

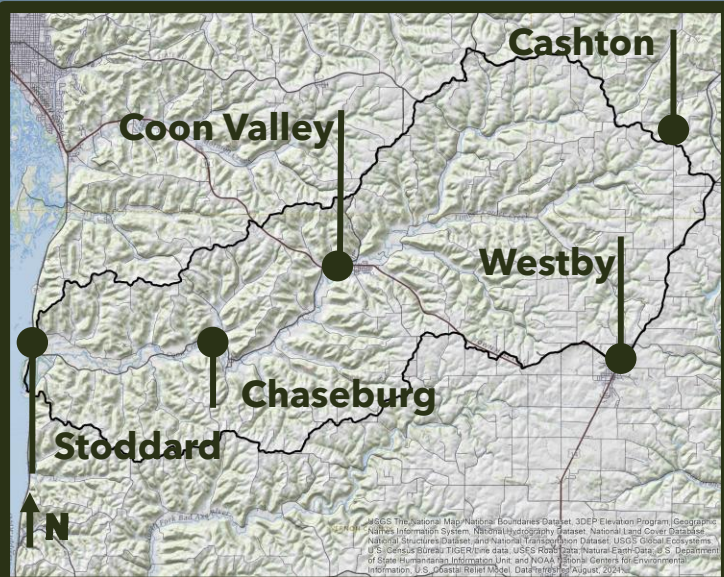
A young child with blonde hair, wearing a blue denim jacket, orange pants, and red rubber boots, is sitting on the grassy bank of a shallow creek. The child is holding a fishing rod and looking towards the water. The creek is surrounded by lush green grass and some rocks. The water is clear and shallow, reflecting the surrounding greenery.

THE COON CREEK COMMUNITY WATERSHED COUNCIL

WATERSHED
MOMENTS
2025

What are watersheds?

Watersheds are basins in which all land drains to a common point. Small watersheds are nested within larger watersheds. Watersheds are also social, ecological, and biophysical systems, where what happens upstream affects everything that happens downstream. **No matter where you live or where you go, you are part of a watershed.**



The Coon Creek Watershed is a 90,000-acre area which spans Vernon, Monroe, and La Crosse counties in southwest Wisconsin's Driftless Area. Coon Creek is about 20 miles long, and flows to the Mississippi River.



About this document: This annual report features watershed highlights from 2025, as well as a summary of the CCCWC's 2025 financial position. Unless otherwise noted, material was developed and compiled by Sydney Widell, with editorial guidance from the CCCWC board and general membership.

Cover: A young member of the CCCWC drops a line along Timber Coulee Creek, in the headwaters of the Coon Creek Watershed. Photo Elliot Young

Accent Artwork: Gabrielle Whisler

Accent Font: Libertario, by Élisée Reclus, via JustSeeds Artist Cooperative

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LEARNING TO MAKE RUNNING WATER WALK

The CCCWC draws inspiration from the myriad conservation traditions that span cultures and generations in the place presently known as the Coon Creek Watershed. Soil conservation efforts made by the Haugen family are an important part of this legacy. As some of the earliest adopters of the novel farming techniques developed in Coon Valley during the national soil conservation movement centered here in the 1930s, the Haugens advanced and refined practices—like terracing and contour farming—that remain critical to reducing soil erosion and flooding in the Coon Creek Watershed.

Ernest Haugen was a child in the 1930s, when his family first began experimenting with soil conservation practices on their farm. When Ernest's teacher asked him about their projects, Ernest famously replied that they were “learning to make running water walk.”

Nearly 90 years later, Coon Creek Watershed grazer Jim Munsch recounted this story at the CCCWC's very first meeting, and it continues to guide our watershed council's work. This project—learning to make running water walk; and also, learning to *walk with water*—is ongoing.

From the dam decommissionings poised to alter our hydrology at a basin scale, to the climatic shifts upending ways of life worldwide, this moment feels precarious for many reasons. But the Coon Creek Watershed has faced challenges before. Ernest Haugen grew up at a time when soil erosion from intensive agriculture was so severe, cows disappeared into gullies, and rivers, as one-time Coon Creek-based conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote, were “washing the future into the sea.”

Today, Coon Creek residents point to the vision and audacity of the Haugens and their watershed neighbors who stared up at their eroding hillsides and came together to address the problem, and to the beautiful testament to the power of coordinated, basin-scale approaches to conservation their work continues to offer.



CCCWC board members, as well as representatives from the Iowa Flood Center, the Vernon County Land and Water Conservation Department, The River Alliance of Wisconsin, the Iowa Flood Center, Wisconsin Wetlands Alliance, the University of Iowa, and Northeastern Iowa Resource Conservation and Development pause during a tour of the Coon Creek Watershed to visit the historical marker in Coon Valley commemorating Coon Creek as the site of the nation's first watershed project.

From the Coordinator

As the CCCWC's fourth year came to a close, one of our members reminded me that four years was also the length of the Soil Conservation Service project that transformed the Coon Creek Watershed in the 1930s.



Reflecting on our council's achievements over our first four years—including awarding over \$50,000 for conservation practices across more than 1,000 acres, and welcoming 125 members—I remain absolutely amazed and humbled by the scale and success of the project Coon Creek residents were able to carry out in the 1930s.

Of course, the work done in the 1930s was made possible by a \$5 million federal investment in soil health—equivalent to roughly \$125 million in 2025. That funding not only supported on-the-ground conservation projects, but also research and education on everything from crop rotations to farm profitability. But beyond that unprecedented investment, the project worked because of the courage and vision of the Coon Creek community.



Photo: Aneta Gorska

But beyond that unprecedented investment, the project worked because of the courage and vision of the Coon Creek community.

Early on in my time with the CCCWC, I asked our president Nancy Wedwick why she thought so many Coon Creek residents eventually participated in the SCS project. Thinking about her own family who lived in Coon Creek during the 1930s, Nancy told me she had a feeling people were open to taking action for the health of the watershed because so many of them were, quite literally, related.

She explained how sediment from one side of her family would erode from the ridgetops and smother fields in the valley where the other side of her family farmed. The care and obligation intrinsic to those close relationships made inaction unfathomable.

These days, our relationships with each other across the watershed may be a little less direct and a little less tangible. They are also more important than ever.

In the last four years, CCCWC members have taken action to adopt and demonstrate flood resilient land management practices on their own farms, and to share conservation resources with neighbors. Through their hard work, they've also launched an awareness of watersheds—as interconnected physical systems, as complex social networks, as communities—into broader public consciousness.

But maybe most importantly, we've been coming together and reconnecting and building the relationships that sit at heart of watershed conservation. Thank you for being part of this historic movement.

