaluation project was designed to better understand the impacts this project has had on the watershed.

Evaluation Goals

Document the role that Fox Demo Farms played in prompting participating and non-participating farmers to adopt conservation practices

1.

The Fox Demo Farms has been instrumental in farmers' decision to implement practices. The project has facilitated farmer networking and educational opportunities, provided technical support to farmers, and amplified the work of partners in the watershed. Farmers recognize that conventional practices lead to soil erosion and nutrient loss. They now have confidence and the tools to farm differently and make positive changes on their farm.

Get a comprehensive understanding of farmers' experiences with adopting, maintaining, and expanding conservation practices

2.

Farmers identified incompatible or lack of access to equipment, custom operators who are unfamiliar with conservation practices, having multiple decision makers, and lack of time as some of the challenges they have experienced when adopting conservation practices. Through increased awareness, knowledge, and access to information, farmers experienced success with conservation practices. Direct benefits and learning from neighbors has led to increased adoption.

Compile recommendations from farmers and stakeholders to inform Fox Demo Farms' programming priorities for the future

3.

As Demonstration Farm Networks grow and evolve, changes must be made to the approach taken by project partners. Outreach and education must shift to meet farmers needs, while recognizing the importance of reaching new farmers.



Notable Findings

Executive Summary



Building relationships

- Positive changes in the Lower Fox Watershed have stemmed from successful partnerships among local, state, and federal government agencies, as well as academic institutions and non-profit organizations. There has been a **shift from working in silos towards “community conservation,”** where organizations work together to find solutions. When information is shared among partners and acted upon collaboratively, everyone gains from it.
- **Building relationships with the farmers has helped agencies become more proactive versus reactive.** Historically, there was an emphasis on regulation rather than cooperation with farmers. The shift towards collaboration has led to positive changes on the landscape.
- **Multiple farmers mentioned that prior to the Fox Demo Farms, they did not socialize with other farmers or have the courage to talk to farmers in the watershed about conservation practices.** Creating opportunities for farmers to meet one another and build relationships has helped the transfer of knowledge throughout the watershed. As the program continues to grow and work with the next level of adopter, it is important to recognize that not all farmers talk to one another and it is important to create spaces where conversation and shared learning is supported.



Land stewardship

- Farmers want to be good stewards of the land. They recognize increased rainfall amounts and the damage that conventional practices are having on water quality. **When they have the tools and resources to change, they feel empowered to be proactive** and make a difference.



Outreach & education

- As Demonstration Farm Networks grow and evolve, the outreach plan must change to meet the needs of farmers. When programs begin, **hosting field days that encourage large groups is an excellent way to build excitement around the practices**; however, as described by farmers, **interest is only the first step in adoption**. Farmers need to address technical questions with their peers. Farmers expressed value in small group meetings that encourage engaging conversation.
- Farmers are beginning to see **a paradigm shift not only among their peers, but across the agricultural industry**. While farms of all sizes still have challenges to overcome to ensure their teams are on the same page and that they have access to the necessary equipment, they are beginning to see progress. This shift towards conservation is being driven by farmers.
- **Outreach and education specifically designed for agronomists and custom operators**. Farmers stressed the importance of having independent agronomists and custom operators who are knowledgeable and supportive of conservation practices.
- Conservation professionals must **better communicate the short-term benefits of conservation practices**. While the full suite of soil health benefits may take seven or more years to realize, farmers have seen improvements in the first year or two.

Fox Demo Farms Impact Evaluation

Executive Summary



Key Takeaways

- The success of the Fox Demo Farms has spurred interest throughout Wisconsin and the Great Lakes Basin. Other Wisconsin counties and states throughout the Great Lakes region have met with the Fox Demo Farms project team to discuss ways to build similar programs in their watersheds.
- Technical support, where project partners provide assistance and education, has helped farmers not only learn how to adopt practices, but also understand the value added to their farm by incorporating conservation on the landscape. This combined with financial support, such as cost-share dollars, has helped create sustained behavior change.
- The Demonstration Farm model has added value to the watershed in a variety of ways. The program has fostered relationships among farmers and provided opportunities for farmers to learn from one another. Farmers have gained confidence in their ability to share their experiences and lessons learned, provide guidance to their peers, and direct farmers to resources when they do not have the answers themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The Lower Fox Demonstration Farms Network (Fox Demo Farms), established in 2014, is a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) funded project utilizing Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funds. The project is designed to showcase and demonstrate the effectiveness of conservation practices on participating farms located in the Lower Fox River basin. The project aims to reduce erosion and sedimentation, restore soil health, and improve water quality by reducing phosphorus entering the Great Lakes basin. Project partners include producers, crop consultants, Brown and Outagamie County Land and Water Conservation Departments (LWCD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension (Extension), Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District (NEW Water), United States Geological Survey (USGS), and the Great Lakes Commission.¹ Additional funding support comes from Brown County and NEW Water.

In 2019, Whitney Prestby (Natural Resources Educator with Extension and Fox Demo Farms Outreach Specialist) approached the Evaluation Unit at Extension's Natural Resources Institute to conduct an impact evaluation. The evaluation goals were to:

1. document the role that Fox Demo Farms played in prompting participating and non-participating farmers to adopt conservation practices,
2. get a comprehensive understanding of farmers' experiences with adopting, maintaining, and expanding conservation practices, and
3. compile recommendations from farmers and stakeholders to inform Fox Demo Farms' programming priorities for the future.

The uses of the evaluation results are to communicate the project's intended and unintended outcomes to key stakeholders and to improve future programs.

¹
From www.foxdemofarms.org.





METHODOLOGY

The evaluator and the outreach specialist collaboratively decided on evaluation priorities, data collection methods, and instrument design. The outreach specialist led recruitment efforts, the evaluator conducted data analysis and reporting, and both participated in data collection and writing the final report.

Evaluation data were collected in two steps:

- 1.12 in-person and phone interviews with participating and non-participating farmers, and
- 2.8 online focus groups with partners and key stakeholders.

(Refer to appendices A, B, and C for the interview and focus group instruments.)

All the data collected were confidential; therefore, this report will not contain any names or other identifiable information. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed to support analysis and reporting.

RESULTS FROM FARMER INTERVIEWS

Interview data were analyzed using thematic coding. This section summarizes the themes that emerged with supporting quotes from participants.

1. VALUE ADDED BY FOX DEMO FARMS

In describing the value of having the Demo Farms project in their watershed, all farmers agreed that they or the farming community as a whole had benefited from the project. The ways in which farmers characterized the value of Demo Farms are described below with accompanying quotes.

Educating farmers (n=4):

In discussing the value of Fox Demo Farms, farmers highlighted the educational opportunities that the project provides. Farmers especially appreciated the on-field learning aspect of the field days.

"What helped me was getting out there on the field; not just talking to people, but actually seeing what's being done. You don't believe it until you see it firsthand."

"(Being a part of Demo Farms) is so educational for us. It's a great group, and I hope more people come and experience what we're experiencing."

