Winona County
Soil & Water
Conservation District

2026 Outstanding Conservationist
~ Valley Acres Dairy ~

Winona County landowners Carey and Emily Tweten with Valley Acres Dairy have been named the 2026 Winona County Outstanding Conservationists in recognition of their dedication to protecting soil, water, and agricultural resources while maintaining a thriving fifth-generation dairy farming operation. Their commitment to stewardship demonstrates that productive agriculture and conservation can work hand in hand to benefit both today's farm and future generations.

Located near Lewiston, Carey and Emily purchased the property to raise their four children and continue their family's long tradition of dairy farming. Together, they milk approximately 800 dairy cows across two farm sites while actively implementing conservation practices that improve soil health, reduce erosion, and protect downstream water quality.

Conservation Through Stewardship

Since acquiring the property, the family has worked closely with the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to implement conservation practices that strengthen the long-term sustainability of their operation. Their conservation efforts include numerous grassed waterways, cover crops, rotational cropping, limited no-till practices, and grade stabilization structures designed to reduce erosion and slow runoff across highly erodible fields. These practices help keep valuable topsoil in place while improving water infiltration and protecting nearby streams. As a working dairy farm, conservation decisions are carefully evaluated to ensure they provide meaningful environmental benefits while remaining practical for the operation. The family continually explores new technologies and management practices that improve both environmental stewardship and the long-term viability of the farm.

Preserving History While Protecting the Future

One of the property's most notable conservation projects involved the restoration of a historic Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) grade stabilization structure originally constructed during the 1930s. Rather than replacing the aging structure with a new berm that would have required taking productive cropland out of production, the family worked with conservation partners to restore the existing structure. Trees that had grown around the structure and contributed to its deterioration were removed, repairs were completed, and additional rock stabilization was installed below the outlet. The restored structure continues to function as intended—slowing runoff, reducing erosion, and protecting downstream resources—while preserving an important piece of conservation history and minimizing the loss of farmland.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The family's conservation philosophy centers on maintaining healthy soils while ensuring the farm remains productive for generations to come. In addition to structural conservation practices, they maintain waterways through regular mowing and upkeep, reseed areas as needed, and continue evaluating opportunities to improve

manure management systems as technology evolves. Future goals include exploring additional conservation technologies and infrastructure that will further improve nutrient management and environmental sustainability. They also recognize the value of collaboration, regularly sharing experiences with neighboring farmers and learning from others as conservation practices such as cover crops continue to evolve across southeastern Minnesota.

Conservation Beyond the Fields

Conservation efforts extend beyond crop production. Shortly after purchasing the property, the family planted apple, pear, and peach trees, along with native flowers, cut flower gardens, and willow groves that provide habitat and food resources for pollinators, butterflies, and other beneficial wildlife. These intentional plantings complement the working farm by increasing biodiversity while creating a landscape that supports both agriculture and natural resources. The family is also actively involved in the Driftless Area Ag Alliance, where they continue learning about emerging conservation practices and sustainable farming techniques that can benefit both their operation and the broader agricultural community.

Outstanding Conservation Leadership

Carey and Emily were selected as the 2026 Winona County Outstanding Conservationists for their commitment to responsible land stewardship, willingness to adopt and maintain conservation practices, and strong partnership with the Winona County SWCD and NRCS. Their approach demonstrates that conservation is an ongoing process of learning, adapting, and investing in the future. By protecting soil, improving water quality, preserving historic conservation infrastructure, and continually seeking better ways to farm sustainably, they are helping ensure that their land remains productive for generations to come.