



September 2026 Newsletter

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.



AGROECOLOGY + INNOVATION MATTERS UPDATES REFLECTIONS ON THE ILLINOIS STATE FAIR

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate & Conservation Planners

The AIM Initiative had a booth in the Illinois Department of Agriculture tent at the Illinois State Fair from Friday, August 14 to Sunday, August 23, and some of our Conservation Planners traveled from different parts of the state to share information about our program and facilitate our scavenger hunt, which included a \$50 Amazon gift card raffle for those who completed. We would like to congratulate Anna from Effingham County on winning the raffle! The following reflections are from three Conservation Planners who spent plenty of time staffing our booth.



Courtney Lercher, Scott County Conservation Planner

This year, I worked at our fair booth Tuesday through Friday. While working, I was able to interact with a diverse mix of the public since each day of the fair supports a different cause or group. As Conservation Planners, our duty at the fair booth was to promote our scavenger hunt for the kids and inform the public on our role in both agriculture and conservation. There were many great interactions with the public throughout the week, but one really stuck out for me.

We met a local family who was interested in converting cropland and wooded areas into something that would promote native species, but they weren't sure what options were available. Nick Werries and I were able to walk the family through the process of the CRP and CREP programs, options for them to consider, and each step they would need to take if they were interested in this route. By the end of our conversation, we were able to connect them to additional staff and resources to help get their conservation journey started. Interactions like this one are just one of the things we do daily in our line of work and really help us get our conservation message across to the public, who often don't know about the services we provide.

Nick Werries, Sangamon County Conservation Planner

The State Fair is one of my favorite times of the year. It is a tradition like many others, and it allows us a chance to see livestock, Conservation World, and (of course) the food. It also gives us a chance as Conservation Planners to show the work we have done throughout the state. It provides the opportunity to explain the conservation work we do. Most of the people who I speak to are not farmers themselves, so it is nice to talk to people who may not know the work farmers do for conservation. I also had a chance to talk to farmers on their progress implementing conservation practices and CRP. I enjoy hearing stories from farmers and producers participating in the conservation programs from the struggles they may have with invasive species to the successes they have had. Talking with producers, pollinators and native grasses seem to be some of the most popular practices.

Jamie Harris, Clark County Conservation Planner

Upon arriving at the IDOA tent for my shift, I first purchased a frozen apple cider slushie from the Illinois Specialty Growers booth. Amazing, by the way! I remember one family in particular as we discussed our program. They asked how they could sign up for a “Wildflower Program,” and we explained to them that we offer many programs through NRCS/SWCDs and invited them to stop into their local office so we could discuss with them the steps needed and help them get started with the right program to address their specific resource concerns. Our public outreach about our program and how all of us Conservation Planners throughout the State of Illinois can assist in addressing resource concerns and providing education on current programs was very beneficial to promoting conservation and “Keeping Working Lands in Working Hands.”



Clark County Conservation Planner Jamie Harris and Sangamon County Conservation Planner Nick Werries

Overall, the Illinois State Fair was a great opportunity to connect with people from across the state, share the work of our Conservation Planners, and highlight the many ways agriculture and conservation go hand in hand. From answering questions to sharing resources and speaking about conservation practices, our team was proud to be part of the fair and looks forward to returning to next year.



Montgomery County Conservation Planner Chris Emerson, Communications Coordinator Delaney Akers, and Program Coordinator Bella Tryon



Cass County Conservation Planner Alex Daniel and Sangamon County Conservation Planner Nick Werries



CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

DAVONNE LONG

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Although she started as the Wayne County Conservation Planner in October 2023, Davonne Long's work in conservation dates to the late 1990s when she completed a high school internship with Wabash County SWCD. While she worked on similar projects back then, including CRP and terraces, the work was quite different, as the SWCD was not yet using computers for designs, and all projects needed to be drawn by hand. Along with this experience, Davonne regularly utilizes her degree in Plant and Soil Science from SIU Carbondale.

Prior to becoming a Conservation Planner, Davonne worked in a factory for Champion Laboratories assembling different filters (air, oil, fuel, etc.) for everything from lawn mowers to airplanes. She spent over 11.5 years working second shift and frequently worked 12-hour days, from 3 pm to 3 am. Describing why she has been enjoying this job more, she said, "I find this job interesting, and there's always change. There's always something new to do. At the factory, it's just the same thing over and over every night... It's just so much repetition, and it can get kind of old."