"There's definitely been a couple of field days where I walked away with knowledge that I did not have before."

Facilitating farmer networking (n=3):

Participating in Demo Farms events allowed farmers to network with and learn from other more experienced farmers.

"Farmers like to talk, but we also don't like to talk to each other. But seeing other farmers at these Demo Farm events, it's given me a lot more courage and a lot of knowledge to speak to people like (farmer name redacted). Otherwise, I'd never have that interaction in my entire life. Just by being at the meetings, I am having those initial conversations with other farmers and consultants."

"The farmer roundtables are a great avenue, especially since it is farmers talking to farmers. I think that's where you can ask any question. It isn't intimidating because everybody's just trying to learn what works and what doesn't work."

"I've benefited from Demo Farm field days because that's where I get to talk and meet other people. And it's not just me talking; everybody's learning, and everybody's listening."

Technical support from conservation staff (n=3):

Adopting new practices can be challenging. Farmers discussed the importance of working with the conservation staff and receiving technical support through the program. The farmers expressed value in building relationships where ideas are respected and shared learning can occur.

"The challenge was not knowing what was going to happen. Trying new things is always a challenge. We're constantly trying new things in the Demo Farms, like testing new cover crop species. When something did not work, I would try and determine the underlying issue. Then I would share it with (staff name redacted). He is my go-to guy when something fails. Sometimes he has the answers, and sometimes he doesn't. And when he doesn't, we talk back and forth and learn from each other and just keep improving."

"My connection with the County has been helpful to get information about manure application, interseeders, etc. (Staff name redacted) is very good at researching what we need to do. He has an agronomy background and has been very helpful."

Develop farmer champions (n=2)

Demo Farms has cultivated farmer champions who advocate for conservation practices. Participating farmers have first-hand experience implementing practices and can offer practical advice to other local farmers. Demo Farm farmers share their successes to reassure and build confidence in skeptical farmers.

"After the field days, I now get questions when I'm out at a farm auction or dinner. I get asked about the practices, or I get calls about it. I mostly get asked about how to get started. I tell them that the most important thing is to start small. Some people laugh, but some people are serious. Since I am part of Demo Farms, people see me not necessarily as an expert but as someone with experience. Even if I don't have experience with something, I can point people toward the right resources."

"The education (aspect) is priceless. It is invaluable to learn and see what others are doing locally. I've talked to hundreds, maybe thousands of farmers these last couple of years. I hear farmers say, "That will work on the neighbor's farm but not on mine." I tell them that the Demo Farms, which is not that far away, have similar soil, and they are making it work, so there is no reason it cannot work for you."

Instrumental in deciding to implement practices (n=2)

A couple of farmers attributed their participation in Demo Farms as the critical factor that informed their decision to implement conservation practices. Seeing the success that other farmers were having was crucial for motivating farmers to try new practices.

"(Demo Farms) opened our eyes. We always wanted to do no-till but didn't know how to. Meeting producers on Demo Farm road trips was a game-changer. We heard what farmers had learned and what they did right or wrong. That changed everything."

"(I started implementing) after seeing other people doing it and talking with my agronomist and the Demo Farms peer group. I thought, 'The Demo Farms are doing it, so why can't we?'"

Improve farmers' reputation (n=1)

One farmer said that participating in Demo Farms had positively impacted his reputation in the community. Referencing the negative perception of farming in some communities, this farmer said that Demo Farms has helped improve farmers' reputation as a whole.

"(Demo Farms) brings a positive light to the area. I now have farmers reach out to me because they know I am in Demo Farms. I like to be associated with positive things. I'd rather have a good reputation than not. We hear people say, 'Those farmers in northeast Wisconsin are polluting the lake.' So I think Demo Farms has helped improve farmers' reputation."



2. CHANGES OBSERVED IN THE WATERSHED

Farmers were asked to reflect on the changes they had observed in the watershed since the Demo Farms project was established. All farmers mentioned that they had observed an increase in interest and the adoption of conservation practices.

Increased adoption of conservation practices (n=6):

Farmers unanimously agreed that they had noticed an increase in cover crop and no-till adoption in their watershed in the last seven years. Most farmers said that cover crops were more widely being implemented compared to no-till.

"In the last five years, the amount of tillage has significantly reduced in this area. Generally speaking, everybody was doing tillage in the past, whereas now you see more green fields than brown ones."

"There are a lot more cover crops. You can drive anywhere and see that. With no-till, not many are doing it, but there is more of it going on than before."

"I've seen a lot more cover crops. In one way or another, every farmer is worried about water quality, which wasn't the case before. Farmers now notice and understand that it is not normal for brown water to come off the field when it rains. It has been a bit of a paradigm shift. More people are talking about low-disturbance manure application. Contractors and custom harvesters understand that farming now is different from 20 years ago."

"I've seen a lot of changes locally. A lot more farmers have been adopting cover crops and no-till practices. It's night and day; it has grown in our area quite significantly."





Increased interest in conservation in the farming community (n=3):

Three farmers said that they had noticed an increase in the level of engagement around conservation from other farmers, non-farmers, and agriculture professionals.

"I've seen many people express interest, read about, and talk about conservation practices. A few people have asked me about what cover crops I am planting. We've still got a ways to go to actually get the cover crops planted. The Demo Farms has definitely started the conversation around here, especially with the field days."

"A lot of farmers have heard about what's going on here with the Demo Farms, so they call me up and ask me about no-till or cover crops."

3. FARMERS' MOTIVATIONS FOR ADOPTING AND MAINTAINING CONSERVATION PRACTICES

To understand how farmers make decisions about conservation practices, they were asked to describe their primary motivations for the adoption, implementation, and maintenance of conservation practices. The six themes that emerged are discussed below.

Neighbors' success with practices (n=5):

Social norms have played a role in motivating farmers to adopt practices. Particularly, farmers described their neighbors' experience with conservation practices. A couple of farmers mentioned having motivated others to adopt practices.

"Everybody looks over the fence line at what the other farms are doing. It's probably what got me into conservation agriculture. I think that's what's leading to change. People look at other farms and think, 'Oh, it's working for them. I want to find out how it's going to help me.'"

"A farmer friend of my Dad's helps us out on the farm, and for the past seven years, he's said, 'Man, you guys got a lot of yield!' So year after year, I told him to use no till and cover crops, and he didn't do it. And then this year, finally, he put in his first 65 acres of cover crops! It took seven years!"

"All farmers drive down the road just for the heck of it sometimes. That's what it comes down to. Also, people talk at bars or at lunch: 'Hey, what are you doing on that field?' That's what sparks the change."

Directly experiencing the benefits (n=5):

Farmers said that seeing first-hand the benefits of adopting conservation practices motivated them to maintain the practices. The benefits mentioned were improved efficiency, cost savings, and improved environmental outcomes.

