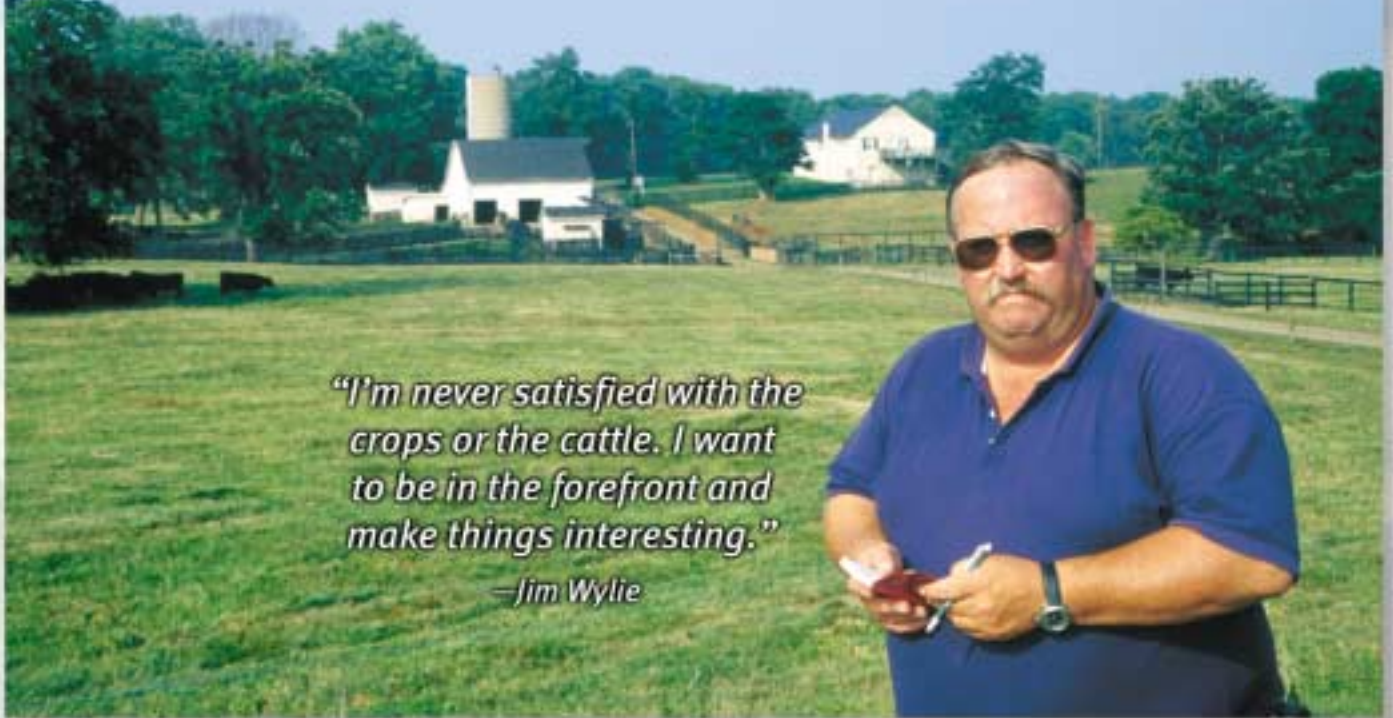


A Graduate Course

A commitment to doing things right and improving the land earned Virginia's Lazy Lane Farms this year's *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award.

by *Becky Mills*



"I'm never satisfied with the crops or the cattle. I want to be in the forefront and make things interesting."

—Jim Wylie

Lazy Lane Farms is a conservationist's classroom.

That's how Wayne Maresch, state conservationist for New York and a judge for the *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award, describes this year's winner.

He's not talking about kindergarten, either, but a teaching tool at the graduate level.

Why the emphasis on conservation? It isn't like farm manager Jim Wylie was looking for ways to occupy his time. He already had the 120-cow registered Angus herd on his "to do" list, as well as the pastures on the 2,000-acre Upperville, Va., operation, not to mention the soybean and wheat crops. It is also his job to supply Lazy Lane's world-class Thoroughbreds with top-quality homegrown alfalfa hay and wheat straw.

Wylie says the emphasis goes back to a conversation he had with the farm's owner, Joe Allbritton, 20 years ago, when Lazy Lane set down roots in Loudoun County. "He told me to do things right," Wylie recalls. "Whether it was with workers' compensation or conservation, he told me to go overboard and do things gentlemanlike."

