



WGF Launches Two-year Farm Conservation Assessment

Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF) is launching an innovative two-year project to reassess farm conservation practices through a farm sustainability rewards project. We will be working in partnership with Clean Wisconsin with support from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture via a cooperative agreement of up to \$438,000. The funding largely supports the project staff who will research and carry out this project, and the resulting model will launch a pay-for-performance approach to better supporting sustainable agriculture in our state.

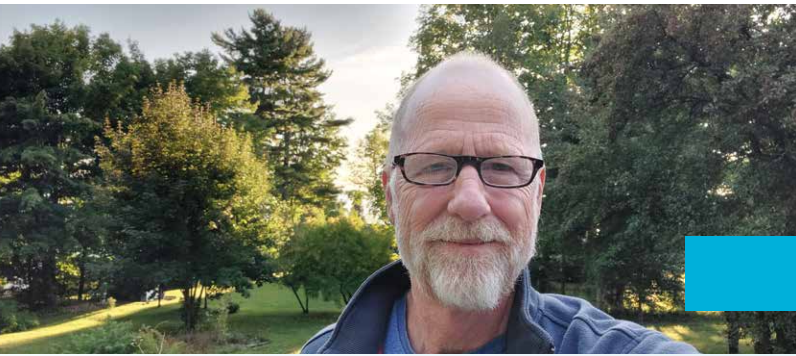
Farming is hard work with tight margins for success. Across Wisconsin, farmers are committed to conservation, using their deep knowledge and experience to navigate the challenges of producing economically viable crops and livestock while protecting soil and water. Yet, serious issues associated with agriculture, like nutrient pollution in drinking water, continue to cause problems for Wisconsin communities.

Since the dust bowl era of the early 20th century, Wisconsin farmers and land managers have been encouraged to adopt practices that reduce soil erosion and protect water from contamination. For example, conservation practices often involve actions like reducing tillage passes on fields to limit erosion, planting cover crops like rye and clover to keep fields green, and maintaining buffer strips of native plants along shorelines to provide wildlife habitat and capture nutrient runoff. But how effective are these practices, and how should they be incentivized?

Traditionally, funding for on-farm conservation practices comes to producers through lump-sum implementation agreements between farm landowners and public agencies, often as fixed amounts per acre for a given practice. The funding agencies usually include county land and water conservation departments, state agencies like the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), or federal agencies like the NRCS. [Continued on page 6](#)

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Reflections

A Message from WGF Leadership

By Fred Clark

Reflections on Five Formative Years

When I informed our Board of Directors in late 2022 that I wanted to step back from my role as Executive Director near the end of 2023, I wanted to be sure we had time to plan for a successful transition and not lose the momentum we've developed since our founding in 2017.

So, I'm especially gratified that our transition planning is paying off! Our new Executive Director Meleesa Johnson has come on board well-prepared to take the helm and continue the great work we've all been doing together. I'm gratified that we've firmly established our identity as an organization driven by good science together with a strong set of values around conservation.

Our Opportunities Now and Conservation Bulletin paper series showcase our deep knowledge of issues and the collective wisdom of our volunteer member-experts. Our work around policy advocacy, citizen engagement, and the critical but quiet role we play behind the scenes with agency staff and policy makers are all possible because of our focus on science and our unparalleled institutional knowledge.

As a result, WGF is considered a thought and policy leader on important and diverse issues including: wildlife and fisheries management, wolf conservation, wetlands protection, conservation of public lands and public waters, climate science, and contaminants of emerging concern.

One of the things I've enjoyed most with WGF has been the chance to work with so many of our members, both career professionals and dedicated citizens, who contribute their unique talents to help us address Wisconsin's greatest conservation challenges. This issue of *Confluences*, together with our "Tending the Fire" publication lays out many of the accomplishments our members have helped achieve just in the last year.

As we close in on our first decade, we know we have more to do! We want to more fully support young people in conservation through mentoring, scholarships, and involving more student members and young professional members in our work groups.

We want to see our work groups, our membership, and our programs reflect a wider range of people, communities, and issues from throughout all corners of Wisconsin. And, we want to more fully establish ourselves as a thought leader with a long view on today's emerging conservation challenges.

I'm personally excited to be able to step back, without stepping out. I'll continue to be active with WGF projects and will help continue our record of success.

For everyone who has contributed to all the conservation successes we've been part of in such a short time, thank you! Our efforts have only been possible because of you, and we're only getting started.

