

The latest news from Minnesota Milk Producers Association

## Advancing soil health for a sustainable food system and the next generation of farmers



Alex Udermann, one of the owners of Meadowbrook Dairy, in his soybean field in Stearns County.

In 2016, fifth-generation dairy farmer Alex Udermann recognized that the management practices on his family farm weren't working. Faced with disappointing crop yields, poor cattle health, high service costs and expensive equipment and labor, he knew something needed to change.

"When my brother and I started taking on a more active management role on the farm, I noticed we needed to figure out a new plan to fix our operation for the better," Udermann said. "I knew, even before my wife and I had children, we needed to change our farm if we wanted the sixth generation to be there."

Udermann, his wife Kirsten, his brother Jake, and Jake's wife Sam currently manage Meadowbrook Dairy in Stearns County, Minn. Udermann and Kirsten now have four kids, and Jake and Sam have two. They milk about 80

cows and have about 300 feeder steers. They also do custom manure hauling and custom no-till planting.

"When we started looking into no-till and cover crops almost 10 years ago, we didn't have the resources or equipment needed to do it on our own," he said. "As a family, we decided to hire out custom work for no-till soybeans. When the no-till soybeans yielded the same as our conventional acres, we knew we needed to commit to this."

The improvement in their soils has been tremendous, Udermann says. They started noticing improvements to soil structures, with more aggregates and earthworm activity. They could also use less fertilizer, less fuel from decreased equipment usage and lower labor costs. In 2021, the farm transitioned to 100% no-till.

"We had to learn a whole new way to farm on our own," he said. "The scariest part was making the initial step, knowing that we had to change and learning it all on our own. But it was well worth it. We've seen the benefits all around us, starting with healthier soils, but also, healthier cows."

Many factors can make transitioning to sustainable farming challenging, including access to appropriate equipment or the funds needed to buy new farming equipment. Additionally, it takes a long time for farmers to fully transition and see the benefits of healthier soils on their farms.

"We're focused on producing the healthiest, most nutrient-dense food

possible using the tools available to us," Udermann said. "Programs that provide support and funding are critical. They help farmers manage the risks of making these transitions in a market where there's little margin for error."



The presence of worm holes signals a thriving soil ecosystem — a foundation for resilient and productive farming.

At Meadowbrook Farm, Udermann and his brother, Jake, are pushing soil health further by composting, planting diverse cover crops and testing new regenerative practices, from improving water infiltration rates to exploring innovative ways to recycle nutrients back into the soil.

"Soil health and regenerative farming aren't about reaching a finish line," he said. "It's a continuous journey. There's always more to learn, experiment with, and improve. When farmers embrace regenerative practices, it ripples beyond the farm—strengthening local food systems, protecting clean water, and improving the air we all share." 🍅



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