DANE COUNTY LAND&WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

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Administration ■ Lakes Management □ Land Conservation □ Parks □ Water Resource Engineering □ Watersheds & Ecosystem Services

**April 2026**

# Nomination for the Wisconsin Land + Water 2027 Conservation Farm Family of the Year Award

**Nominee:** Ripp-Vale Farm (Tom Ripp), (608)333-6947, tjripp@chorus.net

**Nominators:** Kim Meyer, meyer.kim@danecounty.gov, (608)445-1474 & Katie Nicholas, nicholas.katie@danecounty.gov, (608)228-6219, Dane County Land & Water Resources Department, 5201 Fen Oak Drive, Room 208, Madison, WI 53718

**Nomination Summary:**

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

Ripp-Vale Farm is a third-generation, 350-acre cash grain operation located in the Black Earth Creek watershed. The farm operated as a dairy farm until the 1980s, then transitioned to a hog and grain operation until late 2023, when the final shipment of hogs left the farm. Tom Ripp now runs the farming operation independently, with help from his son during planting and harvest seasons. He also operates a mechanic shop, where he provides repair services to local farmers.

Tom is a longtime no-till farmer who has incorporated cover crops into his cropping system for more than 14 years. He previously farmed alongside his father, Don, who began practicing no-till more than 40 years ago. Tom has continued that tradition and expanded no-till practices across the entire farm, including the low-lying acres along Black Earth Creek.

In recent years, Tom has become increasingly focused on soil health and has experimented with a range of cover crops to determine what works best on his farm. He is continually working to improve soil health while closely evaluating economic outcomes. Tom invests significant time and thought into modifying equipment to ensure it functions effectively within his system. After winter wheat, he plants a multi-species cover crop mix, and in the fall he seeds winter rye on as many acres as possible following both soybean and corn grain harvest. He does this on both the lowland fields near the stream and the upland hillsides. He is particularly interested in research related to nutrient stratification and the effect of cover crops on nutrient availability. More recently, he has also explored the relationship between cover crops, beneficial insects, and slug populations.

Ripp-Vale Farm became a Dane Demo Farm in 2023. Since then, Tom has participated in demonstration test plots, hosted multiple field events at his farm, appeared in two podcast discussions, presented at three winter Dane Demo Farm events, and attended local watershed group meetings to educate farmers and community members about soil health, no-till farming, and cover crop practices. Tom's interest in beneficial insects helped launch work across three farms in the Dane Demo Farm network examining the relationship between soil health practices and beneficial insect populations. He is a member of Biological Farming Friends, a producer-led

watershed group that advances innovative conservation farming practices. Tom also serves on the Town of Black Earth Plan Commission and regularly attends conferences to learn from others and share his own knowledge and experience.

Tom's farm is a model of conservation in the Black Earth Creek watershed. His conservation efforts provide ongoing benefits to the stream that runs alongside the land he farms. He takes great pride in his farm, as demonstrated through his conservation work, outreach efforts, and commitment to supporting others in the community as they work to improve stewardship of Black Earth Creek.

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

Ripp-Vale Farm is managed using 100 percent no-till practices, and Tom works to establish cover crops on as many acres as possible each fall before winter. After harvesting winter wheat, he typically plants a multi-species mix that may include oats, crimson clover, sunflowers, and berseem clover. He also no-till drills winter rye following as many soybean and corn grain acres as possible, prioritizing fields near the stream to improve water infiltration and reduce the potential for nutrient leaching. Tom has observed that fields near the stream are often more accessible earlier in the season when a living cover crop is present than they were in the years when those fields were tilled.

Tom manages every acre with intention. He actively studies ways to refine his management so nutrients remain in place and soil stays on the land. He reads widely about cover crops and participates in conferences and farmer networks to continue learning. Whenever Tom encounters a challenge on his farm, he responds with curiosity and a desire to learn, consistently seeking practical solutions rather than stepping away from his soil health goals. His ongoing study, careful observations, and willingness to ask questions have made him an outstanding steward of the land and a strong advocate for conservation and natural resource protection in his area.

