AIM

Agroecology + Innovation Matters

April 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

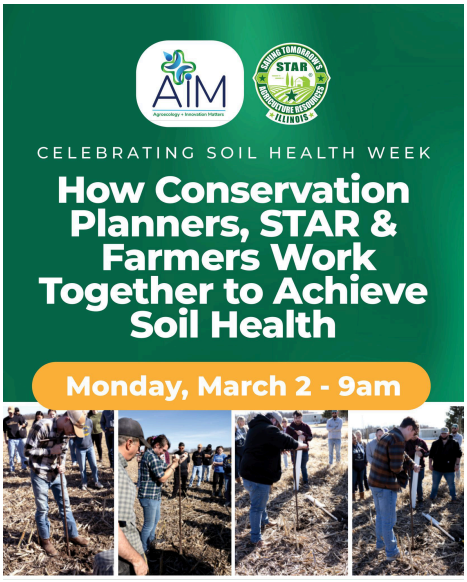
NEWSLETTER RELAUNCH

By Delaney Akers, Communication Coordinator

Welcome back to the AIM monthly newsletter!

We would like to start fresh, bring our readers a new design, and reintroduce our newsletter. We want to keep our readers updated on current events, share stories from our Conservation Planners, highlight the work of Illinois STAR, and feature the innovative conservation practices of Illinois producers out in the field.

On March 2, we kicked off the Illinois Stewardship Alliance's fifth annual Soil Health Week by hosting a special webinar: How Conservation Planners, STAR, and Farmers Work Together to Achieve Soil Health. Along with a couple of our Planners sharing the work they have done with Illinois STAR, we were joined by a Champaign County farmer who has achieved five stars on multiple fields. Learn more about how the STAR program has guided him in selecting conservation practices to improve his soils by watching the webinar here.



This month, we look forward to participating in the Career Spark STEAM Expo on April 14th -15th, where our Conservation Planners will be demonstrating a tabletop rainfall simulator for roughly 2,000 8th grade students, revealing the importance of no-till, cover crops, and careers focused on soil health. We look forward to sharing more about this event in the May newsletter.

As we relaunch the AIM newsletter, we are excited to reconnect with our readers and share more of the work happening across our network. Thank you for being part of the AIM community and for your continued interest in the work we do. Stay tuned for future editions as we highlight upcoming events, share stories from our Conservation Planners, and feature the farmers and partners who make this work possible.

CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

CHAURDA HATHAWAY

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Growing up in the small southern Illinois community of Eldorado, Chaurda Hathaway has always known that she wanted to work outdoors. In June of 2023, she joined the AIM Initiative as the Gallatin County Conservation Planner. On top of this, Chaurda is also working toward her bachelor's degree in forestry at SIU Carbondale, where she has been taking online courses. In her spare time, she enjoys hunting and camping.

Chaurda is currently working toward her NRCS Planner Level 3 certification with a goal of completing the requirements with her District Conservationist by this summer. She works in three different offices but spends most of her time in the Ridgway office working with their soil technician. In McLeansboro and Carmi, she works primarily with soil conservationists.

Paige Steber began working as a Soil Conservationist in the Carmi office on the same day that Chaurda started as a Conservation Planner. Paige said, "She is willing to learn, which is awesome, and willing to help as well. She is pretty determined in getting her work done in a timely manner… She gets the job done, and I know I can count on her to get it done. She's always super helpful and overall great to work with."

Collaborating mainly on forest management plans, Paige said that Chaurda completes multiple documents, including maps and job sheets, that need to be included in the folders. They have also surveyed land together with a soil technician for grassed waterways. Chaurda said that she attended a grassed waterway training a few weeks ago, and she's actively working toward getting job approval to be able to design these herself.

She has also collaborated with colleagues from National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC) on easement monitoring. Describing the benefits of collaborating with different organizations, Chaurda said, "With Pheasants Forever and NGRREC, they are able to do the things that NRCS is not able to do or does not have time to do, but I feel like with everybody who works together, everything gets done on time."

Chaurda said her primary workload is focused on nutrient management plans, and she has noticed the difference these are making in the soil. While conducting soil tests every two years, she has witnessed improvements in the nitrogen and phosphorus levels on farms that have implemented these plans. According to Paige, cover crops, waterways, WASCOBs, and multiple grazing practices are also common in their district.

