Nomination for Conservation Farm Family of the Year

1. Key Information:

Name and contact information of nominee:

a. Patrick and Michelle Socha and Family: Socha Farms
b. Mailing Address: 125849 Cty Road U, Edgar, WI 54426
c. Email: patsocha6@gmail.com
d. Phone: 715-573-1995

2. **Award Category:** Conservation Farm Family of the Year
   a. **County Department Name:** Marathon County Conservation, Planning, and Zoning
   b. **Name and Contact information of Nominator:** Caleb Armstrong, Conservation Specialist 715-261-6038, caleb.armstrong@marathoncounty.gov

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

In the heart of central Wisconsin, where working farms shape both landscape and legacy, Pat Socha has quietly cultivated something extraordinary. On his 435-acre farm, he custom raises heifers, grows crops, and provides planting and harvesting services for neighboring farms—all while managing his land with exceptional care and consistency. For more than 15 years, he has built a farming system rooted in no-till, cover crops, buffer strips, precision technology, and habitat restoration—not because he was required to, but because he believes in working with the land. Pat does not seek recognition for his farming methods, but he consistently earns respect. Pat exemplifies a true land ethic through voluntary, long-term stewardship. His conservation journey began during a challenging wet spring, when he experimented with no-tilling soybeans into sod. What started as a practical solution quickly became a philosophy. He soon adopted cover crops, modified equipment, and ultimately transitioned his entire operation to 100% no-till and 100% cover crops.

Pat's land ethic is exemplified through his observation and understanding of the land he manages. Watching the land closely, he takes the time to understand how it wants to be farmed and makes changes to benefit the entire ecosystem not just himself. An example of this is when he recently converted all his annual cropland along his woodlands into pollinator habitat and harvestable buffers. After observing that this land was low yielding, he changed his management

of these areas to include habitat for wildlife. Today, his farm integrates harvestable buffer strips, pollinator habitat, and managed woodlands through the Wisconsin DNR Forest Management Program. His selective timber harvest avoids clear-cutting, balancing economic return with ecological health. Across the farm, his focus is clear: reduce erosion, protect water quality, and improve soil health while supporting biodiversity.

Pat's operation is designed for long-term resilience. His diversified system—custom raised heifers, cash crops, custom work, and managed forestland—spreads risk and strengthens the whole farm. Conservation practices are not just environmental decisions; they are strategic ones. Eliminating tillage has reduced labor, fuel, and equipment costs while improving soil structure and water infiltration. Pat has also invested in renewable energy, installing solar panels to heat his farm shop and reduce energy costs. Notably, he has chosen not to expand his operation, instead focusing on maximizing the productivity and sustainability of the land he already stewards.

He has tested multi-species cover crop mixes, interseeded crops into standing corn, and explored drone seeding to improve establishment timing. His farm serves as a practical testing ground where ideas are evaluated through real-world application. Pat also collaborates with researchers, including work with a UW-Madison entomologist to study insect populations. Findings showing a high presence of beneficial insects supported reduced insecticide use—data he has shared with others to encourage more informed decision-making. He has also conducted many Producer-Led research projects on his farm looking at the use of different cover crops in soy beans and corn silage. By refining crop rotations and exploring shorter-season varieties, Pat continues to improve both productivity and conservation outcomes. His willingness to try new approaches, even without guaranteed success, sets him apart as a thoughtful and effective innovator.

At the core of Pat's operation is a deep respect for natural systems. His practices have transformed his farm into a resilient ecosystem where soil, water, plants, and wildlife work together. No-till and cover crops have improved soil health, reduced erosion, and enhanced water retention. Pollinator plots and buffer strips provide habitat and protect water quality. Next Pat is looking to take implementing rotational grazing to raise the livestock on his farm. His managed woodlands contribute to biodiversity while offering meaningful connections to the land for his family. Local landowners actively seek Pat to farm their land—not for the highest bid, but because they trust his stewardship. Pat also demonstrates that conservation and appearance can go hand in hand. His farm is both highly functional and well-maintained, helping challenge outdated perceptions of conservation farming.

Pat's influence extends well beyond his own fields. Often referred to as the "neighborhood conservation consultant," Pat is a go-to resource for farmers exploring new practices. For the past six years, he has hosted annual field days, welcoming farmers, students, and conservation professionals to see practices in action and engage in honest conversations about both successes and challenges. His openness has made him a trusted and approachable voice in the community. He offers practical, experience-based guidance and encourages others to focus on progress rather than perfection.

His leadership is also evident through service. He serves as President of the local FFA Alumni, supports youth agricultural education, and has hosted large community events on his farm. He is a longtime member of the Lions Club and served nine years on the Marathon County Farm Bureau Board. Since 2019, Pat has been a key leader in EPPIC (Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation), helping advance farmer-led conservation efforts across the watershed. In 2024, he was recognized as EPPIC's Farmer of the Year.

Pat Socha's impact is not defined by recognition, but by results. Through healthier soils, cleaner water, and a stronger farming community, he has demonstrated what thoughtful, conservation-minded agriculture can achieve. His leadership is quiet but powerful, grounded in humility, guided by experience, and driven by a deep commitment to the land. In honoring Pat Socha as the Wisconsin Land + Water Conservation Farm Family of the Year, we recognize not only his accomplishments, but the lasting example he sets for others to follow.

Additional Information:

- Number of acres under management: 435, which includes approximately 3 acres of buildings, just over 400 acres of cropland, 23 acres of managed forest and 8 acres of permanent pasture
- Local, state, federal agencies or partner organizations involved with the farm conservation practices: NRCS, DATCP, Marathon County Land Conservation, and EPPIC (Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation)
- Federal conservation programs utilized by the farm: CSP
- Farm advisors: independent agronomists from Short Lane Ag Supply, a private certified NMP writer, county land conservationists and NRCS staff

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

Pat incorporates small grains into his crop rotations to add a different root structure, break pest problems, and grow grain for fall cover crops and bedding. He then follows the small grain harvest with a cocktail blend of multispecies cover crops with clovers, brassicas, and radish to increase nutrient uptake, break up any compaction issues, increase soil organism, and reduce erosion with living growing crop.

