



AEA Snapshot: Apple Lake AEA Helps Lead Conservation Efforts in Northwestern Wisconsin

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Editor's Note: Download the [infographic](#) and [brochure](#).

MADISON, Wis. – Situated in Wisconsin's Northwoods just east of the Mississippi River, the Apple Lake Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA) is surrounded by small lakes in the Lower Apple River Watershed. This AEA covers almost 10,000 acres in the towns of Farmington and Alden in Polk County, and the town of Star Prairie in St. Croix County. Originally established in 2011, the Apple Lake AEA is rooted in its commitment to improving and protecting the local surface waters of the Horse Creek Watershed.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, Polk County lost 12.6%, or more than 36,000 acres, of farmland between 2002 and 2017. These changes can have significant impacts for communities that depend on agriculture to support the local economy, but Polk County is working on a plan to rebuild the foundation of its farmland preservation program so that it can grow and expand into areas that have not yet had the opportunity to participate.

“We are going to be more specific when identifying agricultural lands that are most valuable and that have the best chance at being in a farmland preservation zoning district or designated as an AEA,” said Eric Wojchik, Polk County Conservationist. The county is currently working with a group of local stakeholders, including farmers, business owners, local governments, and the West Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, to draft the plan.

The Horse Creek Watershed Council, which includes the area of the Apple Lake AEA, was founded by producers with a mission of helping others adopt best management practices related to water quality and soil health. Since 2015, Timm Johnson, a local farmer and member of the group, has hosted cover crop and tillage test plots on his land to support the council's ongoing research. This project has led to the reduction of tens of thousands of pounds of phosphorus from entering the watershed.

“Our models show that, in one year, our implementation of no-till and cover crops have resulted in 6,800 fewer pounds of phosphorus entering Cedar Lake,” said Johnson. “A one-pound reduction in phosphorus can result in a 500-pound reduction in algae growth. This means there was 3.4 million pounds less of algae in the lake.”

While Polk County is working on expanding opportunities to other areas of the county through their planning process, they also hope to work with landowners who are currently in the AEA to protect their farmland.

“The producers we have in the Apple Lake AEA are committed to the conservation and preservation of these valuable lands, not only in an agricultural preservation sense but also in how they farm,” said Wojchik.

Landowners within the Apple Lake AEA are eligible to participate in the Farmland Preservation Program through farmland preservation agreements. These agreements are a 10-year voluntary contract between the landowner and the state. During the agreement period, the landowner must keep the land in agricultural use and maintain soil and water best management practices. In return, the landowner may claim the farmland preservation tax credit. Gov. Evers signed into law an increase to the tax credit for farmland preservation agreement holders and,

beginning in tax year 2023, the tax credit is now \$10 per acre or \$12.50 if lands are also located in a certified farmland preservation zoning district.

Local landowners or townships who are interested in starting a new AEA or who are interested in farmland preservation zoning should contact the Polk County Land and Water Resources Department to learn more.

About Agricultural Enterprise Areas (AEAs)

AEAs are community-led efforts to establish designated areas important to Wisconsin's agricultural future. As a part of the state's Farmland Preservation Program, AEAs strive to support local farmland protection goals. Through this designation, communities can encourage continued agricultural production and investment in the local agricultural economy.

Eligible landowners within an AEA can sign a 10-year farmland preservation agreement committing all or a portion of their farm to agricultural use and maintaining state soil and water conservation standards. In return, they may be eligible to claim the farmland preservation tax credit.

To learn more about AEAs and the Farmland Preservation Program, visit https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Programs_Services/AgriculturalEnterpriseAreas.aspx. To start or join a current AEA, contact the county land conservation department in the county where your land is located.

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