— Sydney Widell

Our thanks & acknowledgements

Our members and volunteers

Our members and volunteers are the heart of the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council. Volunteers created this grassroots organization from their desire to better care for Coon Creek's lands and waters. From the start, this has been a community-led effort, involving all its facets—its landowners, producers, business owners, and more, all dedicated to creating good lives in the Coon Creek Watershed.

Our volunteers have opened up their homes to host meetings, generously shared their skills, knowledge, and ideas, stepped up to plan our events, and so much more. Most of all, their dedication to CCCWC's core value of inclusion drives the culture of this group. We are so grateful for the time, hard work, and heart our volunteers have poured into this organization over the last years.

Coon Creek Watershed farmers and producers

The watershed's farmers are on-the-ground conservationists. We are inspired by the way they put words into action every day through practices that increase water infiltration, cultivate healthy soils, increase biodiversity, and more.

In 2025, they shared their expertise on contour farming, pasturing steep hillsides, hazelnut cultivation, and other conservation practices with each other and with attendees at our CCCWC meetings. We owe our thanks to them for doing all that they can to make running water walk in the Coon Creek Watershed..

Our partners and sister councils

In 2025, we were grateful for the support and friendship of our federal, state, county, and non-profit partners, who have provided guidance to us on grant applications, helped us build relationships with a wide range of farmers and other conservation leaders, and shared their time at CCCWC meetings.

We also wish to recognize our sister watershed councils in the Bad Axe, Tainter Creek, Little La Crosse, and Rush Creek Watersheds, who inspire us with their different approaches to conservation and watershed organizing. We are grateful to learn and grow with you, and for the continual reminder that we are all part of and connected by larger watersheds.

This land and the people who have long cared for it:

The area we presently know as the Coon Creek Watershed spans the current and ancestral homelands of the Ho-Chunk, Kickapoo, Santee Dakota, Sauk, and Meskwaki.

The rise of settler agriculture, which unfolded in concert with U.S. attempts to remove the people indigenous to this region, initiated the cycles of flooding, erosion, and sedimentation that continue to play out in the Coon Creek Watershed. Any work to address these ongoing ecological crises must begin by confronting their roots in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands, and by deferring to and learning from the leadership of Indigenous Peoples.

Our own work is made possible, in part, by funding from the Ho Chunk Nation, granted to us by Vernon County in 2021. Vernon County receives and reallocates revenue from the Ho Chunk Nation, in accordance with the Ho Chunk Nation's gaming compact with the State of Wisconsin.





VISION: "A WATERSHED NURTURED, CHERISHED, & FLOURISHING."

CCCWC members learn about grazing along steep upland forest margins at the Moilien Farm, during the August 2025 meeting

About the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council

The Coon Creek Community Watershed Council (CCCWC) is a nearly entirely volunteer-run, producer-led non-profit dedicated to caring for our watershed's soil, water, air, and communities. We were founded in 2021, and we are anchored in one of America's most iconic conservation landscapes.

It's not lost on us that, more than 90 years ago, the valley where we got our start was the same place Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers camped while they helped carry out the first watershed conservation project in the nation.

In the 1930s, Coon Creek residents facing overwhelming and intertwined soil erosion and flooding crises collaborated with the CCC, as well as state, federal, and university partners, to develop what are now widespread

soil conservation practices—practices like contour farming, terracing, and adjusting land use intensity to the slopes of the hills.

Many of these practices continue across the watershed, marking our community's long-term commitment to conservation.

But we know there is more work to be done, and that, as we face increasingly severe floods and droughts, this work is more urgent than ever.

CCCWC's diverse membership comes together around a shared interest in learning to live well with floods, as well as shared hopes for good lives in a thriving Coon Creek Watershed. Our organization is increasing awareness, adoption, and the accessibility of land management practices that increase

flood resilience and community well-being more broadly.

Our approach to conservation is guided by the lessons in cooperation and experimentation watershed residents learned during the 1930s.

The CCCWC believes that efforts to care for our watershed community are rooted in the relationships linking people to each other and to land and water, from the ridgetops to the valleys, and across generations.

Our organization is committed to building community around sound land and water conservation practices, supporting producers and other landholders in implementing those practices, and cultivating awareness and wonder for the complex ways water connects us all.

Our members

Our members are farmers, conservationists, educators, writers, entrepreneurs, and more, united by our love for the Coon Creek Watershed and our pride in its conservation history. In 2025, the CCCWC was 125 members strong, and membership growth was up 12 percent from 2024.

Becoming a CCCWC member is **free and easy**. You may fill out a membership form on our website or at a CCCWC General Meeting.

Membership offers a voice in protecting and shaping the future of this historic and beautiful watershed.

Our board

CCCWC Board members are elected and serve the council on a voluntary basis. Our 2025 board included the following:

Nancy Wedwick President	Ashley Olson Events Planning
Tucker Gretebeck Vice President	Tim Hundt Public Relations
Monique Hassman Secretary (Jan–Nov)	Matthew Canter Secretary (Nov–Dec)
Eric Weninger Treasurer	Kevin Traastad Crop Specialist (Jan–May)
Marc Moilien Historian	Zach King Conservation Liaison
Chelsey Myhre-Foster Youth Programs	Emje McCarty Sustainability

We welcome board applications from anyone with a vested interest in the Coon Creek Watershed. Visit our website for more information about board elections.

Our Funding: CCCWC, Inc. is a 501-(c)(3) non-profit. This means we operate as a charitable organization and may not attempt to influence policy or benefit private interests. Our work is made possible through grants, donations, and partnerships.



MISSION: "TO CONTINUE THE HISTORIC LEGACY OF CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP THROUGH IMPROVING AND RESTORING OUR SOIL, WATER, AND AIR AS STEWARDS OF THE COON CREEK WATERSHED."



(Left to right) Vernon County Conservationist David Hettenbach, Trout Unlimited Driftless Engagement Coordinator Cameron Aker, River Alliance of Wisconsin Climate Resilience Director Ellen Voss, and Wisconsin Wetlands Associated Government Outreach specialist Kyle Magyera tour CCCWC Vice President Tucker Gretebeck's farm as part of an exchange with the Iowa Flood Center in Sept. 2025

Our collaborators

We are thankful for direct and indirect support from the following:

Bad Axe Watershed Stewards • Coon Valley Business Association • The Coon Valley Conservation Club • Coulee Region Trout Unlimited • Habitat for Humanity • Hill Country Watershed Alliance • The Iowa Flood Center • La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon County Conservation Departments • The Nature Conservancy • The Natural Resources Conservation Service • River Alliance of Wisconsin • The Rural Climate Partnership • Rush Creek Conservation Watershed Council • Tainter Creek Farmer-Led Watershed Council • Trout Unlimited Driftless Area Restoration Effort • U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service • UW-La Crosse • UW-Madison • UW Extension & Extension Lakes • Valley Stewardship Network • WI Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection • WI Department of Natural Resources • Wisconsin Department of Tourism • WI Land and Water • Wisconsin Wetlands Association, & many more.