"For us, we first adopted the practices because we felt it was cheaper. We could grow covers and also save some money with no till. Then we saw the results; harvesting and planting got easier. So for us, it was a real easy decision to keep going, because it's easier and cheaper and better. We like seeing the clean water runoff. Also, we get a lot less ponding than we used to, so we're happy with that."

"It's a lot of trial and error, but seeing my successes come through at the end of the year is what makes me want to do it again the following year."

Access to cost-share funds (n=4):

Farmers acknowledged that receiving cost-share funds gave them peace of mind and made it possible to take risks and experiment without worrying about profitability.

"Grant monies covered the cost of cover crop seed, which was phenomenal. I'm sure we would have done it without cost-share, but again, it did provide ease of mind."

"I'm not going to kid you (about motivating factors); there are the cost-share payments. It's nice to be able to collect the payments for doing conservation. It helps encourage me and others to try to be better agents of the soil."

Addressing soil erosion (n=4):

Some farmers said their primary motivation to adopt conservation practices was to address soil erosion and runoff. Farmers who had adopted practices said that they noticed a reduction in erosion and runoff.

"The main reason (for adopting practices) was erosion. We were having an incredible amount of sheet and gully erosion on our farm here, and it just wasn't sustainable. Then I learned about invasive tillage, soil degradation, poor infiltration, and how they were all tied together. That's when I worked with some people in the watershed to change how we do things."

"We started conservation way back in the late 80s, and wind erosion was probably the most important factor why. We felt we were losing valuable topsoil, so that's why we started with our first campaign of conservation tillage."

"With the higher rainfall amounts and seeing the damage and destruction that our current practices are doing as far as runoff and nutrient loss, you almost have that sick feeling in your stomach and most of that was from not really knowing at that time, how to farm with any other practices. Now I don't have near the anxiety and the power to change."

"With our old practices, heavy rainfall was causing damage. I observed runoff and nutrient loss, but at the time I did not know how to farm using other practices. Now I know that running a profitable dairy operation and conservation practices can go hand-in-hand. I also feel like I am doing the right thing for the environment by helping clean up waterways and reducing nutrient loss."

Stewardship and conservation ethic (n=4):

Some farmers said they were motivated by their sense of responsibility toward their land and ensuring productivity over time.

"I guess it's (conservation) always been part of our farm culture. My dad always did stuff like this and my grandpa before him. Can't really say why that is, but I was brought up knowing we wanted to keep the soil on the land."

"I think it's (motivation to adopt practices) kind of like the global warming thing. We have to start doing something. We have to start being proactive and taking the initiative to keep the water clean and the soil healthy. We have to have that mindset. We can't just plow deep and let that soil blow away!"

Increased awareness, knowledge, and access to information (n=3):

Some farmers said they began adopting conservation practices when they learned about the negative environmental implications of conventional farming, the benefits of conservation agriculture, and how to implement the practices.

"The awareness of the problem is now out there. I think the awareness increased because of the Demo Farms. I think many people are starting small and figuring out that it actually does work."

"I started (adopting practices) after learning how it worked and how to do it. I basically took the bull by the horns and went right into it, and now I would say that I am 100% invested!"



4. OBSERVED BENEFITS OF ADOPTING CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Farmers overwhelmingly described there being both short-term and long-term benefits to adopting conservation practices on their farms. The benefits range from soil improvements to financial savings and are described below.

Improved soil health (n=9):

Farmers who participate in edge-of-field monitoring have begun to see results that suggest conservation practices reduce erosion. Other farms shared anecdotal evidence that their soil has improved since adopting conservation practices.

"We've seen a big difference on our farm with erosion. At the monitoring station, we left some fields conventional, so we could see side-by-side changes. It is amazing the difference between the two fields in the seven years that we were monitoring."

"For the last few years, I've noticed a lot of neighboring farms that do conventional tillage struggling a lot with trying to get equipment through the field. I don't have that problem on my farm. We've built up the soil structure and helped it firm up with no-till. So I think that's what made harvesting easier when it was wet."

Cost savings and comparable or higher yields (n=6):

Farms are experiencing financial savings since adopting conservation practices. Through reduced inputs and similar, if not improved yields, farms are recognizing that these practices benefit their bottom line.

"The benefits (of adopting practices) would be fuel-saving and lower labor costs and manpower to do the planting and spraying. We used to have a crew of five guys working and prepping the ground. But this year, I planted 5,000 acres by myself, so that is a significant reduction with manpower."

"People now realize that cover cropping their fields can be cheaper than tilling them. There is also the ease of harvest, so we're spending less money renting equipment."



Increased efficiency (n=3):

Farmers recognized that by adopting conservation practices, they have improved their farm's overall efficiency.

"For our farm, we consider our competitive edge to be efficiency. One of the main things we try to reduce always is labor needs. Moving to no-till allowed us to reduce labor tremendously. We can now work larger areas at a time. I feel efficiency and conservation works nicely together."

"What we've noticed is that the fields dry out a little quicker on the top. So we can get back out onto that field sooner to spread fertilizer or harvest the field. We definitely also noticed the ease of harvesting because the fields were undisturbed and could carry the weight of the equipment much better. We're getting the same yield with easier harvesting and less damage...for us that has real value."

Cleaner water runoff (n=2)

