**Conservation Stewardship Program**

**Farmer Profile: Tom Yucus**

Tom Yucus has spent 50 years in Ohio—Ohio, Illinois that is. After high school, he attended Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois and graduated in 1979 with a degree in ag business. Soon after graduation, he and his high school sweetheart, Colleen, got married. After a couple of years working for the Federal Land Bank in Morrison, they moved back to the family farm.

Tom and Colleen have raised five children on the farm—four sons and 1 daughter and they all have helped out on the farm and with the hunt club they operate.

The Yucus farm is known as Sand Prairie Farms and is a total of 480 acres; 320 tillable crop production, all of which is certified organic. True to the name, Tom has learned to manage sandy soils, using towable center pivots on about 170 acres. In addition, as they became aware of the wind erosion on their sand hills, they worked with Pheasants Forever in 1988 to plant native prairie grass along with switching to no till on the corn and soybeans.

Tom enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program, and in spite of the paper work involved, he finds it worthwhile. He does not find the enhancements he has committed to do as part of the program to be restrictive. The criteria may seem daunting when first looking at CSP, but Tom says working with the local NRCS office makes it much easier than it may seem.

In addition to the crop acres, Sand Prairie Farms includes creeks, ponds, CRP acres and CSP acres. CRP acres include filter strips along both creeks and a pond, hardwood tree acres, windbreaks along the north and west boundaries of each farm, two wetland areas, and field borders. CSP acres include native prairie flower mix for pollinators.

All of the good conservation work Yucus is doing has not gone without notice. In 1994, he was named Lee County Conservation Farmer of the Year by the Soil and Water Conservation District.

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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.

Farmer Profile Continued:
Tom Yucus

To help the farm’s bottom line during the tight farm economy, Tom started watching costs more closely and tried banding herbicides and side dressing nitrogen to more efficiently farm. After attending conferences on sustainable and organic farming, such as the Midwest Organic & Sustainable Education Service, Tom became convinced that organic was the right thing to do for the land and for our health. He started transitioning into organics in 2005 and certified his first fields in 2008, with the entire farm certified in 2010. The challenges and rewards of farming organically have formed a deeper bond with the land and the responsibilities of stewardship and conservation of that land.

Tom is a strong proponent of cover crops. His rotation schedule is corn, then no-till rye planted into harvested cornstalks. In the spring, he disks in the rye and plants soybeans. After soybean harvest, he plants no-till tillage radishes, then in the spring disk the land (the radishes decay over the winter, helping to aerate the soil and helps with fertility), and plant oats; after oats, plant hairy vetch and tillage radish in August, then follow in the spring with corn. And repeat--sustainable agriculture!

And what to do in the winter? No problem for the Yucus family. In 1991 they started a licensed hunting preserve with the State, which keeps them busy and “fully employed thru the winter months.” The conservation practices along their creeks and ponds and the wetlands and prairie grass are well utilized during the hunting season.