Our programs are made possible through essential support from our friends in and around the Coon Creek Watershed, including: Tom's Tents Triggers and Tackle, Driftless Seed Supply, Knutson and McIntosh Memorial Libraires, Embark Maple Energy, Fizeology Foods and Gist Teas, Great American Pancake Co., Hansen's IGA, Hazelheart Farms, Potato King, the Westby FCCLA, Westby Rod and Gun Club, and to students and faculty at UW-Madison.



We also wish to thank the following for their direct financial support in 2024:

- Coulee Region Insurance Group
- Coulee Region Trout Unlimited
- Susan Elston and Friends
- Great American Pancake Co
- Stanley Gretebeck and Friends
- Good Culture
- Nelson Agriculture
- Neutral
- Organic Valley
- Pasture Pride Cheese
- Sleepy Hollow Chevrolet
- Thrive Wellness
- WCCU
- Westby Book Club
- Westby Sewing Circle

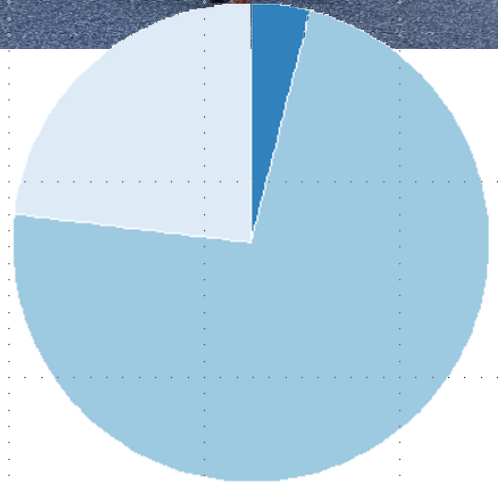
VOLUNTEERS DONATED MORE THAN 1,880 HOURS AT FORMAL CCCWC EVENTS, AND COUNTLESS MORE OUTSIDE THEM



Financial Snapshot

In 2025, CCCWC received \$151,000 in grants from the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), The Rural Climate Partnership (RCP), The Nature Conservancy, The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Wisconsin Department of Tourism. Our grants were supported by matches from CCCWC's producers, county partners, and volunteers, as well as \$8,575 in donations and sales throughout the year.

2025 Key Program Areas



End of Year Summary*

Total Grant Credits	\$125,000
Grants Receivable	\$28,250
Total Donations/Sales Credits	\$8,575
Net Credits	\$161,825
Total Expenses	\$115,340
Closing Balance	\$94,470

Conservation Cost Share: \$21,705

- \$10,205 (DATCP Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant)
- \$1,500 (Rural Climate Partnership)
- \$10,000 (The Nature Conservancy Conservation Challenge Grant)

Conservation Demonstrations, Education, & Outreach: \$68,506

- \$42,314 (Rural Climate Partnership)
- \$11,192 (DATCP Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant)
- \$15,000 (Joint Effort Marketing Grant)

Watershed Planning: \$3,753

- \$602 (DATCP Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant)
- \$3,151 (Rural Climate Partnership)

* These statements have not yet been reviewed by an accountant.

2025 Cost Share Report

The CCCWC offered cost share assistance for cover cropping for the fourth year in a row, thanks to support from the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection’s Producer-led Watershed Protection program. Enrollment in our programming grew by 3 farms and more than 130 acres from 2024.

Cover crops	2025	2024	2023
Total funding available	\$9,705	\$6,000	\$8,450
Number of participants	12	9	8
Total acres planted in covers	440	304.6	235.25
Average acres/participant	36.7	33.8	29.4

The CCCWC also offered cost share assistance for planting trees, hedges, prairie, and riparian buffers, through a \$10,000 grant from The Nature Conservancy, and \$500 in support from WI-DATCP. Our members used this funding for everything from wildlife habitat enhancement to specialty crop establishment.

Perennials	2025	2024
Total funding available	\$10,500	\$10,000
Number of participants	13	12
Trees and Shrubs planted	1291	1094
Prairies & Riparian Plantings (acre)	7.39	0

Cultivating a hazelnut community and a thriving local food system: CCCWC cost share at work



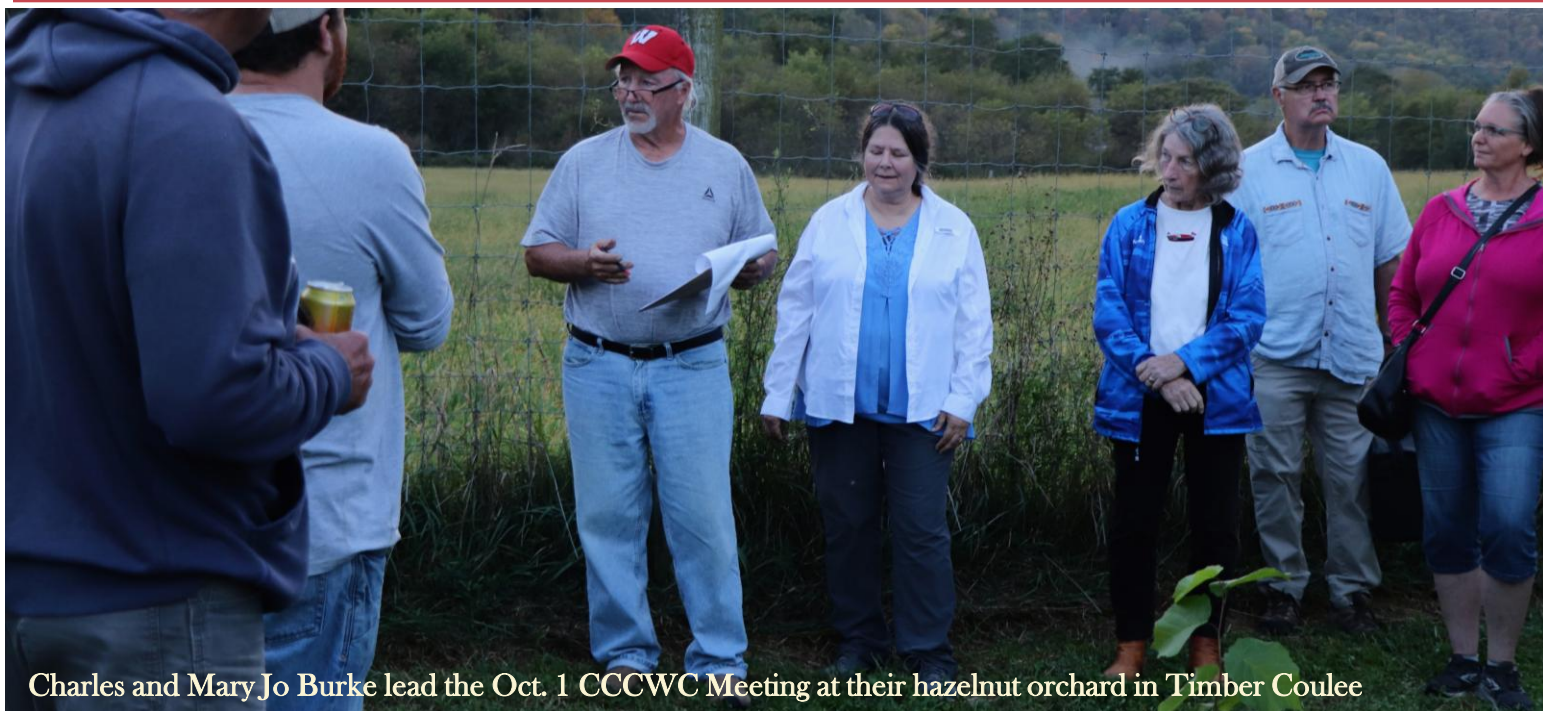
In 2025, the CCCWC helped plant 1,291 trees and hedges in Coon Creek, including 200 hazelnut seedlings at the Burke Farm

