



# Agriculture Enterprise Area

Preserve farmland. Protect the environment. Grow the economy.

# SNAPSHOT

## Heart of America's Dairyland

Focus on Marathon County

Counties: Clark & Marathon

Acres: 224,906

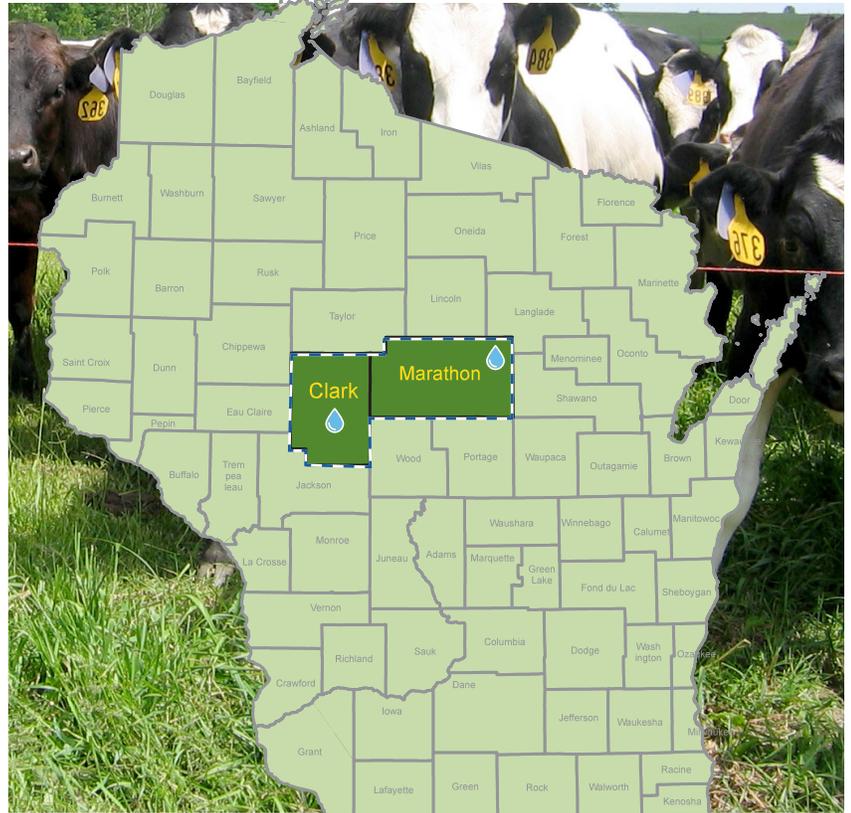
AEA Designation: 2011

Municipalities: Beaver, Brighton, Burn, Colby, Eau Pleine, Frankfort, Holton, Hull, Johnson, Loyal, Mayville, McMillan, Unity

### Background

The Heart of America's Dairyland Agriculture Enterprise Area (AEA) was established in 2011 in eastern Clark County with a mission "to preserve and promote the agricultural economy and its social, cultural and economic heritage." Since then, it has expanded to include more towns in Clark County and parts of the towns of Bern, Brighton, Eau Pleine, Frankfort, Holton, Hull, Johnson, and McMillan in western Marathon County.

The Heart of America's Dairyland AEA now spans more than 224,906 acres, making it the largest AEA in the state. Its name is a tribute to Marathon County's long history in the dairy industry. Some cheese factories in the area date back to 1891. Marathon County continues to host many dairy operations of various sizes with a total of 61,000 cows producing more than 1.4 billion pounds of milk each year. Through this AEA designation, farmers, community members, and local governments are working to preserve their culture and economic history in agriculture as well as the rich farmland, soil, and water resources that make it possible.

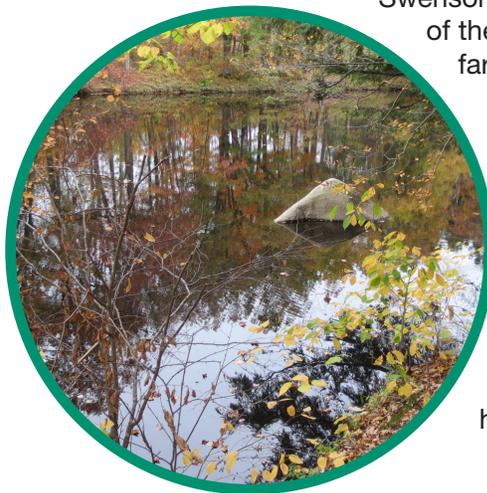


### Local Support

Dave Swenson is a dairy farmer in the AEA and a volunteer firefighter who has been on the McMillan Town Board for more than 30 years. Swenson has deep ties to the area and explains, "My family has been on the original 100 acres that my great grandfather homesteaded in the 1900s. We're on the seventh generation on that same 100 acres. I felt it was really important that we preserve ag land for dairy interests and crop and livestock farming."

|                                   |  |   |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>15</b><br>LOCAL<br>GOVERNMENTS | <b>48</b><br>AG CO-OPS &<br>BUSINESSES | <b>388</b><br>PRODUCERS &<br>LANDOWNERS |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|

When Swenson saw the pressure for development in the agricultural areas near his farm, he looked into options to preserve his way of life and address the threat of farmland conversion. In 2014, this led to a collaboration between Swenson, 115 other farmers, two counties, 10 towns, and broad support from members of the community to expand the HOAD AEA with the goal of preserving the county's farmland.