Pat also "plants green" on all soybean fields. Every Fall, he plants 100 pounds per acre of winter rye. He lets it overwinter and grow in the early spring which creates a thick mat of organic matter on the field. Then he no-till soybean seeds into growing cover crop. He lets the soybeans get up to leaf stage, then proceeds to use grass selective herbicide to terminate rye. This lets the soybean grow up through the thick mat of organic matter created by the dead winter rye. The winter rye acts as a security blanket to reduce erosion in the spring while also reducing weed pressure so he doesn't have to use additional herbicide applications, resulting in reduced cost of planting per acre.

In the past 6 years Pat has been working with interseeding and overseeding cover crops. He interseeds a multispecies cover crop into his corn grain around V2-V6 broadcast spread on. He includes clovers, radish, and ryegrass into his mix to have complete ground coverage as long as possible. Also does this for the clovers to sequester nitrogen for the fields. He overseeds winter rye grass and, most recently, winter camelina on his soybeans/corn silage fields around Labor Day weekend to early September via drone. He does this to get early growth on winter rye, so that way he has something green growing as soon as he is done harvesting crops.

Pat also has been looking into converting marginal acres of cropland into vegetative buffers. Within the last three years he has converted roughly 10 acres into harvestable buffers around cash crops fields. He did this to help stabilize soil with runoff as well as improve the marginal land in that area. In doing this he gets heifer feed for his animals. Pat has mentioned how this also has increased his relationship with the renters on the land that he rents as they no longer run over crop and can drive their 4-wheelers on these buffers without damaging the cash crop. They are so pleased with these areas that they no longer charge rent on those acres. Pat also recently installed a pollinator of about 3 acres on a field that is tougher to farm, due to access of the field. He planted a butterfly friendly pollinator mix in that marginal acreage that is already being used by monarchs and other pollinator friendly habitat.

5. **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:**

In 2025, Pat was selected as a Top 4 Finalist for the very prestigious Aldo Leopold Conservation Family Award. Pat had to do several interviews and news articles, some of which we have attached.

Pat was 1 of 6 farmers who was selected to be part of the “producer led pilot research project” in 2025. He worked alongside the other farmers and agencies to conduct research on interseeding winter rye from V2-V5 into corn grain and studied the effects on the cover crop growth as well as the crop yield. Pat wanted to take it a step farther and decided to do a multispecies blend that he had done in the past to test how that would compare to the winter rye. Overall, the project went well, and Pat was able to present on his research down in the Wisconsin Dells at the WWASH conference in December of 2025.

Pat has spoken for several years at the WWASH Conference and is now part of the official WWASH conference planning committee after attending last year and serving as a farmer role on that committee.

Pat is also part of the 12 farmers group for continuing research through the producer led group. He is part of the team that will select what kind of research they would like to conduct on their fields that can be compared throughout the state.

Pat was recently elected as one of EPPIC's lead farmers, which was a unanimous choice this year by the EPPIC advisory panel. In this role Pat serves as a mentor for other farmers of the group, he represents the producer-led group at conferences such as WWASH, Producer-Led Conference, and other expos/conferences. He also goes above and beyond at reaching out to other farmers in the group to see how they are doing and what he can help with. This year, Pat called all his neighboring farmers and friends to invite them our annual event for EPPIC called Common Ground. He made sure they had a ride and when/where to go. He also made sure they all took home a flyer at the end of the night with EPPIC Farm Tours for the summer of 2026. This really speaks to Pat's care to create a strong community.

Pat is also a very active member in Edgar FFA where his children have all served in roles. He volunteers for a lot of their events and lends a hand when needed.

Socha Homestead was selected for the June Dairy breakfast in 2024, they held a great event and allowed a couple hundred people on their farm for this event which is a ton of work!

Our Favorite Pictures of Pat:

Figure 1. Pat gave a tour of one of his trial fields to the Buffalo-Trempealeau Farmer Network that came to tour his farm and other Marathon County farms.

Figure 2. Pat teaching at the 2025 WWASH Conference in Wisconsin Dells.

Figure 3. Pat with his wife and three children at their farm near Edgar, Wisconsin.

Figure 4. Pat receiving the 2024 "Most EPPIC" of the Year Award.

Figure 5. Pat leading a field day on his farm in 2024 where they drone-seeded cover crops.

Figure 6. Pat leading a field day at the Marshfield Agricultural Research Station (UW-MARS).

Figure 7. Pat in his happy place: A no-till soybean field.

News Articles

Keynote Speakers

Ray "the Soils Guy" Archuleta

Ray Archuleta is a nationally known and sought after speaker on soil health and cover crops. His infectious enthusiasm for soil health has earned him the moniker, "Ray the Soils Guy." Ray comes from a farming family and has 25 years of experience with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and is Certified Professional Soil Scientist. He has a B.S. in Agricultural Biology.

Fred "Dr. Dirt" Madison

Fred Madison is Professor Emeritus, Soil Science, UW-Extension and UW-Madison. Fred's career accomplishments include having written the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Fred loves rubbing elbows with farmers.

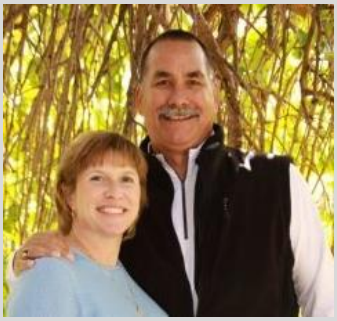
Breakout Session Presenters: *Locally Led Conservation Leadership*

John Eron and his wife Melissa own and operate a custom harvesting and cash crop business in Junction City WI. John serves as President of the Portage County Farm Bureau, and is the spokesperson, and resource and education coordinator for the Mill Creek Watershed.

Jeff Endres of Endres Berry Ridge Farms is a fifth generation dairy farmer. Jeff is also Chairman of Yahara Pride Farms, a farmer-led organization working to improve soil and water quality, and advance new ideas and technology that balances water quality improvement with farm sustainability and profitability.

Rick Georgeson is the President of the Petenwell & Castle Rock Stewards, and a retired teacher. Rick and his family have enjoyed sailing on Lake Petenwell for 38 years.

Kirk Boehm is President and a founding member of the Lake Wisconsin Alliance, as well as a real estate agent who specializes in selling waterfront property. He has lived on Lake Wisconsin for 15 years.