Hazelnuts have been a cornerstone of traditional foodways and ecology in the Driftless Area for countless generations. Increasingly, farmers in the region are collaborating to bring these plants onto their farms for their diverse ecological benefits, and for their healthy and delicious nuts.

Charles and Mary Jo Burke, who have grown corn and hay on their farm in Timber Coulee since the 1980s, made the shift to hazelnuts three years ago. The Burkes shared more about their experiences with hazelnuts as hosts of the CCCWC’s Oct 1 2025 meeting.

For the Burkes, growing hazelnuts is a way to diversify their farm, while also supporting the ecology of the land where they live.

The trees’ deep, perennial roots improve soil health and water infiltration, leading to reduced erosion and runoff. Birds and other wildlife love their nuts, which are high in protein, important vitamins, and healthy fats. The nuts are also delicious—on their own, ground as flour, or pressed as



Charles and Mary Jo Burke lead the Oct. 1 CCCWC Meeting at their hazelnut orchard in Timber Coulee

oil. But maybe most importantly, raising hazelnuts is something the Burkes love to do together.

“We really have fun,” Mary Jo says. “And we are trying to find something that, once it’s established, our kids and grandkids can do.”

The Burkes are taking up hazelnut cultivation at a moment when demand for the nuts is expanding rapidly across the globe. But despite the long history of hazelnuts in the Midwest and the trees’ resilience to climate extremes, only a small share of nuts on the market are grown here.

As the hazelnut movement takes root in Western Wisconsin, Charles sees high start up costs, like specialized tree hybrids and harvesting equipment, as a key limiting factor for would-be hazelnut growers. He is hopeful that expanding awareness of and participation in hazelnut growing systems will help make the cropping practice more accessible.

“The whole thought would be, if you can get a group of people together who are interested in raising hazelnuts, you have a community, and you can pool your time and talent and equipment,” Charles says.

For the Burkes and others in the Driftless Area, raising hazelnuts is just as much about cultivating a thriving local food system as it is about cultivating trees. The Burkes collaborate with Hazel Heart Farms, a

collective of Midwest hazelnut farmers working to develop local hazelnut supply chains by aggregating hazelnuts from small farms around the Upper Midwest and turning them into products like oil, flour, roast nuts, and trail mixes.

“We saw this company as an opportunity to transform the Midwestern landscape – fighting climate change on a meaningful scale while building local food systems and introducing the world to these incredible nuts,” Hazel Heart Farms writes on their website.

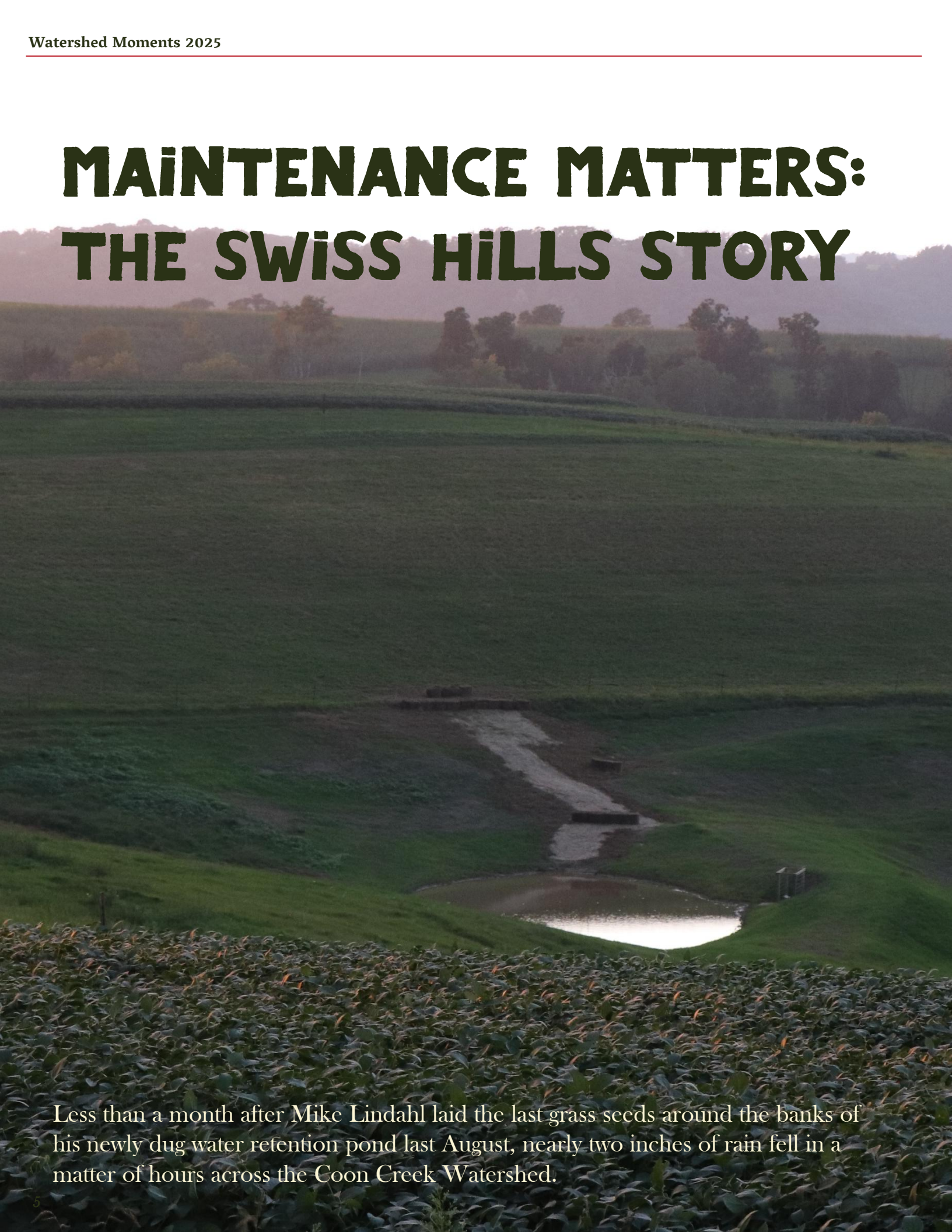
Leaders from Hazel Heart Farms attended the Oct. 1 meeting to share more about their grower collective, and to share samples of their hazelnut products.

