

Wisconsin Demonstration Farms Spotlight

Jim Luedtke – Transforming Low-Yield Acres into Productive Forage with Buffers

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Photo credit: Maranda Miller

In 2025, Upper Fox-Wolf Demonstration Farms Network farmer, Jim Luedtke, converted the lower-producing outer 60 feet of his corn fields into permanent vegetative buffers. After soybean harvest last fall Jim planted cereal rye, leaving the outer 60 feet of the field. The following August, he seeded the strips with grasses, alfalfa, and clover. These buffers will turn low production acres into forage for his cattle while improving water infiltration, reducing erosion, and creating wildlife habitat. Taking land out of row crop production might seem like a loss, but Jim doesn't see it that way. He expects the buffers to deliver more value — like forage for his cattle — than they ever did in corn or soybeans. “Whether corn is \$8 or \$4 a bushel, those acres weren't making money anyway. It was dragging down my farm average,” he explains. While he gave up a few acres for access lanes, Jim sees it as a smart trade-off: “You need to give something up to get something in return.”



Jim and Krista Luedtke on their farm.

Experienced operators know their fields—where water ponds, which pass fills the grain tank more slowly, and which areas lag in production. Yield monitors are also powerful tools for spotting acres that consistently underperform. “They help you analyze the data to show what areas aren't producing as much and maybe aren't hitting a profitability margin,” Jim explains. This is all valuable insight, but the challenge can be remembering problem spots or putting a dollar value to them. “You watch the monitor and think, ‘this area's bad,’ but if you don't record it, you forget in three months,” Jim says. That's where Pheasants Forever helps—turning observations into actionable data. They add insight with satellite imagery and NDVI (Normalized Difference Vegetation Index) analysis, highlighting low-yield zones. Combining imagery with yield data can help farmers decide where buffers make sense. Jim shared,

“Pheasants Forever came in with that Excel sheet... plugged in all our inputs and said, ‘If corn is \$4, you need to grow this much, and your field is producing this much.’ So, you make a decision.”

Not every farmer has advanced tech, but simple tools like a yield monitor, weigh wagons, and in-field observation can go a long way. As Jim puts it, “pay attention to whatever yield monitor you have in the combine” and “sometimes you just grab a shovel and take a walk through the field and say, ‘this area is just not good.’”

Jim hopes that as more farmers share data, trends will emerge—like areas where management changes make a difference. For example, “people often treat headlands like the rest of the field, regardless of what it gets for a yield,” he says, “but we've been looking at the yield maps, and you can tell just from

turning around, compaction occurs on the ends of the field that the yields are impacted.” Comparing notes with other farmers and reviewing data often highlights these problem spots. As Jim explains: “You need to talk to somebody else to get other ideas and think, ‘Maybe what I’m doing isn’t the best thing for what I’m trying to accomplish.’”



Jim's 60 ft buffers transform low-yield acres into productive forage.



Species were planted into the buffers that can provide forage for Jim's cattle.

Farmer-Led Solutions Across the Watershed

The NRCS, in collaboration with the EPA's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), Pheasants Forever, and numerous partners, supports farmers through the Upper Fox-Wolf Demonstration Farm Network. Spanning the Upper Fox and Wolf River watersheds across central and northeastern Wisconsin, these farmers test and adapt conservation practices to fit their unique operations. Their efforts help improve water quality flowing into the Great Lakes.

By connecting producers, championing their field-tested knowledge, and offering technical support, the Network helps identify and share conservation strategies that address challenges like erosion and non-point source pollution. These issues can otherwise lead to sediment, phosphorus, and nitrogen entering our waterways.

The Network offers farmers multiple ways to connect, learn, and apply new ideas:

- **Field Days on the Fly** – Quick, hands-on events to see practices in action and ask questions.
- **Soil Conversation Social Hours** – Informal evening meetups to share ideas and local concerns.
- **Educational Social Media** – Visual, practical content to spread soil health knowledge.
- **Peer-to-Peer Learning** – Farmer-driven knowledge that highlights real-world experience.
- **Technical Expertise** – Direct support from soil health specialists to guide effective practices.

These resources are designed to meet farmers where they are—whether they're just beginning to explore conservation or looking to refine and expand their current practices.

Follow Along

Want to learn more about Jim's work and other farm-tested practices in the Upper Fox-Wolf Basin?

Follow Upper Fox-Wolf Demonstration Farms Network

 Facebook - @UFWDemoFarms  YouTube - @FoxWolfDemo

Explore Pheasants Forever's precision ag tools to identify low-performing acres:

 <https://www.pheasantsforever.org/Conservation/Precision-Agriculture.aspx>