

Soil Conservation Education for Amish Farmers in the Kickapoo Valley

SUCCESS AT A GLANCE

Problem:	Limited adoption of practices to prevent soil erosion and stream habitat degradation by Amish farming communities
Audience:	Amish communities in southwestern Wisconsin
Partners:	Trout Unlimited, County Land Conservation Department, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Private Individuals
Results:	Direct work with Amish communities to promote farm conservation practices that improve watershed health
Sites:	4 conservation demonstration sites and contact with over 50 Amish farms
Impacts:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placed 14 lunkers in trout streams Restored 675 feet of streambank Created 19 acres of rotational grazing pasture (cost-share equivalent of \$45 per acre) Provided 60+ booklets of conservation information to Amish farmers



An Amish farm.

The Kickapoo Valley of southwestern Wisconsin is home to one of the fastest growing Amish communities in the United States. The expansion of these agrarian-based communities has increased farming in the valley's rolling hills, affecting both soil erosion and streamwater quality.

This project provides outreach and education to the Amish communities through a local educator from Trout Unlimited, a non-governmental



Trucks and horse-driven buggies are often seen sharing the road in southwestern Wisconsin.

organization. The goal is to create a social network of increased environmental awareness that will have a positive impact on the political, economic, and environmental decisions made by the community.

Best management practices have been established on several representative Amish farms, where other community members are exposed to the practices and hopefully will become influenced to make voluntary behavioral changes.

The Wisconsin Amish Community

Wisconsin is home to some of the fastest growing Amish communities in the nation. While the Amish are often idealized for their simple lifestyles and strong work and family ethics, their traditional methods of transportation and cultivation are not always easily integrated into modern society. Some old-order Amish travel exclusively by horse and buggy. The town of Cashton, Wisconsin, has recognized the value of its Amish citizens by building shelters for the Amish horses and buggies, providing them protection from summer heat and winter snows. They are a part of the local community while retaining their separate lifestyle.

Cultural Diversity

Despite the good will of local communities, rapid growth in the Kickapoo Valley has caused some difficulties. Conflicts over land use and availability have resulted. Because Amish culture focuses on religious and family values, they avoid lengthy contact with outsiders and don't adopt new practices quickly. While government-sponsored grants and programs provide financial benefits to farmers willing to try conservation practices on their farms, these grants are not readily accepted by the Amish who avoid government employees and programs.



Eroding streambanks contribute to the degradation of Kickapoo Valley streams.

Soil Erosion and Environmental Problems

The Kickapoo Valley is rapidly becoming a popular tourist destination in the Midwest. Many of the region's trout streams have been given Class 1 ratings, a designation reserved for the healthiest stream habitats.

The watershed is an increasingly important resource for the community because of its economic and ecological values. "Local economies depend on gas, motels, food, and fishing equipment," explains Dan Peper, who has witnessed the growth of the tourist industry during his years as a resident and outreach educator for Trout Unlimited in the Kickapoo Valley.

Along with growth in tourism, the region is experiencing rapid growth in the Amish community as well. Because

of the strong community element among the Amish, they prefer to purchase and farm land next to Amish neighbors. This strong sense of community means that Amish often rely on advice of neighboring Amish farmers. However, the erosion of rich topsoil from the upland areas into the valleys is becoming an issue of great concern to natural resource managers. When traditions have long been part of a strong network of people, like the Amish, the solutions to degrading farming practices must be given time to be accepted as part of the community's tradition.

As Peper works with local Amish, he is understanding why farmers have been slow in modifying some of their farm management practices. The cost of supplies and skepticism of unfamiliar practices keep many Amish from adopting the other practices readily. The

practices that have been accepted in the community include buffer strips, woodland grazing, manure handling, composting, free-range chicken rearing, product marketing, stream buffers, rotational grazing, and streambank restoration. These last two have drawn the most attention from the Amish community and have been implemented on several area farms.



Amish buggy and horse in Cashton, Wisconsin.

On-Farm Education and Outreach

During the past two years, Peper has worked as an outreach educator through Trout Unlimited. Since the start of his position, he has consulted with close to 50 Amish farmers about

practices they have used on their farms. The key aspect of Peper's job is initiating contact with Amish farmers and becoming a welcome part of the community. He answers questions and searches for specific information when requested by farmers. Though the Amish were hesitant to work with an outsider at first, Peper continued to provide brochures and reading materials about conservation practices to the

The Amish were hesitant about working with outsiders, but Peper's persistence has created a trust and allowed him to work with nearly 50 Amish farmers.

farmers. His persistence and continuous presence have created a trust that has allowed communication inroads with the Amish. Several conservation practices have been introduced to the Amish communities, and Peper can see evidence of these spreading across neighbor's fences.