Guests at the October CCCWC meeting also had an opportunity to learn about the specialized hazelnut hybrids the Burkes are trialing on their land, and to walk the rows of hazelnuts they planted this season.

The Burkes practice alley cropping, a method for integrating trees like hazelnuts into fields where other crops are growing. In alley cropped systems, trees are planted in rows with enough space between the rows for other crops to flourish.

The CCCWC was pleased to sponsor 200 hazelnut trees at the Burke farm in 2025, thanks to a grant from The Nature Conservancy.

MAINTENANCE MATTERS: THE SWISS HILLS STORY



Less than a month after Mike Lindahl laid the last grass seeds around the banks of his newly dug water retention pond last August, nearly two inches of rain fell in a matter of hours across the Coon Creek Watershed.



As the rain fell, Mike went about his morning chores, checking on cows and their calves. All the while, he kept an eye on his farm pond, and he watched with a sinking feeling as the freshly seeded waterways feeding into the pond unraveled, and knee deep gullies opened into the hillside.

When the storm passed, Mike went outside to inspect the damage. Most of the grass seed he had planted to shore up the waterways against this exact situation had washed away.

“It was disheartening. It’s not about the money, but it is disheartening to watch all your work wash out,” Mike said. “Once it starts washing, there’s not much you can do until the rain stops.”

Mike and his wife Sally graze cattle and grow alfalfa, corn, and soybeans with their childrens’ families on Hamburg Ridge, in rural Stoddard. The farm has been in their family for 98 years, with Mike at the helm for the last 40. During the time he’s farmed there, he’s experimented with soil conservation techniques including minimum and no till corn and soybean planting, cover cropping, and managed grazing.

To help cover the often-prohibitive costs of adopting these practices, Mike has looked to the United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Vernon County Land and Water Conservation Department for funding assistance—including programs like the ones that helped him build the retention pond.

The Vernon County Land and Water Conservation Department cost shared 70 percent of the \$14,212 pond project, using funding it receives from local wastewater treatment plants to protect water quality. Mike covered the remaining 30 percent of the cost.

While retention ponds like the one Mike dug are designed to capture the excess sediment and nutrients that flow off of farm fields, they store and slowly release stormwater runoff as well, which helps reduce flooding and “makes running water walk.” They also support wildlife habitat, and can be a water source for farm animals.

Mike’s pond is nestled low on his fields, where it is supposed to collect water that drains from the land



Top to bottom: Guests arrive at Swiss Hills for the CCCWC’s 4th anniversary; the Lindahl family pauses during the celebration for a photo; young guests explore the Lindahl’s farm pond.

above along grass waterways. In the pond, water that doesn't infiltrate into the ground should be released slowly through a drawdown structure. Packed soil stabilized with grass is designed to form an embankment around the pond.

But as is often the case in the Coon Creek Watershed, heavy rains had other plans, and the waterways draining into the pond washed out before the stabilizing grasses Mike planted had a chance to take root.

After the storm, Mike called a few contractors to ask about repairs. All the bids he received were at least several thousand dollars. He figured he could cut costs by doing the project himself, but there would still be the expenses of buying new seed, putting down stabilizing ground netting, and hiring an excavator to re-level the rutted-out waterways—not to mention the time he'd lose getting ready for the busy harvest season.

By chance, Mike's contract with Vernon County was still open, so he was able to access additional cost share for the repairs. But he was still left with unforeseen expenses,

on top of the costs of the project he had just completed.

Mike was also concerned because he was planning to showcase the project as the host of our 4th Anniversary celebration in Sept. 2025, which was only a few weeks away. He wanted to make the repairs quickly.

We had heard about the Lindahls' pond project, and invited them to share it with our broader council membership as an illustration of an upland runoff management intervention that can enhance flood resilience in the Coon Creek Watershed.

When Mike explained the situation to our board, they didn't think twice before voting to grant him \$1,500 to help restore the pond before the September celebration. But the board also realized Mike's story pointed to a much larger problem.

There are a wide range of state and federal programs that fund conservation practice adoption. But there are far fewer programs that also invest in maintaining those practices. Families like the Lindahls can be left on the hook for costly, unexpected repairs, and projects meant



Living legacy



CCCWC members Alan Seelow (pictured) and Rod Jorgenson maintain functioning small dams, water drops, and terraces constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s on a farm Alan rents from Rod. A new program from the CCCWC aims to support the restoration of these structures across the Coon Creek watershed.



CCCWC board members Ashley Olson and Nancy Wedwick on the farm where Ashley grew up in rural Stoddard.

to enhance flood resilience and soil health in the Coon Creek Watershed might not work to their full potential because they don't receive adequate maintenance. Or, these projects might be abandoned altogether.

In the Coon Creek Watershed, this pattern is a tale as old as the 1930s.

During the 1930s, Coon Creek residents collaborated with federal, state, and university partners to develop land management strategies like terracing and contour farming in what is now celebrated as the first watershed conservation project in the nation. These strategies significantly reversed the flooding and erosion crisis set in motion by intensive settler agriculture.

