



# SAGINAW BAY SOIL HEALTH HERO AWARDS



The Nature  
Conservancy 

Thursday, January 27 | Mt. Pleasant, MI

Presented by The Nature Conservancy

*Thank you to our generous sponsors:*



COVER: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative; PAGE 2: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative

# Welcome!

Dear Attendees,

Welcome to Mount Pleasant for The Nature Conservancy's Soil Health Awards at the Great Lakes Crop Summit.

I am proud to work with The Nature Conservancy, farmers, agribusinesses and other partners in protecting Michigan's distinct and abundant natural resources. The Saginaw Bay watershed is the largest in the state and its health is critically important not only to Lake Huron, but the entire state. This event is a great opportunity to reflect on the importance of the watershed and to recognize those who are working to preserve it.

Congratulations to those being honored tonight as Soil Health Heroes. Our Great Lakes and water are a common bond uniting people in Michigan. All those involved in the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, local conservation districts and other initiatives help strengthen that bond. I applaud your efforts to keep the watersheds of Saginaw Bay healthy and the region's economy growing.

Thank you to The Nature Conservancy for its leadership and support of these efforts. I hope you have a memorable event.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Debbie Stabenow". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Debbie Stabenow  
United States Senator

# PROGRAM

**12:45 pm WELCOME**

Mary Fales, The Nature Conservancy Midwest Division Soil & Nutrient Director

**12:50 pm ADVANCES IN SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES**

Keith Martus, Star of the West Milling Co. Vice President of Agronomy and Michigan Agri-Business Association Board Chair

**1:10 pm GROWING SOIL HEALTH IN SAGINAW VALLEY**

The Nature Conservancy Soil Health Team

**PRESENTATION OF THE SOIL HEALTH HERO AWARDS**

**1:15 pm *Conservation Excellence Agribusiness Award***

Lisa Woodke, Star of the West Milling Co. Sustainability Director

***Conservation Impact Award***

Grant Pohl, Pohl Dairy

***Conservation Newcomer Award***

Scott Brechtelsbauer

***Conservation Innovation Award***

Don Morse, Morse Farms

***Conservation Legacy Award***

Nate Rupprecht, King Street Dairy

# ABOUT THE NATURE CONSERVANCY



The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to some of our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change; conserving lands, waters and oceans at an unprecedented scale; providing food and water sustainably and pursuing nature's solutions for healthy cities.

Working in 70+ countries and territories around the world and all 50 U.S. states, we use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector and other partners. To learn more about our work in Michigan, visit [www.nature.org/michigan](http://www.nature.org/michigan).

## TNC IN SAGINAW VALLEY



In Michigan, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) shares a common goal with farmers: a thriving and resilient Saginaw Valley. About 20% of Michigan’s agricultural acres—which support a \$13 billion economy—are located right here in the Saginaw Bay watershed. This 5.5-million-acre watershed features Michigan’s highest concentration of prime farmland, and rich soils that allow for diverse crop rotations and higher yields than many other areas of the Midwest.

Saginaw Bay and the river systems that flow into it are also vital for the clean water we all depend on. In addition to providing drinking water to local communities, the bay supports a thriving recreational fishery and boating industry, attracts thousands of visitors each year and is a critical area for migratory birds.