Thanks for all you do,

Fred Clark



Mission

Wisconsin's Green Fire advances science-informed analysis and policy solutions that address Wisconsin's greatest conservation challenges.

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Wood Duck by Kathy Trochlell, acrylics



"Lightning Flash" Work Group Updates



Pelican River Forest by Jay Brittain courtesy of Gathering Waters

Public Lands and Forestry Work Group

We focus on wildlife habitat, forest biodiversity and forest-climate considerations as well as issues related to the protection and management of Wisconsin's public lands. We work with state and local government agencies through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (WDNR) Silviculture Guidance Team, the Governor's Council on Forestry and the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts (WICCI). We partner with conservation organizations such as Gathering Waters, The Nature Conservancy, Partners in Forestry, the Wisconsin Chapters of The Wildlife Society, and the Society of American Foresters.

Current work includes preparing forest management bulletins for WICCI, reviewing WDNR's Central Sand Hills Regional Master Plan and, with the Wildlife Work Group, reviewing the Sharp-tailed Grouse Management Plan. Linda Parker gave a talk at the Forests, Birds and Climate Symposium in Ashland and Ron Eckstein attended the Oak Management Conference in Wisconsin Dells. We continue to work with Gathering Waters on completing the 56,000-acre Pelican River Forest conservation easement and renewing the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program.

Energy Policy and Climate Change Work Group

We have been submitting our policy positions to the Wisconsin Public Service Commission's (WIPSC) dockets, and to other Wisconsin agencies on statewide initiatives during the State of Wisconsin Budget processes. Our ideas are getting researched and adopted by the WIPSC. For example, Governor Tony Evers included in his recent budget a call for a state energy plan, increasing funding in the Focus on Energy program, and including the cost of carbon in program planning. While these ideas have not been adopted by the Legislature, they continue to be discussed in the public forum.

Other specific WGF policy recommendations, such as performance-based ratemaking, have been placed into the formal WIPSC docket and study framework. The WIPSC has not fully adopted third-party financing, but rather is endorsing this on a case-by-case basis.

"Lightning Flash" Updates



October Morning, Big Falls County Park, Eau Claire County by Jeff Henry

Fisheries Work Group

We have a couple of focus areas for 2024, including a goal to engage more young people in our fisheries work! One of our focus areas for 2024 is a proposed emergency rule bill in the state legislature that would force WDNR to open a commercial fishing season for lake trout in both Lakes Michigan and Superior. Our group has science-based concerns about the status of the fish stocks and the capacity available for WDNR to run a sustainable fishery. In addition, there are concerns about the political damage this bill could do to the stakeholder trust that has been gained and the cooperative progress that has been made by management in Lake Superior.

Another focus is a proposal developed with the Environmental Rules and Water Resources Work Group for research on nutrient loading effects on fisheries. This work would analyze existing databases of estimated phosphorus loading rates and fish community integrity covering much of the state. The goal is to see if there is a correlation good enough to quantify the fishery benefits of reducing nutrient pollution by a certain amount. The group is in discussions about potential collaborators and funding sources.

Visit WGF's website at
wigreenfire.org/our-work
to keep up to date on WGF's work across Wisconsin



Marisue Zillig and Olaf by
Pike Lake Photography

Supporter Spotlight: Marisue Zillig

Marisue Zillig, a generous supporter of Wisconsin's Green Fire, recently talked with our Communications Coordinator, Carolyn Pralle. Marisue is a retired Registered Nurse with a passion for international travel. Originally from Wauwatosa, she has lived in West Bend since the 1980s. Marisue has donated to WGF since 2017.

Carolyn: Thank you so much for your time and generosity, Marisue. Would you tell me more about why you support Wisconsin's Green Fire?

Marisue: "From the very beginning, I just was so impressed with Green Fire being based in Wisconsin and attracting all these knowledgeable and dedicated people. And then, not just talking about doing things, but doing them."

Carolyn: How did you first learn about Wisconsin's Green Fire?

Marisue: "It was a total coincidence! Back in 2017, I met another Green Fire member at an Ozaukee County spelling bee. She was so excited about being involved and so I just started learning! I was so impressed by the expertise and happy to see so much going on with conservation in the northern part of my state."

Carolyn: What conservation topic are you most interested in?

Marisue: "Well, I'm kind of a generalist in that way. But if there's one thing that I am really concerned about, it's water, clean water for people and for wildlife. It's all connected. So many people through no fault of their own, just don't have easy access to good drinking water."