But as our president Nancy Wedwick pointed out, the decades following this massive federal project in Coon Creek have seen the abandonment or removal of many of the practices developed during that time, in favor of larger scale, more intensive agriculture. These changes also correspond to a rise in increasingly severe floods in the Coon Creek Watershed. A 2021 UW-Madison study found the estimated 10-30 percent increase in total row cropping acreage in the Driftless Area between 2006-2017, enabled in part by the removal of conservation interventions that reduced erosion and promoted infiltration, has been accompanied by elevated flood peaks across the region.

Amid this urgent context, Nancy worries that the lack of funding for project maintenance can deter landowners from adopting the types of land management practices needed to mitigate flooding in the Coon Creek Watershed.

“If you want to make sustainable environmental changes, you have to really sustain them. This was a gap we identified.”

**-Nancy Wedwick
CCCWC President**

“The fact that you don't always get help for maintenance is prohibitive,” Nancy said. “If you want to make sustainable environmental changes, you have to really sustain them. This was a gap we identified.”

That's why, at the same time we were helping fund pond repairs at the Lindahl Farm, we were also developing our new Post Project Maintenance Program, which will open officially in January 2026. Through the program, applicants will be able to request up to \$1,500 to offset the cost of project repairs, thanks to funding from the Rural Climate Partnership.

“Our strategy is to call attention to this gap,” Nancy said. “We can provide a small financial contribution, but long term this is a much larger problem and must be addressed on the policy level—through cost share programs that consider long term maintenance.”

Back on the Lindahl farm, Mike says his repairs are holding up. The grass is taking root, the gullies are gone, and water collects in the pond and infiltrates into the ground before flowing off the Lindahls' fields.

“Everything seems to be good, it's all grassed in,” Mike said. “It's an ongoing thing, but it's 100 percent better than when we started.”

Like all of our cost share programs, the Post Project Maintenance Program is made possible through community and grant support. In 2026, we will seek to increase the maximum grant award, as well as the number of people it might serve.



Conservation Farmer of the Year

CCCWC Vice president Tucker Gretebeck and his family were recognized for their conservation leadership

We are thrilled to share that Monroe County recognized our Vice President Tucker Gretebeck, and his wife, Becky Gretebeck, as its 2025 Conservation Farmers of the Year. The annual award, which is in its 50th year, celebrates Monroe County farmers for outstanding stewardship, including community involvement and conservation education. Award recipients are nominated by their peers and mentors, and selected by a Monroe County committee.

If you know the Gretebeck Family, you know just how well-deserved this recognition is. To spend time with them or step foot on their farm is to be inspired by their bold conservation vision, and to be moved by their strong community ethic.

I had a chance to speak with Tucker after news about the award broke.

“It was a complete honor to be recognized,” he told me. “I feel really lucky that I get to farm the way I do. I have found a way to interact with the world, and I feel like I can have an impact on others in a positive way whether they realize it or not.”

The Gretebecks and their two children graze 50 dairy cows and raise horses at All Seasons Farm, near Cashton, in the headwaters of the Coon Creek Watershed. In the fall, they also run a pumpkin patch in their valley.

In addition to making the transition to managed grazing, the Gretebecks experiment with a diverse suite of soil health and flood mitigation strategies on their farm.

These measures range from structural interventions, like the pond they dug last summer to retain runoff and protect water quality; to large-scale management shifts, like adopting agroforestry in the upland pastures where they’ve planted 1,100 trees.

“This is a prime example of what you can do on the uplands,” said Monroe County Conservationist Bob Micheel. “Tucker is infiltrating as much water as he can as a farmer and a landowner, and he’s doing everything he can to mitigate climate change and build resilience.”

Bob said the Conservation Farmer of the Year award recognized what he sees as the Gretebecks’ passion for not only putting conservation into practice on their farm, but for advocating for climate resilient land management across Monroe County and the Coon Creek Watershed.

“If you step back and look at their family, it’s a lifestyle, being stewards of the land,” Bob said. “And it doesn’t matter if it’s preschoolers, college students, elected officials, or neighbors, they do such a great job welcoming people in and getting that message out there.”

Back in 2022, I was one of those college students, and the Gretebecks' farm was one of the first places I visited

in the Coon Creek Watershed. It was June, a month after their family had undertaken their massive tree planting project, in partnership with the Monroe County Conservation Department, The Nature Conservancy, and the Savana Institute, and with the help of many neighbors and friends. Later, Tucker told the Learning to Make Running Water Walk Oral Narrative Project that the shift to silvopasture had felt like a giant "leap of faith."

While bringing the forest onto his fields may have been an enormous risk, Tucker also saw it as an important opportunity to diversify his farm and make his land and livelihood more resilient to everything from shifting agricultural markets to accelerating climate change.

"If I can make this farm more resilient, there are just more places to lean when something happens," Tucker explained.

The Gretebecks' approach to conservation has always stemmed from their desire to honor those who lived on the land before them, to do right by those who live downstream, to produce high quality milk, and to leave a legacy for their children. But after 2018's record flood, land conservation took on even more meaning and urgency for their family.

The flood devastated the Gretebecks' valley bottom pumpkin patch and event space, scouring out fields and washing away entire buildings. As they began the long recovery process, the Gretebecks noticed they sustained less damage in places where there were roots in the ground.

Their experience in the flood deepened the Gretebecks' commitment to conservation and land management practices that enhance flood resilience by reducing runoff and soil erosion.

For Tucker, the flood also brought into focus the urgent need for a watershed-scale approach to land conservation.

"Things aren't going to get better if no one does anything. But farmers don't jump unless someone does it first," Tucker said. "We just had to prove that you could do it in a different way. Not that mine is the only way, but it happens to work on my farm. Watching it grow out has got to be the best feeling."

For Tucker, serving at the helm of the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council and connecting other Coon Creek farmers with conservation resources and examples of ways to farm differently is an extension of the land stewardship ethic that drives his farming practice. He envisions the council as a supportive network that could make "leaps of faith" a little less daunting for others.

"We get to make connections with people, and get them out on each other's farms," Tucker told me. "We just need to get our feet on the ground and get connected again. The relationships are the most important thing to me."

When Tucker talks about the diversity of conservation practices he's adopted on his farm and the wide range of causes he throws his energy behind, he talks about the exciting ideas that emerge when neighbors come together to solve problems, as well as the importance of creating places to lean when times get hard. More often than not, we at the CCCWC also find ourselves leaning on Tucker and his family, whether it's for a last minute visit on a watershed tour, a do-it-yourself tent installation, an idea just far enough out there to work, or reassurance over a milking hours-turned-office hours phone call that "everything's gonna be fine."



