



CRIMSON CLOVER & CEREAL RYE
CREDIT: EDWIN REMSBERG AND USDA-SARE

SEPTEMBER 2025 NEWSLETTER

AGROECOLOGY + INNOVATION MATTERS

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.



AIMING FORWARD

UPDATES FROM AIM



Bella Tryon
Grant Coordinator

AIM has undergone some changes as autumn begins to roll in. Isabella Tryon, who joined AIM last October as Program Coordinator, is the new Grant Coordinator as of September 1. Congratulations, Bella!

We have the following message from Bella regarding her new role over the program:

Hello everyone! My name is Isabella Tryon, and I am excited to take on the role of Grant Coordinator. As a fourth-generation farmer, I have a deep connection to agriculture and a strong sense of tradition in my family.

Outside of work, I have a variety of interests that keep me busy. I absolutely love sunflowers, which are not only my favorite flowers but also hold a special place in my heart due to their bright and uplifting nature. Yellow is my favorite color, and it's always been a color that brings me joy and positivity. When I'm not working, you can usually find me enjoying concerts, spending time with family and friends, or cheering on my favorite sports teams.

I'm a dedicated fan of both the Dallas Cowboys and the Minnesota Vikings in football, and when it comes to baseball, I support the St. Louis Cardinals and, of course, any team my little brother plays on. I am incredibly excited to fully immerse myself in this new role and contribute to the success of this grant. Since taking on the role of Program Coordinator in October of 2024, it has truly been an amazing experience, and I'm looking forward to what's ahead in this next chapter!

If you are interested in a position with the AIM program, please contact Bella at isabella.tryon@illinois.gov.



CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

TIM BLACKWELL

Prior to joining the AIM Initiative, Knox County Conservation Planner Tim Blackwell was giving tours of the Lincoln Home National Historic Site as a Pathways intern for the National Park Service. Although Tim grew up in Florida, he moved to Illinois in 2018 to attend Illinois College, where he received his degree in history. Explaining the connection between his previous work and conservation planning, he stated, "History, to me, is that you're a steward of the stories and people's lives, whereas the work we do now—we are stewards of the land and educating people and giving them the resources they need to make the best decisions about their land. So, it kind of went hand in hand."

Tim and his wife recently moved to her family's farm, located just west of Farmington, IL, where he now grows vegetables in their backyard. His brother-in-law is an intern for Dr. Joel Gruver at the WIU Allison Organic Research and Demonstration Farm. He said, "So we talked a lot,



Tim Blackwell
Conservation Planner



and he's trying to bring some of those ideas to the family farm. This is the first year they did cover crops. They did like three acres of it, and they were pretty happy with how it turned out."

Tim was the first Conservation Planner in the program to reach Level 3 certification, and his hard work is greatly appreciated by both landowners and the Knox County Soil and Water Conservation District. Knox County Resource Conservationist Kara Downin said, "He definitely has gained landowner recognition, so landowners are asking for him. Landowners come in, and they know him, so they go right to his desk." Describing his work on CRP, she added, "He's recognized as the go-to person for landowners on that program, which is lovely."



Knox County Soil and Water Conservation District staff.

Describing his role as the point person for CRP in his office, Tim stated, "The most rewarding thing for me is that people are recognizing me, and they will ask me questions about things. And just two years ago, I didn't know anything about this." Tim explained that he loves interacting with the public and giving back to the community. He said, "Public sector work for me is super important, and it's what I enjoy, because ultimately my work is driven by the people who call our phone and knock on our door."

He also enjoys helping with different SWCD events and has assisted with everything from fish sales and plant and tree sales to annual meetings, farm to table dinners, and Envirothons. Tim said, "They're just great people, and I love helping them out. I really enjoy the work that SWCDs do." Describing his assistance with their events, Kara said, "He's very teamwork-oriented, for sure."

Tim has also gone above and beyond his duties by training their Administrative Coordinator on technical skills. Kara said, "He doesn't have to do that, certainly, but he's stepped up and been trying to show her establishment and maintenance status reviews, and he's also worked with her on doing CPO (Conservation Plan of Operation) modifications."

Comparing this work to his previous experience with the National Park Service, Tim said, "I just love





interacting with the public, and it's just a way to give back to the community." His community outreach extends beyond the office too, as this will be his fourth year officiating high school football in central and western Illinois. After playing football in high school, he has taken pleasure in getting back into the sport in this way.

In his spare time, Tim also likes to go fishing, an activity he frequently participated in with his father while growing up in Florida. His father now lives in Northeast Ohio, and they continue to delight in fishing together whenever Tim visits. He said, "There's a series of eight manmade lakes up there that are all managed by a water conservation district, and we'll go out fishing on those. And so, fishing is probably one of my main outdoor activities that brings me outside.

I do love to go hiking and probably pick trails that I have no business doing, but they're a lot of fun to do."