Carolyn: That's so true, and we're focusing a lot on protecting drinking water. Is there anything else you want others to know about giving to Wisconsin's Green Fire?

Marisue: "It makes me feel good to have such confidence in a group. I would just encourage anybody to become more involved. I'm really glad to be a supporter."

Learn more about supporting WGF at
<https://wigreenfire.org/2023-fall-appeal>.

Primer on Our New PFAS 2.0 Publication

Around Wisconsin, communities are facing drinking water contamination due to a complex group of chemicals known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). Yet, drinking water standards and PFAS treatment options are currently inadequate to protect people and water in our state. To help address this critical issue, the Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CEC) Work Group at Wisconsin's Green Fire has written a new Opportunities Now paper "PFAS in Wisconsin Drinking Water: A Summary of Current Detections and their Implications for Wisconsin."

This new publication, nicknamed our "PFAS 2.0 paper," builds on our May 2023 conference "PFAS in Wisconsin" and our 2021 Opportunities Now paper, "PFAS – Forever Chemicals in Wisconsin." Papers in our Opportunities Now series summarize the science on top conservation issues in Wisconsin and make policy recommendations that support pro-conservation outcomes.

Written for non-experts, this new PFAS 2.0 paper explains what PFAS chemicals are and shows how and where PFAS affects people and drinking water in our state. The authors unpack the current drinking water rules and standards around PFAS. They also suggest where new standards are needed to protect human health and the environment. Most importantly, the paper offers recommendations using a science-based approach to address PFAS contamination in Wisconsin's drinking water and recommends adequate funding to aid private well-owners and communities struggling with the issue.

Read the new PFAS 2.0 paper online at
<https://wigreenfire.org/our-publications>.



PFAS testing equipment, image courtesy of WDNR



Meleesa Johnson, WGF's new Executive Director, presenting at PFAS in Wisconsin Conference, May 2023

Some of the key findings and recommendations of the PFAS 2.0 paper include:

1. PFAS contamination in Wisconsin's water supplies mainly affects areas near specific PFAS sources and mostly comes from "legacy" sources, though the extent of PFAS contamination is not static.
2. In affected communities, PFAS in drinking water causes severe and costly environmental and human health impacts, with potentially disproportionate impacts in disadvantaged communities and for vulnerable people and populations.
3. Wisconsin's Green Fire estimates the capital cost for PFAS treatment of public water systems and alternative water supplies is \$208 Million. This number may change depending on the findings of additional testing and rising costs from inflation.
4. Wisconsin's drinking water standards will need to be modified as upcoming federal standards will likely be significantly more restrictive than Wisconsin's current standards. Wisconsin currently has no standard for PFAS in groundwater and therefore no PFAS standard for private well water.
5. Like any complex problem, addressing the impacts of PFAS will require investment, coordination, and most of all, cooperation across all sectors including state and federal government, the manufacturing and business community, academia, health care systems, non-governmental organizations, local units of government, and members of the public.

Unfortunately, this model of funding has not been enough to adequately protect Wisconsin's waters, farms, and people. As WGF's recently retired executive director Fred Clark said, "In some important cases, we don't know how much improvement producers are making in protecting us from things like water quality contamination as a result of nutrients, specifically nitrates or phosphorus, or bacteria. And so, with a lot of our public investment, we haven't had a good way to measure how effective it is." The traditional funding model also limits eligibility for farmers to receive additional funds to support successful practices.

Our new farm conservation model aims to correct those problems. Over the next two years, experts at WGF and Clean Wisconsin will be working with farmers to assess and design metrics to determine the success of different conservation practices over time. This pay-for-performance approach could allow farmers to voluntarily meet a particular performance standard, then improve the conservation outcomes and earn a higher paying level of incentive. Some of the subject matter experts on agriculture and water quality from WGF and Clean Wisconsin include Sara Walling and John Exo (see their Profiles in Conservation on page 7), Jim Vandenbrook, Jim Baumann, Paul La Liberte, Jim Matson, and Chris Mechenich, among others.

This project supports WGF as a leader in innovative approaches to farm conservation. Fred Clark adds, "this project is a reflection of our work on one of our top conservation priorities, which is conservation and agriculture. The fact that the NRCS wants to support this work is a really encouraging sign that the time is ripe for new thinking about how we protect water quality and other environmental benefits in farm country."

For WGF, this project directly upholds our programmatic priorities around sustainable agricultural systems, with strong connection to our work on climate actions, protecting water quality, and biodiversity. By supporting farmers in implementing conservation practices on the lands and waters they know so well, we are optimistic that this work will lead to major improvements in protecting the economic and environmental health of Wisconsin's working lands.