Tom's work with Dane Demo Farms includes hosting a series of plots that examine cover crop termination timing and its effects on yield, soil nitrate and ammonia levels throughout the season, long-term soil health, soil moisture, soil temperature, slug populations, beneficial insect populations, and more. Tom fully manages these plots, while the Dane Demo Farm team collects the data. He communicates regularly with the team to ensure research data are gathered before any relevant field operations take place. Tom is highly detail-oriented and unafraid to ask questions or challenge ideas to ensure the research he is participating in is not only relevant to area farmers, but also as accurate as possible.

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.**

Black Earth Creek is a Class I trout stream and a popular fishing destination for anglers in Dane County. Because the stream is closely monitored and widely valued, maintaining water quality is essential for both aquatic habitat and public recreation. Ripp-Vale Farm is a conservation leader in the watershed, with years of practical experience that can benefit not only neighboring producers, but also farmers in other watersheds facing similar challenges.

Tom’s leadership stands out because he combines long-term conservation commitment with a willingness to test new ideas, share results, and help others adopt effective practices. Through his participation in the Dane Demo Farm program, producer-led groups, educational events, and community service, he has demonstrated that conservation leadership extends beyond the farm gate. For these reasons, Ripp-Vale Farm is highly deserving of recognition as Wisconsin Conservation Farmer of the Year.

Field Notes Episode 25: Good Bugs and Planting Naked Seed – Crops and Soils

No-Till Farming and Cover Crops with Tom Ripp

Dane Demo Farm Newsletter

Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

RE: Letter of support for Ripp-Vale Farm (Tom Ripp) Conservation Farm Family of the Year

April 22, 2026

Dear WI Land+Water Professional Improvement Committee,

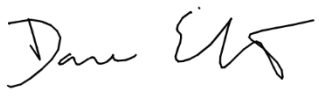
As the statewide Conservation Cropping Outreach Specialist with UW-Madison Extension, I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for the nomination of Tom Ripp and Ripp-Vale Farm for the Conservation Farm Family of the Year Award. Having worked closely with Tom through the Dane Demo Farms network, I can attest that his operation is a premier example of how innovative, systems-level thinking can advance conservation practices in Wisconsin.

While soil health has certainly become a hot topic in recent years, Tom and his family have been quietly putting in the work for over four decades, long before conservation adoption was considered "cool" or even particularly common. This long-term commitment allows him to speak with a level of authority that only comes from years of trial, error, and eventual success.

One of the most impressive aspects of Tom's leadership is his curiosity and willingness to ask cutting-edge questions. His specific interest in how conservation management influences beneficial insects and pest slug populations is a perfect example. What began as Tom's keen observation on his own operation has since evolved into a dedicated area of research across multiple farms in the Dane Demo Farm network. Furthermore, these inquiries have filtered into the Biological Farming Friends producer-led group, influencing how other farmers in Dane County view the extent to which conservation practices can influence desirable, insect-mediated ecosystem services on their own farms.

It is evident that Tom's approach to conservation represents a sophisticated, whole-farm mindset. He isn't just managing a crop; he's managing his farm as an agricultural ecosystem. Even though he has been a no-till and cover crop farmer for years, it is clear that Tom doesn't think of his system as "finished" and he continues to be an innovator and conservation leader. Tom Ripp and Ripp-Vale Farm exemplify the cutting-edge nature of Wisconsin conservation, and I can think of no family more deserving of being recognized as the Conservation Farm Family of the Year.

Sincerely,



Dane Elmquist, Ph.D.

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Tom showing off his “soiled” underwear after placing below ground for thirty days to show microbial activity.

Multi-species cover crop following wheat harvest. Farm and valley in background.

Tom checking his cover crop growth after wheat. Species included oats, crimson clover, and sunflower.

Tom speaking at a summer field day hosted at his farm.

Tom speaking at a spring field day hosted at his farm.

Tom presenting at a winter farming equipment clinic.

Tom planting corn into green winter rye cover crop by Black Earth Creek.

Tom planting corn into green multi-species cover crop.