Davonne believes the producers in her district are on the more innovative side. She said, "A lot of them are really on the front lines of some of this new technology, the new ideas, and the new science that is coming out." She said one specific producer will frequently apply a new practice to a 20 or 40-acre field and compare the outcomes to his other fields nearby.

Edwards County Resource Conservationist Michelle Piller said that Davonne has been helpful due to her education and background in plant and soil science. She said, "She knows more about soils and things like that than I do. So, in that respect, she's very beneficial to me. I always like to ask the question 'why?' If we're doing something, why are we doing it? And she's very good about answering that.... When I'm struggling with something, she jumps right in and shows me or tells me how to do it."

Wayne and Edwards Counties are also unique in their ability to secure cost-share funding for producers, with both counties receiving a significant amount of money in EQIP contracts through Act Now. Michelle said, "We went out. We advertised. We let farmers know that this plan is here, and they came in. I mean, we worked up until the absolute last minute."



Wayne County Conservation Planner
Davonne Long



Terrace photo provided by
Davonne Long

Davonne is currently working on verification for these contracts, which include cover crops, crop rotation, no-till, reduced till, and nutrient management. She has completed Wayne County and is now focusing on Edwards County, with over 200 tracts to be reviewed between both counties. With nutrient management, producers just bring paperwork to be verified into the office, but the rest of the practices require site visits, including multiple per year for some. Describing this work, Davonne said, “Later in the fall, after the cover crop gets planted, then you go out and verify that the cover crop has been put on. And then once you verify that it has been put on, they bring in their seed tags, and you verify their rates are to NRCS specs.”

When asked about the biggest lessons that she has learned in this position, Davonne said, “If you don’t know something, tell the producer you don’t know, but will try to find out. Don’t try to fabricate an answer that you don’t know.” Michelle also highlighted Davonne’s ability to locate information for producers, saying, “She’s a good resource as far as finding anything. If she doesn’t know, she will look it up, and she will find it.”

Davonne hopes to eventually apply her skills to a career with NRCS or IDNR. Michelle seemed confident that Davonne will succeed in any job moving forward, saying, “She’s a hard worker, and she gets her work done, that’s for sure.”



Terrace photos provided by Davonne Long



THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

STAR Farmers join project to determine how soil health may increase land value

IL STAR is thrilled to be partnering with Delta Institute on a project that is paving the way for soil health to be factored into farmland valuation. Compeer Financial and the Soil Health Institute are the other major partners in the Soil Health Appraisal Project, which has selected 12 tracts of land from Piatt, Logan and Macon counties, a region that was identified for its uniform soil types largely unaffected by urban sprawl or changing land use. IL STAR producers in these areas were contacted to gauge interest in this project, and we were happy to identify six different STAR farmers who will be participating!

Lucas Chamberlain and Gillian Chesnut, Resilient Agriculture Programs Staff for Delta Institute, are the primary coordinators of this project. Describing the importance of this project, Lucas said, “One of the big barriers to farmers adopting conservation practices is there are a lot of upfront costs and risks. They may be worried their yields are going to take a hit or they can’t afford equipment. If risk is the big issue, and it’s related to financing, is there somewhere in the financing process that we can demonstrate that soil health is mitigating risk? The value of their land might be improved so they might have greater equity. They have more collateral if they are trying to get a loan, and ultimately, we would love to see if there is less risk.”

When asked about why they decided to partner with STAR on this project, Lucas explained, “That was a very easy decision. What we learned in previous iterations of this pilot project is we want to see what is happening on farms where conservation is happening. We did not have the network of these farmers. We worked with STAR before on previous projects, and we admire the work you all do. And we wanted to also help reward some of the STAR farmers with a little something extra.” In exchange for their participation, farmers will receive a free land appraisal and soil health report showing how their soil compares to other soils in the study region.



Soil sampling during previous Soil Health Appraisal Project

Gillian added, “When I first started learning about STAR, something that made me assured in our decision to work together is that STAR’s online rating system and platform is free. For people who may not be involved in the ag sector, it can be really tempting and exciting to make your own version of something like this. I like that STAR does not overcomplicate.”