Watershed Literature



In June 2025, Missouri-based conservation historian Joshua Nygren visited the Coon Creek Watershed to share insights from his latest book, which featured the history of flood control dam building in the Coon Creek Watershed.

The CCCWC distributed 60 free copies of his book to members and local libraries, with support from the Rural Climate Partnership.

The following is an expert from our interview with Josh. The full text is available on our website.



“A lot of times, we look back and it seems like [the dams were] this unstoppable or inevitable force, but I don’t think people living on the land viewed it as inevitable, and it wasn’t without tremendous human cost.

...One of the things I hope readers get from my book is that not all conservation is the same. Conservation is one of those words that everyone can get behind. It’s a big tent concept, but what exactly it seeks to do matters tremendously.

Reliance on expensive technofixes might solve one problem, but it often creates wholly new problems. Today, a lot of these fixes are promoted as tools of sustainability that are going to help farmers produce more from less land, with fewer inputs. That might be true, but that’s not the entire story.

The rise of digital agriculture more recently, where you have self driving tractors, and all this high tech equipment that monitors real time field conditions and tells people exactly how much fertilizer and pesticide to apply per square foot, I hope people see those as not

just neutral technologies. If we took as a principle that a well-populated country side is good—not out of romantic attachment to family farmers, or that sort thing, but just as a sign of an equitable society—then I think we can view the rise of high tech, low populated farms as a testimony to the tendency of expensive technofixes to concentrate wealth in fewer people’s hands in the name of environmental conservation.

As a starting point, pay attention to how power works within agricultural conservation. Any time we’re talking about the protection of nature, we’re talking about those three big things that people were paying attention to during the New Deal. It’s about the environment, it’s about the economy, and it’s about who can actually afford to participate. ”



Confluence Bright Spots

- Nearly 800 guests and over 50 volunteers spent the day connecting along Coon Creek.
- Live music all day, including headliner Mollie B and Friends.
- Over 30 watershed partners on site to share conservation resources, art, writing, and locally produced goods.



The Coon Creek Confluence is our annual watershed celebration. The free day long, creek-side event brings together our community, watershed partners, and visitors to learn about conservation resources and ongoing efforts to protect the Coon Creek Watershed.

We partnered with the Westby Rod and Gun Club to host the 2025 Confluence along Timber Coulee Creek. The day was filled with music, dancing, local food, creek exploration, and lots of learning.

This year, support from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism allowed us to promote the event across the region, bringing watershed literacy to a wider audience.



Driftless Exchange

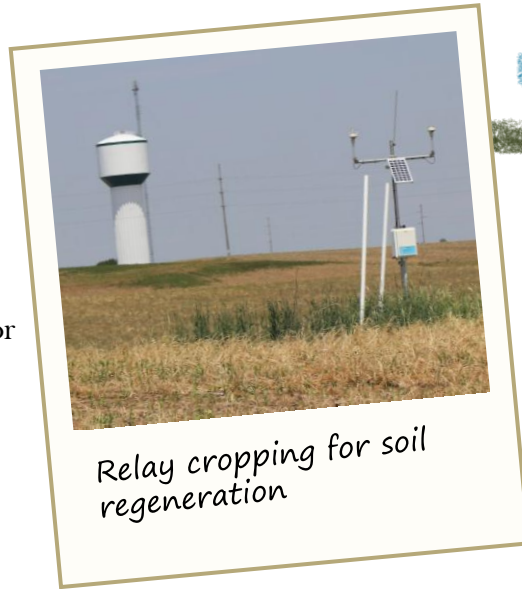
Text adapted from the Iowa Flood Center

In June 2025, the CCCWC led a group of passionate watershed conservationists, engineers, farmers, and community members to Postville, Iowa, where we connected with experts from the Iowa Flood Center, Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation & Development, and Trout Unlimited to learn about innovative watershed management strategies. The group toured several sites in Postville, West Union, Elgin, and surrounding areas.

The group learned how cover crops and relay crops protect the soil, ensuring that topsoil is not blown off the field while also promoting better water infiltration and less runoff. The Iowa Flood Center's state-of-the-art hydrostation deployed on the farm helps to monitor hydrologic conditions and understand the potential flood reduction benefits of such practices to explore how it can be scaled up and more easily adopted in other areas.

Two on-road structure (ORS) stops gave the group a chance to compare different designs and scales of these projects. Unlike traditional culverts, ORS help to temporarily hold back water instead of quickly pushing it downstream.

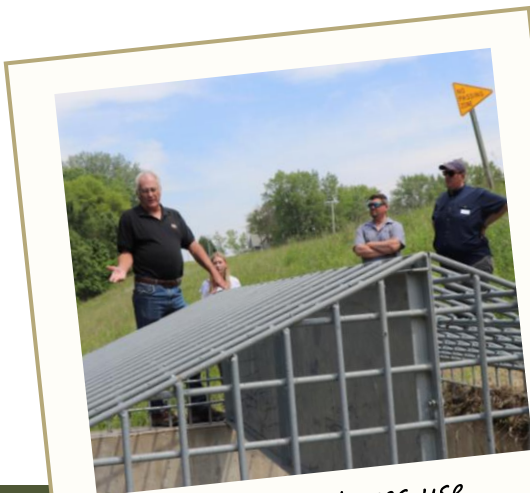
“These physical interventions are only part of the picture,” said Sydney Widell, CCCWC coordinator. “They need to work in tandem with other initiatives, like the Iowa Flood Center's sophisticated network of flood gauges that alert residents when floods happen, programs that address systemic barriers to changes in land management practices, and proactive local policies that prioritize flood resilience.”



