



## Managing Woodlands with a Conservation Land Ethic

*Renowned Cabin Builder Protects 3,000 Forested Acres*

*Above: (L to R) Joe and Mary Hovel, landowners in Vilas County, at their home log cabin property with Celie Borndal, NRCS Soil Conservationist.*

Walking up to the Hovel log cabin in the woods, Joe helps his wife, Mary, wash various vegetables they just picked from their land. The Hovels are Vilas County, Wisconsin, landowners who started out decades ago working with the land to utilize and benefit the sustainable natural resource. When in school, Joe knew he wanted to use his hands and get into the building trade. Joe and Mary married young and moved right to the country, buying 25 acres, to get started on their dream. “I’ve been self-employed my whole career, since 1970,” explained Hovel.

Joe obtained a sawmill from a friend and started building out of wood, anything and everything area farmers and landowners needed. “Things really turned around in 1973; I had a bunch of pine logs cut and I owed the landowner stumpage. I couldn’t sell the stuff due to the recession, so I contacted a farmer I knew who did sawmilling,” said Joe. “I was a young, eager, 20 something and asked if he still had the old sawmill.” The farmer took Joe to see the sawmill. It was out in the open with trees growing through it from unuse. “I asked him if he thought it would run and he said yes, with some work,” explained Joe. “The farmer said I could haul it out of there and when I started making money with it, he wanted \$1,000 dollars for it.” The next day, Hovel hauled the sawmill 35 miles back to his land and started repairs. “I got the thing home by using an old tractor from my grandpa; I set up the sawmill and utilized a USDA Forest Service publication to get it running within a week,” said Joe. “It was so much fun; that’s all I wanted to do; it was so interesting and rewarding, sawing logs, making lumber, building with my hands.” Joe needed to find his “value-added” to the lumber. He decided to build calf feeders and hay racks that were better than others on the market. Joe’s business took off. “I had fun making the products bigger, better and stronger; I was able to make one a day and then the same farmers kept asking for more and more different things; I once made 50 picnic tables for a campground one summer,” explained Hovel.

Joe’s business continued to grow. He decided to build his very first log cabin. “This guy kept driving by as I was building the cabin, so I finally waved him down; he asked what I was building and what I was going to do with it. I told him I was building a cabin and was going to sell it. The guy said he wanted to buy it,” said Joe. Hovel had sold his first cabin before it was even finished. After the first successful cabin build, neighbors lined up to get their own built. “We built around 12 a year and worked year-round,” added Joe. As of fall 2017, Hovel has built over 250 cabins and full time homes all over central and northern Wisconsin. As his business continued to thrive, he and Mary acquired more land.

Hovel slowly built community relationships and acquired land from friends who offered it to him due to his conservation mindset and ability to nurture the land. Today, the Hovels own or manage around 3,000 acres of forestland in Wisconsin and Michigan. “I’ve developed a pretty strong land ethic in my line of work. Conservation to me is the wise use and maintenance of our land for the future; using it wisely and leaving it so the next generation can use it wisely also,” said Hovel. “You can see some of the effects of forest fragmentation and unwise use. I have made it my personal goal to help as much land as I can by active management and implementing conservation practices,” explained Joe. “When I first saw some of these properties, I knew we needed to help protect them.”

In 1979, Joe planted some trees with the help of the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This was the first time Hovel learned about the cost-share and technical assistance available through conservation programs. Hovel’s home property, 396 acres in northern Vilas County, encompasses mixed habitat of maple, oak, pine, aspen, birch and spruce. “Mary and I feel responsible for the protection of water quality on our lake, the Wisconsin River and Pilgrim River in Michigan,” said Joe. As the Hovels acquired more land, they realized the





*Left: The Hovels discuss conservation while washing homegrown produce.*



*Right: Joe Hovel and Celie Borndal inspect a tree in a stand where Conservation Stewardship Program practices were applied.*

*Below: (Top to Bottom) New pine growth on the Hovel property. Joe and Celie measure a pine tree. Hovel's multi-species forested acres.*



importance of managing and conserving it. "We manage the land and promote land conservation for multiple benefits, including, economic (growing timber), social (recreation, hunting, fishing), environmental (clean water and clean air), and intrinsic (inspiring beauty)," explains Joe.

In managing the large plots of land, that's when the U.S. Department of Agriculture came in. "I am so passionate about doing land management right and so is NRCS," said Joe. With mutual goals, taking part in conservation programs can be the difference between someone being able to afford active management or having to sell their property," added Joe. In 2014, Joe worked with the NRCS Rhinelander Service Center to write a Forest Management Plan. "Forest management plans are really an affirmation of what your goals are as a landowner," explained Joe. "After a Forest Management Plan was written, we worked with Joe through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program to implement forest stand improvements and tree and shrub site preparation. He also utilized the Regional Conservation Partnership Program for tree and shrub site preparation and establishment," said Celie Borndal, NRCS Soil Conservationist, Rhinelander Service Center. "Any technical and financial assistance can be a huge incentive to accomplish forest management goals," said Joe.

"When we were faced with a major tree planting project in 2015, I knew I needed some help to do it right, so I once again, called my local NRCS office in Rhinelander," said Hovel. "This is conservation funding, if I take it to roll it into further

conservation efforts, that's what it's for and I am so thankful for the assistance," said Joe. In 2015, through the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program Joe completed some conifer and young hardwood stand crop tree release; creation and retention of snags, den trees and coarse wood debris for wildlife habitat; hinge cutting for wildlife; multi-story cropping; sustainable management of non-timber forest plants and pruning of low density pine trees to improve tree quality and wildlife habitat. "The difference the NRCS programs make are from a landowner doing nothing at all or something ok, to doing something that is exceptionally great for conservation," said Hovel. "NRCS is here to really help landowners meet their forest conservation goals while also do things right the first time, for their private lands," added Borndal. Hovel also worked with NRCS in 2016, through the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program to complete forest stand improvements for wildlife habitat and soil quality. He also continues his work with multi-story cropping and sustainable management of non-timber forest plants on many of his acres.

"The overwhelming, hands down, most important thing to me is to protect this land and these properties with a goal of the land being economically viable and socially attractive for future generations," said Hovel. Land management and conservation are of the utmost importance to the Hovels and they will continue to work tirelessly to meet their natural resource goals with the help of NRCS.