Paige also stated that having a Conservation Planner helps with managing the workload in their district, which she believes is unique in how well everyone works together. Chaurda echoed the sentiment, stating, "Our soil and water [district] does great with all the programs they have down here, and it just seems like the community really works together. With everything they have going on, I find that pretty amazing. I don't see that a lot."

Fieldwork photos provided by Chaurda.

THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator &
Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Siemer-STAR Producer Reward Payment Program to Continue in 2026

Illinois STAR is thrilled to continue a partnership with Siemer Milling Company (SMC) that has formally recognized and financially rewarded farmers for their outstanding conservation achievements. In 2025, the Siemer-STAR Producer Reward Payment Program (PRPP) awarded $75,000 to 10 producers and 61 different fields. Since it began in 2023, the PRPP has grown in popularity so much that 139 fields spanning over 8,500 acres across Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky were submitted for consideration in 2025. Due to this high demand, not all eligible growers were able to receive payment last year.

The PRPP is open to farmers who have delivered wheat to SMC within the last five years, but corn and soybean fields are eligible for submission, along with wheat fields. The program identifies eligible fields using the STAR tool, and SMC compensates growers on a per-acre basis. Eligibility requires a field to achieve or maintain a 5 STAR Rating or improve at least one STAR from the previous year's rating. The chart below illustrates payment incentives based on ratings.

Change Incentive (one time per Rating)	Payment per Acre
1 >> 2-STAR	$10
2 >>3-STAR	$15
3 >> 4-STAR	$20
Flat Incentive (can receive multiple years)	**Payment per Acre**
5-STAR	$25

Out of the 24 farmers who submitted applications in 2025, 16 qualified for payment. However, due to the $75,000 cap, only 10 were able to receive payment. Since this is a first-come, first-serve basis, early enrollment is highly encouraged. If all 84 of the eligible fields were paid, the payments would have added up to $119,793.10.

Environmental Outcomes

The Illinois STAR Science Committee has developed an environmental outcomes estimation methodology to calculate the impacts of these conservation practices. This methodology estimates non-point-source nitrogen loss avoided (NPS NO3-N Loss Avoided), total phosphorus loss avoided (NPS TP Loss Avoided), sediment delivery avoided, and carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas emission reduction. These calculations are based on the use of cover crops, no-till/strip-till, and applying nutrients below MRTN rates. All reported metrics are calculated on a per-practice basis and are meant to provide an estimate of practice-level performance; therefore, such equations are not additive. This methodology relies on county-specific variables and uses nutrient removal efficiencies for the selected practice out of the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. Therefore, outcomes cannot be calculated for fields in Indiana or Kentucky.

Practice	NPS NO3-N Loss Avoided (lbs)	NPS TP Loss Avoided (lbs)	Sediment Delivery Avoided (tons)	Carbon Sequestration and GHG Emission Reduction (CO_2e) (Tonne)
Winter-hardy cover crops	6,354.10	724.50	2,604.84	864.54
Use of no-till/strip-till		1,703.28	4,694.76	1,916.03
Applying nitrogen at or below MRTN rates	1,283.88			
Applying phosphorus at or below removal rates		291.32		

Early Enrollment Encouraged!

Enrollment for this year will begin in June. Since we anticipate the cap to be reached quickly again this year, early enrollment is highly recommended. Please contact your Siemer representative for further enrollment details. Illinois STAR is very happy to be partnering with SMC once again on a program that rewards producers for contributing to their supply chain without requiring much extra work for the farmers involved, as we understand how much they already have on their plates, especially this time of year!

2026 ILLINOIS LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD WINNER

SHARES INNOVATIVE GRAZING TECHNIQUES

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Greg Thoren has achieved great success on his farm by combining age-old conservation practices with new technology, such as virtual fencing for his cattle, and he and his wife Janis are now being recognized as the 2026 winner of the Leopold Conservation Award in Illinois. Located in the far southeast corner of Jo Daviess County, Greg farms in the Driftless Area where the topography differs a great deal from central Illinois, and a variety of soil types can be found.