MINNESOTA

IOWA

POSTVILLE



On-road structures use roads to slow the flow of flood water



Stream monitors at bridges detect floods

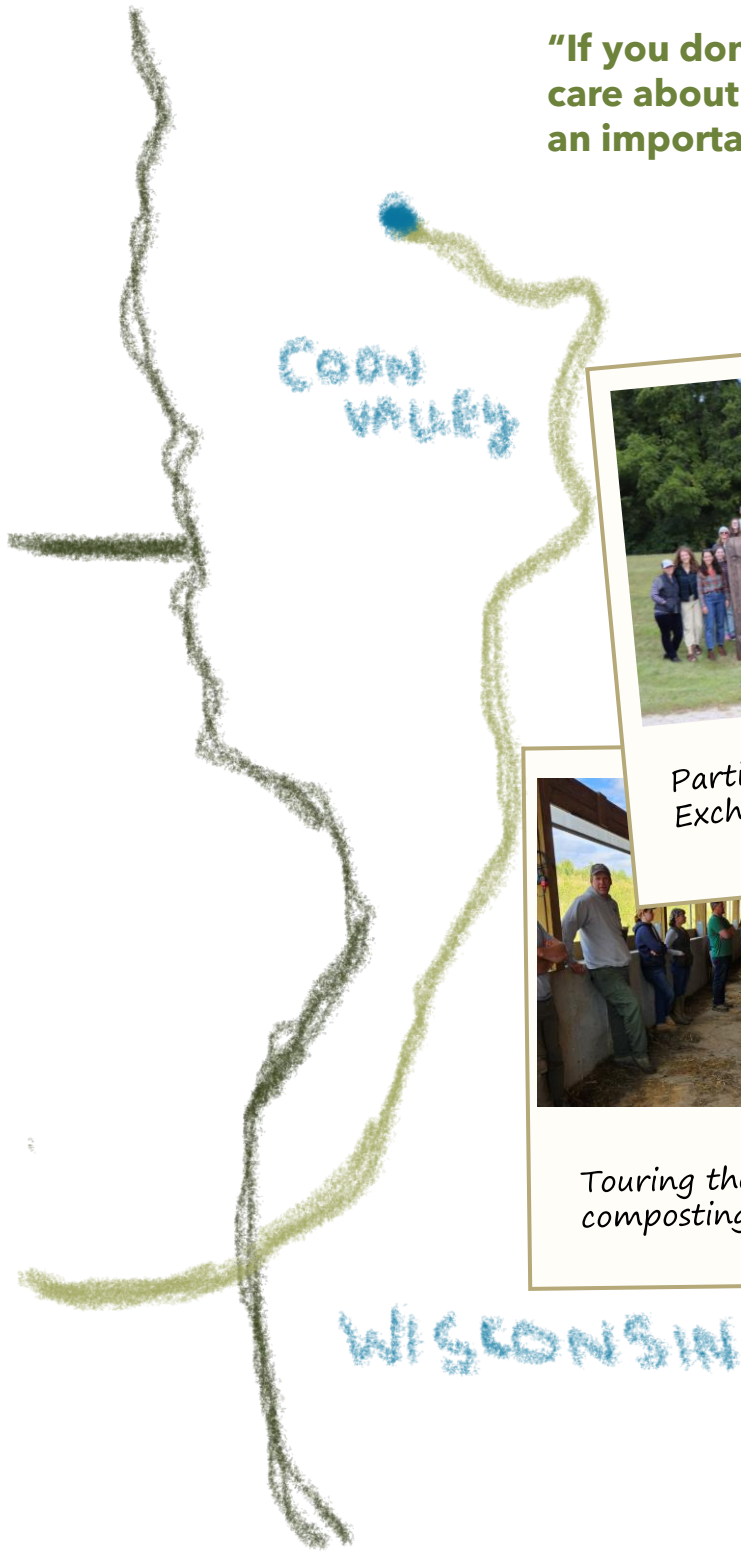


Stream habitat project on the Yellow River

"If you don't know you live in a watershed, it's hard to care about it and protect it. Watershed awareness is an important step towards stewardship"

--Ross Evelsizer

RC&D natural resources project director.



Participants in the Driftless Exchange



Touring the Canter's composting barn



Visiting the Gretebeck's grass-fed dairy



A flood control dam decommissioning project

Then, in Sept.2025, collaborators from Iowa returned the visit and joined the CCCWC to celebrate their 4th anniversary, learn about the history of watershed conservation in Coon Creek, tour a first of its kind flood control decommissioning project, and see the producer-led watershed conservation model in action. The exchange was made possible by the Wisconsin Idea Collaboration Grant and the Rural Climate Partnership.

A LOOK AHEAD

Join us at our 2026 CCCWC meetings!

The CCCWC meets at 6:00 the first Wednesday of the month at homes and farms across the watershed for dinner, council news, and presentations from a wide range of guests. Our meetings are free and open to all. Information about meeting locations is posted to our website: <https://cooncreekwatershed.org/events/>

Conservation curious?

If you are interested in learning more about making running water walk where you live, there are many resources to get you started. Here are just a few:

- Your county conservationists can provide consultations and access to state-of-the-art conservation planning tools. Depending on where you live in the watershed, contact the La Crosse, Monroe, or Vernon County conservation department.
- Your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Center can connect you with additional technical assistance, as well as a wide range of cost share programs. Search for your local office here: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/wisconsin>
- NRCS also provides a variety of primers on different conservation practices, like cover cropping, no-till farming, and more. Find it at this link: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/natural-resource-concerns>
- CCCWC offers an expanding range of cost share options to our members. Visit our website or contact us



Ashley Olson and Jim Munsch share a laugh at the July CCCWC meeting. CCCWC meetings are a place to connect with and learn from others.

to learn how we can support your conservation projects. Additionally, our monthly meetings offer an opportunity to see conservation practices in action and learn from the wealth of knowledge in our community.

2026 Conservation Cost Share Programs



The Coon Creek Community Watershed Council

The Coon Creek Community Watershed Council is pleased offer a range of cost share options for council members and watershed residents interested in making running water walk where they live. We administer cost share on a first come, first serve basis, so apply early if our programming is of interest!

Seeding support

- Cover crops: \$25/acre up to 30 acres. Request by Nov. 1, 2026
- Prairie establishment & buffer strips: \$200/acre up to 3 acres. Request by Nov. 1, 2026

Grazing support

- Fencing: \$0.50/ft, for up to 5,000ft. Request by Sept. 30, 2026 for 2027 season.
- Pasture renovation: \$25/acre up to 50 acres. Request by Sept. 30, 2026 for 2027 season.

Trees and shrubs

- Hazelnuts: \$10/Adventure Series cultivar. **Place fall 2026 order by May 25!**
- Other trees & shrubs: \$10/ tree up to 80 trees; \$3/shrub up to 100 shrubs. Request by Dec. 31, 2026.

Project maintenance

Request up to \$1,500 to make repairs to existing conservation projects, including projects constructed by the CCCWC in the 1930s, as well as work completed more recently. Applications rolling.

Land rent

We will offset the cost of lost rent for one season during your transition to a perennial system, at a rate of \$155/acre, up to 50 acres.

Request funding for 2027 season by Sept 30, 2026.

Erosion control

The CCCWC will cover 2/3 of your cost share commitment up to \$5,000 on county sponsored erosion control projects, including:

- Grassed waterways
- Water Diversions
- Grade Stabilization
- Farm ponds

Request cost share:

Email council@cooncreekwatershed.org to get started!





BE IN TOUCH

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