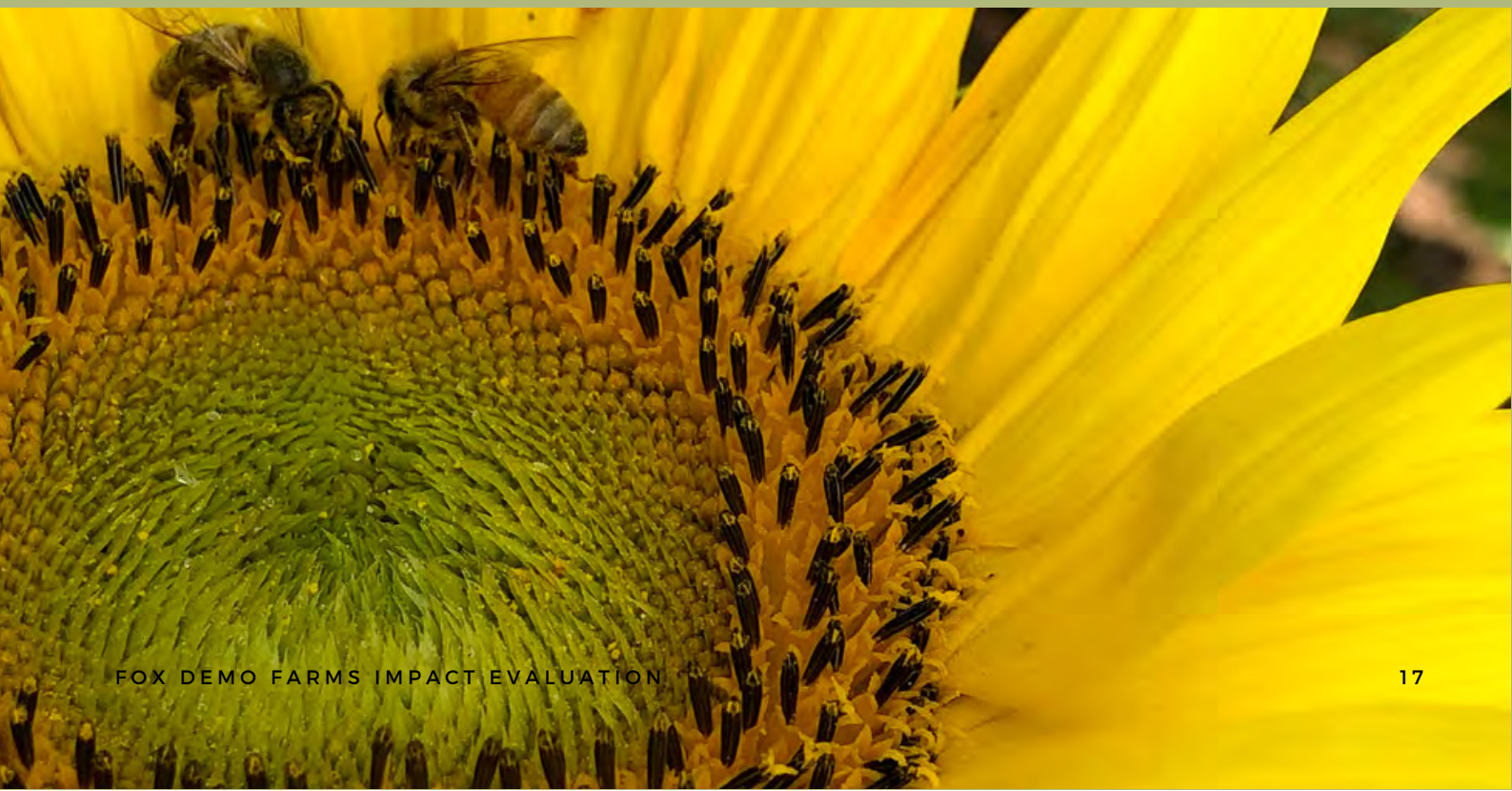
Farmers provided anecdotal evidence that conservation practices have reduced soil erosion in their fields.

"One thing we noticed on the no-till and cover crop fields, the water running off the fields seemed to be a lot clearer looking with less sediment running from the fields. That's definitely a positive thing."

Increased wildlife (n=1):

One farmer discussed how there are more signs of life in their cover crop fields.

"We definitely see more wildlife now than ever before. We see hawks, deer, or rabbits...It seems like if there is food, there is wildlife. It's also nice for snowmobiling!"



5. CHALLENGES TO ADOPTING CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Despite having adopted conservation practices on their farms, the farmers acknowledged that there are real challenges to adoption. The biggest obstacles to adoption were identified and are described below.

Incompatible or lack of access to equipment and operators that are knowledgeable about practices (n=7):

Farmers mentioned access to equipment necessary to adopt conservation practices as a challenge. Specifically, farmers said they had difficulties purchasing, setting up, modifying, and learning how to use the new equipment. Finding mechanics and custom operators with the expertise to work with specialized equipment was an added complication. The equipment mentioned included interseeders, planters, tractors, and manure applicators.

"Having the right pieces of equipment matters. We were fortunate because our corn planter was no-till ready. We didn't have to do anything to it. All we did was change the down pressure, and we were good to go. Most guys are not that fortunate. You can't take just a regular corn planter and start no-tilling with it. You've got to do some serious modifications to most of the equipment."

"By far, my biggest challenge was finding somebody with a planter set up the way we wanted it. Then came the other challenge of harvesters and manure applicators who don't really understand the no-till process."

"Getting the equipment set up correctly was a challenge for sure. It's like re-learning how to farm. I can farm like my uncle farmed all day long... it's pretty simple. But (with conservation practices) having the right equipment, the correct setup, and the right rhythm, that is the key. We're still trying to figure it all out."

"The technology is very expensive. You have to buy this equipment that maybe gets used for a total of 30 days. There is a very narrow window of opportunity to use this extremely expensive equipment."



Resistance to change (n=5):

Farmers were asked to reflect on why farms in the watershed have not adopted conservation practices. Responses ranged from farmer age, perceived length of time before realized benefits, and generational practices.

"They've (other farmers) been doing it the conventional way all their lives. Older farmers don't want to change because they're retiring soon, so why change their whole fleet, their whole farming practice, when they're planning to retire in a few years. I definitely see more younger farmers getting into it (conservation practices).

At first, I heard that it could take five to seven years to see the benefits of these practices. But for me personally, I saw benefits in the first one or two years. I would say, to other farmers, to not get discouraged about it and to keep trying a few things at a time. They don't have to buy a whole new fleet of equipment to change their practices; they can get into no-till with a minimal investment."

"I think a lot of farmers have the mindset of, 'That's the way grandpa did it, or that's the way Dad did it, so that's the way I'm going to do it.' It has worked for them. Change is hard, and it depends on the farmer's age. My son, for example, is fearless with technology, but I'm scared to death of it!"

The unpredictability of weather (n=4):

Weather can pose challenges for farmers with conservation experience, but these challenges can be especially difficult to overcome for farmers who are new to the practices.

"I guess I'll give the typical farmer response. Weather. It's always the weather. If you can tell me what the weather will be like, I can tell you what needs to be done. But the problem is, I don't know what the weather will be like until after it's happened, and that's the real challenge. Some years we get really great growth, planting cover crops right after we chop, and other years, we plant, and then it rains, and it's cold, and nothing happens."

"The biggest challenge I had was two years ago when we wanted to get two fields planted for the first time with winter rye. The Fall was so wet we never got a chance to get it done. That's probably the biggest problem farmers have; if you want to try to get rye in and you have a wet Fall, that can be really challenging."



Lack of time or patience (n=2):

Adopting conservation practices requires a change in management and the timing in which things are done during the growing season. Understanding farmer personalities and the way they operate is important when advising on new practices.

"My biggest challenge is my patience. If we have cover crops, sometimes it's best to just wait a couple of extra days for the soil to be ready for no-till. That goes against my personality. I don't have the patience to wait it out. I always want to check one thing off and move on to the next. These things (practices) can work; we just have to believe in the science and be a little patient. We need to understand that the system might look slightly different from what we're used to; it takes us out of our comfort zone. The hardest thing is getting yourself out of the way."

Having multiple decision makers (n=1):

The complexity of farm ownership and the number of decision-makers can be an added challenge for farms looking to adopt conservation practices.

"Part of my success (with conservation practices) is I don't have another partner to fight with. Sometimes it's not enough to just change one mind on a farm; you have to change five minds or something like that. That's maybe the biggest challenge. Sometimes it's three or four brothers working and making decisions together."

6. FARMERS' RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Farmers identified different approaches to education, our target audiences, and how we frame conservation agriculture.

a. Highlight the financial benefits of conservation practices (n=2).