Swenson sees firsthand how intertwined the Marathon County community is with the agriculture and treatment of the land. "Farming operations from custom operations coming in, to fertilizer going onto the land, impact the local area," he said. "People need to understand, bottom line, where their food comes from. I became involved in the process and, hopefully, I left an impact."

Swenson's fight to preserve farmland has now allowed his son, the seventh generation on the land, to milk the family's 60-cow herd. Swenson sees great potential in using AEAs and farmland preservation as tools to pass down operations to the next generation and allow smaller community dairy farmers like his family to continue their way of life.

This AEA is supported and surrounded by the following ag enterprises, businesses, nonprofits and institutions:

-  Animal dealers/markets/truckers
-  Aquaculture
-  Cheese makers
-  Dairy plants
-  Food processing
-  Grain dealers
-  Milk producers
-  Agro-tourism
-  CREP easements
-  UW-Discovery Farms
-  Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation
-  NRCS
-  North Central Conservancy Trust
-  Big Eau Pleine Citizens Organization
-  The River Alliance of Wisconsin
-  Marathon Partnerships in Progressive Agriculture
-  North Central Technical College Center for Agricultural Excellence
-  Center of Land Use Education UW-Stevens Point
-  UW-Madison Urban and Regional Planning Department
-  Dairy Business Association
-  UW-Madison Agricultural Research Station (Town of McMillan)

## County Support

Marathon County has similar goals for the preservation of the area's farmland and would like to sustain the area's agriculture resources by encouraging increased participation in conservation practices. To meet this goal, Amanda Kasperek, the county's conservation technician, and Kirk Langfoss, county conservation analyst, are working toward 35% participation in the Farmland Preservation (FP) program within the AEA. Kasperek hopes the AEA and FP programs can "help farmers, help the environment," she said. "The cost of the tax credit helps offset the cost of implementing those conservation practices."

To help achieve this goal, Marathon County is partnering with landowners in the AEA through an incentive program that launched in 2021. New participants who are interested in signing an FP agreement may be eligible to receive a \$500 incentive payment. New participants who are located in a township with FP zoning may also be eligible to receive a \$500 incentive payment to participate in the FP program through zoning. A limited amount of funding is available for the incentive program, and landowners interested in claiming the FP tax credit, meeting conservation goals, and protecting land from nonagricultural-related uses should contact the Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department at (715) 261-6048 or email [amanda.kasperek@co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:amanda.kasperek@co.marathon.wi.us).

## Future Growth

Swenson and the county conservation office aren't alone in their mission to preserve and advance dairy and other agriculture efforts in Marathon County. Members of the county's farming community have banded together in a producer-led watershed group to encourage and promote conservation practices such as no-till farming, managed grazing and cover crops. Their group, the Eau Pleine Partnership for Integrated Conservation (EPPIC), began in 2017. Its mission is "Integrating resilience into the natural resources, community, and economy of the Eau Pleine Watershed." EPPIC has a unique relationship with the community in Marathon County because it seeks to bring more stakeholders to the table, including farmers, conservationists, county officials, university researchers and residents, in the interest of generating new conversations and progress.

Marathon County has been working with EPPIC to spread the word about conservation practices. Langfoss and Kasperek both feel that EPPIC shares many of the same goals as the Heart of America's Dairyland AEA, and they hope to continue to this partnership for years to come. The Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning Department also has plans to further expand the AEA in Marathon County, much like Swenson and others rallied for in 2014 with the goal protecting additional farmland and reaching more producers. Marathon County has a long and rich history in dairy and agriculture. With the continued efforts of its community, this tradition will continue for years to come.

## Preserving Local Agriculture

-  Farmland and working agriculture.
-  Open spaces and natural beauty.
-  Enhance the local tax base.

## Protecting Natural Resources

-  Water, diverse vegetation and soils.
-  Preservation of environmental resources.
-  Prevalence of nutrient management plans.

To find out if your land is located in the Heart of America's Dairyland in Marathon County or sign a farmland preservation agreement, contact:  
**Amanda Kasperek, County Conservation Technician**  
 Marathon County Conservation, Planning and Zoning – (715) 261-6031  
[Amanda.Kasperek@co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:Amanda.Kasperek@co.marathon.wi.us)  
 To learn more about the Heart of America's Dairyland in Clark County, contact the Clark County land conservation department.