Bankers Conservation Award for Water Quality – Robert Larson

What is arguably the most important resource to a farmer? Is it the equipment? Or a good, hired hand? Or maybe it's the soil under our feet? No one could argue that those are not important resources for a farmer, but none of that matters if there is no water. Archeological evidence dates the first irrigation practice started in 6,000 B.C and to this day farmers are still innovating new ways to not rely solely on the rain to make sure their crops come up every year. Robert Larson took the initiative to move from an outdated flood irrigation system to a center pivot. Robert said "the soil type was a large reason we made the decision to purchase the system". Half of his soils were loamy clay, but the other half was loamy sand. This sand element made it so he needed to use twice the amount of water needed to make the water flow to the other half of the field. Switching to a center pivot system allowed Robert to apply only what water was needed, effectively saving half of his water budget. Robert then took it a step farther, taking a 5-year average usage, then splitting that average over a 3-year period and still not using all the water allotted for the 3 years. Robert also used probes in the soil to make sure he wasn't turning the system when the soil was already at or near the water holding capacity of the soil. Making the switch also saved Robert the cost of fuel he no longer needs to run the large pumps to flood the field and saved him on labor costs. The system is hooked up to his phone; Robert can turn the system on and off while also making sure water is being pumped out and that the system is moving across the field, all without needing to leave the dinner table. The switch Robert made increased water conservation, and not just for him, but also for you and I. Any water that is saved by one farmer is water that can be used by another.

Bankers Conservation Award for Soil Health - Brendon Wheelock Spring Creek Cow Company, LLC

"Rome wasn't built in a day, nor with a single brick, and similarly, soil erosion will not be solved in one day or with a single practice." Getting into the micro concepts of tailoring an environment to breed soil biology would take days, but we will spare the details today.

Brendon was fifteen when he started farming family ground 23 years ago. Continuing a family tradition using plowing and other conventional cultivation methods, he would spend countless hours and eventually years observing the soil on his land being stripped away by erosion. His observations turned into an obsession to address the problems. Incorporating new management practices including building catch ponds and new terraces, minimum-till practices with VT tools and adding solar water wells plus tanks to accommodate rotational grazing. However, through time and educational opportunities, Brendon learned that soil erosion was not the only concern. He adopted and implemented multiple innovative practices to improve soil health.

Starting with conventional crop land, Brendon implemented cover crops, crop rotation, no-till farming, and biochar application. Implementing new practices gave Brendon new challenges and hope. He quickly transitioned more than 80% of the no-till crop land to long term grass (warm, cool season, legume, and forbs blend). These methods increase water infiltration, reduce soil compaction, add organic matter, and keep living roots in the soil for as long as possible. Brendon started mob grazing cattle, rotating every 12 to 48 hours on Rangeland with poly wire paddocks, allowing the range environment to rest significantly while grazing heavier to eliminate "selective grazing".

Like most farmers and ranchers, Mr. Wheelock needed hard evidence implementing new practices that would provide environmental and overall economic returns. His proof came when his ponds did not fill up during or after heavy rain events. Soil health continues to improve and water infiltration rates increase water retained in the soil profile. Discouraging unwanted losses caused by run off was a goal for the ranch and environment. Brendon continues to develop his ranching operation with a renewed commitment and understanding that a mindset is not set in stone. He found while restoring the environment more than soil health has started to return an abundant amount of wildlife resident and migratory birds to flourish.

If he went back in time, he would change his mind set to recognize every practice is connected to environmental ecology impacting erosion, return on investments, and, most importantly, future farmers and ranchers. Some landowners would argue "Regenerative" is a long game conceptually but, once infrastructure is planned and executed the returns can be exponential at 3x stocking rates, improving the soil, forage quality, lowering inputs and increasing efficiencies. Ultra-high stock density Is proving to be a self-feeding cycle.

Converting sun, grass and water into red meat muscle and sequestering carbon is the goal!