



WILD LUPINE, J NORMAN JENSEN FOREST PRESERVE  
HUNTER CEJKA, CONSERVATION PLANNER

JUNE 2025 NEWSLETTER

# AGROECOLOGY + INNOVATION MATTERS

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The Capacity Building Initiative promotes bottom-up agroecology, fostering sustainable innovation at the local level, and sharing progress through Agroecology + Innovation Matters (AIM) initiative communications.



# CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

## CHARLIE COLE



Charlie Cole, Monroe County Conservation Planner.

Monroe County Conservation Planner Charlie Cole has always naturally gravitated toward leadership roles, beginning with his first paid job as a nature instructor for the Boy Scout Camp at age 14. He said, “So I taught nature-related, environmental-related merit badge classes to the other Scouts, and one of them was soil and water conservation. So, I always say this was my first job... I just got back into it.” On June 24<sup>th</sup> he will be participating in a Soil and Water Conservation Society webinar entitled Conservation Voices | What Tomorrow’s Conservationists Need Today Featuring SWCS Emerging Leaders.

Shortly after high school, Charlie began his 9-year career in the insurance field. At age 17, he started going to insurance school and took the test to become licensed at 18. Since his grandparents own a mobile home insurance company in California, and his mother worked in insurance for her entire career, he was a third-generation insurance agent. He started off in Orange County, CA selling mobile home insurance, and sold homeowners and auto insurance after moving back to the St. Louis area.

Then he worked for a farm mutual insurance company doing inspections on farm buildings and equipment that were insured and putting a value on them. During this time, he helped the company create a better system for their inspections. He said, “I was the only one doing it, and it was a very inefficient process, so I got them to buy a drone and to get me licensed. So, I went to flight school and got licensed to be a commercial drone pilot. So, I came up with the whole like software and standard operating procedures and everything for using this drone to do insurance inspections on farm properties.”

While working in insurance, he started homebrewing as a hobby. At the time, he was living with two homebrewers who taught him how to do it in their garage. He began educating himself as much as possible from online resources and joined a local homebrew club where they had monthly meetings and gave each other feedback. He said, “And then I found out there was competitive homebrewing where you could send in your beer and get evaluated and win medals and things, so I got really into that, and I won over a dozen awards the year before I became professional.”

Over the years, he has worked at nine different breweries. His first professional job in the brewing industry was as an assistant brewmaster at a Hofbrauhaus, which originated in Munich, Germany and created the brand Oktoberfest. They have locations across the world, and he worked at one in Belleville, IL.

After being involved with Boy Scouts as a teenager, Charlie now enjoys participating in these activities with his own children, mentioning that his daughter is particularly engaged in Scouts. Although he has always very much enjoyed for this type of work, he was not aware there were career opportunities like this that would be a good fit for him. He said, “It’s always been something that I have had this background passion for, but never imagined that there were actual careers out there for it. It always seemed like a very niche thing, that you had to go to school for a very specific thing, and



then there were only a handful of jobs for those specific people.”

Since the landowners and producers that he works with come from such different backgrounds than him, he likes being able to build these connections and learn from them. He said, “I’ve always been a city boy. I live 10 minutes away from St. Louis and grew up between St. Louis and Orange County, and I never really experienced the rural life other than when I was doing insurance inspections, but I wasn’t very face to face with those producers and landowners like I am today. Just finding out what their needs are, what their wants are, and the passion that they have for their environment, for their land... that it’s not just this money-making thing, that they need to put back into it for it to continue to be successful. That was a very eye-opening experience of just trying to learn their world.”

Since Charlie joined the AIM Initiative in March of 2023, he’s now able to do CRP status reviews on plans that he worked on two years ago. He said, “I get to see these pollinator plots, and I get to see these native prairie plantings and waterways, and none of these things were a part of that landscape until I helped plan them. So that’s a really rewarding thing to see. And knowing what their actual purpose is and what resource concerns they are addressing... Knowing that they’re not just there to look pretty, they’re doing so many good things. And that it came from me having to learn a whole new skill set and to learn all the ins and outs, the standards and specs, and get job approvals, and to be able to give the right knowledge to these people to put the right practices out there.”