Jerusalem artichoke by Don Behm

Call for Art Submissions!

WGF is looking for submissions of Wisconsin-based artwork or poetry that could be included in future editions of *Confluences* or as keepsakes for members, like the photos and paintings by WGF members featured in this issue!

Submissions should celebrate Wisconsin natural resources and be appropriate for all audiences. Please contact cpralle@wigreenfire.org.



Cranberry marshes in Jackson County by Jeff Henry

PROFILES IN CONSERVATION



Sara Walling

Sara Walling knows farm policy and water quality science. She will co-lead the Farm Sustainability Rewards project with WGF's agriculture expert Jim VandenBrook.

Sara is the Water and Agriculture Program Director for Clean Wisconsin. Her work focuses on reducing the impacts of

Wisconsin's agricultural industry on soil and water resources. She expects to provide a reality check during each step of the NRCS project's two-year process of testing and proving new incentive programs that will sustain farms while protecting water resources.

One of her roles is to bring representatives of the agricultural community to the table as members of an advisory board. This advisory board is invited to speak out on whether the recommended programs can be implemented on the farm. Sara will check the in-field performance of measures proposed to reduce runoff of fertilizers, lower carbon emissions of agricultural practices, or sequester carbon in soils. The success of those measures in achieving performance goals is at the heart of the project's proposed incentive programs.

Sara knows a change in strategy is needed to encourage farmers "to go above and beyond in their conservation efforts," and "do everything we can" to prevent pollution of surface and groundwater and achieve water quality goals.

Meet Two Partners in Our Farm Sustainability Rewards Project

Written by Don Behm

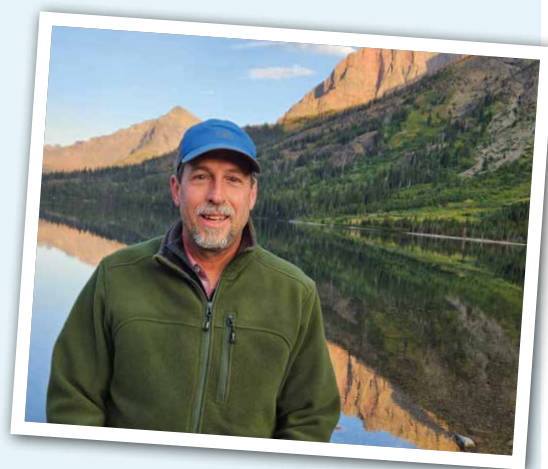
Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF) turned to several experts to ensure that our two-year farm sustainability rewards project with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is based on the best science and shaped by real-life conditions. As the project gets underway this fall, we are introducing two of the partners to WGF members.

John Exo

John Exo will be an advisor to the core group of WGF and Clean Wisconsin representatives directly involved in the project. John describes the NRCS project as "extremely ambitious," requiring Wisconsin's Green Fire to pull in university scientists with expertise in the water quality impacts of agriculture as well as the motivations behind decisions made by farmers.

John retired in April 2023 as a program manager with UW-Madison Division of Extension, where he co-led creation of the new Ag Water Quality Program in the Agriculture Institute. In this role, he hired and mentored staff and developed outreach programs for farmers, crop advisors and conservation professionals on the relationships between field-level management and loss of soil and nutrients.

He started his career as a farmland preservation specialist in Sauk County tasked with developing and implementing soil and water conservation plans and moved on to Lakes & Watershed Coordinator for Dane County. He subsequently was named Natural Resource Educator with Extension, a job he held for more than 21 years.





Queensboro clothing with WGF logo
Credit: Jim Perry

Wear our Logo!

Let everyone know that you are one of the Voices for Conservation! By wearing a piece of clothing with the Wisconsin's Green Fire logo on it, you can stimulate discussion about WGF and the great work we do.

Our logo wear is handled by an independent on-line business called Queensboro. WGF receives a small royalty fee with each purchase.

Options include T-shirts, dress shirts, sweaters, outerwear, caps, hats, towels, gear bags, all available in a wide range of sizes and price points.

Purchase items at <https://wigreenfire.qbstores.com>. First, set up an account with Queensboro, then scroll through their enormous selection, all showing the WGF logo.

Show the world you are a proud supporter of Wisconsin's Green Fire! Share pictures in your WGF gear with us on social media or by emailing info@wigreenfire.org!