



## Water Stewards Program Makes Inroads

Grower-driven initiative focuses on water stewardship and conservation

By Deana Knuteson, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin (UW) Department of Horticulture, and Jed Colquhoun, professor and extension specialist, UW-Madison

Water is a critically important resource in agricultural ecosystems across the United States, and quantity and resource availability are key areas of concern.

In Wisconsin, the water quantity issue was tackled by a group working together to develop reasonable

solutions for the long-term viability of the resource.

This working group created sustainable options by developing a grower-driven plan, ultimately becoming known as the Wisconsin Water Stewards Program, focused on water stewardship.

The Wisconsin Water Stewards Program started in 2018 with the goal of developing a plan that would allow farmers to be recognized when providing water stewardship and documenting improvements. It is based on progress toward research-based water stewardship and conservation goals.

This led to the Water Stewards tier-based program that is now being used by potato and vegetable growers in Central Wisconsin.

**Above:** The grower-driven initiative known as the Wisconsin Water Stewards Program focuses on water stewardship and sustainable options, such as irrigation drip nozzles (shown suspended vertically) and variable rate irrigation.

**Left:** In Wisconsin, the water quantity issue was tackled by a group working together to develop reasonable solutions for the long-term viability of the resource. Plainfield Lake in Waushara County has sustained high water levels in recent years of heavy and frequent rain events. The image was taken in May 2018.





The assessment has two tiers:

1. A base tier that is a practice-based management program leading to long-term water conservation and increased use efficiencies; and
2. A top tier that includes a visit with a water use specialist. The specialist helps design a detailed conservation program focused on regional farm and location-based options that emphasize restoration, ecological principles, stream protection and new strategies based on risk levels associated with farms.

This innovative new approach to water quantity stewardship has launched in Wisconsin, and now potato and vegetable growers can use the program to identify where they are on the spectrum of agricultural conservation strategies.

The Water Stewards Program

provides flexibility and includes options for all growers—from those who initially want to learn more about stewardship, to those ready to invest in production- and location-based conservation changes.

A key outcome of the Water Stewards Program is the linking of sustainability programs to achieve goals, as supply chain partners are looking for local water stewardship solutions.

The program has helped develop a process to work toward comprehensive, informed, research-based options for water stewardship.

With a renewed emphasis on water quality, we are now looking to expand the Water Stewards Program to include quality concerns and options.

#### QUALITY MODULES

Through support from the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) Water Task

Force, we have developed new quality modules to be included for water stewardship.

University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers Yi Wang and Matt Ruark have provided key practices that are economical, research based and evaluated to ensure best management water quality while ensuring on-farm conservation approaches.

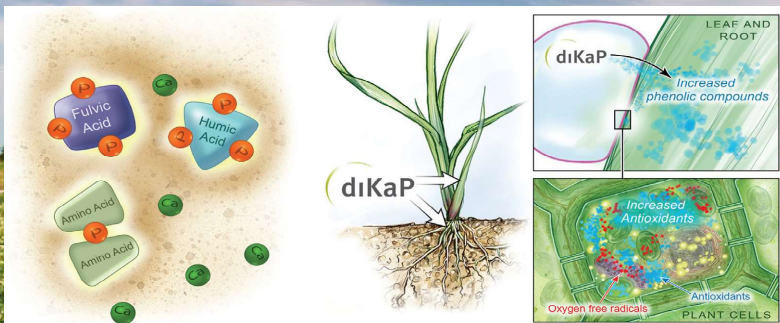
Many of the practices already required within the program are unique in that they promote both water quality and quantity conservation approaches, as well as BMP (Best Management Practices) alternatives.

There is a link between water quality and quantity approaches, and we can now use this program to promote positive aspects for farm water conservation and stewardship.

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Benefits to growers and the industry include enhanced education, better messaging and increased public relations.

For long-term maintenance of the Wisconsin Water Stewards Program, we are working to link it to the existing Healthy Grown program so it can be managed and maintained out of the WPVGA office.

### PROMOTE ADVANCEMENTS

This will allow the industry to maintain the water stewards focus

while also gathering data over time to track changes and promote advancements.

The Water Stewards Program will be a requirement of Healthy Grown certification, but it will also be available as a stand-alone program for growers who just want to utilize the tools to track their farm's progress as well as for their individual promotion and conservation efforts.

Next, we are expanding the educational approach by developing

**Above:** The Wisconsin Water Stewards Program started in 2018 with the goal of developing a plan that would allow farmers to be recognized when providing water stewardship and documenting improvements.

an on-line course to increase participation in the Wisconsin Water Stewards Program.

This program will be a comprehensive, on-line, self-directed course enhanced with detailed on-farm scenarios and outlining the basic principles of water management and conservation.

It will not only be targeted to growers, but also to affiliated industries including NGO's (Non-government Organizations), government agencies and agribusiness clientele.

This training will enable farmers and all interested stakeholders to learn about the development of practical, location-based and appropriate techniques for research-based, on-farm water management. The course will be available in early 2020. **BCT**

For more information on the Wisconsin Water Stewards Program, contact Deana Knuteson, UW-Madison, [dknuteson@wisc.edu](mailto:dknuteson@wisc.edu), or call 608-347-8236.

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