



AEA Snapshot: Montana Society of Responsible Land Use Agricultural Enterprise Area Helps Protect, Preserve Local Farmland

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 10, 2025

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

MADISON, Wis. – For generations, the close-knit community of Montana, situated on the northern end of the Driftless region in Buffalo County, has been home to family farms. The area features a landscape full of rolling hills and dense forests nestled in plunging valleys. While much of the land in the township is productive, the flat fields that line the winding roadways are optimal for maneuvering agricultural equipment and are the most desirable for farming. These areas, however, are also highly sought-after for conversion to residential land or recreational use by local hunting outfitters.

In 2021, the Montana Society of Responsible Land Use Agricultural Enterprise Area (AEA) was formed as a response to the local land use conversion pressures and the community's desire to keep the rich farmland in production. By itself, an AEA does not have any land use restrictions or requirements for landowners. However, when a landowner in an AEA signs a farmland preservation (FP) agreement, they voluntarily commit to keeping their land in agricultural use and to implement soil and water conservation practice for 10 years. This allows landowners to limit land conversion and discourage potential buyers from purchasing land for uses outside of agriculture.

Joe Bragger, a farmer and innovator in the local agricultural community, first introduced the idea of the AEA program to the Town of Montana Board. Bragger had previously participated in the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's Farmland Preservation Program. However, his land had not been eligible for the farmland preservation tax credit because the town did not have a certified farmland preservation zoning district. With the addition of an AEA, Bragger and other area landowners with an FP agreement would be eligible to claim a \$10 per acre tax credit.

"We have a lot of farmers in the township who are participating in nutrient management planning and conservation planning. Any credits they get back from the FP Program can be reinvested back into their operation to further improve it," said Bragger.

Like many farmers across the state, Bragger operates both owned and rented farmland. As an FP participant, he provides Buffalo County with a nutrient management plan that includes all the acres that he operates. By including the rented farmland in his land stewardship activities and nutrient management plans, Bragger enables those landowners who are not producers themselves to participate in the FP Program and sign an FP agreement, thus widening the positive impact the FP Program has on the local community.

Since the establishment of the Montana Society of Responsible Land Use AEA four years ago, the community has protected over 1,200 acres through FP agreements. That number will hopefully continue to grow as more members of the community become eligible and choose to participate in the program, achieving the Town of Montana's goal to continue their agricultural legacy long into the future.

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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