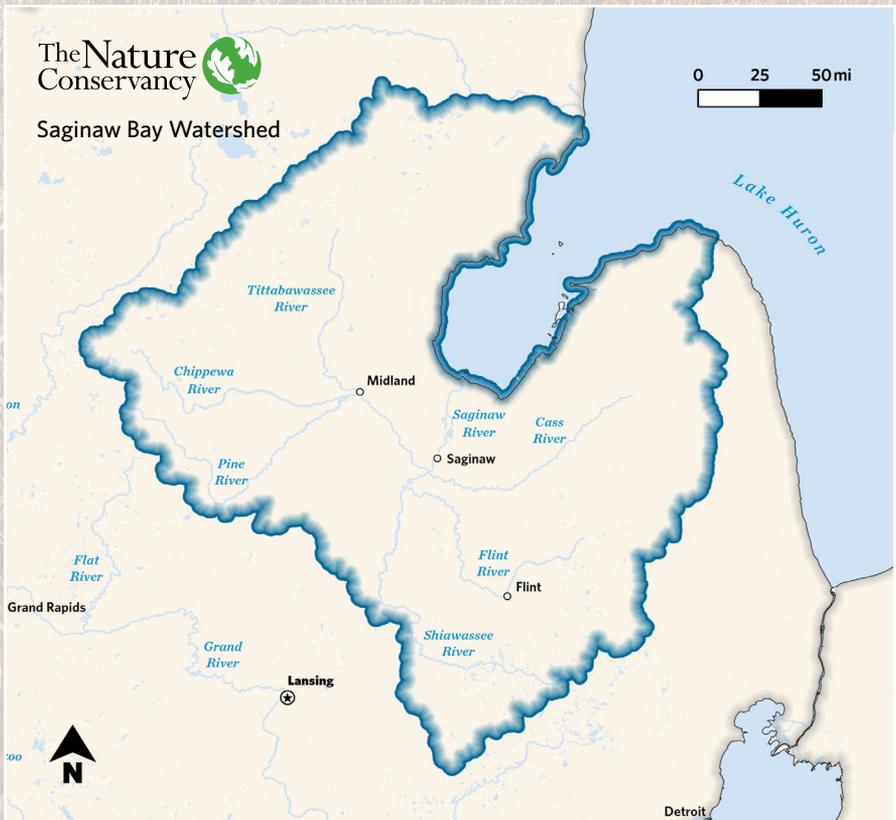
It’s a place worth protecting—for nature and for people.

TNC’s goal is to work with farmers, agribusinesses and other key partners to help farmers incorporate soil health practices—such as reduced tillage, cover crops and nutrient management—into their operations. These practices help maintain farm resilience to weather extremes, reduce nutrient loss and protect water quality.

TNC's work includes:

1. Convening partners and experts to provide information and learning opportunities;
2. Developing new tools and financial incentives to help measure impact and prioritize soil health practices where they're most needed; and
3. Recognizing farmers who have had success with these practices, to help others navigate the journey.

Current efforts range from building out a comprehensive water quality monitoring network in the Saginaw Bay watershed, to several emerging incentives programs for sugar beets, wheat and dairy. Learn more about TNC's work at [www.soilsavings.com](http://www.soilsavings.com).



## SPEAKER



### MARY FALES

*The Nature Conservancy Midwest  
Division Soil & Nutrient Director*

Mary joined The Nature Conservancy in 2012 with more than 10 years of experience in project and watershed management, specifically in Michigan's agricultural watersheds. She leads the Conservancy's agricultural conservation work with a team of staff in IL, IN, MI, OH and WI, with a focus on building scalable strategies aimed at demonstrating that a transition to soil health practices can benefit farmers while also improving water quality by reducing nutrient and sediment runoff.

Mary has extensive experience implementing conservation practices to address water quality concerns, building a wide range of partnerships, using social science to learn more about how agricultural stakeholders make decisions, and securing critical resources by obtaining sizeable federal and private grants.

She lives just outside of Grand Rapids in Caledonia, Michigan with her husband and three sons and enjoys camping, kayaking, and fishing with her family.

## SPEAKER



### KEITH MARTUS

*Star of the West Milling Co. Vice President  
of Agronomy and Michigan Agri-Business  
Association Board Chair*

Keith's roots have been in agriculture his entire life being raised on a small crop and dairy farm near Brown City, MI. He is a graduate of Western Michigan University with a degree in Agri-Business Management and Marketing. During his college intern experience, with ICI Americas, he had the opportunity to get to know Star of the West.

After graduation, he joined Star as an agronomy sales consultant and has had 28 of his 33 years in the business with them. He worked those five years at his hometown coop (Southern Thumb Coop) in Marlette, MI.

Mr. Martus is also a Certified Crop Advisor for over 25 years. He admits that his career has been a whirlwind of an experience with change always around every corner. How agriculture has transformed in the past 30 + years has been a great opportunity to learn – new ideas, new thoughts, new technologies and new concepts.

Keith's common phrase in relation to his career is, "if there is a day I stop learning in this business, then that is the day I need to find a new occupation."

