

Gene and Lori Zempel Honored as 2023 Outstanding Conservationist

The Brown Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) recognizes Gene and Lori Zempel as the 2023 Outstanding Conservationist in Brown County.

The Zempels reside a few miles northeast of Morgan, in what they refer to as the “Garden of Eden”. Spanning over five generations, the Zempel family have been involved in conservation and agriculture since the beginning of Brown County. Gene’s great grandfather first settled in the town of Mecan, WI, arriving via steamboat and ending his long journey from Germany. From there, several generations of Zempel family members traveled and lived throughout the area, spanning from Wisconsin to Morgan. Eventually, Gene and his siblings settled in the township of Eden learning from their parents the value of conservation through multiple enterprises. Lori grew up in Clements with an early appreciation for the outdoors from riding horses to helping her dad out on the farm. She worked for over 12 years at Harvest Land Co-Op and brings a wealth of knowledge they apply to their acreage.



Gene and Lori maintain one CREP easement and several CRP easements in addition to a plethora of conservation focused projects. Of which include: several native pollinator plantings, woodlands managed for timber harvests, a recreational pond with surrounding native wetland species, a water control structure, and many shelterbelt/windbreaks throughout their property. Gene was a district technician for Redwood SWCD early on in his career, and at one point held the record for more tree windbreak plantings in a single year than any other county in the United States. Additionally, he is responsible for promoting the early adoption of variable rate fertilizer and helped countless landowners in reducing their fertilizer use and environmental impact. Leading to a time in the mid-90’s that his southern Minnesota territory boasted more variable rate equipment than the rest of the nation combined. The Zempels are retired but their rented acres continue to be carefully managed by longtime local residents who practice good conservation. Gene and Lori emphasize they were not alone in this transformation and have received help from a multitude of family and community members to help them achieve the goals they see on their landscape.



The Zempels have committed their entire life to conservation. Gene is a lifetime Pheasants Forever member and Lori has used ‘Master Gardener’ techniques to grow, harvest, process, preserve and freeze their various garden crop for 30 years. They have preserved a legacy of conservation by improving the lives of the community and surrounding environment through distributing food at their local church, recycling and repurposing wood throughout their acreage, and continuing to make sure every piece of their farm is working at its best. They acknowledge that not everything in conservation works perfectly, but their resilience to different environmental conditions is evident in their life through a myriad of conservation practices. Whether it’s a small regenerative drainage

system exiting into a pollinator planted garden, native vegetation planted next to a creek for wildlife cover, or never going a year without planting a tree, it is clear the Zempels truly give back to the land as much as they can offer.

Along with other Outstanding Conservationists from across the entire state, the Zempels will be recognized at the Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts Annual Convention in Bloomington this December.