The most popular hand-out materials have been *Pastures for Profit – A Guide to Rotational Grazing*, *Controlled Grazing for Dairy Cows* and *Farming Contour Strips*. Amish farmers have clearly found the practice of rotational grazing most easily adopted into their lifestyle. Since the beginning of the educational initiative, one training seminar and three pasture walks have introduced interested farmers to conservation practices. With the gradual acceptance of Dan's influence, three other farmers



Rotational grazing fence posts lining the hills on an Amish farm.

have installed rotational grazing voluntarily on their farms.

Rotational Grazing

More than 25 percent of agricultural land in the Kickapoo Valley is in some form of pasture. While continuous grazing can lead to soil erosion and uneven grass fertility, alternative grazing methods can alleviate these problems and increase economic benefits for the farmer. Rotational grazing, or managed intensive grazing, allows one section of pasture to be grazed while the remaining sections rest. This is done by dividing a pasture into sections and moving the livestock from one paddock to another. When done properly, the result is healthier grass forage, maximized production, increased plant vigor and long-term sustainability of pasture land.

Converting from continuous to rotational grazing requires building enough fencing to create sections within a fenced perimeter of the whole pasture. The cost can be relatively low, especially due to

recent technological advances and methods borrowed from other locations. For example, one farmer suggests that New Zealand low impedance fencing can be installed on his farm for less than 7 cents per foot as compared to the alternative cost of \$1.25 per foot for the traditional 5 links of barbed wire. This new fencing system has gained such popularity in recent years that it can be found in local hardware shops throughout Wisconsin.

By making this low financial and labor investment, Amish farmers can substantially increase milk production.

Peper hears more and more Amish farmers talking to each other about rotational grazing, and sees it as a positive step toward more conservation.

Since grass is cheap and cows eat grass, Peper sees rotational grazing as a simple solution: "Instead of bringing feed to

the cows, move the cows to the feed: they have four legs." He hears more and more Amish farmers talking to each other about rotational grazing and sees it as a positive step toward other conservation management goals.



Environmental educator Dan Peper views a newly restored streambank.

Streambank Restoration and Trout Habitat Improvement

Peper and other staff from Trout Unlimited have put in long hours repairing some of the streams in the Kickapoo Valley that have been degraded by sediment washed in from cultivated fields and from stream banks grazed by livestock.

Continuous grazing by cows rapidly wears away stream banks. In an effort to reduce the impact of erosion on the stream banks, Peper and others are working with the Amish, demonstrating the negative impacts of continuous grazing on stream banks and showing them how to restore the health of the stream by placing “lunkers” under the eroding areas. Lunkers are 8-foot wide pallets placed into the stream bank, covered with rocks, and overlain with soil and vegetation. They are effective in dissipating the force of the water, especially at bends in the stream, and they create protective cover for trout.



Lunkers waiting to be placed in streambanks.

In the Amish community, conservation must make sense economically. As Peper suggests, “We have to be able to find what people can do without a lot of money.”

What Happens in the Future

While his work with the Amish is slow and steady, Peper is encouraged by their continued interest in adopting some of the suggested conservation practices. Trout Unlimited extended Peper’s position an extra year due to the success of this project. In his remaining time, he envisions working with Amish elders to set a more permanent precedent for conservation in the Kickapoo community.

The work initiated here can be used as a model for working with cultural diversity in other areas.

Peper and other project participants are certain that they are making a breakthrough in their communication with the Kickapoo Valley Amish. The initial idea of getting a “foot in the door” has been surpassed by the growth of local interest and participation in conservation practices. Examples of good soil conservation practices are emerging among the Amish community and changing their impact on the environment.



Spring clouds over the Kickapoo Valley.

The Multi-Agency Land and Water Education Grant Program (MALWEG)

Since 1997, the Multi-Agency Land and Water Education Grant Program has allocated over 1 million dollars to locally focused educational projects that help Wisconsin’s farmers learn about natural resource issues and adopt conservation practices. The program is a partnership between the Natural Resources Conservation Service; UW-Extension; Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; and Farm Service Agency. Major funding comes from the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Programs and the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative Program. Additional funding comes from the DNR and the UWEX Conservation Technology Program.

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