Wylie jokes, "I thought he would be less likely to fire me if I looked like I was doing something."

Jump-start

Job security aside, the real conservation push came six years ago when Wylie and Loudoun County Extension agent Gary Hornbaker were on their way to the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky. "I mentioned the time is coming where there are going to be laws to make you fence your cattle out of creeks,"

Hornbaker recalls.

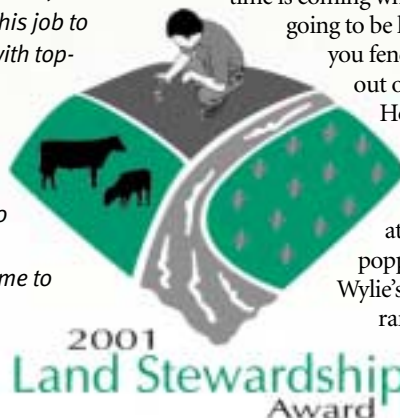
The 200-year-old barn at Lazy Lane popped into Wylie's mind. A creek ran right through the barnyard,

and when cattle were confined to the area around the barn, the creek was vulnerable to contamination.

"I started then and told the general manager, Frank Shipp, what the future was going to bring," Wylie says.

Thankfully, Wylie was up to the task of jump-starting Lazy Lane's conservation program. "I was always interested in conservation and went to a lot of field days, read a lot, and talked to a lot of soil-conservation people and contractors," he notes.

He started on the Lazy Lane side of the Blue Ridge Mountains and installed spring boxes to catch the water. Through perforated pipes, the water is forced into solid pipes, and gravity carries it to the

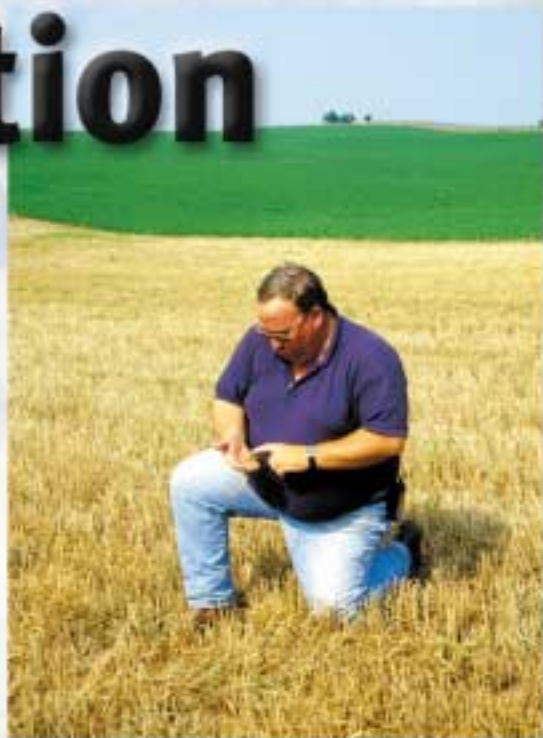


► Above: A 200-year-old barn is one of Jim Wylie's first conservation projects at Lazy Lane Farm — a creek once ran through the barnyard.

in Conservation



► Whether it is with cattle, crops or conservation, Lazy Lane's manager, Jim Wylie, says he is never satisfied.



► The no-till wheat at Lazy Lane provides food for eastern wild turkeys and doves.

concrete water troughs in the pastures and paddocks. "We run lateral pipes off of that to pick up other springs," Wylie says. "Then the water returns to the spring or pond where it would normally go."

In one development, five tanks come off one mountain spring.

Once he had a water source for the cattle and horses, the fence work started. Now the improvements on the farm read like a manual for the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) best management practices (BMPs). In addition to the 15 troughs and six miles of fence to keep livestock from streams and ponds, or at least limit their access, there are hard, fenced crossings where the cattle do have to cross streams, as well as a restricted watering area for the pond on the leased land.

On their own, but not alone

That's just for starters. Wylie and his crew give their no-till drill a workout to reseed their fescue and timothy pastures, as well as to plant soybeans and wheat. They also use integrated



► Three gates and a hardened access area give cattle a place to drink but keep them from lounging in the pond and damaging the banks.

pest management (IPM) to cut down on spraying in their alfalfa and row crops.

Then there are the wildlife corridors along the creeks and ponds.

