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Seeing Signs of Conservation

Leon Thompson, Vermont Correspondent

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Signs such as these on the Wayne and Nancy Fiske Farm have been popping up all over Franklin County, Vermont, thanks to some state grant dollars and a push from officials in the local Natural Resources Conservation District office.

Photo by Brodie Haenke, Vermont Conservation District

FRANKLIN COUNTY, Vt. — When Wayne Fiske heard about the movement last month, he saw the signs — literally — and now motorists are seeing them on his farm — again, literally.

Fiske and his wife, Nancy, are among dozens of farmers in northwestern Vermont who have started posting roadside signs to inform the public of their on-farm efforts to improve water quality.

The signs, which have started peppering farm fields throughout Franklin County, all share the tag line, “For my land, for our water,” and, in five different designs, they describe clean water practices deployed on individual farms.

For example, the Fiske farm, located on four picturesque corners in the Lake Carmi watershed has posted two signs that say, “No-Till Planting” and “Cover Crops.”

To date, 400 signs have been printed, and about 150 have been distributed to landowners and agricultural organizations statewide. The Franklin County Natural Resources Conservation District has spearheaded the project, and somewhere between 30 and 50 signs are already featured on farms in that area.

Franklin County has been the center of attention in recent years regarding publicity — both bad and good — for water quality efforts in Vermont. Studies have continuously shown that farm-rich watersheds in the Missisquoi Bay and St. Albans Bay areas feed too much phosphorous into Lake Champlain. The state is working closely with the EPA to meet a new total maximum daily load for Lake Champlain — and farmers are doing much of the boots-on-the-ground work to meet that threshold.

Many of the signs have cropped up in the Lake Carmi watershed, which, even though it is not connected to Lake Champlain, has become infested with phosphorous-filled algae blooms in recent years.

The signs can help the general public understand what farms are doing to help improve water quality in their communities, said Wayne Fiske and Jeannie Bartlett, district manager for the FCNRCD.

“Folks have wanted signs like these for a long time, so I’m glad we have been able to make some available,” Bartlett said. “I hope they’ll be used widely and help improve communication about agriculture’s relationship to water quality.”

The FCNRCD received a grant from the Vermont Agriculture Agency’s Clean Water Initiative Program that included \$4,500 to design five roadsigns and print 100 copies of each. The grant covered half the cost of printing. Various landowners, conservation districts, the regional Farmer’s Watershed Alliance and other groups helped offset the remainder of printing costs.

The FCNRCD has received a second grant from the state agriculture agency to design and print signs that mention other practices — some of which are mandated by Vermont’s Required Agricultural Practices, and some of which are entirely voluntary. State and federal dollars pay for some practices, while others come out of farmers’ pockets.

The Fiskes have been seeing that mix on their farm for decades — ever since they bought their 360-acre farm and immediately started conservation practices. The Fiskes milk 130 cows.

“Farmers should start tooting their own horns about what they’re doing for water on their farms,” Wayne Fiske said. “These signs help the public understand just what’s going on at the farm.”

Franklin County farmers planted more than 7,000 acres of corn with cover crops in fall 2017, and thousands more acres received other conservation practices, such as no-till planting and conversion to grass.

The Fiskes attempt to plant 130 to 150 acres of cover crop each year, but they might be looking at just 80 acres this year.

“With it being so dry, we might not be right where we want to be,” Wayne Fiske said. “Mother Nature plays a big, important part in what we do here.”

The Fiskes started practicing no-till farming about eight years ago.

“We’re getting better at it each year,” Wayne Fiske said.

Fiske first heard of the signs from University of Vermont Extension officials at a Farmer’s Watershed Alliance meeting earlier this summer. UVM Extension staffers have partnered for decades with Franklin County farmers on conservation practices.

“People driving around don’t necessarily realize that a lot of the farms here are already doing a lot for soil conservation and water quality work,” said Jeff Sanders, who assists farmers with many of these practices through his role at UVM Extension. “In the Lake Carmi watershed, for example, about 300 acres have been seeded down to hay in the last three years. There’s only about 200 acres of corn in the watershed at this point, and 75 percent of them are managed using no-till, cover crops or both.”

The hope is that the movement spreads to other affected watersheds in other regions of Vermont.

“I was so excited to see the signs along Franklin Road,” said Sara Larose, soil conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. “So many of the farmers I work with are leaders in soil conservation and water quality protection, and I hope these signs will help their efforts be more visible and celebrated.”

Leon Thompson is a freelance writer in Vermont.