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[Website link](#)

[Watch Michael Thompson's conservation story](#)

Michael Thompson Receives Kansas Leopold Conservation Award

Michael Thompson of Almena has been selected as the recipient of the 2022 Kansas Leopold Conservation Award®.

Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes farmers, ranchers and forestland owners who inspire others with their dedication to land, water and wildlife resources in their care.

In [Kansas](#) the award is presented annually by [Sand County Foundation](#) and national sponsor [American Farmland Trust](#), with state partners: [Kansas Association of Conservation Districts](#) and the [Ranchland Trust of Kansas](#).

Thompson grows crops and raises beef cattle at Thompson Farm and Ranch in Norton County with his father Richard, and brother Brian. He's a vocal advocate for soil stewardship among other farmers and ranchers. He was announced as the recipient of the award at the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts' 78th Annual Convention in Wichita, and receives \$10,000 and a crystal award for being selected.

“Michael’s passion for conservation and improving soil health serves as an inspiration to farmers and ranchers across Kansas,” said Mike Beam, Kansas Secretary of Agriculture. “His commitment to sharing his experience and knowledge with others makes him very deserving of the honor of being a Leopold Conservation Award winner.”

“Michael’s passion and drive as a leader in the soil health movement is contagious. He is always learning and sharing his knowledge and experiences with others,” said Dan Meyerhoff, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts Executive Director. “Michael exemplifies the extraordinary commitment celebrated by the Leopold Conservation Award.”

“Congratulations to Michael Thompson regarding his selection as the 2022 Kansas Leopold Conservation Award recipient,” said Chelsea Good, Ranchland Trust of Kansas Chair of the Board. “RTK is pleased to recognize great advocates for and practitioners of conservation, such as Michael Thompson.”

“These award recipients are examples of how Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is alive and well today. Their dedication to conservation shows how individuals can improve the health of the land while producing food and fiber,” said Kevin McAleese, Sand County Foundation President and CEO.

“As the national sponsor for Sand County Foundation’s Leopold Conservation Award, American Farmland Trust celebrates the hard work and dedication of Michael Thompson,” said John Piotti, AFT President and CEO. “At AFT we believe that conservation in agriculture requires a focus on the land, the practices and the people and this award recognizes the integral role of all three.”

Earlier this year, Kansas landowners were encouraged to apply (or be nominated) for the award. Applications were reviewed by an independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders. Among the many outstanding Kansas landowners nominated for the award were finalists: Ray and Susan Flickner of Wichita, Kevin Karr of Emporia, and Glenn and Barbara Walker of Brookville.

The first Kansas Leopold Conservation Award was presented to Sproul Ranch of Sedan in 2015. Last year’s recipient was Dwane Roth of Holcomb. View all recipients at www.SandCountyFoundation.org/Kansas

The Leopold Conservation Award in Kansas is made possible thanks to the generous support of American Farmland Trust, Kansas Association of Conservation Districts, Ranchland Trust of Kansas, Sand County Foundation, Farm Credit Associations of Kansas, ITC Great Plains, Evergy, Kansas Department of Agriculture (Division of Conservation), Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, Kansas Forest Service, McDonald’s, The Nature Conservancy, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service and a Kansas Leopold Conservation Award recipient.

In his influential 1949 book, [*A Sand County Almanac*](#), Leopold called for an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage, which he called “an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.”

Sand County Foundation presents the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 24 states for extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation. For more information, visit www.leopoldconservationaward.org.



ABOUT MICHAEL THOMPSON

Like the five generations before him, Michael Thompson grew up knowing the challenges of farming and ranching in northwest Kansas. There were crop failures brought on by harsh weather. Michael also remembers the scars left by tillage on semi-arid soil.

As young adults, Michael and his brother Brian were told there wasn’t a future for them at Thompson Farm & Ranch. However, the avid learner and experimenter knew there had to be a different (and more profitable) way to grow crops and raise cattle.

Michael began researching land stewardship and soil improvement. He knew his family's land could no longer afford to lose more topsoil from wind and rain. After seeking out peer groups across Kansas, he soon saw the benefits of growing a diverse rotation of cover crops, using no-till practices and rotational grazing.