Breakout Session Presenters: *Conservation Tools and Partnerships*

Andy Wallendal is a second-generation farmer. His father, Pete, discovered the importance of sandy and loamy soils for vegetable production and could not have chosen a better place to grow vegetables than the Central Sands region. Wallendal also says his father showed him how to maintain productivity through sound fertility programs. Eventually, Wallendal says he began to understand aspects surrounding nutrient release and how to control soil fertility. When it comes to technology. Wallendal Supply, Inc. is known as a leader and early adopter of variable-rate irrigation technology and is continuously improve its relationships and sustainability outcomes.

Wallendal is President of the Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA). He previously served as Wisconsin Potato Industry Board (WPIB) President and Director, and Healthy Grown Executive Board Member.

Pat Socha is in his second year of no-till and using cover crops at his farm near Edgar, WI. This year he planted a mix of clover, barley and radish.

Paul Onan farms 350 acres in eastern Portage County. Paul milks 130 cows in a grass based dairy. The first experiment with no-till was in about 1985 with corn. Today, he is almost exclusively no-till on corn and alfalfa/grass seedlings. Paul has also begun experimenting with cover crops following corn.

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Sam Warp is the Wastewater Superintendant for the City of Marshfield, WI. Sam spends his days overseeing the operation of a facility that cleans, disinfects, and removes nutrients including phosphorus, from the water we all flush down the drain. Sam's day involves more than just overseeing plant operations however, hear about the risks and economics associated with overseeing the operation of a wastewater treatment plant, and how his work intersects with agricultural producers.

Bob Micheel is the Director of the Monroe County Land Conservation Department, where he has provided conservation expertise since 1989. Bob has been instrumental in working with the City of Sparta implementing one of Wisconsin's first water quality trading plans. He grew up in Winona County, Minnesota, and his interests include tree farming and bow hunting.

Plowless farmer

Rietbrock producer Socha says he's happy with regenerative agriculture

As an undergraduate student at UW-River Falls, a young Pat Socha sat in a soils class and thought his professor, Larry Meyers, was crazy. So did his classmates.

"He said that the moldboard plow should be illegal," recalled Socha on Friday. "He told us that soil was a wonderful living thing, but we treat it like dirt."

Now, decades later, Socha, a cash grain and replacement heifer producer in the town of Rietbrock, is living without any tillage equipment, including a moldboard plow, and is

See **PLOWLESS/** page 5

A FAMILY OPERATION-Pat and Michelle Socha, along with sons, Isaac, at right, and Lucas, at left, stand in a no-till cornfield on their town of Rietbrock farmstead.

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Plowless

Continued from page 1

intent on giving soil on his 400-acre operation all the respect it deserves.

Socha, a co-founder of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation, switched from conventional agriculture to regenerative agriculture (cover crops in conjunction with no-till cropping) in 2016 and would never go back.

"We have to look at soil as a living organism and we have to treat it that way," he said.

In 1997, Socha took over the small dairy operated by his parents, Joe and Betty Socha, located on the CTH U curve south of Poniatowski, but, rather than increasing the number of milk cows, decided to raise replacement heifers.

"That was the big push at the time," he said. "Everybody was becoming specialized."

The Socha operation was fairly diversified. The family raised soybeans and corn, small grains and heifers, while doing some custom field work. Both Socha and his wife, Michelle, worked out.

Socha farmed conventionally until he had a conversation in 2013 with Carl Oberholtzer, The Planter Shop, Colby, who suggested trying no-till cropping.

Socha performed an experiment with corn and was hooked. "I was impressed at how well it worked." he remembers. "The next year, I tried soybeans."

By 2016, Socha was fully a no-till farmer. He now owns three no-till planters: one for corn, a second for soybeans and a third for small grains. Each has a slightly different mechanism for slitting open the soil through field trash and closing up the ground around the seed.

Socha is well aware how resistant area farmers are to regenerative agriculture, but he thinks that glacier is melting.

"More and more farmers are no tilling into soybean stubble," he said. "That's the easiest thing to do."

The farmer said switching from conventional to regenerative agriculture means having a different aesthetics, a different picture in your mind about what a field is supposed to look like.

"Most farmers like to see a clean field with crops in a neat row, not a weedy field with dandelions in there," he said.

The trick is to remember, Socha said, that cover crops (even the occasional dandelion) are naturally tilling the soil, building topsoil organic matter. He said he typically plants a "cocktail" of grasses, legumes and other plants as part of cover crop. These include cereal rye, turnip, radius, clover and vetch.

Socha ticked off four reasons why farmers should opt for cover crops and no-till:

■ **Saving time.** Socha said he typically makes one tractor pass to plant a crop. He doesn't make the typical three passes, which includes plowing and finishing passes.

■ **Saving money.** Socha calculates that he saves around $50 an acre in fuel and wear and tear on equipment in not plowing up fields every year. The farmer said he is able to do his field work without today's large, powerful (and expensive) tractors. His cover crops help control weeds.

■ **Saving soil.** With a living crop in the ground, Socha said he doesn't lose as much topsoil in heavy rains and undisturbed fields provide a better home for earthworms, which fertilize and aerate the soil. More organic matter in the soil holds moisture, he said, and is critical during periods of drought.

■ **Saving carbon.** Carbon is released to the atmosphere every time a plot of land is plowed. Socha said his no-till operation sequesters carbon and, hopefully, in a few years, he will be able to sell carbon credits worth up to $20 per acre.

Socha said his field yields have not suffered due to use of no-till or cover crops. He said his corn and soybeans look the same as any of his neighbors by the time fall rolls around. Socha said today's genetically improved seeds are helpful. In the past, he said, farmers tilled up fields so they would air out and warm up in order to allow for early planting without seed rot. Nowadays, he said, that's not as much of an issue. Newly developed seeds can sit dormant in the soil for a longer period of time.

Socha said purchase of no-till planters can be an obstacle when it comes to getting into regenerative agriculture. The biggest challenge, he said, however, was the farmer himself or herself.

"You have to have an open mind," he said.

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TOP STORY

Partnership key to watershed effort

Lynn Grooms
Sep 12, 2018

Several members of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation are working to improve soil health and v
row from left are Kelly King, a farmer and member of the Marathon County board; Lauren Nichols of the Marathon C
superintendent of the Marshfield Agricultural Research Station; Becky Brathal of Pheasant's Forever; and Jason Cava
Agricultural Research Station.

