

Employee-Farmer Puts Special Emphasis On Conserving Soil, Wildlife

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Three years later, Hicks began working for the previous owner of Double-D (then called Del Chester Farm) owned by Anne Pepper Ashton. Ashton sold the property in 1986 to Gwynne McDevitt.

Hicks, who lives on an eight-acre farmette in West Chester and leases 172 acres of crop farm to Norman Laffey in Cochranville, said that McDevitt has "her heart invested strongly" in all aspects of the farm and the dog training enterprise. As a result, years ago, the farm was converted to small grain and hay cropland to a wildlife farm in order to facilitate training of the dogs.

She also has invested heavily in the soil conservation aspects of the farm, Hicks noted.

Hicks indicated that the half the land is highly erodible, with some land sloping more than 30 percent in some spots.

Conservation practices are vital.

The hilly, rocky land presents many challenges to the groundkeepers — they have to maintain switchgrass strips for the many quail and pheasants and food crops to support the extensive wildlife.

There are a total of 131 acres in wildlife upland habitat management, wildlife refuge tree plots (consisting of Norway Spruce, juniper, and barberry), managed meadows, brush management, fencing (the farm is completely bordered), stream crossing, heavy use area protection, hedgerow planting, and prescribed burnings. The Hicks have installed 80 acres of a conservation cropping system, contour strip cropping, and grasses and legumes in rotation, according to the district. There is also a one-acre grassed waterway, 12 acres of no-till switchgrass seedings, one acre of critical area plantings, and 131.9 acres of crop residue use.

Through the years, Hicks has been helped by his son, Jay, a

senior in ag and bioengineering at Penn State and a member of the Delta Theta Sigma fraternity.

At the farm late last week, Jay was busy preparing an additional 25 acres of land purchased by McDevitt that will be converted to training ground.

When John Hicks speaks to school children, he emphasizes the importance of water quality. He likes to equate the streams on the farm, he said, with the human body.

The human body is a metaphor for the farm. Hicks uses the analogy of the skin as a covering (the

grasses protecting the soil) for the body, which pumps good blood through the veins (the water transportation and purification processes of the land).

While using environmental sound ag practices, Hicks believes that as farmers, they can "still remain afloat in these tough times." In the process of converting from strictly dairying to maintaining land for wildlife, Hicks said he had to "relearn and rethink" agriculture.

As a result, instead of worrying about seeding times, the weather, and harvest logistics, John and Jay

Hicks spend a good deal of time looking at wildlife management. That includes managing the deer.

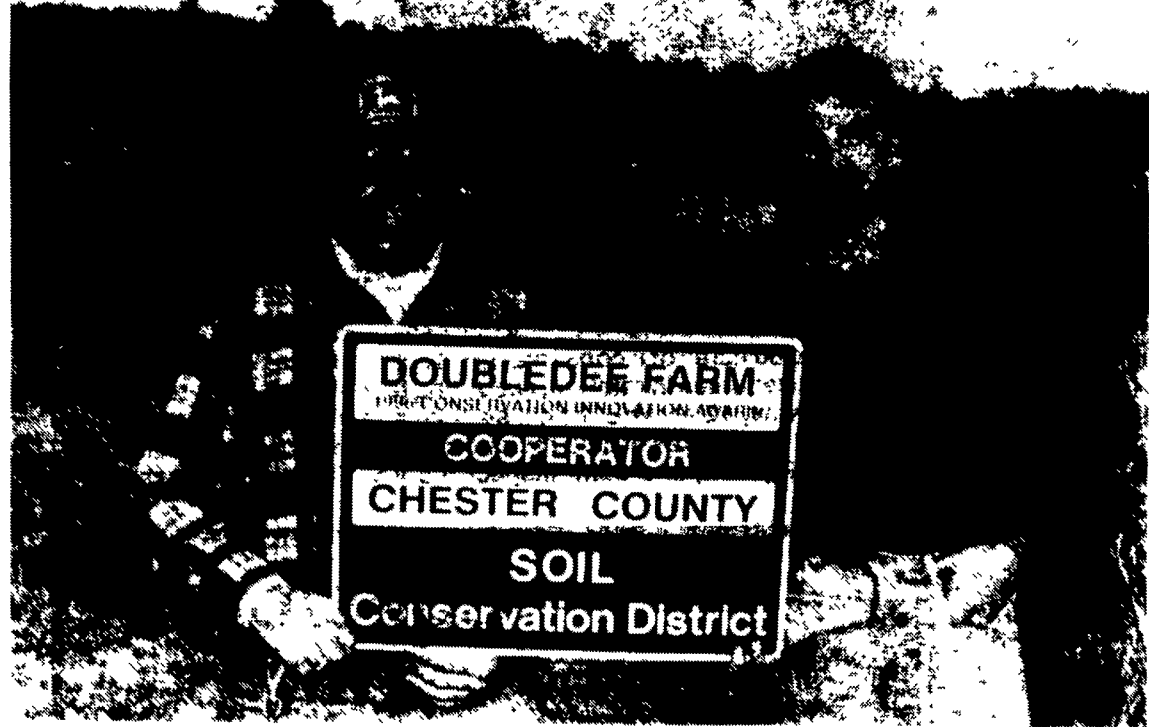
"We're overloaded with deer," said John. To keep the deer population in line, the farm relies on the work of Tom Marsh, formerly with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, to hold structured hunting outings each year.

Small mammals and other wildlife — such as raccoons, groundhogs, fox, and skunks — have to be kept in check with traps set up by Marsh. The worst predator is the common house cat, a real chal-

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Regarding the implementation of conservation practices at the farm, Hicks noted the work of Tim Small, with NRCS. Small's work of laying out the fields provided the basic outlines of the constant "food and cover, food and cover" system in place for the wildlife, Hicks said.



For his efforts as manager of the Doubledee Farm owned by Gwynne McDevitt, John Hicks, left, was honored with the 1996 Conservation Innovation Award by the Chester County Conservation District, presented to the farm in January at the county crops day. At right is his son, Jay.

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