

The latest news from Minnesota Milk Producers Association

The Young Family Inspires Collective Change Across the Driftless Area



Rita Young and her family, at their farm Emerald Spring Dairy in Plainview, Minn.

Rita Young and her husband, Maurie, bought their farm, Emerald Spring Dairy, in 1983 in Plainview, Minn., with 50 cows and 170 acres. Over the years, they've expanded and advanced their operation with a continued focus on sustainability.

By 1998, the Youngs built two free-stall barns and increased their herd size to 500 cows, and later, they added another 500 cows at a second location. In 2009, their son, Darrin, returned to the farm and began managing more of the milking operations, allowing Maurie to dedicate more time to crop management. In 2017, another son, Brandon, joined the agronomy side of the operation with a focus on precision farming technology.

"It was right around then (2009) that we really started getting into cover crops, experimenting and seeing what worked," Rita said. "We wanted to grow the best feed we could for our animals, and we started looking at more ways to build soil health."

Today, the farm uses multiple conservation methods to build soil health, including no-till

and minimal-till, low-disturbance manure application and split nitrogen applications timed for maximum crop uptake.

"We do lots of soil testing and plant testing to be intentional about knowing what our plants need and when they need it," she said. "Reducing our inputs and still having quality crops is a win-win for our farm and for the environment."

Their emphasis on environmental stewardship is influenced, in part, by their location in the Driftless Area region of Minnesota, where the karst topography comes with unique sensitivities to water quality.

"We're in a sensitive area, so we know that building our soil health is extremely important," Rita said. "Better soil health is better for water quality and better for the environment. This is top of mind for us: how can we be better stewards of the land?"

This desire to be stewards of the land and implement best management practices led to the establishment of Driftless Area Ag Alliance, a farmer-led conservation group formed in 2023.

"A group of farmers in our area wanted to find a way to encourage more farmers to adopt these practices," Rita said. "Farmers like to learn from farmers. We felt having a farmer peer group might be a way to spur some of these adoptions."

As president of DAAA, Rita emphasizes the importance of collaboration and learning from one another.

"Although I have the president title, I have an awesome group of directors who are all working hard to get the word out to the community of what we're doing and what we want to achieve," she said.

The group hosts field days and educational opportunities that are open to farmers and community members.

"We know we're using these practices, but others in the community might not see this," Rita said. "By opening up our farms to the community, it's a way to address potential misconceptions in our area and invite important discussions."

The Young Family is committed to expanding its sustainable farming impact and continually improving for the benefit of their farm and their community.

"We want to make sure farmers and others can live in a community where they enjoy our natural resources together," Rita said. ❤️

The Driftless or karst region at the confluence of state borders and the Mississippi River at Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, is highly sensitive environmentally because its porous limestone and dolomite bedrock allow water — and anything dissolved in it, like nitrogen — to move rapidly from the surface into groundwater without natural filtration. Thin soils and sinkholes make this process even faster, bypassing the buffering that would normally occur in deeper soils. For farmers, this means by carefully managing nitrogen use and timing, they can protect water quality while keeping more nutrients available for their crops.



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