Back row from left are Paul Daigle of the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department; Pat Soc
coordinator for the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship; Gem Kaiser, a shoreline homeowner and member of Big Eau Plein
Forrest, owner of Maple Ridge Dairy and a board member of the Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin.

Lynn Grooms

Lynn Grooms

Integrating resilience into the natural resources, community and economy of the Eau Pleine watershed is the mission of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation. That mission will require the efforts of many hands working together to improve the watershed's soil health and water quality.

"No one group can do it alone," said Paul Daigle, land and water program director for the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department.

Daigle was speaking about working to reduce increased phosphorus levels as well as sediment buildup in the watershed.

The Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department hosted a meeting in fall 2017 to discuss those problems. Gem Kaiser, a lakefront property owner and member of the Big Eau Pleine Citizens Organization, recalled that meeting.

"We came from all walks of life," she said. "We didn't know each other."

But from that meeting the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation was formed.

"We've since become friends … working for the same goal," Kaiser said.

The group is comprised of farmers, farm groups, lake stewards, natural-resource organizations and agencies, agronomists, equipment dealers and others. The partnership has welcomed the public to attend a number of events in order to encourage greater community participation. In July, for example, the group addressed water-quality issues while providing a boat cruise around the Big Eau Pleine Reservoir. In August it hosted an event called "Common Ground," featuring

farm tours, a U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service rainfall simulation, and speakers. The members plan more events in upcoming months.

“Everyone along the watershed needs to understand the importance of the Eau Pleine’s health,” Kaiser said.

The Big Eau Pleine River Watershed drains about 240,000 acres of land.

There are currently about eight farmers in the partnership; they may launch a separate group for farmer-to-farmer learning. The farmers are focused on soil- and water-conservation practices such as no-till, cover crops, extending hay rotation via interseeding, and managed grazing, Daigle said.

People are also reading...

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Pat Socha and his family own a custom heifer-raising business and farm about 360 acres near Edgar, Wisconsin. While Socha doesn’t reside in the Eau Pleine watershed, he has been practicing no-till for four years.

“Paul Daigle called for my input at a few of the partnership’s meetings,” Socha said.

Socha experimented with no-till planting in 2014 and went full no-till in 2015.

“I hope that more farmers become open-minded to no-till and cover crops,” Socha said. “They can and do work.”

He said he'd like to see more cover crops planted to cover the ground after corn silage. There are grants available for farmers to try cover-crop seeding as well as for upgrading planters to no-till, he said. There are learning curves for both practices, but resources such as the University of Wisconsin's Marshfield Agricultural Research Station are available.

Jason Cavadini, an agronomist and assistant superintendent at the research station, has been experimenting with no-till and cover crops for six growing seasons. He has tested the transition process from 100 percent conventional planting to 100 percent no-till. During the transition he studied the use of triticale as a cover crop. Triticale has forage value, which makes cover cropping more economically feasible for farmers with dairy herds, he said. He also is studying kernza, which can be used as a forage crop.

He has spent several years collecting data and observing no-till practices. The research station hosts field days so more farmers can see how no-till planting works, he said. Farmers also can talk to other farmers who have practiced no-till to learn what worked and what didn't. In addition to the research station's efforts, the Central Wisconsin No-Tillers group holds three to four meetings annually to discuss the practice of no-till planting.

Cavadini said he'd like to see some type of standardization of conservation practices in central Wisconsin. Marathon and Clark counties produce the most corn silage in Wisconsin; thousands of acres of that corn are harvested in about a three-week period. But after harvest ground is often left bare or it may be covered with manure for an extended period. That bare ground is vulnerable to erosion. To avoid that, farmers could possibly interseed cover crops into knee-high corn and have it well-established when corn for silage is harvested.

"To standardize such a practice, we need to do a better job of showing farmers the value of cover crops," he said.

The watershed partnership also helps to show that farmers are concerned about soil and water quality, and are doing their part to improve conservation efforts, Cavadini said. People with different backgrounds can learn from each other.

“They’re all well-intentioned and want the same goal,” he said.

Visit **www.facebook.com/EauPleinePartnership** to follow the Eau Pleine Partnership.

*Lynn Grooms writes about the diversity of agriculture, including the industry’s newest ideas, research and technologies as a staff reporter for Agri-View based in Wisconsin. Email lgro**oms@madison.com to** contact her.*

Wisconsin Leopold Conservation Award Finalists Selected

September 17, 2025

Four finalists have been selected for the 2025 Wisconsin Leopold Conservation Award®.

The award honors farmers and forestland owners who go above and beyond in their management of soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat on working land.

Named in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, this award recognizes landowners who inspire others with their dedication to environmental improvement. In his influential 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold advocated for "a land ethic," an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage.

Sand County Foundation and national sponsor American Farmland Trust present Leopold Conservation Awards to private landowners in 28 states. In Wisconsin the $10,000 award is presented with state partners: Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin.

The finalists are:

- **Andy Bensend of Dallas in Barron County**: Andy Bensend has seen measurable gains in soil health, water retention, and biodiversity at AB Farms. Despite northern Wisconsin's shortened growing season, he grows cover crops which complement nutrient management and uses reduced tillage practices used to raise corn, soybeans, and winter wheat. In addition to collaborative and self-driven on-farm research projects, he is a member of Farmers of Barron County Watersheds and serves on Wisconsin Farm Bureau's Sustainability Committee.
- **Michael Berg of Blanchardville in Lafayette County**: The Berg family has practiced no-till and grown crops on contour strips since the 1970s. They have since installed terraces and nearly one mile of streambank riprapping to prevent soil erosion into the Pecatonica River. This effort to improve water quality and fish habitat as done in collaboration with local municipality, county, watershed, and state entities as part of Wisconsin's Water Quality Trading Program. The Bergs rotationally graze beef cattle and have planted about 25,000 pine and walnut trees on marginal lands.
- **Brattset Family Farm of Jefferson in Jefferson County**: Mother and daughter, Weenonah Brattset and Kirsten Jurcek, have rotationally grazed beef cattle since 2005. Integrating cropland into perennial vegetation has produced quality forage while improving soil health, water quality, and biodiversity. Their commitment to improving grazing practices while enhancing grassland bird habitat includes mentoring other graziers and partnering with the National Audubon Society.