Their manure management is another environmental plus. They feed round bales on concrete pads and push the manure to one side to dry, then

spread it on the fields. In the horse operation, manure is composted, then spread on the farm to increase the organic matter in the soil.

"We have a high concentration of clay in this soil," Wylie comments. "Air and water have a hard time getting through it because of the lack of organic matter."

The list of accomplishments is even more impressive when you consider Lazy Lane didn't take a cent of cost-share money for any of the conservation work on its 1,800 acres.

Although Lazy Lane paid for the work, the owner and managers believe in sharing the information. The farm hosts

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► Although the August heat dried up the stream, hardened crossings limit the cattle's access to the creek and prevents them from damaging fragile creek banks. Wylie is shown with Extension agent Gary Hornbaker.

CREP: CRP with a bonus

You've heard of the tried and true Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Now there is the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). In the CREP, highly erodible land is taken from production and planted in grass or trees. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) pays the landowner 50% of the cost of planting the new cover, as well as an annual rent on the land removed from production.

In the enhanced version, the state and conservation groups can bring that up to 100% cost share. Larry Wilkinson, district conservationist for the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS), says open land on a creek or wetland is eligible. If it is in pasture, it has to go into trees. If it is cropland, at least part has to go into trees. The trees are nut-bearing hardwoods, such as oak or hickory, that provide food for wildlife.

At Lazy Lane Farm, manager Jim Wylie enrolled a strip of land bordering a pond on leased land. Ducks Unlimited and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation pitched in to pay the total cost of installing a fence and a hardened watering area flanked by three 16-foot gates, limiting the area where the cattle can drink.

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soil- and water-conservation area meetings, field days for the Culpeper Farmers' Cooperative Inc., Extension service beef meetings, 4-H and FFA workshops, and Virginia Tech Extension tours, as well as Virginia Angus Association functions.

"They were the greatest hosts on the district soil and water tours," says Pat McIlvane, agronomist with the Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District. "They provide us a good model farm to show people how it should be done."

"They are a great farm to work with because of their concern for the land," she adds.

Numerous rewards

Their efforts have been recognized. In 1998 they won a Clean Water Farm Award from the Loudoun Soil and Water Conservation District. In 1999 Wylie won the Conservation Farmer of the Year Award for Loudoun County. That same year, Lazy Lane won the Governor's Clean Water Award as grand champion for the Potomac River Basin.

Perhaps even more importantly, the wildlife of Lazy Lane are also thriving. It is odd when white-tailed deer aren't seen in an alfalfa field. Eastern wild turkey gobblers strut through the wildlife corridors, while turkey hens and poults have their own field days in the wheat stubble, also a favorite for doves. Wood ducks nest along the pond edges and swim in the pristine ponds.

"It is fascinating to see how those streams recover after you get the cows out of there. Plants and animals, minnows, crayfish — when cattle use those streams heavily, that is all gone," Wylie says.

Hornbaker, who has worked with Wylie for nine years, says, "They want the water to be as clean or cleaner when it leaves their farm as it is when it comes on their farm. I've been there

after some tremendous rainstorms, and the water is clear — no silt and no mud. They do an excellent job."

"The cattle are not in the mud, and they have free-flowing water," he adds.

More than a caretaker

While Wylie and Lazy Lane go beyond what is expected in their conservation work, their neighbors share their concern and efforts. Hornbaker says more than \$1.4 million in cost-share funds have been spent in the 564-square-mile county. And more than 60 miles of fence have been put up to keep livestock from streams.

By the way, the Angus cattle that benefit from the conservation work are also a Loudoun County tradition. One of the three farms that make up the present Lazy Lane operation belonged to John C. Gall, president of the American Angus Association in 1957.

Still, Wylie wants to stay ahead of the pack. "I'm never satisfied with the crops or the cattle. I want to be in the forefront and make things interesting," he says.

He is. He is patiently killing small blocks of fungus-infected fescue and replacing them with a fungus-free variety, rather than killing whole fields at once and leaving them vulnerable to erosion.

"As we have brought in cattle with more growth and milk, they wouldn't breed back on the fescue. They'd raise a 700- or 800-pound (lb.) calf and come up open," he explains.

There is also more ahead on the conservation front. A stream still flows through one corner of one pasture that isn't fenced out. And there are game food plots to plant and bluebird houses and wood-duck boxes to erect.

"I don't want to be just a caretaker," Wylie emphasizes. "I want to do better and leave the land in better shape."