"Some of the larger farmers are businessmen. They have to see the financial benefits (of conservation agriculture). When the practices are in place, they can go across the field just once rather than four times. They're saving on fuel and avoiding wearing out their machinery. It pays off."

b. Promote farmer to farmer learning (n=2).

"I'd recommend a roundtable with 20 farmers with some who are doing these practices and some who are not. In large meetings, nobody absorbs anything, but when you can get people talking one-on-one, that drives the message across easier."

c. Prioritize engagement with large farming operations (n=1).

"In 20 years, I don't think there's going to be any small dairies and cash croppers. So looking forward, maybe the priority should be "How do you motivate these big operations?"

d. Educate agronomists and crop consultants (n=1).

"My agronomist is on board with cover crops and no-till. He is constantly learning and doing research, so he has been a vital resource. But often, other farmers have agronomists who may not be as knowledgeable about these practices. So their agronomists might be telling them one thing, and we're telling them another."

e. Address access to equipment and technical support (n=1).

"Having the right equipment definitely helps. We're fortunate to now have a no-till planter for cover crops. Our choices were limited when we did not have the planter. Most farmers are not that fortunate."

RESULTS FROM PARTNER FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group data were analyzed using thematic coding. This section summarizes the themes that emerged with supporting quotes from participants.

1. VALUE ADDED BY FOX DEMO FARMS

In describing the value of having the Demo Farms project in their watershed, all project partners agreed that their organization or the farming community as a whole had benefited from the project. The ways in which project partners characterized the value of Demo Farms are described below with accompanying quotes.

Farmer outreach, education, and engagement (n=9):

Effective outreach strategies that utilized various platforms (i.e., field days, newsletters, social media, etc.) to reach farmers has led to an increased excitement within the farming community and the changing mindset of some farmers. Outreach has been consistent, long-term, and has focused on peer-to-peer learning.

"For me, the biggest success is the educational component to this project. Farmers are hungry to learn new ideas. Several of them have said that farming is becoming fun again rather than a burden. The regulatory component just takes the fun out of it. But with these new practices, the farmers are excited again."



Prompted the expansion of the Demo Farms model into other regions (n=5):

As the first project of its kind in the Great Lakes Basin, the Fox Demo Farms has set an example for how this model can be successful in a watershed. Through meetings and on-site tours, project partners have helped other counties and states develop similar programs. The success that Fox Demo Farm farmers have had has helped new groups with farmer recruitment.

"We started the Demo Farms in the Lower Fox, and now there are six of them in Northeast Wisconsin. If this first one wasn't successful, we wouldn't be here today. Several of these other networks looked at the Lower Fox and said, 'We want that in our watershed; we need that.' The newest Demo Farm, in part, was born out of a field day that some farmers attended in the Lower Fox."

"Five of the six demonstration farm networks are agreements with land conservation departments. When our department got involved 7 years ago, we did not know if the collaboration would work. But Brown County and Outagamie County have demonstrated that the Demo Farms can be successfully incorporated into counties' delivery. The other LCDs saw this success and wanted to replicate or expand upon it."

"We were the first to have a demonstration farm in the Lower Fox. We've received interest from other states; Ohio came to the Lower Fox to see what was going on and established a network there. We heard from New York and Pennsylvania, and they used our agreement as their template for their demo farm network."



Addressed farmer skepticism by demonstrating the success of conservation practices (n=5):

Having the opportunity to see conservation practices work on neighbors' land has helped address farmers' reservations and has given farmers confidence to try new practices after seeing local success.

"Farmers are always skeptical of what I am saying (about conservation practices). I once said to a grower, 'You got time right now, let's hop in my truck, and I'll show you a couple of fields right now. We can dig around and then give me your opinion.' Guess what he did last year for the first time? He no-tilled corn and said that he got 10 better bushels on that field than others at the end of the year. This year, he's doing like 60 or 80 acres of no-till corn."

"Our field staff can now point farmers to the Demo Farms. It gives farmers some confidence that we're not springing something new that is being done in Iowa. We can say to them, 'It's working here. We're already doing it on some of these Demo Farms. So let's give it a shot on 10 acres on your farm this year. If you want to see what we're talking about, let's run over to one of the demo farms.'"

"The misgivings that farmers had were addressed by just showing them the successes on the farms adopting practices. I've heard several people say, 'If they can do it on that crappy ground, anybody can do it.' It is good for farmers to see for themselves that the practices work on farms. Also, the Demo Farms farmers are good spokesmen. They are highly regarded in the community, so people look up to them."

Developed farmer leaders (n=4):

The Fox Demo Farms has developed an effective communication strategy that elevates the voices of farmers who are willing to challenge the status quo. Through various platforms, these farmers serve as spokespersons for the program and the practices.

"Demo Farms picked good farmers, farmers who are leaders in their own right. These farmers want to try new things and be the best stewards of the land that they can be. Even when things are not the most cost-effective, they are willing to take on the challenge."

"The greatest thing that the Demo Farm network has done is open up the door for producers to talk with other producers. We know that farmers watch their neighbors, so adoption increases when the neighbors are conservation champions."

Connected university and government researchers with farmers (n=4)

The Fox Demo Farms has created new opportunities for on-site farm monitoring and research. The program has fostered relationships between farmers and university and agency researchers. Farmers now have access to high quality data which allows them to track progress on their farm. Research data is also being shared with conservation professionals across the Great Lakes region.

"The Demo Farms project has normalized this idea of working with partners to demonstrate, validate, and measure things on the landscape. Many more farms in the area now allow university researchers and partners to work on their land. It is now an acceptable thing to be doing in the watershed."

"We (researchers) share the data we collect with the farmers every year. Our monitoring year ends in October. By December, we will start scheduling meetings with each of our farmers to discuss the data. We talk about how their farm data compares to the previous year and state-wide data and how their management practices impact water quality. We always want to ensure that farmers get their data first and understand it. We also present combined data at a lot of farm group meetings."

"We've had multiple students involved with the baseline soil health monitoring on the Demo Farms. One graduate student worked very closely with the farmers and the crop consultants, which was beneficial. Our students are getting first-hand experience with soil sampling on these farms. They are getting exposure to the world of agriculture, conservation, and landscape and watershed management."



Amplified partners' ongoing efforts (n=3)

The Fox Demo Farms has created momentum across the watershed and has supported a collaborative approach to address conservation agriculture. The project has played a pivotal role in building new partnerships and connecting related, but different work happening throughout the watershed.

"Our partnership (with Fox Demo Farms) made logical sense. We're also committed to improving water quality in the Lower Fox and the Bay, so it (Fox Demo Farms) perfectly fits our efforts. When we (partners) share information, we all gain from it. Our partnership with Fox Demo Farms amplifies our ongoing work."

"We were fortunate that there was a lot of interest (in conservation and water quality) when we got started. Many of us (partners) worked toward similar goals, which wove our work together. Because of our partnerships, we've all been more successful, and we are seeing (farmers') mindsets change."