- **Pat and Michelle Socha of Edgar in Marathon County**: While growing crops, the Sochas utilize precision technology, no-till practices, and cover crops to reduce erosion and prevent nutrient losses. Buffer strips and a pollinator plot promote biodiversity. To manage timber production and wildlife habitat, selective harvests are carefully timed every 15-20 years without clear cutting. Pat is a founding member and board member of Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation.

Wisconsin landowners were encouraged to apply, or be nominated, for the award. An independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders reviewed the applications. This year's recipient will be revealed at the Wisconsin Board of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection meeting November 13.

The Wisconsin Leopold Conservation Award is made possible thanks to the generous contributions from American Farmland Trust, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, Sand County Foundation, Culver's, Compeer Financial, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Corn Growers Association, Wisconsin Corn Promotion Board, Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association, and Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association.

The first Wisconsin Leopold Conservation Award was presented to woodland conservationist Gerry Mich of Appleton in 2006. The 2024 recipient was Full Circle Farm of Seymour in Shawano County.

"Wisconsin farmers know that caring for the land sustains both their communities and future generations," said Chad Vincent, CEO at Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin. "The Leopold Conservation Award finalists show how strong conservation practices protect natural resources while strengthening farms and rural life. Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin is proud to honor their leadership in proving that agriculture and stewardship go hand in hand."

"Wisconsin farmers are proving that conservation is not just a smart choice; it is a vital investment in both the land and future of agriculture. These finalists show how protecting our environment goes hand in hand with keeping farms resilient. Wisconsin Farm Bureau is proud to honor their leadership in advancing a sustainable future for Wisconsin agriculture," said Brad Olson, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation President.

"These award finalists are examples of how Aldo Leopold's land ethic is alive and well today," said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation President and CEO. "Their dedication to conservation is both an inspiration to their peers as well as a reminder to all how important thoughtful agriculture is to clean water, healthy soil, and wildlife habitat."

"As the national sponsor for Sand County Foundation's Leopold Conservation Award, American Farmland Trust celebrates the hard work and dedication of the award recipients,"

said John Piotti, AFT President and CEO. “At AFT we believe that exemplary conservation involves the land itself, the practices employed on the land, and the people who steward it. This award recognizes the integral role of all three.”

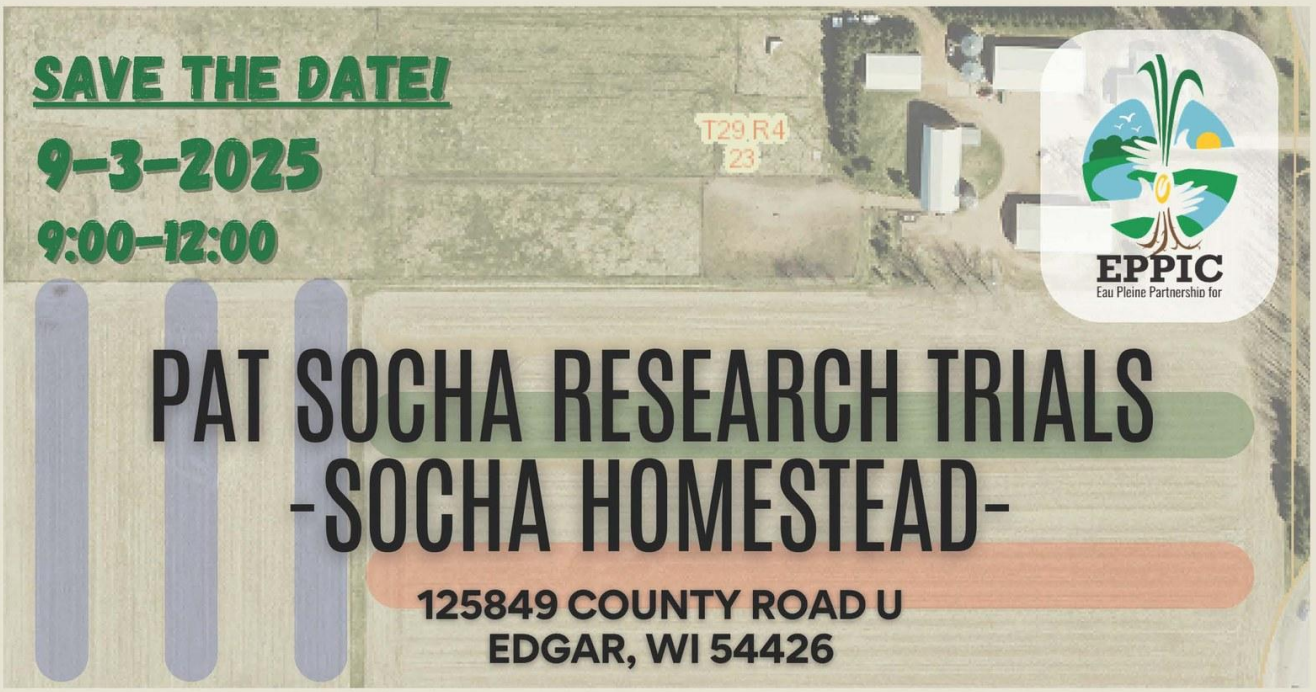
For more information on the award, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.

Andy Bensend of Dallas in Barron County

Michael Berg of Blanchardville in Lafayette County

Brattset Family Farm of Jefferson in Jefferson County

Pat and Michelle Socha of Edgar in Marathon County



PAT SOCHA RESEARCH TRIALS -SOCHA HOMESTEAD-

125849 COUNTY ROAD U
EDGAR, WI 54426

The objective of Pat's research pilot project is to determine the effects of interseeding cover crops into corn grain on corn yield, cover crop biomass, and cover crop forage quality. In collaboration with DATCP and other watershed groups around the state, Pat will plant a series of cover crops via drone at different times during the growing season. Working with UW Extension, corn grain samples will be collected to determine yield, and forage samples will be collected from the cover crops to determine quality and tonnage. This event is weather permitting, to receive the most updated information, please follow EPPIC's Facebook Page or text/call **Caleb Armstrong at 715-722-9808.**

LUNCH WILL BE PROVIDED!

FUNDING FOR THIS EVENT IS PROVIDED BY:
NORTH CENTRAL SARE
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Socha's Homestead to host Edgar Dairy Breakfast Sunday

By Kevin O'Brien

When talking to Pat and Michelle Socha about their fourth-generation farm in the town of Rietbrock, you quickly get a sense of just how devoted the couple is to keeping their operation going well into the 21st century.

