

Patchwork Quilt Stewardship

John Ledermann's Rental Relationships are Built on Healthy Soil

By Brian DeVore

Dick Gulbranson is proud of the steps he's taken to steward the landscape on his little slice of paradise in west-central Minnesota. When his family bought 65 acres on the shores of Big Chippewa Lake in 1984, they built their house well away from the water to reduce the water quality impacts of possible runoff and erosion. Much of the land is in trees and there's a creek running through it, along with tiny pothole wetlands that can be swarming with waterfowl during migrations. The retired school administrator and banker — he's 83 — loves seeing the wildlife and knowing that he's doing his part to keep the Big Chippewa clean — after all, the lake is at the head of a watershed that feeds into the Chippewa River, which in turn is the biggest waterway flowing into the Minnesota River.

"Guess how many species I got last year?" Gulbranson asks a visitor on a summer day, pointing to a set of bird feeders at the back of the house. "Twenty-eight! We finally got a pair of cardinals to come after all these years."

But he's also proud of the "working" aspects of his property, 15 acres of which is tillable. While he takes a break from yard work, Gulbranson points out a nearby soybean field which has rows covered in a natural mulch created by a dead rye cover crop. That cover keeps soil in place while building its biological health in the long term.

"There are some slopes here, but there's nothing being washed into the lake," he says. "I can say I don't think there's any erosion. We just trust John, he does a good job."

"John" is John Ledermann, a neighbor-

ing farmer who rents those 15 acres, along with a patchwork quilt of other parcels in the neighborhood that are as small as just over an acre in size. Ledermann shares the stewardship ethic of Gulbranson and his other seven landlords, and reflects that ethic in the way he raises crops on their properties — taking extra care to utilize soil healthy practices like minimum tillage, cover-cropping, and diverse rotations. While these parcels make up a small part of his overall



"I can say I don't think there's any erosion. We just trust John, he does a good job," says Dick Gulbranson (left), shown here with John Ledermann, who he rents land to. (LSP Photo)

operation, Ledermann feels it's extra important to implement conservation practices on them. At a time when many crop producers prefer to farm fields hundreds of acres in size, Ledermann has carved out a niche dealing with the odd corners that are tucked in among lakes, wetlands, and woodlands. They may not lend themselves to efficient use of big equipment, but this piecemeal farming has allowed him to do his part to take care of the landscape in his community while experimenting with new practices and exposing landowners to the long-term benefits of working lands conservation.

"It feels good to drive around and see these fields no-tilled and cover-cropped,"

says the 55-year-old farmer. "I grew up on conventional tillage and there's always that point where you drive by a nicely clean, black field and think, 'Oh, that looks kind of picturesque, you know.' But on my own fields, I don't like to see black soil. If I work a little bit of an area, I cringe."

Transition into Soil Health

Ledermann has taken a methodical approach to adopting soil health practices. He started farming in 1987 and has always raised corn, soybeans, and wheat. Back in the 1990s, he tried no-till and a form of conservation tillage called ridge-till, but had problems with reduced yields, among other things. However, Ledermann was always drawn to the idea of disturbing the soil less and building up its structure in a way that it cut erosion and runoff. The part of Douglas County he farms in is full of pothole wetlands and lakes, making water quality issues a big concern. And the fewer passes required in a minimally tilled field can produce big savings in terms of the fuel burned and time spent in the tractor seat.

In 2011, Ledermann began utilizing a conservation tillage system called strip-till, and added cover cropping into the mix. Within the first year, he got what he calls "a convincer," thanks to an impromptu side-by-side experiment.

He had a cornfield where part of it was strip-tilled and planted to cover crops the previous fall. The other half had been managed in a more conventional manner: no cover crops and it was chisel plowed after harvest the previous fall. One day, after a three-to-four-inch rain on corn that was a couple inches tall, Ledermann was walking across the field at dusk and he noted that on the portion that was strip-tilled and cover-cropped, there was no erosion. He also spied something else.

"I have bifocals and so walking along I saw a little motion, you know, and I thought, 'Is it my glasses or what?' And then I began slowing down and here it was — the earthworms were coming out," Ledermann recalls. "I walked along and they were slipping back into the soil."

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In contrast, the conventional portion of the field had no earthworms and lots of erosion. “So that was basically six months into a system and it was night and day difference,” he says. “It was just amazing to me that there could be that much difference in that short of time. Ever since then, I’ve been pretty sold on it, more or less.”