Dan Liptzin is the Research Soil Scientist with the Soil Health Institute who will be collecting and analyzing soil samples and preparing reports for the landowners. Describing their role, Lucas said, “They help us ensure that our soil sampling methodology and soil tests are replicable and standardizable. We want to ensure that anyone can do this in any location.” Currently, he’s preparing to collect samples from the 12 tracts that were selected for this project. Describing the potential impacts of this project, Dan said, “Property appraisal already includes some static soils information based on maps that may be decades old. We are hoping that soil health measurements, including the local context and the management history, can be incorporated into the appraisal process to reward farmers who have healthy soils.”

Andy Weidner and Ethan Koch are the Real Estate Appraisers with Compeer Financial who will be conducting the appraisals. Describing why they wanted to become involved in this project, Andy said, “Ethan and I became involved with this project because soil health is becoming a more visible part of how the market perceives farmland. This is often tied to a farm’s long-term productive capacity; however, this characteristic has not traditionally been addressed in a consistent, market-supported way within farmland valuation. As both agricultural appraisers and farmers, we are interested in helping examine whether observable and measurable soil-health characteristics could be analyzed within the same disciplined framework we use for other real-property influences.”



Soil sampling for previous round of Soil Health Appraisal Project. Photos provided by Lucas Chamberlain.

Ethan described the additional steps involved in this project and how it differs from traditional land appraisals. He said, “The fundamental appraisal process remains the same: the value conclusion must be supported by market evidence. What differs is the additional effort to understand soil-health management, field-level conditions, and the potential ways those characteristics may affect productivity, risk, operating costs, and purchaser perception. The project requires collaboration among appraisers, farm operators, market participants (buyers / sellers, farm managers), soil-health professionals, and lenders to identify information that is meaningful, verifiable, and capable of eventually being reflected in market behavior, not simply to assume that a particular practice automatically creates a value premium.”

Describing his hopes for the ultimate outcome of this project, Andy said, “Our goal for the long-term is to develop a practical, credible, and replicable framework that allows soil health to be recognized when the market supports it. Ideally, that would give landowners a clearer understanding of how long-term stewardship may protect or enhance the productive utility and marketability of farmland, while preserving the appraiser’s obligation to reach conclusions grounded in market evidence.”

Although individual information will only be shared with participants, the aggregated data and results of this project will be published on the Delta website and possibly other locations. When asked about what he hopes that the public will take from this project, Lucas said, “On the farmer level, I want farmers to feel empowered to keep doing all the hard work they are doing in conservation and know they are supported in that financially. We just want to incentivize the adoption of conservation practices and reward farmers who are putting all the time and money into long-term stewardship. We are very optimistic about the results of this work... that years from now, farmers can use the results of this to show lenders they are lower- risk borrowers, and they will provide them with a low interest rate. We are hoping this can grow.”

Building on the idea of rewarding farmers for their efforts, IL STAR Coordinator Natalie Kerr said, “Illinois STAR exists to support farmers on their conservation journey. Inevitably, cost is a part of the conversation so we are always looking for ways that STAR can bring value to farmers. We currently do that in producer reward programs, but this is a new and exciting opportunity to draw attention to the long term benefits of conservation through soil health. If farmers are making management decisions that improve their soil quality and make their farms more resilient, then that should be recognized in the land valuation process.”

FEATURED PRODUCER SPOTLIGHT

Wayne County Farmer Shares Conservation Success Story

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Continuing his great-great-grandfather's legacy, Greg Dickey started farming when he was only 8 years old. He now grows corn, soybeans, wheat and milo with his two sons, Tyler and Gavin, who each have their own roles on the farm. According to Greg, he plants corn and milo, Gavin plants all the beans and wheat using no-till, and Tyler (who also serves as a Director on their SWCD Board) does all the spraying with a drone and ground rig, along with making drone videos showcasing their conservation farming practices on TikTok.

He has also been involved in several research projects, including a nitrogen rate study with the University of Illinois. Greg said, "I worked on it with my crop consultant, and he was in touch with the university. It showed the sweet spot here is 180 lbs, so I have been on a quest to lower my nitrogen rates for several years. We are running no more than 180. Last year, we got down to 160, and it worked fine in some fields, but others needed a bit more."

