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Marathon County Farmers Honored in National “Small Farm” Award Competition

Athens, WI.....Mark and Dawn Mroczenski operate a small dairy grazing operation in the heart of central Wisconsin. They have made many choices along the way... to remain small, to focus on health and safety for the family, to be profitable and sustainable. Their farm was recently nominated from Wisconsin and placed third in the national Lloyd Wright Small Farmer of the Year Award.

The Mroczenskis were nominated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Wisconsin. The award is sponsored by the National Organization for Black Professional Natural Resources Conservation Service Employees.

To accept the award, Dawn Mroczenski and her mother, Rozanne Zernicke, traveled to New Orleans for the awards ceremony in early December. Farmers from Florida and Mississippi tied for first place in the national competition.

Amy Neigum, NRCS District Conservationist for Marathon County, recognized that the Mroczenskis would be good candidates for the award because of their focus on staying economically and environmentally sound, as well as their work in the community and in the state to help new farmers get started with grazing.

“The Mroczenskis are good conservation farmers, and they have frequently opened their farm for pasture walks and educational events, including Farm Technology Days, to share their experience with young people and beginning graziers,” says Neigum.

Mark and Dawn came back to the small farming operation that his parents began and built on that success by converting to a dairy grazing system that has proven sustainable both in economics and environmental protection. They have chosen conservation practices to manage their dairy operation efficiently and to stay profitable. More importantly, it gives them the quality of life they wanted to raise their three boys. They have integrated government programs as needed, and set an example to get better, not bigger. Their milk is sold to a local cheese factory which has its own cheese store.

The Mroczenskis applied for and were selected for the USDA Conservation Security Program when the Lake du Bay Watershed was eligible in 2006. They are a Tier 3 farm, the highest level of stewardship, with wildlife and energy conservation enhancements.

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They are always willing to open their farm to show others the benefits of Management Intensive Grazing by hosting pasture walks and demonstrations on their farm. They have been on panel discussions at the Wisconsin Grazing Conference, participated in meetings with local bankers and loan officers, and hosted FFA groups and foreign students from local technical colleges. They offered their farm financial data to the UW Center for Dairy Profitability as part of a study which showed that dairy grazing can compete financially with confinement operations in Wisconsin.

Mark is a Marathon County Farm Bureau director, serves on the township zoning committee, and is an advisory member of the Central Wisconsin River Graziers network. Dawn is a 4-H leader, Sunday school teacher and school volunteer. They both work on the farm full-time.

The Mroczenskis will be honored at the 16th Annual Wisconsin Grazing Conference in Stevens Point on Feb 15th, 2008. For more information, contact Amy Neigum, NRCS District Conservationist, at the USDA Service Center in Wausau.



Dawn Mroczenski, far right, accepting the award for both herself and her husband, Mark, who was unable to attend. From left are Patti Jackson-Kelly, NRCS Richland Center, Pat Leavenworth, NRCS State Conservationist for Wisconsin, and Lloyd Wright, for whom the national Small Farmer Award is named.

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Mark and Dawn Mroczenski at home on their dairy grazing operation near Athens in Marathon County.

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