**WISCONSIN LAND+WATER**
**2027 CONSERVATION FARMER OF THE YEAR**
**AWARD NOMINATION INFORMATION**

**Nominee:**
Moonlight Meadows Farm; Tim Mika Family
41359 Mika Road
Marengo, WI 54855

**Nominator:**
Ashland County Land & Water Conservation Dept.; MaryJo Gingras
315 Sanborn Avenue; Suite 100
Ashland, WI 54806

1. Give a brief biographical sketch of nominee(s). Include their conservation accomplishments, community involvement, commitment to conservation and other relevant information.

Tim Mika is a family man, farmer of 40 years (driving tractor at age 8), conservationist, community man, coach, deacon, beef grazing farmer, and an Agricultural Technician for Ashland County. He is a fourth-generation family farmer, and his daughter recently purchased his father's house and home farm next door to continue the 5th generation. The farm now has roots of 100 years, and the family was approved for a Century Farm Award to be received at the Wisconsin State Fair in August 2026. When discussing his farm, he recognizes "what a rare and unique operation ours is."

His great grandfather John, left Chicago and moved north to Marengo to join relatives who lived where the current farm resides. John Mika wanted to farm, and in all places, northern WI. Ashland County doesn't provide the best farmland, but there is a lot of wildlife, waters, and open space. Tim's great grandfather John, and grandfather Frank, spent their farming careers milking cows, and clearing the land for crops and cattle. They wanted to farm like southern farmers who row cropped on lush black soil. However, Marengo holds many, many feet of solid red clay and corn does not grow in the north like the south. Also, in northern WI, we have "wicked" winters with "lake effect snow." In fact, just a few years ago in the winter of 2023, there was so much snow that Tim's cattle were bale grazing from the top of the bales and walking over poly fence as it was buried.

John and Frank cleared the land of trees and put fences up. The cows grazed the ravines and accessed water in the creek. Then came Tim's father, George. As a UW-Madison short course graduate, he was taught and convinced that moving the cattle off the fields and into barns was the best farming practice.

Tim's dad spent his years row cropping, hauling feed to the cattle, and hauling manure out of the barn. His cattle were confined to the barn. George and the young Tim had to fight (or adapt) to the daily rain, snow, and heat, but the cattle did not. Together, they spent days and nights removing the barbed wire fence that Tim's grandfather and great grandfather put up many years prior. Tim hated barbed

wire. And, it wasn't until into his 20's and after many years of conventional dairy farming with his father, that Tim realized that they were really not farming with the rhythm of nature.

Tim recognizes that there were advantages then, and still today, of confined cattle with an advantage being the ability to control the temperature and weather (in a sense). Cattle in barns are not exposed to rain, snow, or heat like grazing cattle. But as Tim learned, the biggest disadvantage of confinement is that grass, soil, and nature in general, NEED the cattle.

Tim's father George began planting trees on the farm. Every spring, they planted or transplanted, starting in the ravines, and moving upland. To date, they have planted over 20,000 trees. The ravines are now all trees and understory vegetation where once they were overgrazed and eroded.

The farm has now come full circle, from his great grandfather clearing the land, to his father and himself beginning to plant, and himself and his kids continuing to put the land back into trees. His father instilled a path of conservation that Tim now walks. George served on the Ashland County Board and Land Conservation Committee for 20 years. George and Tim implemented more than 20 conservation cost-share projects including wetland restoration, barnyard, livestock watering facilities, and heavy use protection. Tim recalled one of the first conservation projects they implemented. It was a fence setback to keep the cattle away from a ravine. It worked great and the land healed itself in only a couple years. Then they put a culvert. Very few farmers were doing conservation practices. Since George served on the Land Conservation Committee, he thought they needed to get practices on the ground so other farmers could see how conservation worked. The property often now collects the "T" lost from neighboring row crop farmers before it hits our river.

Tim bought the farm from his father, and transitioned from a conventional dairy operation to managed beef grazing. He has implemented a long and respectable list of conservation practices in working towards his purpose of promoting soil health and protecting water quality of the Marengo River adjacent to his farm.