When new people start working in his office, Charlie takes initiative to show them the ropes, including showing them how to get signed up on AgLearn and taking them to do status reviews. He said, “Just kind of teaching them what I’m looking for and the different species that I’m able to pick up on and things like that. So, I kind of do a shadowing thing anytime somebody new is brought into our team.



And that’s something nobody asked me to do, it’s just something that I naturally gravitate toward.”

Describing his district, he said, “I work in a great district. I work under a great DC that has really given me a lot of opportunities for training. Anytime there’s any training available... if I ask for it, I get to go, and sometimes he will find things for me to go to. So, he’s always helping me advance quick... quicker than a lot of people probably did in our program.”

District Conservationist Andy Schlichting said, “To me, he’s basically one of our soil cons because he’s learned enough to be able to take on so many things, and he always wants to learn as much as he possibly can. He wants to make sure that he has all the information to do it the right way the first time. He’s very, very good at speaking with clients and making sure that they are very informed and knowledgeable on whether it’s a good aspect or bad aspect and what they might need to do... He’s always up for learning how to do something if it’s something new, so we really enjoy having him on staff.”

He’s also part of the wetland monitoring team in his district, so he does wetland monitoring with the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC). Anytime he’s working on a wildlife habitat-related project, he works with Pheasants Forever. Describing the different organizations he collaborates with, he said, “That shared knowledge is not just helpful, but completely necessary to finish something correctly.”

Shortly after joining the AIM Initiative, Charlie became involved with the Soil and Water Conservation Society, joining their Emerging Leaders Program, which allowed him to figure out how to apply the skills he gained through previous careers and experiences to the conservation field. His capstone project for this program was a presentation called Kegs for Conservation, which he has already presented multiple times to different groups. He has three more presentations booked in Illinois for this summer, and he will be presenting it at the Soil and Water Conservation Society’s International Annual Conference in Costa Mesa, CA in August, where he will also receive the Emerging Leader award.



# THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

## SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

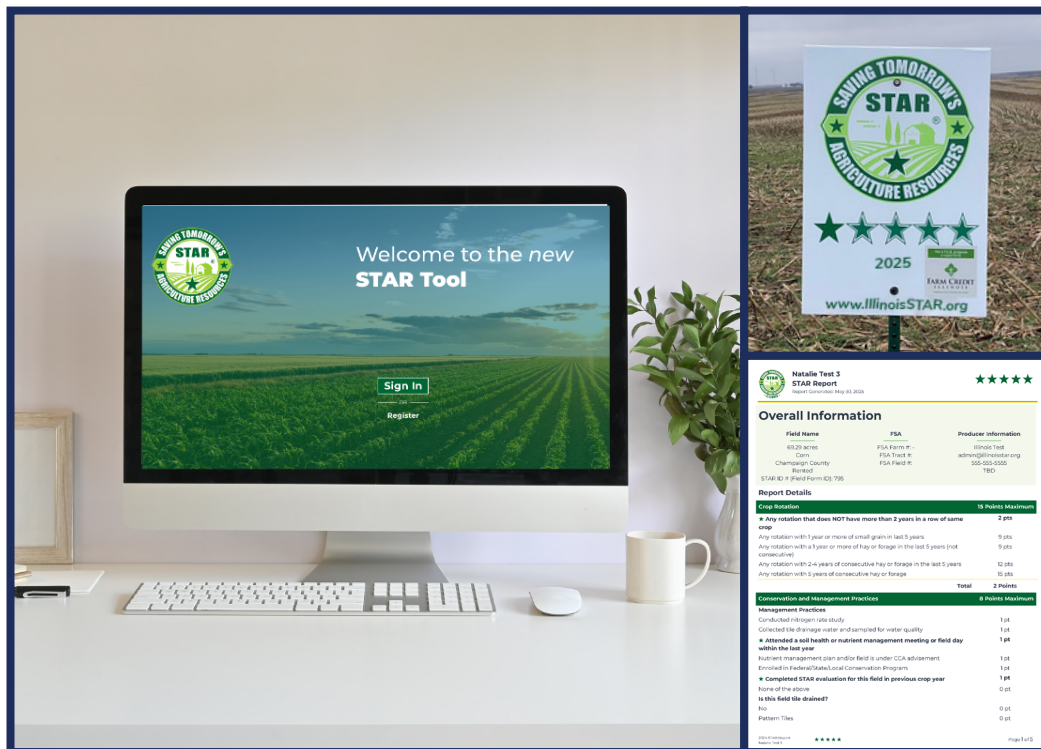
Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator

### TAKE A BREAK FROM THE CHAOS: START CROP YEAR 2025 WITH STAR

Let's be honest - it's wild out there. Markets are volatile, input prices are unpredictable, the weather is doing whatever it wants, and the headlines aren't much better.

