



AFT PHOTO APRIL ANN OPATIK

Farmers and Landowners Partnering for Clean Water in the Great Lakes *Individual Stories from the Field*

Nearly one third, or 284 million acres of U.S. land, are owned and rented out by landowners who do not farm. This dynamic can make the decision to implement conservation practices complicated for both farmers and landowners. In addition, USDA data indicates that women are inheriting more farmland. They are often the primary decision makers on farms and inclined towards conservation, but are underrepresented in USDA conservation programs.

With support from the Great Lakes Protection Fund, AFT is leading a team of local conservation districts, extension agents, the IPM Institute, and sociologists to create a coordinated, replicable model for increasing conservation practices on rented farmland. The project team is piloting this work in the Portage and Toussaint River Basins in northwestern Ohio, and the Genesee River Basin in western New York—where 22 to 49 percent of the farmland is leased.

Our **Farmers & Landowners Partnering for Clean Water in the Great Lakes project** is designed to engage three key groups:

- 1** Women landowners
- 2** Farmers who lease land
- 3** Agricultural retailers or consultants who provide support and advice to farmers

This series of farmer and landowner profiles highlights the stories of farmers and landowners working together to improve the stewardship of farmland in the Great Lakes. Lesley Riker, a Learning Circle Participant in Bowling Green, Ohio shares her story as a landowner partnering with her farmer to implement conservation practices that help the great lakes.

Lesley Riker, Learning Circle Participant in Bowling Green, Ohio

There was a shift from snow to small bits of corn stalk pieces in northern Ohio this harvest season. There has also been a shift of agricultural land. Over the next 20 years, about 371 million acres of farmland are expected to change hands as farmers retire or leave their land to the next generation. Lesley Riker, a wife, mother, and now farmer is an example of that shift.

Lesley has always been involved in agriculture: 4-H committee leader, FSA board, and more. She shared this involvement with her daughters who participated in their local 4-H club and who dedicate their successful careers to the leadership skills they earned in 4-H.

Lesley never imagined being a full-time farmer—until four years ago her husband fell incredibly ill with multiple sclerosis. “The biggest challenge was myself,” Lesley recalls, “I didn’t have enough knowledge or skills to address issues such as farm equipment maintenance or the right time of planting. These are skills you can only gain over time and by working directly in the field.”

Luckily, the farm was co-managed with lifelong friend, Dan.

“I wouldn’t have been able to farm this land without Dan—co-farmer and mentor. I would suggest every beginning farmer to find someone you can trust and learn from,” Lesley recommends.



American Farmland Trust’s national Women for the Land initiative addresses the obstacles women landowners face in accessing conservation programs and resources by hosting “learning circles”.

There are now nearly one million women farm operators and over a half million additional women landowners who lease their land to farmers.



Lesley farms over 750 acres and has a strong belief in giving back to the land. All the acreage is in no-till conservation practices and some acres are sown with cover crops. Lesley and her husband have three daughters who originally showed no interest in taking over the farm. Recently, one of their daughters has shown immense interest and wishes to continue and take-over their farming legacy. “Dan and I are teaching my daughter all we know about farming. The biggest issue is trying to find a balance for incorporating fairness for all three of my daughters and the land’s value,” Lesley said. She continues, “I heard about an opportunity for women to learn about land legacy at a Women for the Land Conservation Learning Circle and knew I had to attend.”

Lesley admits, “There’s some truth to the stigma of women not farming and handling equipment—women can be totally ill-prepared, and some are forced into this lifestyle through unfortunate life events. Women can overcome this, and learning circles help by giving women the chance to learn equal farming practices and to ask questions.”

Just like a harvest season, life has a way of shifting in many different directions—for some that means taking over a different lifestyle and career. For Lesley, it meant overcoming herself by gaining endless amounts of knowledge from a dedicated mentor, attending a women learning circle, and forming trust with her family.

To read more stories and learn about the project visit:
<https://farmland.org/greatlakes>

We are grateful for the generous support of the Great Lakes Protection Fund to make this work possible. American Farmland Trust works in collaboration with a team of organizations to foster the adoption of agricultural conservation practices on rented farmland that can improve water quality of the Great Lakes: Wood and Ottawa Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Ohio; Cornell University Cooperative Extension NWN Dairy, Livestock & Field Crops Team in New York; Utah State University; and IPM Institute of North America.



Great Lakes
Protection Fund



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
NWN Dairy, Livestock & Field Crops Team



Ottawa
Soil & Water
Conservation District

