

2019 Conservation Farmer of the Year (Forest Steward)

Lewis & Kate Lobdell



Trees are a crop. Just not an annual crop, Lewis and Kate Lobdell will tell you. “We have to have a longer time horizon than a traditional farmer,” Lewis explained, as it can take decades for forest trees to reach optimum size.

The Lobdells have been farming, or in more traditionally used terms, stewarding forest land in Ligonier, Cook and Unity townships for more than 20 years.

Their goal is to create a healthier and more diverse woodlands; one that supports native flora and fauna for the long term.



The Lobdells have been working toward their goal systematically, following the guidance of several Forest Stewardship Plans prepared over the past 15 years by the District. The plans lay out a series of site-specific steps for managing the various aspects of the land, including the trees, wildlife, and waterways.

The Lobdells also follow the recommendations of a wildlife management plan the Natural Resources Conservation Service prepared for their property.

Over the years, the Lobdells have implemented a number of important conservation practices, including removing acres of autumn olive, honeysuckle, Japanese stilt grass, and other invasive plant species; cleaning up what had once been an unsanctioned community dump on their property; and turning the opening of two pocket coal mines into a vernal pond for wildlife.

They have been regenerating a 24-acre area on the crest of the ridge that had been strip-mined by

a previous owner, the soil left so compacted that little grew there. After spraying to kill the invasive plants, the Lobdells planted switch grass on the site last summer, and the area is now attracting turkeys and grouse. In time, the switch grass will develop deep roots that can penetrate the compacted clay soil. And it also can be baled as hay.

In another area of their property, the Lobdells created a specialized habitat for a migratory songbird, the golden winged warbler, which has suffered near extirpation in the Appalachian Mountains.



The Lobdells also have installed fencing to protect the young plants and saplings they planted (including more than 1,200 shrubs as a field border) from browsing deer, added subsurface drainage, and are looking into additional conservation programs, including one that involves carbon sequestration.

Lewis completed the 40-hour Pennsylvania Forest Stewards training at Penn State University. For the past five years, he has served on the board of The American Chestnut Foundation and was instrumental in steering that organization toward the development of a genetically engineered chestnut tree that uses a gene from wheat to protect it from the chestnut blight.



Kate serves on the advisory board for the Carnegie Museum of Natural History’s Powdermill Nature Reserve, and has been volunteering with the Westmoreland Land Trust, applying her legal expertise to help the organization negotiate its largest to-date land acquisition (soon to be announced).