"I guess I'd say we're small but mighty and we're willing to try new things," Michelle said, summing up her family's philosophy for surviving in an ever-changing agriculture industry.

Perhaps this is why Socha's Homestead, 125849 CTH U, has been chosen to host this Sunday's Edgar FFAAlumni Dairy Breakfast from 7 a.m. to noon. The event will include a meal of pancakes, sausage, scrambled eggs, applesauce, ice cream, cheese and milk, and will also feature a petting zoo, bouncy houses, a balloon maker and live music.

Guests will be free to walk around the family's barn, and Pat and Michelle will be available to answer questions. The Sochas, who last hosted a Dairy Breakfast in 2000, are expecting between 2,500 and 2,600 guests.

Ever since returning home in 1995 to help his parents, Joe and Betty, run the family farm, Pat

has been changing the way he does things while also staying true to the traditions that go back to 1909, when his greatgrandfather, John, first bought the land from his cousins.

"He lived in Edgar and he had a bar, and he thought it wasn't a good place to raise the kids, so he bought this farm out here," he said.

Pat's grandparents, Frank and Lucy, were the second generation of owners, and his parents bought the farm in the early 1960s. He said his grandparents remained

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involved when he was a kid, with his dad and grandfather branching out into logging and his mom helping with baling hay and milking cows.

“My grandmother would help with canning and babysitting us,” he said. “She was the babysitter.”

Pat is one of seven siblings, which include two brothers, Bob and Mike, and four sisters, Barb, Joan, Bonnie, and Suzy. Mike was the first one to enter the agricultural field, earning a master’s degree and PhD in dairy nu-

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Sochas

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trition. Pat earned an agronomy degree from UW-River Falls and initially worked at the Edgar Co-op (now Rib River Valley Co-op).

“He was more into cows and I was more into the crops,” Pat said.

The two brothers talked about running the farm together and “going big” in the early 1990s, but their dad was opposed to the idea. Pat says this was a good thing in the long run. Mike got a good job at a feed company in the Twin Cities, so it was up to Pat to carry on the family’s legacy. While Pat was still working at the co-op, his dad was diagnosed with a brain tumor, so Pat started milking cows with his mother in the late 1990s, and by the time his father passed away in 2008, he had fully taken over the farm.

“I always thought about farming, but I never was very good with cows,” he said.

Pat decided to remodel the operation to make it more efficient and he started custom raising calves for his friend at the co-op. This continues to be an important part of the farm operation, where he keeps baby cows from the time they are five to seven days old up until they are about two years old.

“As the years went on, we started raising heifers for other people,” he said. “We had three farms we were raising heifers for.”

Pat met Michelle in 2004 at a church retreat, and they got married the following year. Michelle grew up in Lower Michigan and earned an accounting degree at Northern Michigan University in Marquette. She was working at an accounting firm in the western Upper Peninsula when they met. Her first husband died of cancer, and they had a daughter together, Serena, now 27.

Michelle moved to the heart of America’s Dairyland with no background in farming.

“My grandparents did it, but they were pretty much retired by the time I was born,” she said.

Her off-farm jobs have been an important source of income for the family over the years, allowing Pat to continue pursuing his passions on the farm. Michelle worked at Data Flow in Marshfield for 14 years, until COVID 19 hit in 2020, and she briefly stayed at home with their kids during the school shutdowns. A job opened up in the Edgar School District and she has been working there ever since as an office aide.

Michelle has also worked as the office administrator at their church, Holy Family in Poniatowski, for 12 years as a side job. She continues to be heavily involved with the church.

“Faith is very important in our lives,” she said.

Over the past two decades, the Sochas have expanded from 120 to 270 acres (and renting another 100 acres) and Pat has gotten more involved in custom spraying and planting.

Pat was an early adopter of no-till planting, which he started experimenting with in 2015. He said it has saved a lot of time and labor, and after purchasing his own planters for corn, soybeans and small grains, he now does custom no-tilling work for other farms in the

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immediate area. He also plants cover crops and has worked with UW Extension on various trials.

Due to his work with no-till and cover cropping, Pat became one of the founding members of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), even though his family's farm is not located within the Eau Pleine watershed.

Unlike other farms, the Socha Homestead has resisted the trend of growing larger than a traditional family-run operation. When he first started, Pat said the area around his farm felt more like a traditional "neighborhood," with fellow farmers helping each other out with field work. As the years went by and farmers start retiring and selling their land, he said it's not as common to share machinery or swap labor.

"Everything's getting so much bigger," he said.

In addition to farming, Pat has also driven semis and school buses on the side, and he continues to work as a substitute bus driver for the Athens and Edgar school districts. The Sochas have also purchased their own truck to diversify their business.

Besides Michelle's daughter, Serena, the Sochas have three children, including Erica, 17, Isaac, 15, and Lucas, 14. Erica just graduated from Edgar High School and will be pursuing an agricultural education degree at UW-River Falls. She's also running for a state FFA officer position.

Isaac has shown an early interest in crop farming, and he especially enjoys tinkering with farm machinery, according to his parents.

“We’d have to be careful because he would take the pins out of all the wagons,” Michelle said, laughing.

Besides all of their work on the farm and other jobs, the Sochas have also been involved in Edgar FFA Alumni, Edgar Lions Club, Boy and Girl Scouts, the Edgar Theater Company and the Athens Acres 4-H Club. Even though they live the busy lives of farmers, Michelle said they still manage to get away from the farm once a year.

“We always make sure we have time for a family vacation,” she said.

THE HOSTS - Michelle and Pat Socha are pictured with their three children, from left to right, Lucas, Erica and Isaac. Socha’s Homestead will host the Edgar FFA Dairy Breakfast this Sunday, June 9, from 7 a.m. to noon. *SUBMITTED PHOTO*

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Letters of Support

April 10, 2026

WI Land + Water PIC Committee

Dear Committee,

On behalf of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), we are proud to express our full support for Pat Socha of Socha Homestead as a nominee for Conservation Farm Family of the Year.