Greg Thoren, winner of the 2026 Illinois Leopold Conservation Award

Greg's experience with conservation agriculture dates to his teenage years, as he participated in 4H and FFA with crop and livestock projects and learned about rotational grazing from his father. He said, "We have been very conservation minded. My dad did rotational grazing with bigger paddocks like two or three weeks at a time, and now basically today we are moving cattle daily, and we are doing this with virtual fencing." According to Greg, time saving is one of the biggest benefits of this system. He explains, "If I had to move my cattle daily the way I move them with the virtual fence, it would take me at minimum four hours per day, and I can move them in 15 to 20 minutes virtually."

Over the past 50 years, he has rented various farms within a 10-mile radius of where he grew up, but he has been farming in his current location for about 25 years. Although he does not farm any of the ground that his father or grandfather farmed, he is farming in the same area- just south of Stockton, IL. Greg purchased his first Hereford heifer calf in 1969 or 1970 and believes he paid $225 for it, claiming with a laugh that it would probably cost 15 times more than that today.

Greg's herd is now up to 150 cows, primarily black angus, and they plan to slowly continue growing it. A few years ago, they started keeping their own bulls and using a natural line breeding method. Greg said, "We've been very successful because of the epigenetic effect of the animals that we raise that get accustomed to the way that we handle them, the forages they were in… We're into some grass finishing animals here, and they seem to do very well on the cover crops, the diversity of forages." Greg said he can clearly see the difference that his recent practices have made in the health of his cattle, who gain weight and put marbling on much better than they did 10 to 15 years ago when they were just in larger fenced paddocks and being moved every two to three weeks.

In October 2024, he began using eShepherd, Gallagher's virtual fencing system, which uses solar-powered, GPS-enabled livestock neckbands and an app that allows users to track their cattle any time of day. Greg explained, "You put neckbands on the animals, and everything is done on the cellphone. There's nothing in the ground whatsoever. It's all done by GPS location…. Everything is above the ground, and you can move the paddocks very easily. It will not let the animal go from the old paddock to the new paddock until that group has all been communicated with, so you don't have one going through and the others can't get through."


Greg's cattle wearing their eShepherd neckbands

When cattle get close to the fence line, the neckband will beep at them. According to Greg, over 99 percent of the time, the cattle will turn around once they hear the beep. If they continue to cross the line, it will beep three times, shock them three times, and then turn off. However, they can return to the herd without being shocked, and since cattle are mob animals, they tend to stay together.

These grazing practices have led to visible improvements, including blacker, softer soil with improved water infiltration and less erosion. The cattle work their manure into the soil with their hooves, and he relies on dung beetles and natural soil biology to do the rest of the work. He leaves quite a bit of forage in his pasture, along with residue, to keep the soil moist and healthy.

Greg has also implemented solar corridors by interseeding cover crops into 60-inch row corn. He grows a variety of different species with varying heights, each species making its own unique contribution to the health of the soil. When asked if this practice has affected his yields, Greg responded, "We've had some very good yields off 60-inch corn, and we've had some disasters through the years. This year everything looked relatively reasonable. I actually had up to 200 acres of 60-inch row corn this year out of 1,400 acres total corn, and we will be grazing 60-inch row corn on fields that don't have fences around them this fall. I don't recommend that to everybody, but I feel comfortable doing that as of now. And we've been successful last year doing that last winter, and we're going to expand that so we can get more livestock, get that manure, get that biology from the livestock back on the land."

Greg is also happy to share the knowledge that he has gained from these conservation practices with fellow farmers and agriculture professionals, hosting a variety of different events on his farm, including Nutrient Stewardship Field Days. These are coordinated by Bena Pegg, Environmental Program Manager with the Illinois Farm Bureau. Describing Greg's solar corridors, she said, "The corn may lose a bit in production because of spacing, but the loss is more than made up in cattle health and production. Between the 60-inch rows, Thoren plants cover crops that grow all spring and summer long. By harvest the cover crops have grown to large stands of forage—effectively producing winter feed for his cattle. Not to mention when the cattle graze—they are fertilizing the field and cycling nutrients. The program integrates cover crops, animals, and broad scale agriculture—providing an example of what is possible and a transition point to a more diverse and resilient agricultural system."


Greg's black angus cattle grazing in ditch along roadway

April 2026 NEWSLETTER

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 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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