Over the years, Ledermann has gradually upped his use of soil health practices, utilizing initiatives such as the USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program to help cover the costs. He’s modified his equipment to allow him to interseed cover crops into growing corn and has adopted the use of “planting green” — seeding a cash crop like corn or soybeans straight into standing rye.

“I’m still not completely over that,” Ledermann says of the nervousness he feels running a planter into a field of growing rye.

He farms 800 owned acres and rents an additional 350 from eight landowners. The parcels are tucked away in amongst pothole wetlands, lakes, and stands of trees, making for a lot of smaller fields. He’s got a couple parcels that are an acre-and-a-half in size, and one 15-acre rental farm that’s broken up into four or five different fields.

Most of the landowners John rents from are elderly and live in the area. One is a retired farmer; some are people who bought land in the area for hunting, recreation, or, like Gulbranson, a pleasant place to live.

“They don’t have big fields, but they like to see that land productive,” says Ledermann. “They don’t want to idle it under the Conservation Reserve Program. They enjoy seeing it productive.”

Tiny Trips

Besides providing conservation benefits and fuel savings, minimum-till and no-till also save time, which is key when farming numerous tiny parcels. In fact, it was in the smaller fields that Ledermann began experimenting with conservation tillage, and later cover crops, first. Smaller tests equal smaller “disasters” in his mind. In a typical year, Ledermann may have as much as 800 to 900 acres cover-cropped, although it can also be half that, depending on his rotation and weather factors. Over half of Ledermann’s acres are minimum-tilled and no-tilled in

any given year.

These practices seem to be producing positive results. On July 8, he checks on a cornfield that was planted green into standing rye the second week of May. He got into it later than planned because of a late, cold spring, and the rye was 18-inches high, the tallest he had ever let it get for planting corn.

“I was worried about this field,” Ledermann says as he wades into the chest-high corn. But the crop appears to be thriving. The previous cover crop, which he terminated with herbicide soon after the corn was planted, is pretty much broken down into the topsoil, a sign of good biological activity being present. Ledermann had interseeded a new annual ryegrass cover crop the second week of June, and it is starting to emerge



John Ledermann in a field of soybeans that were planted straight into a cover crop of standing rye. “I don’t like to see black soil. If I work a little bit of an area, I cringe,” he says. (LSP Photo)

here and there. With a good rain, it will get established, go a bit dormant, and then take off once the corn is harvested, providing cover and living roots well into the fall and through the winter, starting the cycle anew.

Ledermann points out an earthworm midden and pulls off the dead vegetation the invertebrates had started to pull beneath the ground. Despite recent dry weather, the soil is cool and moist. “That’s what the cover’s for,” the farmer says.

He then drives to a field of soybeans,

which, at 55-acres, feels luxuriously roomy compared to the other parcels Ledermann farms. A dense mulch of dead rye cover crop fills the rows between the soybeans, which are several inches high. Again, even though it’s a hot July day, the soil beneath the mulch is cool and moist. “They’ll really take off now,” Ledermann says of the soybeans.

The farmer says besides building soil health, reducing erosion, and saving time, the use of conservation tillage and cover crops is helping him cut fuel, fertilizer, and herbicide expenses. It costs him roughly \$15 to \$30 to seed cover crops, but they more than make up for the expense. For one thing, he doesn’t have the cost of applying a pre-emergent herbicide to control weeds. That’s why, even though he’s farming some acres that are considered marginal from a yield standpoint, they can generally be money makers — high yields do not automatically equate to high profitability when costs are kept at a minimum.

Paying it Forward

And he feels his soil health practices are adding long-term value to even the marginal fields. Ledermann has had landowners approach him about renting their land because they like seeing the soil taken care of. They also comment on how much more wildlife they see in the area as a result of cover-cropping. Cash rental rates can be competitive in this part of Minnesota, and Ledermann says he gets a bit of a discount due to the oddly sized parcels he’s willing to grapple with. His stewardship is paying off as well, according to Gulbranson.

The retiree says “100%” he gives Ledermann a better deal on the rental rate because of his conservation practices, adding, with a laugh, “And he knows he’s getting a hell of a good deal for rent.”

It’s been well documented that soil healthy methods like cover cropping and conservation tillage often don’t generate immediate benefits, and can even set yields back before they are fully established and build the soil’s self-perpetuating biology. Ledermann mostly has arrangements where he pays direct cash for the lease. But he also has one situation involving a “cropshare” lease where he splits the income with the landowner when the crop is sold. When trying a new method that may impact yields negatively, Ledermann has actually offered to take a lower share of the income generated by a cropshare arrangement. He knows building soil health has long term payoffs, but he doesn’t want the landowner’s short-term view of such practices to be soured by a smaller payout at harvest time.