His youngest daughter works for the company where they purchase fertilizer, and they have participated in some trials with that company as well, including tissue testing to identify nutrient deficiencies. Although they do purchase some products from this company, he tries to stay away from fungicides and other chemicals. Explaining why he's not a fan of fungicides, Greg said, "I grow white corn, and it seems like it does not need any. All these chemicals are not selective; they kill good with the bad. I'm trying to be careful to not kill the beneficials because then there will not be anything to control them."

He's also President of the Wayne City FFA Alumni, and they have been hosting field days for about 12 years just around the corner from his farm. They had 220 children from seven different schools come to the plots last year for a career day. About four years ago, they started a soil health test plot on 18 acres using three different tillage practices. Across the plot, they use the same seed, herbicides, etc., and the only difference is tillage. They have six acres in conventional tillage, six acres in no-till, and six acres in cover crops (using no-till).

Describing these results, he said, "The first year, the conventional corn was the best by five or six bushels per acre. The no-till was about the same as the cover crop. The next year, we had soybeans, and it had leveled out with everything across the plot. You couldn't tell the difference in yield. Last year was the third year, and it was supposed to be corn again, but we got to the end of June and decided that we didn't want to plant corn at the end of June, so it went to beans again, and it got pretty dry in August."



Greg Dickey speaking at his Cover Crop Field Day. Photo provided by Davonne Long.

I can't remember the numbers for sure, but it was a 20 bushel/acre difference... the cover crop (no-till) was better than the other two by 20 bushels per acre. Pretty eye opening, and that goes along with what you read and what you see... it takes three to four years to really see a difference, and that's what we saw on the third year. We have it in corn this year, and I'm excited to see what the difference is going to be. We're going to try to keep it going as long as we can."

Greg is also continuing a family tradition by serving as the Wayne County SWCD Chair, a role previously held by his stepfather. As Chair for the past 15 years or so, Greg has been hosting field days on his farm and recently held a Cover Crop Field Day on August 18, which gave participants the opportunity to witness a Vortek Air Seeder in action, view cover crop comparisons, and explore a soil pit. Describing the success of the Vortek Air Seeder, Greg said, "I have been cover cropping some of the farm for about 18 years now. About seven years ago, I really committed and bought a seeder. We tried different seeding methods, and everything was hit and miss until I bought this system. We got into a drone so we could get them done by the seeding date. If you get a rain right after you do it, it's good. It is on every time, it never misses."

Greg believes there were about 90 people in attendance and was excited to see many new faces this year. Wayne County Conservation Planner Davonne Long attended the field day and said, "The Dickey family has always been on the leading edge of technology and research. They were one of the first in the area to plant cover crops and have had great success. The Cover Crop Field Day is a statement to how dedicated the family is to promoting the benefits of cover crops and soil health."

Three years ago, Greg demonstrated the difference that cover crops make during a field day where he compared the soil temperature in his field to that of his neighbors. Greg said, "I just went out with a temperature gun with a laser point in the neighbor's cornfield in the middle of August. Pretty hot that day, it was up near 100, but in between the rows, even with the corn tousled, the soil was over 120 degrees. And I went into my field and scraped the cover back, and the soil temperature was under 80... And his, I dug down six inches to find any moisture whatsoever. And as soon as I pulled the cover back, I had moisture sticking to my shoes right there on the surface."



Cover crop images from Dickey Farms,
provided by Greg Dickey.

When asked about other benefits of the conservation practices that he has implemented, Greg said, "So many, many benefits... some benefits are probably not even recognized yet, but the bottom line is you still must make money. And I'm getting more yield with less inputs and not losing any fertility. Not losing any soil. It's a win-win-win."



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AGROECOLOGY + INNOVATION MATTERS

The AIM project was initiated through a state/federal funded Capacity Building Initiative between the Illinois Department of Agriculture and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Our 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 and provide educational resources for our community. AIM empowers producers and landowners to explore agroecology and innovative in-field and edge-of-field practices like cover crops, conservation tillage, vegetated buffers, grassed waterways, prairie strips, and constructed wetlands.

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