



Zelle's Goal: Help the Landowner, Help the Land

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Editors note: This is one in a series of stories about DATCP employees and the work they do.

MADISON – Drew Zelle is from the government, and he's here to help. Really.

Zelle works with farmers and local governments to design and build conservation structures. "I want to make government more palatable to people," he says. "I want to make sure they understand their options, and understand how things will affect them. When I drive away, I like the feeling of leaving something tangible there."

Zelle has worked for nearly 20 years as an environmental engineering specialist for the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. He is one of 10 such field specialists, all either agricultural engineers or environmental engineering specialists. With a field office in Appleton, Zelle and his office partner, engineer Matt Woodrow, cover an 18-county area that stretches from Sheboygan County north to Marinette County, and from Door County west to Wood County.

"Drew is exemplary in the way he works with producers and landowners. He's able to address their concerns and find solutions that protect natural resources in a technically sound and cost-effective manner," says Todd Boehne, leader of the departments Conservation Engineering Unit and Zelle's supervisor.

"I plan, design and do construction on conservation practices in the agricultural and urban landscape," Zelle says. Those practices include wetland restoration, ponds, dams, and lake shore and stream bank protection. Soil conservation structures such as terraces and grassed waterways are also among the practices Zelle helps farmers design and build. Recently, he says, animal waste has been one of the primary issues, and he's designed a lot of manure pits.

In each case, the process is the same. There's a problem, he helps find a solution, and then inspects the final results to be sure the environment is protected.

"It's very seasonal work. We're busy from April through November, so we start early and work long days," Zelle says. "I'm in several counties on any given day."

"I like to work directly with landowners. I like to sit down at the kitchen table, look at the problem and work through the whole process," Zelle says, describing the best part of his job. "The average project length is two years. It takes that long for the landowner to think about how to do it."

He shares office space with the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS, and works closely with county land conservation departments or LCDs. "We partner with NRCS and county LCDs. I can't emphasize that enough," he says.



Drew Zelle joins a DATCP team at a recent Habitat for Humanity work day.

ZELLE—ADD ONE

"One of the best experiences I've had on my job was when I designed and installed a large dam upstream from Little Green Lake in Green Lake County. The lake association, county land conservation department, DNR, DATCP, and the local landowners all came together to do this project," Zelle recalls. "It took three years' worth of planning and discussion, but in the end, it kept sediment from several hundred acres of cropland out of the lake, yet didn't diminish the cropland. The dam is a few hundred feet long and 26 feet high and was somewhat intimidating to design and install -- just big enough to keep you awake at nights during big rain events. Twelve years later it's still there and hopefully will be there for a long time."

In fact, he came to DATCP from the Dodge County Land Conservation Department, and prior to that, worked for the USDA Soil Conservation Service, now known as Natural Resources Conservation Service. He holds a civil engineering technician associate degree from Fox Valley Technical Institute.

Zelle also serves in the Wisconsin National Guard, as he has throughout his career in public service. He is a Command Sergeant Major for the 105th Cavalry Squadron of the 32nd Infantry Brigade— the Red Arrow Brigade. In that capacity, he has been deployed to Iraq twice, in 2005-2006 and 2009-2010. The first time he was based in Kuwait, doing patrols into southern Iraq. On his second tour, he was based in Basra Province, meeting with local farmers and government officials to discuss security and the services the United States could provide.

It wasn't that different from his day job, he notes. He was there to help, just like when he's doing his job here.

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