Reached the general public with outreach efforts (n=3)

Outreach efforts have engaged the general public and environmental groups. Both groups were unaware of the progress being made by farmers to adopt practices that promote healthy soils and water quality.

"We've had field days where people from the City showed up. They don't fully understand how agriculture works anymore. And the producers don't understand where they are coming from either. So it was a great way of sharing the concerns from both parties and discussing where we're going with conservation agriculture."

"I haven't talked to anyone who is not supportive of the Demonstration Farms network. It is just a fabulous, great project! They are advancing conservation and getting the public to learn more about agriculture."

Garnered attention from elected officials and federal agencies (n=2)

Some county executives, county officials, congresspeople, and federal agencies are aware and appreciative of the Demo Farms model. The partnership with the Save the Bay initiative was mentioned as a significant contributor to building Demo Farms' reputation at the federal level.

2. CHANGES OBSERVED IN THE WATERSHED

To understand the changes observed in the watershed, we asked project partners to describe what they are seeing on the landscape and their experiences working with farmers in the Lower Fox Watershed.

Agencies changed their approach to conservation (n=9):

Agencies are taking a more collaborative, systems approach to conservation in the watershed. Working on a watershed-scale, rather than being restricted to county boundaries, has created new opportunities to work together and has allowed agency staff to be more proactive than reactive.

"There has been a shift in the business of land conservation in general. In the 90s, many state watershed programs were geared towards counties. Watersheds cross county lines, but we weren't staffed across county lines. Now the watershed programs are more driven from the federal level, and they put a heavier priority on the watershed. That has been a major driver."

"Earlier, the habitat folks did their thing, the fisheries folks did their thing, and the county conservation folks did their thing. We have shifted now to working together to find solutions toward community conservation. It has been really lovely to be part of that. There is a sense of community that we did not have before."

"Conservation has evolved over time. In the past, if there was a problem, we needed to fix it. Now we don't react to problems in the same way. We advise farmers on what they can do to manage their land; so we take preventative measures instead of being reactionary. We are trying to go above and beyond the bare minimum to just get regulatory compliance."



Agencies changed their approach to working with farmers (n=7):

Over time, agencies have evolved from a top-down, regulatory approach to a collaborative approach. This change has improved farmer-agency relationships and has helped agencies become a trusted resource for the farming community. This has led to conversations and practices that go above and beyond state regulations and focus on more innovative conservation practices.

"At one time, we were the big hammer. Now most counties here are not taking the hammer and nail regulatory approach. We are working collaboratively with producers and other agencies to get things done. We take the state performance standards very seriously, but we do not generalize all farmers as being bad actors. Agriculture is not always the problem. We're seeing good things happen with proactively working with the landowners."

"We use the regulatory approach when we need to, but we always try working with farms and building that relationship first. Most of the farmers are at least familiar with us. We say, 'Hey, we're here to help you work through this.' For the most part, the farmers have been consistently cooperative."

"I used to be pretty set on cover crops and no-till. To me, it was the only way that could work. But over time, I realized that we needed to make some adjustments with producers; we can't be quite so rigid. We need to be flexible and figure out what will work for them and what will be economically feasible for them. That's how my mindset has evolved."

"There were several occasions in the past where I'd pull in, and the farmer would run to the back of the barn! Our current approach of working with the farmers means they no longer perceive us as their enemy. We're there to help them out, and I think they appreciate that more. Now they're actually coming to us and meeting us in the driveway!"

Change in farmers' attitudes toward conservation agriculture (n=8):

Project partners have witnessed a change in farmer mentality and the way in which they view conservation practices. The increased interest has led to more farmers taking action to incorporate practices into their operations.

"Five or six years ago, if I told a farmer about a washout on their field, they weren't super concerned. The response from farmers now is, 'How do I get that field covered and protect that soil? I see the spot, and I don't like it. I want it to look different, so I'll try to do things differently.' I think the whole conversation shifted when we started talking about how cover crops relate to soil loss and health. Farmers understand these concepts, and they relate to them."

"Looking back seven years from where we stand right now, there is a drastic increase in the acres of cover crops. The biggest change has been the shift in mentality. I can remember when producers just flat-out rejected our ideas, but that mentality has changed. The intensity of tillage, too, has been lessened. There is excitement around conservation now, from both an environmental and economic standpoint."

"From what I've seen, producers have become more open to trying conservation practices. When I first started, there was a bit of hunger for change, but producers didn't really know how to get started. Now there are more covers out there than we could have ever dreamed of. Farmer to farmer contact and farm visits where producers could talk to each other were important factors in this shift."

Increased adoption of conservation practices (n=7):

Project partners are observing more green fields and fewer heavily tilled fields. They have seen an increase in farms participating in programs that provide support for conservation and an increase in farms investing in equipment needed to adopt these practices.

"My general observations are that come November and December, things are greener than they ever used to be. There's more cover out there than ever before. I've observed a transition away from conservation tillage and an increase in cover cropping."

"When the conservation efforts first started, I was skeptical about being able to affect change. But it is happening; you can see it with cover crops and no-till. We never anticipated CAFOs doing prescribed grazing. We didn't talk about annual forages initially, but now we talk about it a lot more. So it's just really taken off, and it's been fun to be a part of."

Increased interest from agronomists (n=6):

Project partners are seeing a shift in how agronomists approach conservation with their clients. More agronomists appear to be onboard with the practices and are seeing the benefits of adoption. In some situations, project partners identified farmers as the catalyst to this change. Farmers are looking to work with agronomists who have experience advising clients on conservation. Similar to farmer groups, agronomists share information and learn from each other.

"I've heard from agronomists that they now notice things that they never noticed before during field walks. They see conservation-related issues like gullies rather than just pest or crop issues. They are approaching things differently; they are using a systems approach. In my interaction with agronomists, I have heard them speak highly of conservation and encourage their farmers to adopt practices. That has been very encouraging for me."

"At first, the agronomists didn't know of our (conservation) program, but now we're working with a few. It was a transition for the agronomists, but we've gotten really great feedback from them. We have a conservationist go out to the farms with the agronomist so that they can work together. We then meet with the growers to discuss the issues we found during the field walks and ways to fix them with cover crops or no-till. Nothing is enforced; the growers themselves are willing and want to start fixing their practices and start implementing new ones. They're really excited about this change and the partnership. What we can do together is more powerful. A few agronomists even sent over their growers to learn about practices for our program kickoff. It's the same thing as farmers teaching other farmers. I think the agronomists are starting to realize that conservation is important. They're also talking to and learning from each other."

"The agronomists know these fields and farmers better than we (conservationists) do. They have worked with the farmers a lot longer, so they can advise us and help guide the conversation to cater to the farmer. The agronomists have had some of the best ideas we're currently pursuing, so it definitely has been a great partnership."