But here's some good news: not everything is out of your control.

As you wrap up decisions for crop year 2025, the STAR Tool is a quick, satisfying way to take stock of what you can control - your management practices. STAR is simple, free, and actually kind of fun (think: BuzzFeed quiz meets agronomy). Just make an account and answer a few

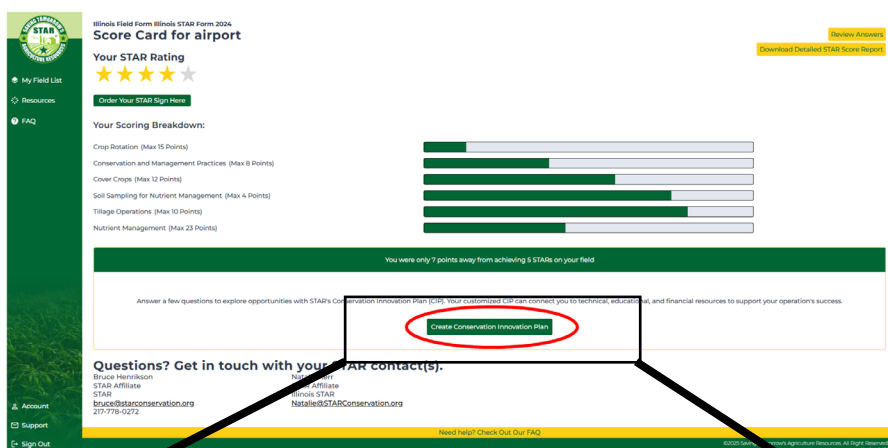


For the crop year 2025, use the STAR tool online at [www.STARtool.ag](http://www.STARtool.ag), and you will receive a Score Report and a STAR Rating (with a free STAR Field Sign)!

questions at [www.STARtool.ag](http://www.STARtool.ag) about what you did in the field, and you'll get a STAR Rating (1-5 STARs), a Score Report that shows how you earned your points, and ideas for what could come next. You can also request a field sign showing your STAR Rating - it'll be mailed to you for free. It's a fun, simple way to take pride in your stewardship and let others know that you're making thoughtful, proactive choices.

It's factual, credible, and actually makes you feel good. It rewards you for the real conservation work you're already doing, whether that's including wheat or cover crops in your rotation, thoughtful nutrient management practices, or dialing back tillage. You don't have to be in a program or have a perfect field to use STAR. This is a tool for real people doing real farming.

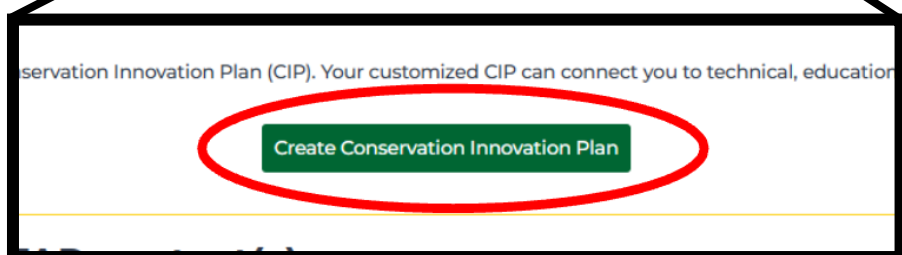
And if the STAR Score Report gets your wheels turning, if you're curious about how to try something new or what options might fit your field, you've got backup. The Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) walks you through additional ideas and connects you directly to technical, financial, and educational resources based on your unique situation. Your STAR Score Report also includes contact info for your local STAR Navigator, a conservation expert who can help you think through your options, and provide technical assistance, connect you



to programs relevant in your area.