EPPIC's mission is to *"integrate resilience into the natural resources, community, and economy of the Eau Pleine Watershed."* Pat has embodied this mission in his everyday farming practices since the formation of our group. He is a true leader when it comes to innovative thinking in agricultural conservation. Whether it's experimenting with new cover crop mixes, participating in statewide research trials, or hosting field days to showcase his work. Pat has participated in field demos with seeding cover crops on standing grain using drones to broadcast the cover crop onto the already growing row crops. Pat consistently demonstrates a commitment to improving soil health and water quality while inspiring others to do the same.

With over a decade of experience in regenerative agriculture, Pat has become a trusted source of knowledge and inspiration for farmers throughout Marathon County and beyond. He generously shares his experience with our Producer-Led group and the larger agricultural community, helping to advance conservation practices across the region.

We believe that Pat Socha and Socha Farms symbolize the meaning of the Conservation Farm Family of the Year. His dedication to conservation-minded farming has made a lasting impact on the Eau Pleine Watershed and serves as a model for others to follow. This is why EPPIC named Pat and his family as our 2024 EPPIC Farmer of the Year.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this nomination.

Sincerely,

Caleb Armstrong
EPPIC Coordinator

Wisconsin Farm Bureau FEDERATION

Dear Selection Committee,

I am honored to offer strong support for Pat Socha's nomination for the Wisconsin Land & Water Conservation Farm Family of the Year.

Pat represents the very best of conservation-minded agriculture in Wisconsin. On his operation in central Wisconsin, he has built a farming system rooted in long-term stewardship, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to soil and water conservation. Over time, he has continually implemented practices not because they were required, but because he believed there was a better way to care for the land.

What makes Pat especially deserving of this recognition is not just the practices he implements, but the mindset behind them. He is constantly seeking ways to reduce erosion, improve soil health, protect water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat—through buffer strips, pollinator plots, rotational grazing, and thoughtful forest management. His farm is a living example of how conservation and productivity can go hand in hand. Pat is never afraid to try something new!

Beyond his own operation, Pat's impact extends across his community. He is a trusted resource for fellow farmers, generously sharing his knowledge, hosting field days, and encouraging others to adopt conservation practices. His leadership is quiet but powerful—built on integrity, humility, and a genuine desire to help others succeed.

Pat Socha doesn't chase recognition, but his work deserves it. He embodies the spirit of Wisconsin conservation: practical, forward-thinking, and deeply rooted in respect for the land and future generations.

It is with great respect and enthusiasm that I recommend Pat Socha for this well-deserved honor.

Sincerely,

Kim Bremmer

Kim Bremmer
District 8 Director
Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation
715.797.7796

Short Lane Ag Supply LLC

April 22nd 2026

To Whom it May Concern –

Agriculture, to be a farmer, is a noble pursuit, but to be a steward of the land is conscientious. For close to two decades Pat Socha has humbly established conservation practices on his field systems that are ever progressing, and showcase a resilience that bring admiration and, most importantly, an example for others to strive for. Ever the welcoming soul, his doors are always open, his smile ready, for anyone and everyone to ask him for advice, and be a guide to learn more about soil health, safeguarding the natural resources, and leaving the land in a better place than what you found it. Because of this I want to formally nominate Pat Socha of Edgar, Wisconsin for the prestigious Conservation Farm Family of the Year Award.

"A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke of the axe he is writing his signature on the face of the land" (Aldo Leopold A Sand County Almanac). Pat doesn't take his time lightly on his farm, and not only sees what needs to be done by the end of the day, but what needs to be done by the end of a decade. For nearly two decades Pat has been a proponent of decreasing nutrient/soil runoff through reducing soil disturbance with no-till, increasing biodiversity with specific mixes of cover crops and enhanced rotations, maintaining ground cover, and living roots with overwintering cover crops. Practices implemented have been genuine (like no-till planting) and others more advanced (summer annual forage mixes, interseeding companion crops into established corn and soybeans), and others with foresight (vegetative buffers, pollinator habitat).

Pat doesn't just stop at his field edges; he extends his acres beyond serving as an educational resource. There hasn't been a time where he said "no" to a proposed field day (of which he has hosted several), or individuals asking for a visit where his conservation practices can be showcased. Most of his field days are done for the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), Wisconsin's largest Farmer-Led Watershed Group. The inquisitive gain much knowledge as he displays his calm demeanor, warm personality, and detailed responses. He never wants to leave doubt and be a source of information that others can gain from. He will go as far as to print off his 'books'; his records of financials (input costs, man hours, yield averages) and hand them out to others. He has opened his acres to research, locally and statewide, and is currently serving on a Producer-Led Research and Demonstration advisory panel with DATCP. He does all of this not just to benefit his farm, but to give others an opportunity to benefit from the future data.

The work isn't easy, and precious time is invested heavily in being a resource to others. In addition to farming and hosting field events, he also serves on the advisory board of EPPIC alongside us, being on planning committees, and serving as a Farm Bureau member. Constantly offering insight, extending invitations to other farmers to attend meetings with him, and networking to connect others, it is clear that Pat sees a higher calling to his actions on his farm. Theodore Roosevelt, our greatest president for

conservation, said it best that rural life and conservation are of the same policy, and that it is "fundamental law that neither man or nation can prosper unless, dealing with the present, *thought* is steadily taken for the future." Pat shows us that bringing resiliency to our farmland and rural communities is not just beneficial but necessary.

In conclusion, this award is fitting and most appropriate for Pat because his farming brings us a living definition to the land ethic that we are no longer a conqueror of the land community, but a citizen of it. That the boundaries of our community include soils, waters, plants, and animals. Pat's true worth isn't from working to be better than everyone else, but instead his endeavor for self-improvement, and making is acres a little better than the year before because he demands it. And there lies the quiet leadership of Pat Socha that leaves agronomist, farmers, and conservationists inspired and motivated to do as Pat does: do your best as if your land depends on it.

Matthew Oehmichen

Owner

Short Lane Ag Supply LLC

W606 Short Road Colby, WI 54421

Advisory Board Member, The Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation

Advisory Panel Member, Producer-Led Research and Demonstration

2021 Award Recipient of the WI Land & Water Conservation Steward Award

To the Wisconsin Land and Water, Farm Family of the Year Award Committee,

It is a distinct honor to recommend Pat Socha for the Wisconsin Land and Water Farmer of the Year award. I have worked with Pat over the past several years, working with him to conduct conservation practice implementation studies on his farm and hosting field days for other farmers to learn from his farm. Pat's operation serves as a living laboratory for the future of Wisconsin dairy and crop farming, proving that high-yield production and environmental preservation are not mutually exclusive.

