



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Coffee Table Dreams Become Reality for Western Iowa Couple

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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 Molly and John Heaps. Only a short decade ago, the pair worked full-time non-farming jobs. Now, they run a diverse operation in Loess Hills, Iowa, with 60 cow-calf pairs.

John was a full-time military and commercial pilot flying overseas flights. Molly was a registered nurse at a local hospital.

Although they both enjoyed their careers, something was missing.

John and Molly found the perfect opportunity to get back to their farming roots when they purchased Molly's family's farm near Moorhead, Iowa.

Today, Molly works on the farm and John continues to pilot commercial flights. Their operation includes 417 acres of pasture, 130 acres of cropland, and 44 acres of native prairie through the [Conservation Reserve Program](#), one of USDA's many Farm Bill-funded conservation programs.

Jackie Kragel, district conservationist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Monona County, says Molly visited the USDA service center a few years ago with questions about her newly-enrolled Conservation Reserve Program contract. At the time, Jackie was new to the local office and hadn't worked with the couple.

"After we got to visiting, I learned much about their operation and her innovative ideas to improve conservation on her family farm," said Jackie.

Since that meeting, Jackie has been heavily involved in providing efficient, practical, and affordable conservation solutions for John and Molly, beginning by helping the couple manage grazing for their 60 cow-calf pairs.

New Watering Facility

Without electrical access on outer areas of the pasture, Jackie developed a livestock watering system that uses a solar powered pump, a deep well, and gravity-fed pipeline that delivers water to a 3,000-gallon storage tank and two tire tanks for water access.

A challenge for many Iowa grazers is getting cattle to utilize as much forage on as many acres as possible, particularly in the undulating Loess Hills.

Molly says cattle sometimes use a creek or walk a mile just to get a drink of water, so the Heaps' goal is to provide easier access to drinking water and keep cattle out of the creek.

USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) provided financial assistance for a portion of the project costs through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#), a voluntary conservation program that helps farmers achieve their agricultural production and environmental goals. To keep the additional costs down, the couple completed much of the construction themselves.

Jackie says setting up a managed grazing system is also good for local natural resources.

The Loess Hills soils are porous, lightweight, and erode easily if not properly protected. Healthy pasture helps prevent soil erosion. And excluding livestock from the creek improves water quality.

"John and Molly are extremely happy to have their coffee table dreams come to reality," said Jackie. "They are now researching ways to implement a [multi-paddock] grazing system with NRCS' help."

Improving Pasture Conditions

In conversations with Jackie, John and Molly also expressed an interest in improving pasture conditions, including removing invasive eastern red cedar trees, managing weeds, and diversifying the forage.

To help improve pasture conditions, Jackie encouraged John and Molly to sign up for the [Conservation Stewardship Program](#), which pays producers for existing conservation efforts and requires implementation of additional activities to further strengthen their operation.

“We were interested in improving grass conditions to reduce fertilizer use,” said Molly. “We want to make this pasture more sustainable for our cow-calf pairs.”

Removing invasive eastern red cedar trees was one of the first projects John and Molly tackled through the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Removal requires cutting off the trees close to the base and burning them.

The red cedar trees had encroached on 130 pasture acres. Their cover and shade hindered growth of beneficial plants and grasses, leaving the loose, crumbly Loess Hills soil susceptible to erosion.

Molly says removing the trees is an ongoing battle but is very important to the future health of the pasture.

“Everywhere there is a cedar tree, there’s grass that isn’t growing that a cow can’t eat,” she said.

Another way the couple is trying to reduce the need for extra feed is interseeding their pasture with warm season grasses. “We are trying to get a balance before we have to supplement feeding hay,” said Molly. “We hope to one day be able to quit supplementing our cattle with extra feed. CSP is helping us accomplish that goal.”

Cover Crops for Livestock Feed

John and Molly used cover crops as a food source during the spring 2018 calving season.

“The cows loved it!” said Molly. “As they were grazing, they walked right down the cover crop rows toward us. Everything was very calm.”

In the fall of 2017, the couple planted a cover crops mix of cereal rye, wheat and turnips on 30 corn acres for another source of livestock feed. John and Molly will plant cover crops on 30 acres for five years through their Conservation Stewardship Program contract.

“I was initially very skeptical about using cover crops for feed, but now I love it,” she said.



Molly is interested to see how soybeans yield this year after using cover crops. “This really is a test for us. We would like to do more cover crops for soil improvement, but we also want to see some results first,” she said.

Molly is confident all their hard work will pay off. “There’s something that gives back from the land around you when you take care of it,” she said. “I don’t know if everybody gets that off their land, but we do. This land is important to me. I want to preserve it for the next generation.”

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and voluntary conservation programs to help America’s agricultural producers invest in improvements to their operations, weather ups and downs in the market, and recover from natural disasters. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

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