

# [***The Nature Conservancy Announces 2023 Soil Health Hero Award Winners***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B6D-2S21-F0YC-N05K-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Arlington, Virginia: The Nature Conservancy has issued the following press release:

On Thursday, January 25, The Nature Conservancy in Michigan (TNC) honored three Saginaw Valley farmers as ***Soil Health*** Heroes. The awards ceremony is held every other year during the Great Lakes Crop Summit.

“This year's ***Soil Health*** Heroes have shown us what it looks like to walk-the-talk when it comes to implementing healthy ***soil*** practices and providing the Saginaw Valley farming community with outstanding examples of how these practices can and do support healthy crops, build in-field resiliency against extreme weather and protect our local waterways,” said Ben Wickerham, agriculture program director for The Nature Conservancy in Michigan. “These winners represent the future of regenerative agriculture in Michigan, and we're honored to share their stories. I have no doubt their ***soil***-first approach to farming will have a positive impact on the industry for years to come. ”

The 2023 ***Soil Health*** Hero Award winners include:

Legacy: Wayne Bierlein (Reese, Mich.): Owner of WMW Bierlein Farms, Wayne has been utilizing no-till practices on his more than 1,500 acres for more than five years and utilizes cover crops on most of those acres each year. Wayne leads a Farmer-Led Watershed Group in his area and works with neighboring farmers to help them improve their ***soil*** practices.

Innovator: James Weber (Vassar, Mich.): James owns Weber Dairy, a medium-sized dairy farm with roughly 250 milking cows. His 550-acre farm utilizes a Recycled Manure Solids System and includes approximately 20 acres of a native harvestable buffer along surface waters. He also sits on the Michigan Milk Producers Association Sustainability Committee.

Conservation Newcomer: Caleb and Cody Symons (Chesaning, Mich.): Brothers Caleb and Cody own Symons Farm. Not to be outdone by farmers twice their age, their 550-acre farm is Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) verified. They have also enrolled in a grant-funded ***soil*** sampling program for the Saginaw Bay Watershed, which ultimately led them to develop a nutrient management plan for their farm. The plan is now being actively applied using Variable Rate Technology on all acres.

Earlier this month, TNC also announced the winner of its annual Conservation Excellence in Agribusiness Award at the 2024 Michigan Agribusiness Winter Conference in Lansing, Michigan.

This year ’ s winner was Sarah Michalek of the Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA). Sarah is sustainability supervisor for MMPA and has overseen a multitude of initiatives aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of the dairy supply chain. She has managed on-farm sustainability programs including Feed in Focus, a partnership project with The Nature Conservancy, which to date has enrolled more than 15 Michigan dairies and reduced 93 tonnes of CO2 equivalents.

Farmer awardees were peer-nominated and selected by an independent review committee of cross-cutting agricultural partners.

***Soil health*** principles—such as reducing tillage, armoring fields with vegetative cover and precisely managing nutrient inputs—can help reduce input costs, rebuild ***soil*** structure and buffer farm fields against weather extremes, all while protecting water quality.

About 20% of Michigan ’ s agricultural acres are within the 5.5-million-acre Saginaw Bay watershed. This watershed features Michigan ’ s highest concentration of prime farmland, an abundance of freshwater resources and ideal growing conditions that support a diversity of crops not seen anywhere else in the Midwest.

“As word continues to spread about how well healthy ***soil*** practices are working on farms across the Saginaw Valley, we ’ re hopeful it supports and informs ongoing conversations about conservation among our farmer partners,” Wickerham said. “That's what leadership by example is all about, and our ***Soil Health*** Heroes are doing it, day-in and day-out. The examples set on their farms speak for themselves, and the agriculture community is listening. ”

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