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“If I try something different and I feel what I tried cost you some yield loss, then I will make sure that it’s right,” he says.

In fact, the farmer sees part of his role as someone who’s educating landowners on the long-term benefits of soil health, no matter who’s farming their land. That’s an important attitude to have, given that he’s renting land without long-term, written contracts. That can be risky — a few years ago, Leder-

mann did lose some land he was renting when another farmer outbid him. But even if he can’t control how soil he used to manage is taken care of in the future, maybe the example he set will make a former landlord more mindful of the importance of stewardship practices. Not that it would be easy to see soil he’s stewarded plowed up.

“That will bother me,” the farmer concedes. “But my philosophy is if I can improve that field while I’m farming it and well, I lose it, it’s still better for it.” □

Give it a Listen

On episode 295 of LSP’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast, John Ledermann talks about the importance of basing his relationship with landowners on good soil stewardship: landstewardshipproject.org/podcast/ear-to-the-ground-295-patchwork-quilt-stewardship.

Building a Regenerative Rental Relationship

Creating a rental agreement based on soil health and stewardship practices requires good communication on both sides:

For Farmers:

✓ **Acknowledge innovation may involve failure, or at least delayed benefits:** John Ledermann has one rental agreement based on a cropshare, where he and the landowner split the income from a particular crop. While experimenting with a new technique, Ledermann offered to take a lower portion of the share, since he assumed in the near term there would be a reduction in yield.

✓ **Provide background on the technique:** If you are proposing to try a new technique such as cover-cropping or no-till, reach out to the landowner to explain why this will benefit you, as well as why it may be advantageous to the long-term care of the land. Prepare them for the fact that even though their fields may not look as picturesque as their neighbor’s, there are long-term benefits to building soil health. “The fields, especially in early spring, just don’t look as groomed and neat,” says Ledermann. A way to introduce a landowner to the world of soil health is to invite them to a field day or workshop put on by the Land Stewardship Project or some other regenerative agriculture group or natural resource agency. Check LSP’s web calendar for details: landstewardshipproject.org/upcoming-events.

✓ **Start small:** If the landowner is a retired farmer, they are likely going to be fully onboard with innovative practices...or very skeptical. “They probably aren’t going

to be in-between,” says Ledermann. If they’re skeptical, starting small and gradually building on early success can help seal the deal. “Don’t start out with a 100-acre field and put it into cover crops the first year,” he suggests.

✓ **Consider the landowner’s motivation:** Is the owner of the farm just renting it out for as much money as possible, or are they interested in seeing it taken care of in the long-term? Are outdoor endeavors like hunting and fishing important to them? “If you’ve had a long-term



John Ledermann checks cover crop residue in a cornfield in early July. He recommends that if a landowner is skeptical about a practice like cover-cropping, start small and gradually build on early successes. (LSP Photo)

relationship with the landowner, that’s going to make it a lot easier to know where they’re coming from,” says Ledermann.

For Landowners:

✓ **Ask questions:** Farming practices that build soil health, like any innovative system, can be full of confusing jargon — “planting green” and “interseeding” are just a few examples. Ask your renter or potential renter how and why they use certain practices, or don’t use them.

✓ **Understand the challenges:** Adopting a new practice can be financially risky for a farmer. Is there a way you can remove some of that risk while providing a stewardship incentive by, for example, reducing the rental rate on acres that are cover-cropped?

✓ **Provide long-term stability:** Multi-year leases help provide a farmer the stability and incentives needed to invest in practices that build soil health in the long-term.

✓ **Get educated:** The Internet is full of information on soil health. Much of it is targeted at farmers, but there are also YouTube videos, podcasts, and fact sheets that are accessible to the general public (*see sidebar below*). In recent years, more non-farming landowners have been showing up to LSP soil health events to network and learn.

✓ **Become aware of what support is available:** There is an increasing amount of cost-share funds and technical support available through the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service or local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Environmental groups are even providing money for putting in certain soil health practices. Check with your local USDA office or LSP about how to get started in the application process.

Conservation Leases Toolkit

The Land Stewardship Project’s “Conservation Leases Toolkit” includes fact sheets, sample leases, and other resources for farmers as well as non-farming landowners who are interested in developing rental arrangements that build soil and ensure stewardship of the land in the long-term. Check it out at landstewardshipproject.org/conservation-leases or contact LSP’s Robin Moore at rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org, 320-269-2105.