You can always access your own data - and that can be a real asset. Your STAR Rating and Score Report give you a credible, science-based way to showcase your conservation efforts without handing over sensitive records or having to painstakingly explain every decision you made in crop year 2025. If you use STAR for multiple years then you can demonstrate improvement or consistency, too. Your STAR assets are a great tool to share with buyers, landowners, or lenders who care about stewardship and want to see real, field-level information.

Worried about privacy? Don't be. STAR was created by farmers for farmers. Your information stays private. The only people who can see your



Access to the Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) can be found in the STAR Tool after submitting STAR field forms.

answers are STAR admin staff and STAR Navigators, and only to help you if needed. Everyone with access signs a strict Data Use Agreement - your data belongs to you, and individual data is not shared without your direct permission. Each year, a subset of fields is randomly selected for verification. If your field is chosen, STAR may follow up to confirm the practices you reported - just a straightforward check that helps keep the program credible and trustworthy. It doesn't affect your Score and your data still stays secure.

There's enough in farming that's unpredictable. With STAR, you've got one tool that helps you focus on what is in your hands - and maybe even enjoy the process.

Check it out at [www.STARtool.ag!](http://www.STARtool.ag!)



# FEATURED LANDOWNERS- MATT & ANNA SCHWEIZER

## WATERLOO COUPLE GETS CREATIVE WITH KARST GROUND

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Located about half a mile north of the [Illinois Caverns](#), the land that was recently purchased by Matt and Anna Schweizer has very unique characteristics, and they are making the most of it. Rather than trying to repair the sinkholes on their property just southeast of Waterloo, they are working with what nature has provided to create a wildlife habitat, selecting species that prefer to grow in these conditions. They are also excited by the discoveries they are making by working with archaeologists, biologists and geologists to identify what is on their land. Matt said, "We have found what may very well end up being a cave on the property back in the woods, and we are working to see how far that can go."

District Conservationist Andy Schlichting said, "Monroe County is probably one of the few places, if not the only place, in Illinois that has a very large number of natural sink holes. Surface water drains into underground aquifers, water sources for various things." He added, "Just pull up Monroe County on the Web Soil Survey site and scroll around a little bit. Once you start seeing areas of the county, it looks like a bunch of bombs were dropped from the sky and made a bunch of divots in the ground. That's the sinkhole areas, because that's what they look like from the air. It looks like somebody just dropped a bunch of bombs, and they went off making a bunch of little circles."

Since all the sinkholes are in the woods of their property, they are not currently posing a safety threat. Anna said, "We've been working with some of the more experienced cavers and spelunkers in the area to try to open up one of those more promising looking sinkholes to see if it's potentially people-worthy or if there's something that is worth trying to manage better. Like there's a salamander in Illinois that's pretty rare to see, and you know, they are only located in a few places... so that is something we could potentially have, and how do we make the place that we have habitable for as much wildlife as we can manage?"

While searching the land with these scientists, they have been finding many objects from the 1950s and before that were thrown out by farmers. Anna explained, "As they were coming out to do a workday with us, they were pulling out a whole bunch of junk that's been found in some of the sinkholes on the property. Farmers in the area just culturally tossed stuff into those pits, because what else are they going to do with it? So, we're clearing out as much of the junk as we can... both the trash junk, but also the invasives."

When they first moved, their entire property was covered in bush honeysuckle and tree of heaven, so the first couple years of their plan just focuses on removal. Anna said that so many people asked her why she would want to get rid of the honeysuckle because it is so pretty and smells nice. While she agrees with these points, she said, "When you realize that's all that's back there... there is nothing else. We didn't have mushrooms, there weren't any gooseberries or shrubby plants. There are tons of plants that are beneficial and just never going to happen, including the oak tree, which is super important for all wildlife. Now the little sapling oak trees can't get enough sun, so they can't grow, and then you just have a dying forest."

In April of 2024, they received a conservation management plan from a Forest Ecologist with the Illinois Natural History Survey, which includes invasive species removal, brush management, tree thinning, tree and shrub planting, and eventually a prescribed burn. They have also been working with Monroe County Conservation Planner Charlie Cole, who has drafted a plan that includes conservation cover in the form of native prairie grass planting and wildlife habitat planting with a mix of over 40 native forbs, legumes, and grasses. Although their EQIP application has not yet been selected for cost-share, they have already begun some of this work. Their forest management plan identifies the soils on their property as either eroded or severely eroded, including Homen silt loam with 5 to 10 percent slopes and Ruma silty clay loam with up to 25 percent slopes.