Keeping farm fields covered with growing vegetation year-round would infiltrate water instead of letting it wash away. Michael admits he was no fan of cattle in his youth, but he's come to see their role in a holistic, regenerative system. Their manure delivers nutrients to native rangeland and his corn, soybean, and wheat fields.

He started small with a few acres of cover crops and some electric fencing. Grazing cover crops provided another source of feed for beef cattle, and provided an unexpected benefit of giving existing pastures and rangeland more time to rest and grow between grazings. The extra rest produced a more robust and diverse stand of native grass species.

Growing cover crops coupled with a no-till system improved earthworm activity and soil life. An increase in nutrient cycling allowed for less fertilizer use. Improved water infiltration meant crops and forage grew even in years of drought.

Ultimately, rebuilding worn-out soils proved essential in allowing Michael and Brian to return home to farm with their father, Richard.

Michael shares his knowledge and lessons learned with other farmers and ranchers. He's a founding member and chairman of the Kansas Soil Health Alliance, president of No-till on the Plains, and a supervisor on the Norton County Conservation District Board.

Michael, who worked as a kindergarten teacher for a dozen years before returning to the farm, now shares his conservation experience with thousands of people each year at local, statewide, regional and international conferences and field days.

He also serves as a mentor in the Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) program that connects Kansas farmers and ranchers to improve water quality. He encourages his mentees to examine what goes on underground. In extreme droughts or after heavy rains, Michael often digs below ground to examine root structure and worm channels. He teaches others that what happens deep within soil determines what grows above ground, and good soil management is key to enduring the weather extremes.

Despite being part of the National Association of Conservation Districts' Soil Health Champions Network, Michael doesn't claim to be an expert. He humbly claims the path to lasting success is often through failure. His peers say this makes him an authentic, accessible, and passionate voice for conservation.

Michael exemplifies the leadership qualities needed in agriculture to better steward its greatest resource, the soil.

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LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD PROGRAM

The Leopold Conservation Award is a competitive award that recognizes landowner achievement in voluntary conservation. Sand County Foundation presents the award in California, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and in New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont). www.leopoldconservationaward.org

SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

Sand County Foundation inspires and empowers a growing number of private landowners to ethically manage natural resources in their care, so future generations have clean and abundant water, healthy soil to support agriculture and forestry, plentiful habitat for wildlife and opportunities for outdoor recreation. www.sandcountyfoundation.org

AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

American Farmland Trust is the only national organization that takes a holistic approach to agriculture, focusing on the land itself, the agricultural practices used on that land, and the farmers and ranchers who do the work. AFT launched the conservation agriculture movement and continues to raise public awareness through its No Farms, No Food message. Since its founding in 1980, AFT has helped permanently protect over 6.5 million acres of agricultural lands, advanced environmentally sound farming practices on millions of additional acres, and supported thousands of farm families. www.farmland.org

KANSAS ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

The Kansas Association of Conservation Districts is a voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit, incorporated organization composed of members from the conservation districts located throughout Kansas' 105 counties. Through partnerships with federal, state and local entities, the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts has brought together groups that share the common goal of wise and efficient conservation practices that protect Kansas' natural resources. The Kansas Association of Conservation Districts promotes and supports the establishment of programs dedicated to conservation and the organized development of Kansas land, water and related resources. www.kacdnet.org

RANGLAND TRUST OF KANSAS

The Ranchland Trust of Kansas is a private, non-profit organization founded by members of the Kansas Livestock Association in 2003. The organization was created to provide assistance to rancher and landowners who desire to conserve their land with conservation easements. Guided by their mission to preserve Kansas' ranching heritage and open spaces for future generations through the conservation of working landscapes, the Ranchland Trust of Kansas values a commitment to conservation, respect for private landownership, integrity, organizational excellence and collaboration with those who share their values. The Ranchland Trust of Kansas remains an affiliate of the Kansas Livestock Association. www.ranchlandtrustofkansas.org