Tim hopes to continue working with SWCDs, potentially as a Resource Conservationist someday. He said, "The soil and water districts get to, based on their Boards, decide what their focuses are. Some of them are very project heavy, some are very CRP heavy, some are very education heavy, and some do all of that." Describing the benefits of his experience with the AIM Initiative, he said, "The stuff I learned in this role perfectly transitions over to a RC role, and you'd be somebody who is fully trained... Someone who has been in the program as long as I have could start on day one, you have job approval authority. I'm a Certified Planner, so I don't have to jump through all those hoops that a new RC would have to."

In reference to his work with landowners, Tim said, "We have a lot of small-scale farmers in this area, and even the ones who have larger operations... They want this land to be around and available for their kids, and so we're an arm to help them facilitate that, and whatever goals that they have if they are conservation-minded, which hopefully they are." While working with these landowners, Tim explained that he tries to "be a sponge" and soak in everything around him. He said, "I have a lot of passion for helping people do what they want to do and accomplish the goals they want to accomplish on their land and giving them the resources to do so."





THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator

WRAPPING UP THE SUMMER EVENT SEASON!

July and August have been full of travel, planning, and partnership conversations. I hope to share a snapshot of those conversations with you here. Despite the funding challenges that the conservation world is facing, I am encouraged that there is still interest, knowledge, and skill in conservation. Our Siemer-STAR Producer Rewards Payment Program saw record-breaking applications, and over 30,000 acres in Illinois have already used the STAR Tool to get their STAR Rating for Crop Year 2025. Over the last two months I've had the opportunity to listen to many different conservation professionals and farmers at in person events and over the phone. I have appreciated those conversations and am entering the fall with them in mind.

SIEMER-STAR PROGRAM, FARM PROGRESS SHOW, VERIFICATION

Cost-Share programs like the Siemer program, the Illinois Department of Agriculture's Partners-for-Conservation (PFC) Cost Share program, Sunrise FS' cover crop program, and others are top of mind for farmers seeking to implement conservation practices on their farms. As CY25 enrollment for the Siemer-STAR Producer Rewards Payment Program wrapped up (the application deadline was August 31st) I spoke on the phone with farmers from Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky to help them submit their fields for the program. Perhaps most memorably was the farmer who described his tenant to me as quite the eligible bachelor! All jokes aside, I especially enjoyed the interest in conservation, curiosity about the STAR Tool, willingness to try something new, and stories about family farms that I heard from many farmers. I was thrilled to subsequently meet some of them in person at the Farm Progress Show and at the 4R Nutrient Management Field Day at Eric Millers' farm in Piatt county! Thank you to those who stopped by my table!



Similarly, as the last round of CY24 verification wrapped up (the deadline was also August 31st), I got to speak on the phone with many of our own AIM Conservation Planners to go through verification documents. The Planners worked with individual farmers randomly selected for verification to gather and submit documentation. While some of the field verifications came with challenges or complications, I was thankful to be working with such dedicated, thoughtful, and detail-oriented colleagues to think through solutions to our problems. Our Planners always had the farmer's experience in mind as a top priority, and were excellent advocates for farmers experiencing unique situations. Some of these Planners also made an appearance at the Farm Progress Show!

SUMMER CONFERENCE AND AWQPF

Prior to the Farm Progress Show the AISWCD Summer Conference brought together SWCD



employees and AIM Conservation Planners from every county in the state, and together we attended conference sessions and soil health training. It was impactful to have everyone in the same place. Working from our separate corners across the state can become isolating at times, and the summer conference really put into perspective how many people are working together to support farmers and improve the soil health and water quality across Illinois. The technical assistance available to farmers through Soil and Water Conservation Districts is truly remarkable. There is a deep

breadth of knowledge, experience, empathy, and passion held by SWCD employees across the state. Unfortunately, state funding for SWCDs is not even at the levels of previous years, let alone

at the funding levels that the Association of Illinois SWCDs (AISWCD) is advocating for on behalf of dedicated employees across the state.

The day after Summer Conference, the Agriculture Water Quality Partnership Forum (AWQPF) that is part of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRs) met with the goal of bringing members together to consider how federal and state funding cuts will impact outreach, education, and adoption of conservation practices by farmers and landowners, and to identify opportunities for members to respond to those challenges by helping to fill resource and capacity gaps. It was good to align with partners and hear the projects and ideas that each organization had.

ISAP LUNCHEON AT THE STATE FAIR



**ILLINOIS
SUSTAINABLE
AG PARTNERSHIP**

Shortly thereafter, at the Illinois State Fair, the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership (ISAP) held their Cultivate Connections Luncheon for the second year in a row. Recently, STAR formally joined ISAP as a member, and I was happy to briefly speak about Illinois STAR at the Luncheon. AgriNews wrote an article about the event, and included a section on my remarks! <https://www.agrinews-pubs.com/news/science/2025/08/26/partners-tout-conservation-efforts-work-remains/>

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I am thankful for all of the connections I made this summer, at both the events I mentioned above and at other events not mentioned here. You, the farmers and the conservation professionals, are the STAR Tool users that Illinois STAR exists to support. While the STAR Tool is housed online (at www.STARtool.ag), it is used on the ground by real people in real situations, often having face-to-face conversations. Thank you to the farmers and conservation professionals across Illinois, I'll see you at the next event!