Increased collaboration between agronomists and other partners (n=3):

Project partners value the professional relationships that have developed over the past several years. Partnerships where information and ideas are shared among agency staff and agronomists is a valued product of the Fox Demo Farms.

"Even though private agronomists are not principal partners in our agreements, they are key partners.² We have a lot of kitchen table meetings with farm managers, the agronomists, and someone from NRCS, where we brainstorm ideas and figure things out. Five of the six demonstration farms have private agronomists as project managers. So their (agronomists') credibility in the ag community, together with what conservation agencies offer, has been really valuable."

"A grower reached out to me (agronomist) about trying pollinator planting for the first time. Now I've never done it myself, so it's a learning experience for both. We want to do it correctly, so I emailed someone at the County because they've done it before. Then I asked someone at NRCS for suggestions. They got back to me, gave me some advice, and put me in touch with a farmer who has done pollinator planting. I learned a lot from these folks. Everybody seems to be willing to work together, and that has been very positive thing in our area."

² Not all Demo Farm Networks have agreements directly with counties. There are networks where private agronomists take the lead role on project management teams and work with participating farms.



3. FACTORS THAT LEAD TO THE ADOPTION OF CONSERVATION PRACTICES

To understand how farmers make decisions, project partners were asked to reflect on the changes they have seen throughout the watershed and the factors attributed to those changes. The six themes that emerged are discussed below.

Farmer personality (n=7)

The personality traits commonly identified with individuals that adopt conservation practices include a willingness to try new practices, the ability to think creatively to solve challenging problems, a recognized leader among their community, and someone who demonstrates land stewardship ideals.

Access to a support network (n=7):

The social networks that have developed in the watershed have been an invaluable resource to farmers. When making large scale changes on their farms, farmers need to have a trusted individual(s) who will listen, provide advice, and who will follow them through the entire adoption process.

"It is helpful for the farmers to know that we are all here to work together. They need to know that we care about their farms and have someone to talk to if they have problems or questions."

"I truly believe that people are the biggest asset in conservation. People could be boots on the ground through the LCD, an agronomist, or neighbors. It's the social aspect that makes the difference. It is exciting to be part of a conservation community. We should fund more people-support. Farmers need guidance on how to do these practices. Someone who can go out to the farm with an interseeder to help build their confidence and let them know that it will work. And if it doesn't work, they have someone to help them through it."

"In our work, we are trying to bring the technical expertise (to farmers). We invest in both cost-share and education. We walk them through applying for EQIP, help them find funding, help them find the technology, and help them get on lists to use shared equipment. Basically, we help them plan and execute their ideas. The Demo Farms and the county are trying similar strategies with their outreach efforts. That's one thing that has been successful with our program."



Framing practice adoption with soil and water health (n=5)

According to partners, farmers positively respond to messaging centered on soil and water health.

"Five years ago, if I told a farmer about a washout in their field, they were not really concerned. Now, farmers are saying they want to cover their fields and protect the soil with cover crops. The whole conversation changed when we started talking about what cover crops can do for soil loss and soil health. Farmers understand that, and they seem to relate very well to that message."

"7 or 8 years ago, we would talk with farmers in the office and tell them about cover crop programs. It really came together for us when we brought the concept of soil health into the conversation and discussed how all these pieces fit together. We discussed both the benefits to the farm and the environment."

Farmers see and hear of neighbors' success (n=4)

The demonstrated success by local farmers has helped validate the legitimacy of these conservation practices and the ability to make them work in northeast Wisconsin.



Mitigate farmers' financial risk (n=4):

Providing farmers with cost-share funding or other economic support to reduce the financial risk has made conservation practices a more viable option for farmers.

"I would argue that upfront cost-share took some pressure off the farmers who wanted to experiment. Producers are risk-takers, but that only goes so far. Equipment can cost 20k to 50k, so one wrong decision could impact their livelihood. The Demo Farms project took some pressure off by giving farmers some cost-share dollars."

Farmers see the benefits on their land (n=3):

There are a variety of benefits to adopting conservation practices. Farmers see that conservation practices can improve efficiency on their farm by reducing labor and input costs. They are also seeing improved soil structure and reduced soil erosion.

"I have pictures of myself in a field before the landowner started to adopt no-till, and I was carrying around 10 pounds of mud on my boots. Now that they have been doing no-till for 4 or 5 years, I can walk out there after a rain event and have no mud on my boots. And the farmer can see these changes. They see that the water stays in the waterway or that the infiltration is better. Having them acknowledge and see the changes on their own is powerful."

4. FACTORS THAT INHIBIT THE ADOPTION OF CONSERVATION PRACTICES

To understand the factors that inhibit farmers from adopting conservation practices, we asked project partners what their experience has been with hesitant farmers. The three themes that emerged are discussed below.

Resistance to change (n=3):

Farmers, like many people, find change difficult. Farmers that are hesitant are usually older and near retirement or are more risk averse and therefore, resistant to adopting new practices.

"For some farmers, this is outside their comfort zone. Some farmers might say, 'My grandpa was a successful farmer, my dad is a successful farmer, and I've been successful up until now, so why change?'"

"Some of these producers are getting a little older, so it is more of a challenge to change equipment and practices. We should keep the younger generation on board with this, and we could see some changes on the land."

Manure haulers lack equipment (n=2):

Access to appropriate equipment is known to inhibit adoption; however, manure equipment designed for conservation is a particularly difficult challenge for many farmers to overcome.

"I have seen a considerable shift in planters to suit the no-till fields, but I have heard manure haulers say they can't afford to have special toolbars for one or two clients. The equipment is incredibly expensive."

Overemphasis on regulation by agencies (n=1):

Relationship building with farmers has proven to be a more effective approach to conservation adoption versus the top-down, regulatory approach that counties historically used.

"In the past, agriculture was always portrayed as the bad actor when that wasn't the case. The producers don't like that, and it makes them defensive. We used to have a regulatory approach, but now we're trying to work with farmers to solve issues and get things done. This has been very helpful for all of us."



5. PARTNERS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FOX DEMO FARMS

Project partners were asked to provide recommendations for how Demo Farms should proceed in northeast Wisconsin. Responses are provided below.

a. Devise a way to demonstrate changes in organic matter (n=1).

"How can we show farmers that the practices are working? If we can show them that organic matter levels are improving, it will help get buy-in. We tell farmers that cover crops will lead to better nitrogen efficiency. We need to better demonstrate the value of conservation to building soil and organic matter."

b. Build on existing successes and keep innovating (n=1).

"Moving forward, Demo Farms should keep pushing boundaries and testing new things. I see the Demo Farms evolving by simply fine-tuning what they're already doing. They should keep innovating and sharing what they learn with others in the Basin."

c. Work toward ensuring the maintenance of practices (n=1).

"The innovators and early adopters are implementing practices, and other farmers are watching. An important piece is to make sure the farmers stick with it instead of going back to what they used to do."

d. Future programming should be informed by farmers' interests (n=1).