Innovation in Practice

Pat has moved far beyond the "standard" conservation playbook. By integrating diverse cover crop blends and reduced tillage systems into a complex dairy rotation, Pat has successfully mitigated the unique erosion challenges of central Wisconsin's soil. What sets Pat apart is the willingness to embrace the "trial and error" phase of innovation—constantly tweaking equipment and timing to ensure these practices are both ecologically sound and economically viable.

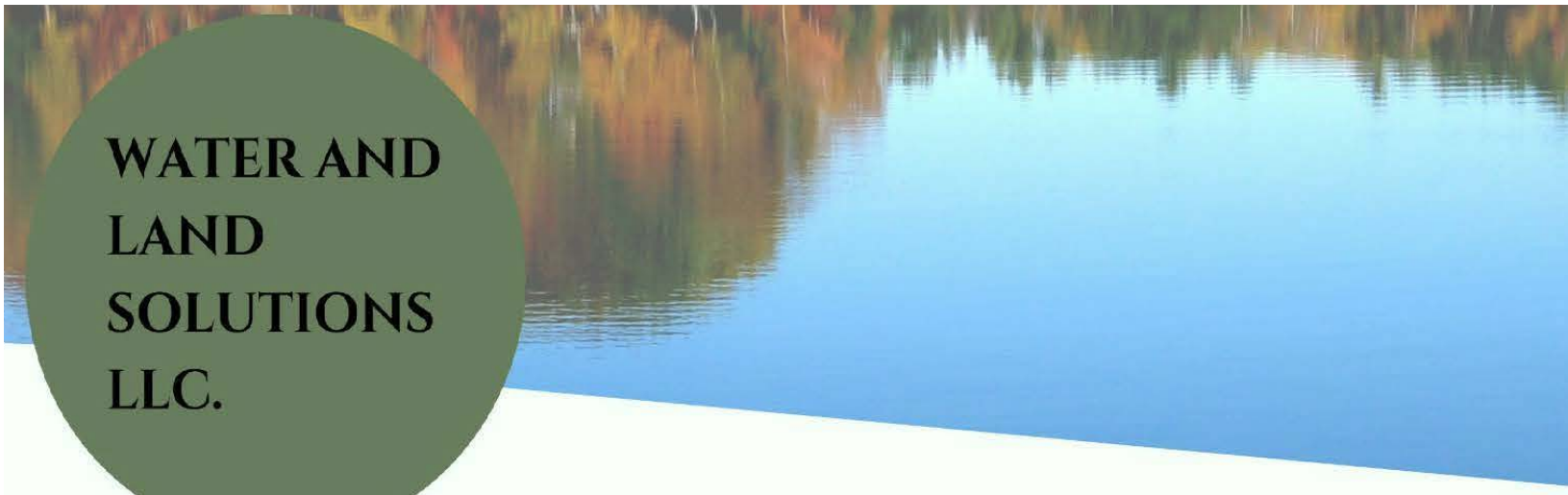
True conservation doesn't stop at the fence line, and Pat understands this better than most. Pat is a fixture in the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC) Producer-Led watershed group and farmer-led conservation initiatives. He has been nominated by fellow regional farmers as "Farmer of the Year" within the EPPIC group. By consistently showing up and speaking up, Pat has helped bridge the gap between regulatory goals and practical on-farm application, fostering a culture of collaboration across the region. Perhaps Pat's greatest contribution is the transparency of the operation. The Socha farm is frequently opened to neighbors, researchers, and students for on-farm research and demonstrations. Pat doesn't just share the successes; Pat is honest about the challenges, which earns the trust of fellow farmers who may be hesitant to change their own practices. Pat's "lead by example" philosophy has directly inspired several local producers to transition toward reduced tillage and cover cropping. He doesn't know how to say "no" to trying something new!

Pat Socha is more than a farmer; Pat is a guardian of Wisconsin's natural resources. I can think of no one more deserving of the Farmer of the Year award—not only for the work done today but for the resilient landscape Pat is building for the next generation.

Sincerely,

Chris Bandura

UW-Madison Division of Extension



WATER AND LAND SOLUTIONS LLC.

April 22, 2026

Wisconsin Land and Water-Selection Committee

Subject: Letter of Recommendation Pat Socha-Conservation Farm Family of the Year Award

Award Reviewer(s), I strongly support the nomination of Pat Socha and family for the 2026 Conservation Farm Family Award. I have known Pat along with his family for over 30 years. In that time, Pat has demonstrated all of the traits that make him along with his supportive family an outstanding candidate for this Award.

In working with Pat, as a Conservationist with Marathon County Land Conservation, Pat has worked for over 30 years to practice exceptional land stewardship on his farmland, whether it is rented or owned. I am sure like many of your nominees, he has done an exceptional job at managing the soil on his farm through carefully applying the nutrients for his crops, protecting the soil from erosion as well as providing wildlife habitat in various ways including native plantings.

What sets Pat and his family apart is their willingness to share experience at field days on their farms and within their community. He and his family has been a willing host of field events for many years, demonstrating what he has tried in relation to cover crops, no-till, and managed grazing. He has always been an early adopter of new cropland practices and he is willing to share with other farmers what works and what does not work on his farm in Western Marathon County.

In addition, Pat is a community leader in many ways. In relation to soil and water conservation, Pat is a founding member and enthusiast supporter of the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), which is a community led group promoting the protection of the land and water in the Eau Pleine Watershed in Western Marathon County. He is very dedicated to this group, sharing his time and experience with farmers, agency staff and anyone willing to listen. He speaks at both local and statewide events promoting land conservation.

Lastly, he is an inspiration to his children, they are in their late teens and eagerly farm with both their mom and dad. They understand their dad is a leader in conservation and eagerly learn from him. One of them is an aspiring farmer and wants to follow in his Dad's footsteps.

As the former County Conservationist for Marathon County and current member of EPPIC, I strongly feel there is no better candidates for the prestigious Conservation Farm Family of the Year Award.

Sincerely,

Paul Daigle

Paul Daigle
Water and Land Solutions LLC
235678 Morgan Lane
Wausau WI 54403

Professional Soil Scientist
Professional Hydrologist
Phosphorus credit verification packet developer