BACKGROUND: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative

# 2021 SOIL HEALTH HERO AWARDEES

## SELECTION COMMITTEE:

### **Karolyn Karl**

District Conservationist, United States Department of Agriculture -  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

### **Joel Leland**

MAEAP Technician, Saginaw Conservation District\*

*\*Joel has since changed positions and is currently employed by The Nature Conservancy.*

### **Dan Moilanen**

Executive Director, Michigan Association of Conservation Districts

### **Glenn O'Neil**

PhD, Environmental Scientist & Geographic Information Specialist,  
Michigan State University - Institute of Water Research

### **Kristen Poley**

Michigan Research Manager, Michigan Corn Growers Association

### **Steve Tait**

Owner/Operator, Tait Farms

### **Tess Van Gorder**

Associate Policy & Regulatory Specialist, Michigan Farm Bureau



*Each awardee has also been recognized by the  
United States Congress. Thank you Congressman  
Moolenaar for providing certificates of recognition!*



## **CONSERVATION EXCELLENCE AGRIBUSINESS AWARD**

### **Lisa Woodke**

Star of the West Milling Co. (Frankenmuth, MI)

*An agribusiness professional who has shown exemplary support and participation in agricultural conservation efforts.*

Lisa, as the Sustainability Director for Star of the West Milling Company, has been a trusted resource to farmers in the Saginaw Bay watershed for more than five years. Lisa has her Sustainability Specialty certificate as a Certified Crop Adviser (CCA). She enjoys working closely with growers in the agriculture industry, and visits farms to help with the upgrade of LED lighting in sheds and other energy efficiency projects.

Lisa has been integral in connecting farmers to conservation services and opportunities. This has included her support for TNC's past conservation programs such as RCPP and Pay-for-Performance (which she helped promote), along with new conservation initiatives such as a low-carbon no-till program she led for Star of the West.

In 2021, Lisa went above and beyond with incredible conservation achievements that include revamping Star of the West's sustainability plan, positioning the company as one of Michigan's agribusiness leaders of sustainability. As part of this effort, Lisa worked with TNC to pilot a new program for sustainably grown wheat in the Saginaw Bay watershed. She secured a usage agreement for Truterra, a state-of-the-art agronomic sustainability tracking platform, to support this program. Over the next three years, this program will certify sustainably raised wheat on over 6,000 acres, effectively reducing 3,600T of CO<sub>2</sub>e.

BACKGROUND: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative



## CONSERVATION IMPACT AWARD

### Pohl Dairy

(Mt. Pleasant, MI)

*A farmer applying conservation practices with significant and sizable environmental benefits.*

For over four decades, the Pohl family has operated a 340-head dairy operation in the upper Pine River watershed (within Isabella County and the Isabella Indian Reservation), an area TNC has identified as high priority for water quality protection. Recently, the Pohls have transitioned out of dairy farming to focus more on their 1,500+ acres of row crops and custom silage/haylage cutting business, as well as increased soil health practices.

In 2020, Pohl Dairy enrolled in TNC's Saginaw Bay RCPP program to adopt 1,274 new acres of cover crops. Due to the local soil and slope conditions, this practice is estimated to reduce 191 tons of sediment and 663 lbs. of phosphorus per year. Over the course of the Pohls' three-year RCPP contract, this will prevent an estimated total of 573 tons of sediment and 1,989 lbs. of phosphorus from entering the Pine River, protecting water quality as well as the productivity of this multi-generational farm.

This represents a huge contribution to the Saginaw Bay RCPP program's outcomes, with nearly double the average conservation impact per acre of most projects!



## CONSERVATION NEWCOMER AWARD

**Scott Brechtelsbauer**

(Frankentrost, MI)

*A farmer applying conservation practices for the first time (within 5 years).*

Scott made the switch to no-till on his 280 acres in Saginaw County as well as a corporate farm he partners on, in response to topsoil loss from wind erosion. Five years later, Scott is already seeing the benefits, including increases in soil organic matter and “earthworms everywhere.”

During this time, Scott also began doing research into soil health practices and their potential for saving time and money. Some of the changes he and his partners have made include selling their large articulated 4-wheel-drive tractor along with its conventional tillage equipment, as well as their cultivators, and replacing them with smaller tractors and a 40-foot no-till drill. This reduced their annual fuel usage to less than 4 gallons per acre.

