This farm’s secret to being a good neighbor: certified practices and open doors

Oesch family members began farming in Alto, Mich., over 100 years ago. It was the creek that drew them there – at the time, it served as a source of drinking water for the cows.

Today, SwissLane Farms limit their animals’ creek access to keep the water clean. They’re preserving Alto’s natural resources for future generations, and they’re working with knowledgeable partners to get results.

The farm is 23 miles from downtown Grand Rapids, the second-largest city in Michigan. That poses both pressures from urban sprawl and opportunities to reach people several generations removed from the farm. Since 2006, their Dairy Discovery program has offered farm tours, reaching more than 36,000 students, teachers and families.

What do they show their visitors about sustainable practices? Plenty! After a farm energy audit, they’ve reduced energy costs by 17% per cow by adding new slurry pumps in strategic locations to transfer water more efficiently. They also added Variable Frequency Drives that reduce wear on equipment, and they converted to tankless water heaters and installed insulation on hot-water piping.

Further long-term energy savings will be achieved through the farm’s LED (Light Emitting Diode) lighting and occupancy sensors, which also provide savings on labor and maintenance.

The family took steps to become verified through the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP). In the process, they learned the heifer barn was too close to a steep hill, increasing potential for runoff to enter the waterway in a torrential downpour. So, in 2007 they built a new, modern barn away from the hill and creek. Now their neighbors can see the results.

For example, through a partnership with the Coldwater River Watershed Council, a fish survey revealed a healthy population of brook and rainbow trout. A few members of the farm’s family can even be found there on opening day of trout season each spring.