Tim has been a 4-H member for 35+ years, and his 6 children are members who participate in the 4-H market sale selling steers and sheep. He has participated in and contributed to the Ashland County Fair for 40+ years; served on the Marengo Valley Volunteer Fire Dept for 20 years; coached football, wrestling, snowboarding, and powerlifting varsity sports at Ashland High School for 20 years; been a member of Bayfield Foods (local food distributor supporting small local farms) for 15 years; is in his 6$^{th}$ year as a deacon for Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church in Ashland; and has hosted farm tours for Northland College, the Ashland County Land Conservation Department, and state grazing networks.

2. Describe the nominee's projects and approaches to land and resource management. Include the impact on conservation and/or management of natural resources.

Tim has continued to implement conservation, working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA to enroll land in Debt for Nature, UW Extension planted hybrid poplar for research, he installed solar and high tunnels to improve efficiency, has a Farmland Preservation Plan, and maintains current Nutrient Management and Managed Grazing Plans. It has improved the landscape and it works.

His approach to conservation and land management is the big picture. Tim says that the bigger goal needs to always be on our minds. "Is it just about making money to pay bills or is the long-term impact we have for the life of the land after we are done farming?" He says that farming in general always provides us opportunities and challenges no matter what our practice is. He said, "I had my "Conservation conversion" moment over 20 years ago." He said, "I still remember the day. I was walking past a new feedlot we put in through NRCS and the county conservation dept. The cattle had a little space to graze but the idea was to bring the feed to the bunk every day and bring the manure out. It is a beautiful lot, and I hope it lasts me another 20 years. As I was walking by it, I was headed to the TMR mixer to feed cows. I needed a tractor, TMR, skid steer, silage bag, another tractor and a big manure spreader to do the job. I simply wondered, what am I doing? The cattle were designed to eat grass and drop their manure on the fields by themselves. Wouldn't it be easier to let them do the work?" That was the moment that changed his mind set and whole farming career.

He has since spent most of his farming career putting fence back on the fields, and has installed 9,000' of waterline within the pasture. It was a LOT of work to get the grazing operation to where it is, but he says that he can see the conservation working. Statistically, he has seen the organic matter on his soil tests DOUBLE on all the pasture land. And he has a ton of wildlife starting with field mice, snakes and predator birds. Native plants have increased bees, butterfly, and other pollinators. And he says they have very little runoff, and little to no soil erosion.

Tim says that his farm's GREATEST attribute is the regular presence of mature bull elk, cow, and young elk running around. He said they bring a new set of challenges but his new conservation goal is to learn how to farm with them. He thought that he was done implementing conservation projects, but is now trying to learn silviculture practices that will provide elk habitat so they will continue visiting the farm.

With his daughter next door on the family farm, he is fostering her interest in utilizing conservation as part of her farming career. He finds joy in discussing how she wants the farm to improve during her time with the land.

Tim has served as the Ashland County Agricultural Technician since July 2025. He works with producers in the Lake Superior Basin throughout Ashland, Bayfield, Douglas, and Iron counties on Nutrient Management Plans, soil health, no-till, promoting Natural Resource Conservation Service farm programs, Farmland Preservation Plans, farm field days, and more. He is passionate about sharing his personal farming experience and professional knowledge and ideas with other producers. He is aware that he will never convince every farmer to use all conservation practices, but he can help them understand our responsibility to the land that we have the privilege to use. Farmers are often people who hunt, fish, camp, snowmobile and hike. Helping farmers understand how the practices used in their operation effects the land and water is critical.

Tim also believes that it is important to help consumers and the government to understand the cost of food. He says that we only see the money we pay for a pound of hamburger or a bag of chips at the store. We don't think about how much extra we have to pay in taxes to fund conservation because of the impacts from farming. We CAN farm with conservation in mind, we often just have to think a little different and have an open mind.

3. List any other specific factors why the nominee should be given this award. Include any other activities, capabilities, innovative techniques or outreach efforts where they have demonstrated leadership.

Conservation Farmer of the Year would not only be a gift to Tim and his family, but also to his father, George Mika, who served Ashland County and the Ashland County Land Conservation Committee for more than 2 decades. The combined efforts of the legacy of this father and son are commendable. And Tim will continue sharing that legacy with his daughter (5th generation) and his daughter's first child, Tim's granddaughter (6th generation).

In addition, Conservation Farmer of the Year, would be wonderful for Ashland County and northern WI (north of Highway 8 😊) in general.

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