Science Societies

Guilette receives inaugural CCA Conservationist of the Year Award

By Denice Rackley

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Nick Guilette (center) is the inaugural recipient of the CCA Conservationist of the Year Award. Source: USDA-NRCS Wisconsin.

The importance of conservation-minded agricultural practices has brought together the USDA-NRCS, Agriculture Retailers Association, American Society of Agronomy, CropLife America, Crop Science Society of America, National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, Soil Science Society of America, Syngenta, and The Fertilizer Institute in support of a new award celebrating CCAs who work to advance environmental stewardship within agriculture.

The CCA Conservationist of the Year Award recognizes a CCA who is an innovative leader in conservation, delivers exceptional conservation advice and results, and contributes substantially to the exchange of conservation ideas and knowledge within the agriculture industry.

Agriculture and environmental stewardship must proceed hand in hand believes the inaugural award recipient, Nick Guilette. Quick to give credit to his grandfather, Guilette's love and respect for the land took root on the family farm in Casco, WI. Graduating with a general resource management degree and minor in soil science from the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point furthered Guilette's passion for agriculture and commitment to conservation. He now works as a nutrient manager for Ebert Enterprises where he enjoys extensive time in the field and working side by side with producers.

Guilette previously worked as a nutrient plan writer and GPS soil sampler at AgSource Laboratories in Bonduel, WI for nine years, advising local dairy farmers on proper manure application on nearly 30,000 acres. Chis Clark, fellow CCA at AgScource who nominated Guilette for the award, says, “Nick has always looked to the future for innovations that will further conservation efforts within agriculture.”

Guilette's area of northeastern Wisconsin is an environmentally sensitive area with extensive agricultural production. This area has particular water quality challenges due to considerable quantities of manure, shallow soil depths, fractured bedrock that makes groundwater susceptible to contamination, and proximity to the bay of Green Bay and Lake Michigan, Clark explains. However, CCAs in the area are providing advice to maximize nutrient availability and minimize nutrient loss with best management practices.

Committed, Proactive Involvement in the Community

Guilette's commitment to environmental stewardship and proactive conservation solutions are evident in his community involvement. He serves as co-crop adviser for two farmer-led groups concentrating on water quality solutions, Peninsula Pride Farms (PPF) and the Door-Kewaunee Demonstration Farm Network (DK Demo Farms).

“PPF's vision is to demonstrate that clean water and a prosperous dairy community can co-exist,” says Dr. Don Niles, DVM and PPF President. Created in 2016, PPF now consists of 50 farmers, representing half the cows and tillable acres within two counties and 10 business members. As a farmer-led nonprofit, PPF focuses on improving surface water quality and protecting groundwater by improving soil health, reducing pathogens, and decreasing phosphorus and nitrogen loss. “Nick is often the public face of PPF, whether it involves speaking to reporters or with our newly elected governor, in a farm field, where each were [recently] holding clumps of soil and root

mass, discussing soil health," Niles says. "There is no doubt in my mind that Nick's ideas and leadership have led to a healthier and more balanced agricultural community in northeast Wisconsin."

Improving Water Quality using Soil Health Principles, Sustainable Ag

The Door-Kewaunee Demo Farm Network consists of four farms committed to the testing and sharing of the best conservation practices for protecting water quality in the Great Lakes Basin. The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, the USDA-NRCS, and PPF are working in unison through the DK Demo Farm Network to find innovative solutions, sharing not only their successes but also their failures with other farmers through field days and conferences. NRCS representative and CCA Barry Bubolz, working alongside the farmers, Guilette, and others at the Demo Farms states, "We are utilizing soil health principles and sustainable agriculture practices to improve water quality."

Proof that the innovative efforts of this team are working came with the deluge of rain that hung over Wisconsin this past year. The Demo Farms led the way for low-disturbance manure applicators to be used in the area. "This type of applicator allows manure to be applied in tiny slits into winter rye, other cover crops, and alfalfa, reducing runoff and potential contamination," Bubolz explains. "The success of these types of applicators has led to more producers utilizing the management and local manure applicators, adding these types of applicators to their lineup of available equipment."



USDA-NRCS Chief Matthew Lohr (left) presents the CCA Conservationist of the Year award to Nick Guilette, with Bill Northey (right), Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation. Source: USDA-NRCS Wisconsin.

Beginning in fall of 2018 and continuing through 2019, the area received 10 to 18 inches above the normal precipitation. The saturated ground presents multiple problems, but a new management style of "planting green," demonstrated at the DK Farms, is showing promise. "Planting green, planting into a growing cover crop, enabled planting to continue this year despite excessive moisture," Bubolz says. "The green cover crop taking up water and the root systems holding soils helped reduce soil erosion, reduce nutrient runoff, and dramatically improved harvesting conditions in a very wet and difficult fall."

"Three years ago, we began participating in the DK Demo Farm Network, exploring better conservation practices," says Aaron Augustian of Augustian Farms LLC, owned and operated by Todd and Aaron Augustian. "I wanted to try some out-of-the-box thinking." The farm is home to 1,250 milking and dry cows housed in freestall barns and milked three times a day. Corn, wheat, and alfalfa are grown on 1,300 acres. The Augustian farm is 1.5 miles off the shores of Lake Michigan, which underscores the importance of keeping nutrients in the fields. "With Nick's assistance, we are using more cover crops to prevent soil and nutrient loss." Planting corn into growing rye, applying manure to a growing crop to reduce nutrient runoff, seeding a cover crop with manure application, reshaping grass waterways, and planting native grasses for wildlife and bee habitat represent some of the innovations being tested at the Augustian Farm.

“Under Nick's guidance, the DK Demo Farms have been testing how specific conservation practice systems reduce erosion and sedimentation, control phosphorus runoff, and increase organic matter and improve soil health. The scientific data collected is then used to explain the results of experiments taking place and shared through a wide range of educational opportunities for the public and all those involved in agriculture,” Clark states.

“Nick is a strong promoter of the 4R practices of nutrient application; right source, right rate, right time, and right place. He conveys and presents his recommendations for conservation practices with a personal approach that garners trust,” notes Vice President of Laboratory Services at AgSource Laboratories, Steve Peterson.

“He pushes his clients to be better and has a great ability to describe agricultural principles to people with little prior knowledge of farming,” Niles says. Guilette is an educator at heart, sharing his wealth of knowledge and the lessons learned through PPF and the DK Demo Farms with all those involved in agriculture and those outside of agriculture. His commitment to environmental stewardship and belief that the path to the future necessitates that agriculture and conservation proceed hand in hand confirms the CCA Conservationist of the Year Award couldn't be in more capable hands.

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