In their wildlife habitat, they hope to attract primarily quail, turkey, and deer. In addition to building a wildlife habitat, they are hoping to eventually establish a food forest for themselves,



The Schweizer Property in Waterloo.

explaining there are so many trees that could be useful to both them and the wildlife, including natives like persimmon and pawpaw trees.

Along with the work they are doing on their property, Matt and Anna own Hopskeller Brewing Company in Waterloo. Matt knew Charlie professionally in the brewing world long before he was their Conservation Planner and did not know that he had transitioned to this career until after they submitted their application. He said, "He ended up just from sheer happenstance being in our office, and he knew my name from the application. He has been incredible to work for, great human being." Anna agreed, adding, "He gave me a few websites to start the process of trying to figure out what type of seed we want to use for our native prairie grasses." During the day, Anna performs X-rays, CTs, and MRIs as a radiological technologist. After work, they do not have much time to spend outdoors, which is an additional reason they would like to build a habitat that can care for itself.

Prior to their current careers, both Matt and Anna worked as teachers, and they are very excited by the prospect of their land being used for educational purposes. Matt said, "One thing we get really excited about is the idea of having space for people and groups to be able to do research... whether it's with the caves or geology or even if something archaeological presented itself. We've been very, very, very open, even with SIU Carbondale... you know, if you ever have a project, go for it here."

While working in Randolph County years ago, District Conservationist Andy Schlichtling worked on some sinkhole stabilization projects, which involves installing a pipe to replace gully erosion that's causing soil loss. Since their sinkholes are all in the woods, they are not worried about trying to repair the ground for now. They were told there was once a decent sized pond on the property that suddenly drained overnight, but in meeting with the Speleological Society, Anna learned that trying to fill these holes can occasionally cause bigger issues. She said, "They were talking about caves as being something that a lot of people want to plug up. But if you try to plug it, what ends up happening is like you're putting a thumb on a fire hose, or your hose in your backyard... you're concentrating the water pressure, and so it's blasting faster and creating more of a problem than if you had just left it alone in the first place or even opened it up."

Matt said, "What's neat to me about karst... superficially there's really not much you can do with it, right? It's eroded, it's not great for farming, it's not even all that ideal for ranching, but it's a huge part of why our part of Illinois is so beautiful, right? There are so many things that just thrive in it, and it's neat to take something like that and really see what it can do."

# CONSERVATION IN THE CLASSROOM

## PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION

We need to inspire, educate, and provide more opportunities for the next generation to enter the agroecology workforce. From elementary school to college, we need to foster interest in natural resources, teach the importance of conservation, and provide young people with the requisite tools and pathways to pursue further education or professional opportunities in related education, trade, science, etc. fields.

The goal of **Conservation in the Classroom** in the AIM Illinois newsletters is to provide classroom and community engagement resources regarding featured conservation agriculture topics. We “aim” to support educators in discussing these vitally important topics and fostering excitement for the future of agroecology with their students.



This month's lesson plan is “Where Does the Water Go? Exploring Watersheds and Conservation.” In this lesson, students will investigate how watersheds function and the impact of agricultural practices on watershed health. Through interactive simulations, students will analyze how rainfall, land cover, and soil type influence water movement, runoff, and infiltration. Using the Model My Watershed - Runoff Simulation, they will explore real-world conservation strategies to protect water quality and minimize erosion. By applying their findings to scenario-based challenges, students will develop evidence-based solutions for sustainable land and water management.

[Lesson Plan Download Folder](#)







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## AGROECOLOGY + INNOVATION MATTERS

The AIM project was initiated through a state/federal leveraged funded Capacity Building Initiative between the Illinois Department of Agriculture and the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Services (NRCS). Our 40 Conservation Planners and Coordinators aim to enhance soil health, reduce nutrient loss, maintain clean waters, and bolster the advancement of best conservation practices by collaborating with NRCS field offices, soil and water conservation districts, producers, and landowners across the state.

Our team strives to communicate best practices stories and provide educational resources for our community. AIM empowers producers and landowners to explore agroecology and innovative infield and edge of field practices like cover crops, conservation tillage, vegetated buffers, grassed waterways, prairie strips, and constructed wetlands.

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