

First-generation dairy farmer



Douglas SWCD staff working with NRCS assistance, Clean Water Funds ease ownership transition by making it possible to add rotationally grazed pasture and a new manure storage system. Both will improve water quality in the Chippewa River watershed.

BRANDON — A first-generation dairy farmer is getting a start in a more efficient and environmentally sound setup with assistance from the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and guidance from the longtime organic farmer whose operation he’ll eventually own.

Jack Schouweiler, 21, is phasing into full-time dairy farming as Ben Wagner, 61, transitions into retirement.

A remodeled parlor style barn, new manure storage facility and 59 acres of additional pasture for rotational grazing will make chores less back-breaking, allow the dairy to expand — and protect both groundwater and surface water in the Upper Chippewa River watershed.

Schouweiler is remodeling the barn at his own expense. Leveraging a combined \$247,000 in Environmental



Top: Jack Schouweiler brings the last of the cows from the pasture to the barn July 8 on Ben Wagner’s Douglas County farm. **Above:** Schouweiler, 21, is getting into farming as Ben Wagner, 61, prepares to eventually retire.

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Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance from NRCS and Clean Water Funds from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) made the manure facility and pasture expansion possible. As a beginning farmer, Schouweiler qualified for higher NRCS payment rates.

“Otherwise, we couldn’t

do this,” Wagner said of NRCS and Clean Water Fund assistance. “I couldn’t afford to borrow that kind of money, and (Schouweiler) doesn’t have the assets to borrow against.”

What Schouweiler does have is a “fire in his belly” for farming, Wagner said, and a talent for working with cattle.



Douglas SWCD’s \$356,960 Clean Water Fund grant from BWSR will protect groundwater and improve water quality in the Upper Chippewa River watershed by upgrading or fixing manure storage areas and feedlot runoff. The 10 projects would reduce nitrogen by an estimated 421 pounds and phosphorus by an estimated 122 pounds a year.

“I’m starting to call him the cow-whisperer. When he works with cattle, they seem to respond to him so easily. He’s got cattle sense that you can’t teach. He’s going to be a better cattleman than I ever was,” Wagner said. “He sees calves are sick before I do. ... Heifers, they don’t get startled with him.”

Schouweiler grew up on a hobby farm 18 miles from Wagner’s 38-cow organic dairy, and has milked cows

for more than a dozen other farmers. He wanted a farm of his own. Wagner's children had no plans to farm. He was looking for someone to take over.

They met at a 4-H rabbit show.

But Schouweiler was only 14. Wagner wasn't sure what would come of their initial conversation. Two years later, he got a call. It was Schouweiler, wondering when he could start milking.

On June 1, 2020, Schouweiler became the owner of the dairy herd.

It's one milestone among many in two years of intensive planning. Schouweiler plans to rent — and eventually buy — Wagner's machinery and land, as cash-flow allows. Meanwhile, Schouweiler is learning about fieldwork and crops from Wagner. Together, they run about 440 acres of cropland and pasture.

"I want to preserve what I worked for, and he wants to take it to the next level — and that's something unique," Wagner said.

Together, Schouweiler and Wagner completed a program through the nonprofit Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, and a farm business management program through Alexandria Technical and Community College. Schouweiler earned a two-year dairy management degree from Willmar's Ridgewater College in May 2019 — the one condition his mother placed on supporting his decision to farm.

Ian Olson, the Chippewa River watershed conservation planner based at Douglas Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), has worked with Schouweiler and Wagner on plans tied to Schouweiler's NRCS applications. Olson



The Chippewa River winds its way through Pope County in July 2020. From the headwaters region in Otter Tail County, the Chippewa River flows 130 miles to the Minnesota River at Montevideo. Its watershed encompasses 2,080 square miles in parts of Otter Tail, Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Kandiyohi and Chippewa counties and a bit of Stearns County.

was hired as part of BWSR and NRCS' collaborative [Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative](#) (WCPI).

Building a new manure storage system to replace a decommissioned manure pit will allow the cows to move a mile down the road into the milking barn on the farm Schouweiler bought from Wagner's retired brother, Robert. When the cows move out of Wagner's tie-stall barn — a setup that's harder on the back — Wagner will continue to rotationally graze heifers on his farm.

The new, 400,000-gallon lagoon at the remodeled barn site has a 12-month capacity.

Clean Water Funds — part of a \$356,960 grant Douglas SWCD received in 2019 to improve drinking water quality by upgrading, replacing or closing out-of-compliance manure pits — covered 75% of the project costs, which included a 60-by-100-foot cement stacking slab with 4-foot-high walls, and fenced cattle walkways leading to the pasture.

The area was among those identified through a 2017 Clean Water Fund accelerated

implementation grant to conduct soil investigations for liquid manure storage areas in hydrologically vulnerable townships, which led to work in Millerville Township and parts of Ida and Leaf Valley townships.

Douglas SWCD initially targeted the area based on Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) nitrate testing of 1,864 wells in nine Douglas County townships. On average, 1.7% of the wells tested exceeded the state's allowable limits. MDH has linked nitrate to blue baby syndrome.

"By either eliminating existing pits that aren't in compliance, or (reconstructing) those that are still being used, the groundwater resources in that area will be better protected," said Jerry Haggemiller, Douglas SWCD coordinator. "As a secondary bonus, any runoff into surface waters will be corrected by these ag waste system (upgrades)."

The Upper Chippewa River watershed in Douglas County consists of dairy farms, cropland, wetlands and lakes set amid rolling hills. Land-use and topography make the area more vulnerable to nitrate pollution.

Among the concerns within the watershed are sediment, phosphorus, nitrogen and bacteria.

"Whatever protection we can do here is going to benefit everybody all the way down," Haggemiller said.

Converting marginal cropland to pasture is among the protections that benefit water quality.

NRCS grazing lands specialist Jeff Duchene writes 70 to 100 grazing plans a year for producers within 20-some northwestern Minnesota counties.



Natural Resources Conservation Service website: www.nrcs.usda.gov

Duchene initially worked with Wagner to establish his rotationally grazed pasture. His most recent 50-acre enrollment — bordering a wetland, with steep slopes that made it difficult to farm — grew out of a discussion during a field day Wagner hosted a few years ago. Schouweiler enrolled 9 acres.

"With well-managed grazing, you can really minimize your impact as far as water quality and reduced soil erosion," Duchene said.

Grasses will grow where crops were spotty. EQIP assistance will offset expenses tied to seeding, extending water lines and fencing.

By buffering the wetlands, the pasture will decrease the potential for runoff.

The new setup plus more pastureland will make it possible for Schouweiler and Wagner to eventually milk up to 70 cows.