



Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District

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2020 Outstanding Conservationist: Joe Borgerding

Each year the Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District recognizes an individual(s) or organization for outstanding accomplishments in implement conservation practices and improving Minnesota's natural resources.



When talking with Joe Borgerding, one can tell very quickly how passionate he is about conservation and soil health on his organic dairy operation near Belgrade, MN. Growing up on his family dairy farm, his father provided him with the opportunity to learn and gain first-hand experience working in the field.

The Borgerding family has been actively farming in Stearns County since 1870, with his family farm beginning in 1946. For more than 20 years of conventional farming and 8 years of biological farming, Borgerding managed his farming operation with conventional methods before becoming certified as organic in 2004. He first became interested in soil health when he started to notice the soil gradually became too compacted to farm efficiently. “Soil structure deteriorated so bad that rain wouldn’t penetrate, and chemicals wouldn’t dissipate,” said Borgerding. “As I learned more about soil health and biology, it became clear that we were doing something wrong on our land.” To find answers, Borgerding had to change the way he thought about farming.

Borgerding met with other farmers who had better soil health and researched books about balancing minerals and the benefits of rotations. Once he started to incorporate many different conservation practices such as cover crops, nutrient, and pest management, Borgerding saw his soil come to life. “Little changes were fun to see,” said Borgerding. “It kept me motivated to continue to implement conservation practices and improve my operation.”

On Borgerding’s operation, conventional farming practices of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and deep tillage have been replaced with more regenerative farming methods. “In my journey, I have gone from conventional to biological farming, organic, and now incorporate regenerative farming practices,” said Borgerding. Since transitioning from conventional to organic, Borgerding keeps a close eye on soil health practices and adjusts as needed based on conditions and crop development.

Joe, and his wife Toni, are fortunate in being able to extend the opportunity to farm to two of their sons, Dan and Tom, by selling the livestock operation to them. They are currently milking 185 cows and continue to grow cash grain crops and all the feed for the livestock while utilizing the valuable manure from the 185 milk cows, 150 heifers and 50 steers. Legumes and cover crops provide the balance of the nitrogen needed for small grains and corn. At least 400 acres are protected by pasture or forages, and most of the rest by residue or cover crops. “Each farming operation is unique,” said Borgerding. “Each farmer must determine what works best for them and make adjustments as needed.”

With the success of the conservation practices, Borgerding started utilizing other practices on his farm such as strip tillage. Strip tillage conserves nutrients for more efficient crop uptake and helps reduce soil loss potential. Over the years, Borgerding has participated in the NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), where he worked with staff to improve his lighting system. This program completed an audit throughout his operation to determine where lighting efficiencies could be improved, and electricity needs reduced.

Currently, Borgerding’s rotationally graze the dairy cattle and seed cover crops between all annual crops. Other conservation practices he utilizes and implements on his operation are nutrient and manure management to ensure the nutrients are being applied correctly to optimize the crop response. Integrated pest management is also a focus, using natural methods to control weeds and insects instead of turning to chemical methods of control. With careful planning, Borgerding can avoid these input costs, which in turn helps both profitability and sustainability.

“Borgerding has demonstrated a great commitment to conservation with adopting practices to ensure he is doing his part to protect soil health and improve water quality,” said Dennis Fuchs, SWCD Administrator. “Highlighting his farming operation and recognizing him for his efforts can provide encouragement for farmers looking to incorporate conservation practices on their farm, reduce input costs, and protect our natural resources.”

Although Borgerding has spent his career doing something he loves, working and caring for the land, he is humbled and honored to be acknowledged for his conservation efforts. He is looking forward to sharing his passion for soil health and conservation with his sons, as they transition the farm into the next generation.