



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Fiber Farm Weaves Together Resources

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, meet Bridget Kavanagh, owner and shepherdess of Happy Goat Lucky Ewe Fiber Farm in Mason, Michigan. She raises livestock for fleece and cut flowers for producing natural dyes.

From Homestead to Business

"It was always my desire to have a sheep farm," says Kavanagh. She bought the property in 1987 when her children were little. It wasn't until her children grew up and started moving out on their own that she was able to turn the homestead into a business.

Kavanagh saw the need to expand her sheep and goat herd to meet customer demand for her merino and angora goat fiber. Much of her prospective pasture land was covered in dense, overgrown thorny scrub brush. Kavanagh first had to turn "the jungle" into quality pasture for livestock.

Kavanagh visited her local USDA Service Center and learned that her farm was eligible for the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) through [USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service \(NRCS\)](#). EQIP provides agricultural producers with financial resources, along with one-on-one help to make conservation improvements on their land.

"The NRCS and county conservationists were willing to go out and traipse through the field," says Kavanagh. "They had survey and satellite imagery and access to all the soil information for the property. They drew up a conservation plan and did all of the estimates on costs."

As part of her plan, Kavanagh was able to get help clearing brush and adopting a prescribed grazing system. Through prescribed grazing, sheep are rotated from pasture to pasture, which prevents overgrazing and soil erosion and boosts plant vigor. This also helps her graze more sheep and goats.

The conservation plan also includes installing seasonal high tunnels to lengthen the growing season for her crops, installing water lines to further assist in grazing management, and creating a pollinator habitat along her pasture.

For all of these practices, NRCS provided financial assistance to help with the cost of implementation. But Kavanagh needed help with the up-front costs to install these practices.

Microloans for Agricultural Operations

That's when Kavanagh reached out to another USDA agency, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), to see if she was eligible for a microloan. FSA microloans offer more flexible access to credit for small, beginning and niche agricultural operations.

"They helped me figure out collateral and not obligate the farm. By the end, I was confident my farm had the ability to support the loan," said Kavanagh.

Kavanagh was able to use the FSA microloan to initially fund the fencing and brush clearing in her grazing management plan. The financial assistance from EQIP was then applied directly to the microloan debt, significantly reducing the loan principle.

Leave the Land Better Than You Found It

In the coming years, Kavanagh will continue with EQIP by building a seasonal high tunnel to extend the growing season for cut flowers and dye-producing crops, install water lines to further implement her grazing management plan and create more pollinator habitats. "I knew this was a good fit for my farm. If we humans want to eat fruit and vegetables, we need creatures including butterflies, bees, dragonflies, even hummingbirds to pollinate the flowers on our food plants," says Kavanagh. "I have the space, so why not put it to good use, especially late in the growing season when pollinators are desperate for food."

"In the end, I'm just the steward of this property. We are only here on this Earth temporarily and it's important to leave the land better than you found it for the next generation," Kavanagh says. "Maybe our family will still be farming here in 100 years. It sure would be nice."

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster, loan and conservation programs to help America's agricultural producers weather ups and downs in the market and natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations.



For more information about USDA programs, contact your local USDA service center or visit Farmers.gov.

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