Scott has also started using cover crops regularly, experimenting to find optimal blends for their fields. Today, he uses diverse, 7-8 species blends on most fields, striving to maintain on-field vegetative coverage throughout the entire year.

Scott stands out for his commitment to permanent no-till on all acres, as well as his leadership in his community. He frequently works with NRCS and the local Conservation District to enroll land in state programs such as MAEAP, and federal programs such as Farm Bill conservation programs. Scott has even volunteered to be a pioneer of “carbon farming” by enrolling his farm in a trial carbon credit program offered through his local grain processor. He also shares his experience by hosting public field days and contributing to educational outreach videos.

BACKGROUND: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative



## CONSERVATION INNOVATION AWARD

### Don Morse

Morse Farms (Birch Run, MI)

*A farmer applying new or experimental conservation practices.*

On 2,800 acres of row crops (corn, soy, wheat and beets) in Saginaw County, Don Morse—a soil health advocate and Pioneer seed dealer—utilizes a suite of practices that includes conservation cover, cover crops and no-till. He is one of the longest-practicing “no-tillers” in the region!

A true farmer-inventor, Don has made several innovative customizations to his equipment. Before planting cash crops, Don will sometimes let his cereal rye cover crop reach 5 ft. tall, because he has modified his no-till planter to simply sweep green biomass out of the way in the row being planted. Don’s innovative and entrepreneurial spirit has led him to make DIY modifications to his sprayer equipment, as well as purchase a used corn de-tasseler that he plans to repurpose into a cover crop interseeder.

Don has perfected aerial application of cover crops and has advocated for it at field day speaking engagements. He applies cover crops to nearly all fields, noting that fields seeded by plane have rarely failed. He is also an advocate for a new biological soil additive that uses natural processes to unlock more nitrogen for corn in lieu of additional synthetic fertilizer. Don shares his experience and knowledge widely, and is said to be very influential among his farming peers.

Don credits his long term, continuous use of no-till and cover crops for the multiple benefits he’s observed—including reduced soil loss, increased organic matter, preserved soil moisture and prevention of invasive weed species. Some of Don’s practices have been funded by Farm Bill conservation programs, but many have been adopted voluntarily. Don is always seeking out ways to innovate and enhance the sustainability of his operation!



## CONSERVATION LEGACY AWARD

### Nate Rupprecht

King Street Dairy (Vassar, MI)

*A farmer applying conservation practices for 7+ years.*

Nate, along with his family, farms both cash crops and livestock (dairy) in Tuscola County, using cover crops, no-till and manure management practices. The Rupprechts have used no-till for over 20 years, with cover crops on nearly all acres. More recently, Nate has begun using multi-species cover crop mixes. He harvests some of these mixes as forage for the dairy herd managed by his children (also farmers).

In short, the Rupprechts blend no-till, multi-species cover crops and integration of livestock and manure, all while protecting water quality and maintaining the high environmental standards that CSP and MAEAP require. Nate and his children are MAEAP-verified in all four systems!

Just one example of Nate's dedication to soil health was his decision to plant cereal rye into all their harvested crop stubble last year, taking advantage of some favorable November weather. This spring, that rye was left untilled, and the beans that were planted among the rye thrived.

Nate has helped with, and hosted, several field days for the MAEAP program and the local Conservation District. In 2018, the Rupprechts' farm was used as a research site for NRCS on the forage value of cover crops. The Rupprechts have also enrolled in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Their conservation achievements in CSP have been so prolific that their farm was profiled as an NRCS Soil Health farm in 2020/21, earning them a 'Conservationist of the Year' award from the local Conservation District.

BACKGROUND: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative



PHOTO: © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative

## START YOUR SOIL HEALTH JOURNEY TODAY!

Contact our local TNC Conservation Associate, Rebecca McNitt,  
at (517) 316-2282 or [rebecca.mcnitt@tnc.org](mailto:rebecca.mcnitt@tnc.org).

## STAY CONNECTED!



Follow us on social media: [@TNCMichigan](https://www.instagram.com/TNCMichigan).



Sign up for our free soil health e-newsletter: [bit.ly/soilnewsletter](https://bit.ly/soilnewsletter).



Learn more at our website: [soilsavings.com](https://soilsavings.com).

