Conservation Stewardship Program
Farmer Profile: Harold Wilken

Some folks don’t need to get too far from home to find a satisfying career and way of life. Meet Harold Wilken, Danforth, IL, as an example. Except for his time at Joliet Jr. College and ISU, Harold moved a whole seven miles from the farm where he lived as a child! He grew up on a farm and in 1982 went out on his own to farm. While he started as a mostly conventional farmer, he joined the sustainable ag movement in the 1990s, even serving for a time on the board of the Illinois Stewardship Alliance.

Harold credits Herman Brockman from Congerville as his inspiration to transition his operation to organic in 2003. By 2005 all of his farms were in transition to organic; he has 1100 acres of organically certified corn, soybean, wheat, and hay.

The Wilken farm is called Janie’s Farm, named after his daughter who was killed in a car accident in 2001. His son, Ross, will graduate from the University of Illinois in 2013 and will be coming back to the farm to join his father; another generation sticking close to home to do what he loves to do.

Harold recently sold his cattle herd and will be concentrating on using his hay ground for custom grazing, a practice he has been doing the past two years. The organic certified hay fields are attractive to neighbors who are looking for places for their sheep and cows to graze in the off season. Sheep are a great fertilizer spreader.

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About the program:

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), administered by USDA NRCS, is a voluntary conservation program designed to encourage agricultural and forestry producers to adopt additional conservation practices and improve, maintain and manage existing ones. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie, improved pastureland, rangeland, non-industrial private forestland, and agricultural land.

CSP is available statewide through continuous enrollment with announced cut-off application dates for ranking periods. To learn if CSP is right for your operation, visit http://www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/csp/index, or contact your local NRCS office.

Harold enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program in 2010; he read about it and has always been interested in conservation, so he decided to take part in the program. The enrollment went smoothly. He has land in Conservation Reserve Program; filter strips along drainage ditches along with participating in a riparian program to put buffer strips along his field borders. Before going organic, he practiced no-till soybeans and strip tilled corn. He plants legumes in his rotation to naturally raise the nitrogen levels in his fields before corn.

Harold likes CSP for a number of reasons. He likes that it is a five year program rather than a 10 year commitment like CRP. Five years is a better time frame for most farmers. While there are programs to benefit organic growers, there are a lot of programs for conventional farmers as well. CSP rewards farmers for what they are already doing and encourages and assists them to do more conservation. Wilken is a proponent of cover crops and urges his neighbors to use cover crops; CSP is a great way to get involved with cover crops; it offers great incentives and allows farmers to explore new ways of improving soil health.

"Farmers are the best innovators there are," says Wilken.