FEATURED PRODUCER

VERMILLION COUNTY FARM UNDERGOING ORGANIC TRANSITION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON SOIL HEALTH

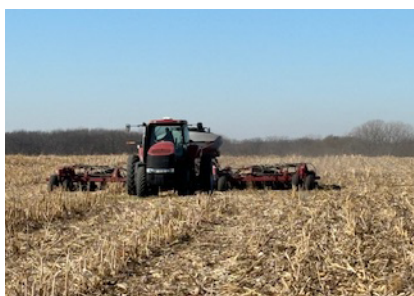
By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Named after their two children, Mica and Alex, MI-AL Farms Owners Tom and Susan Kentner pride themselves in protecting their soil. Although Tom was raised on a farm, and his father and grandfather both farmed, he worked in the ag retail business for quite some time. Describing his family farm history, he said, "Of course back in the 80s, we hit some struggles and kind of got out of the farming business but stayed in the ag supply business. We did that up until about 17 years ago and sold our ag retail business, and then transitioned back into farming. And so, we've been farming this land for the last 17 years."

Along with adopting conservation practices like no-till and cover crops, MI-AL Farms is currently transitioning roughly 40% of their acres to organic. On this land, their crop rotation includes non-GMO soybeans, non-GMO wheat, and corn. Vermillion County Conservation Planner John McNally said, "He is in the process of transitioning part of his operation to organic, which is very rare in Vermillion County. Tom is also very forward thinking about adopting conservation practices, and he is fully invested in building the soil on his farm."



Frost seeding clover with drone



Air drill seeding cereal rye into harvested corn

Describing the organic transition process, Tom said, “We have slowed down with our acreage so we can be more focused on this. The transition is a learning curve every day. That’s what I tell the next generation- we are learning something every day. Probably what we figure out works today is not going to work next year. But hopefully we can get some experience to learn what we should do.”

According to Tom, they have also been using cover crops quite a bit over the past 12 to 13 years, and they have an EQIP contract focusing on cover crops and no-till. In between their wheat and corn crops, Tom plants a cover crop of red clover, which is drone seeded into standing wheat around March. Upon harvesting corn, they also grow cereal rye ahead of soybeans.

They have been increasing their CRP acreage over the past 5 to 7 years. According to John, the sheer volume of CRP contracts on MI-AL Farms makes it unique from others in the area. Describing his experience working with Tom, John said, “Tom has always been a great communicator and very easy to work with. He is always very proactive about making improvements to his CRP... It is clear that Tom values the program very much.”

Tom said that he has also had a very good experience working with John and the Vermillion County SWCD. Describing his CRP acreage, Tom said, “We have some ground that’s got a little bit of a slope to it, so we’re trying to keep our erosion, whether it’s water or wind erosion, down. Because we are very concerned about erosion and losing our topsoil.”

Their pollinator plot contains the **Pheasants Forever IL Basic Pollinator** seed mix, which includes 37 native grass and wildflower species. Aside from CRP, they have also planted a blend of timothy, medium red clover, and tall fescue in their field borders and lanes. Organic certification requires 30 ft setbacks, which is why they have been planting a hay mix in these areas, to provide a buffer from neighboring fields. In addition to this, they have started cleaning out brush under their tree lines, while keeping the good trees to help reduce wind erosion.



Growing cover crop

Tom explained that Mica and Alex, along with their spouses (Jason and Becca), are both active in decision making on the farm. He said, “Our children are very pro stewardship and conservation minded.” They also have four grandsons and one granddaughter, and two of their grandsons have shown an interest in crop production operations.



EDUCATION RESOURCES

As students return to school, we invite all educators to explore the vast array of **teaching resources** that have been assembled by Kankakee County Soil and Water Conservation District. This includes lessons, presentations, and activities that can be done both inside and outside of the classroom. Topics range from soil & water to prairie, insects and wildlife!

Some of our favorites include:

The Scoop on Compost (KCSWCD)

Create a mini composter with a canning jar!

Designed for elementary school students but can be modified for older audiences.

Native Plants & Pollinators (KCSWCD)

Activity booklet with facts about native plants & pollinators and matching games!

Optional presentation to provide more background on pollinators.

Illinois Common Birds (IDNR)

Provides facts on 18 bird species commonly seen in our state.

Includes coloring, habitat quizzes, and fill-in-the-blank word games!



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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RYE COVER CROPS
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