"Farmer input has been huge (factor in the success) for the Demo Farms. The key to making it work is both farmer and Demo Farms' input on where they want to go next."

e. Apply the Demo Farms model to other farming challenges (n=1).

"I don't want the Demo Farms to lose momentum. There are challenges and opportunities to consider. It could be the reintegration of livestock on land, manure management, irrigation with leachate water, or nutrient separation."

f. Work to improve understanding of the economics of soil health (n=1).

"As we prepare for the next generation of the Demo Farms, it is important to move beyond the most progressive farms to the middle adopters. We should definitely continue offering technical assistance and look more closely at the economics of soil health."

g. Focus outreach and education efforts on the public (n=1).

"The two priorities for Demo Farms should be getting more acres under conservation and outreach to the general public. I think that the urban-rural conflicts will grow, especially in Brown County, so we need to educate the general public about conservation farming."

CONCLUSION

Farmers and partners expressed deep appreciation for Demo Farms' contributions to supporting and promoting the adoption of conservation practices. Participants of the evaluation unanimously agreed that conservation practices are gaining popularity. They attributed this change to the work of the Demo Farms and other partners, including counties, agencies, NGOs, and utilities.

This evaluation demonstrates that the Fox Demo Farms has made considerable progress toward its objectives. As of 2022, seven Demo Farms have been established in the Lower Fox Watershed to demonstrate the effectiveness and adaptability of conservation practices. Insights and knowledge gained from establishing and managing the Fox Demo Farms have consistently been shared with other counties, agencies, and partners. This has promoted the expansion of the Demo Farms model into other regions of the State and country. Demo Farm farmers and researchers have collaborated to explore, monitor, and research new practices leading to new partnerships. The Demo Farms has successfully amplified its impact by collaborating with various partners and contributing to ongoing efforts.

Farmers and partners offered actionable recommendations for the Demo Farms to consider. If implemented, these recommendations can build upon and strengthen the project.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express our deep gratitude to the farmers and partners who volunteered their time to participate in the interviews and focus groups. We also extend our gratitude to our colleagues Rachael Whitehair, Aaron Pape, and Liz Binversie who helped conduct the interviews.

The Fox Demo Farms project is a USDA-NRCS funded project utilizing GLRI funds. In addition, the project receives financial support from Brown County and NEW Water.

Tools used:

- Report designed using a template from canva.com
- Images provided by Whitney Prestby

If you have any questions about this report, please contact:

Whitney Prestby
Natural Resources Educator & Outreach
Specialist for Fox Demo Farms
UW-Madison Division of Extension
whitney.prestby@wisc.edu

APPENDIX A: FOX DEMO FARM FARMER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. From your perspective, what changes have you seen in conservation agriculture in the Fox River Watershed over the last five years?

- a. Why do you think these changes have happened?
- b. Do you think that the Fox Demo Farms project has helped other farmers adopt conservation practices?

2. Who do you turn to when you are looking for advice on conservation practices?

- a. Can you describe a situation when you asked for advice from someone? Have you acted on this advice?
- b. Have you reached out to other farmers for help or advice? Or have you been following the progress of any particular farm? Is there a practice that really interests you? What have you learned?

3. On the flip side, have other farmers reached out to you for advice?

- a. Can you describe a situation when this happened?
- b. From what you know, have they acted on this advice?

4. Thinking back to before you started using conservation practices, what were the biggest challenges to adopting cover crops and no-till planting?

- a. Have you been able to overcome these challenges? If so, how? If no, are there resources you need to do so?
- b. What role, if any, did the Fox Demo Farms overcome your challenges?
- c. What are your biggest challenges? What resources will you need to overcome these challenges?

5. From your perspective, what have been the benefits of using conservation practices on your farm?

6. In your opinion, why haven't other farmers adopted conservation practices?

- a. What do you think we can do differently to reach farmers who are not adopting conservation practices?

7. Is it important to you to publicly show your commitment to clean water?

8. Have you received comments about your signs?

- a. If so, what have you heard?
- b. Were the comments from farmers or others?

APPENDIX B: LOWER FOX FARMER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did you begin using conservation practices on your farm?
2. What have been the biggest challenges to adopting cover crops and no-till planting?
 - a. Have you been able to overcome these challenges?
 - b. If so, how? If no, are there resources you need to do so?
3. Who do you turn to when you are looking for advice on conservation practices?
 - a. Can you describe a situation when you asked for advice from someone?
4. On the flip side, have other farmers reached out to you for advice?
 - a. Can you describe a situation when this happened?
5. Have you applied anything that you learned at a Fox Demo Farms field day?
 - a. Can you describe an example of when this happened?
6. Has your farm directly benefited from having the Fox Demo Farms project in the watershed?
 - a. In what ways have you benefited?
7. Is it important to you to publicly show your commitment to clean water?
8. Have you received comments about your signs?
 - a. If so, what have you heard?
 - b. Were the comments from farmers or others?

APPENDIX C: PARTNER FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The framing of the questions was slightly edited to suit the context of the focus group participants.

1. Over the last 7 years, what changes have you seen in conservation agriculture in the Fox River Watershed?

- a. What role has Fox Demo Farms had in the spread of conservation practices in the watershed?
- b. Do non-demo farms bring up the work being done on Demo Farms?

2. Thinking back to before the Fox Demo Farms project began, can you describe a typical conservation-related conversation with farmers in the watershed? How willing were farmers to discuss conservation agriculture?

- a. How is the conversation different among Demo Farm farmers and non-Demo Farm farmers?
- b. Can you think of an instance where you approached a middle adopter about conservation and how that conversation went?
- c. How has Fox Demo Farms built confidence around these practices?
- d. Why do you think some farms are still reluctant to adopt these practices?

3. When you compare the start of the Fox Demo Farms with some of the new farms added to the group, were there similar challenges when recruiting new farms?

- a. What elements of the Fox Demo Farms helped you make your case for these new farms?

b. Can you describe an instance when a County Conservationist or a county reached out to you about the Fox Demo Farms? How did that conversation go and did it lead to the development of a new network?

4. In past conversations, you have indicated that agencies have shifted from a regulatory, top-down approach to focusing on building trust and relationships with farmers. Can you discuss what has caused this shift?

- a. What has been the biggest challenge in building trust with farmers in the watershed?
- b. What role has the Fox Demo Farms had in building relationships with farmers?

5. We know there are perceptions that our soils are too heavy, too wet, or it's too cold in northeast Wisconsin to make conservation practices work here. How have you addressed these perceptions?

- a. How has Fox Demo Farms built confidence around these practices?
- b. Why do you think some farms are still reluctant to adopt these practices?
- c. Over time, how has your involvement with the Fox Demo Farms influenced your approach to conservation agriculture?

6. In the next five years, how do you see the priorities of Fox Demo Farms evolving?

7. Counties in this area are taking a watershed approach to conservation by working beyond county lines. Has the Fox Demo Farms influenced this approach and if so, can you describe its role in the shift?