Protecting their farm’s future and their community’s water supply

The hills of Mount Horeb, Wis., earned it the nickname “Mount Horrible.”

This highly erodible land doesn’t sound ideal for farming, but Kellercrest Registered Holsteins, Inc. made it work for their 300-plus cows and for their community.

The Kellers – Mark and his wife, Kareen, and Mark’s brother Tim and his wife Sandy, plus their children Andrew and Kim – raise much of the cows’ feed on this land. So, to protect Wisconsin waterways as well as their farm’s future, the Kellers led an effort to lower phosphorus levels in water runoff from their land.

Called the Pleasant Valley Watershed Project, it was a collaboration among the Natural Resources Conservation Service, University of Wisconsin, The Nature Conservancy and other state, local and national agencies to reduce the phosphorus load in the local watershed. The results were dramatic and positive.

In fact, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is expected to propose removing the Pleasant Valley Branch from the EPA’s list of sediment-impaired streams.

The Kellers, whose family has farmed the hills of Mount Horeb since the late 1840s, saw cost savings as well as environmental benefits when they shifted to no-till practices and a different manure application method. And their winter rye cover crop does double duty as a heifer feed and a phosphorus gruber.

Other farms that participated in the project saw economic benefits too. This spurred Mark to form a group of farmers to build on the learnings.

With Kellercrest Registered Holsteins, Inc.’s proximity to the annual World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wis., as well as the University of Wisconsin, the family has opportunities to share practices with international audiences of agronomists, veterinarians, retailers and others.

They eagerly give tours because they care about what people think of dairy farming. They, also, demonstrate how much care goes into dairy production. It’s also an opportunity to meet other farmers.

“We’re still trying to learn something new every day,” Tim said.