



CRIMSON CLOVER

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FEBRUARY 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

Groundhog's Day was on Sunday, and with Punxsutawney Phil seeing his shadow we can expect six more weeks of winter. February is also home to Lincoln's Birthday, Valentine's Day, Washington's Birthday, and President's Day. AIM hopes you have a wonderful time celebrating each of these days.

NEW HIRES

In January, AIM added three new Conservation Planners to the program. Branyn Staples joined the Calhoun County SWCD, he has a degree in Environmental Biology & Zoology from Western Illinois University. Union County SWCD saw the addition of Ben Miller, who studied at Shawnee Community College. Elizabeth Thornberry started at Macon County SWCD, and she attained a degree in Environment Studies from the University of Illinois (Springfield).

SOIL HEALTH WEEK

The Fourth Annual Soil Health Week, hosted by the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, is just around the corner! Taking place March 3-9, this weeklong event has organizations across the state coming together to celebrate our state's most precious resource — soil. AIM is participating in Soil Health Week by hosting a Free Lunch & Learn webinar on the AIM program on **MARCH 4TH AT 11 AM**. Three Level 3 Conservation Planners from the program will explain their work, how they collaborate with SWCD staff and other organizations, and how their efforts are improving soil health for producers in their districts. [Learn more here](#) or see page 6 of the AIM Newsletter.

Lunch & Learn: What Are Conservation Planners?

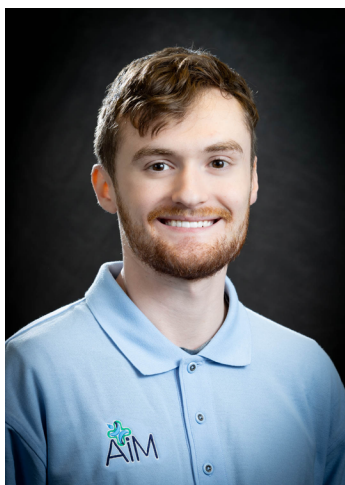


Online - Virtual
Tuesday, March 4th
11am - 12pm CT



CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

NICHOLAS WERRIES



Conservation Planner
Nicholas Werries

Working alongside his father and uncle on their family farm in Meredosia, Nick Werries gained an appreciation for nature at an early age. He described his fond memories of riding in the tractor and helping his uncle plant apple and peach trees. He said, “I helped quite a bit with getting equipment ready for the next season and generally just helping with whatever needs to be done. Usually during harvest and planting season was when I was out there the most.”

In 2022, he received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois at Springfield with a double major in criminology and criminal justice and environmental studies. Shortly after graduating, he began working in ground remediation for Chase Environmental, cleaning up spills from underground fuel tanks around Springfield. In February of 2023, he joined the Conservation Capacity Building Initiative. Nick learned about the program from his father, who practices no-till and has CRP acreage.

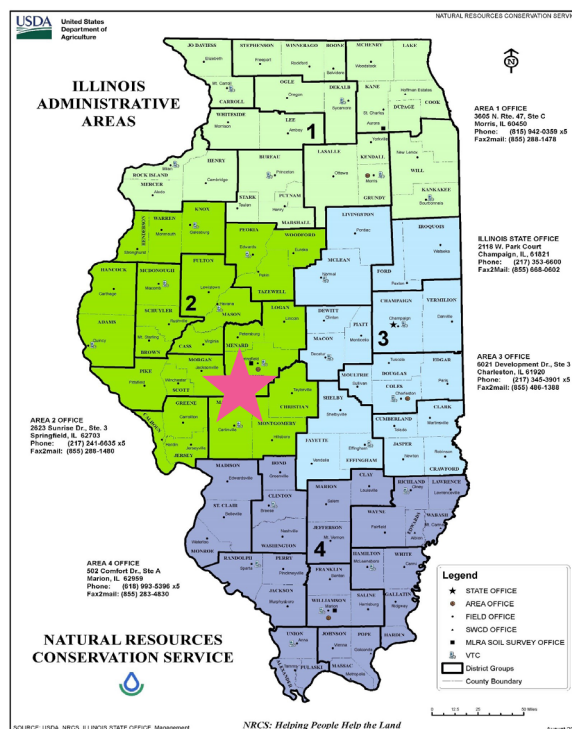
Nick said that one of his favorite practices to work on is wildlife habitats, and he particularly enjoys seeing milkweed growing and birds flying around in these areas. Describing a recent site visit to one of these locations, he said, “I was visiting a wildlife habitat, and I was checking the plants, and I got scared by two deer that were just standing about 10 feet in front of me. They just jumped up and ran off!”

When putting seed mixes together, he said that he needs to frequently consider which plants will work well with dogs, explaining that some have thorns that can get stuck in the dog’s paws and others are toxic to them. He said, “A lot of people around here have hunting dogs, so that’s a big thing people want- to make sure they will be OK. And sometimes they don’t even think of it- so we will ask- ‘hey, are you going to have your dogs out there?’ We always make sure about that.”

Pheasants Forever is one of the organizations their office works with on coordinating seed mixes, and Nick specifically works with Farm Bill Biologist Emilee Hale. He also works with her when he has a producer who needs a fire burn plan. He said, “She does the fire burns in Sangamon County. We can’t really do the fire burn plans, and she’s really good. She will fill out the plans for all those producers.”

District Conservationist Andrew Fulton occasionally accompanies Nick on site visits. Describing their work with farmers, he said, “I would say the biggest success stories are someone having an idea and being able to see it through in a short period of time. They don’t lose sight of what they want that way.”

Andrew took over as the District Conservationist for Logan, Menard, and Sangamon Counties approximately two and a half years ago. Describing how he became interested in conservation, he said, “Our Resource Conservationist in Lincoln taught me how to survey in high school. He found a picture of it from 20-some years ago, teaching me as a high school



Location of the Sangamon County SWCD.



Conservation Planner Nicholas Werries and District Conservationist Andrew Fulton.

and spoke with the students about careers in conservation. During the Illinois State Fair, Nick spent quite a bit of time staffing our AIM booth in the Illinois Department of Agriculture tent, which included a scavenger hunt activity for children, along with sharing information with the public about the Conservation Capacity Building Initiative.

As well as spending time outdoors, Nick said that seeing the plans get completed is very satisfying for him. He said, "I really like the planning aspect of it, and it's just rewarding seeing everything come in on both ends too. I love conservation, and honestly- I don't picture myself doing anything different. It's limitless. As soon as you learn one thing, there's something else here too."

student how to survey. That was kind of the beginning of it with Steve Bracey."

Andrew said another organization they work with is the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC), and Land Conservation Specialist Cody Berry helps with some of the CRP and Wetland Reserve Easement Programs (WRP) plans in Sangamon County. Andrew appreciates the flexibility in the work that Nick can do as a Conservation Planner. He said, "A lot of offices have a lot of different agreements, so it's nice to have someone who can float in between and pick up slack with all of them."

According to Andrew, they have held many different events to educate the public about their programs. He said, "We have tried doing things in machine sheds where one farmer invites the people in their circle. Sometimes the circle isn't that big, which is fine. But the more you have—you don't see the same faces at one event. It's mostly geared around the Lake Springfield Watershed. We do them for lots of other things, but that's what we have been focused on lately."

Nick has also done a fair amount of outreach for AIM. Last spring, he helped facilitate a paint with soils display for 8th graders at the Career Spark STEAM Expo





THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, STAR Coordinator

ADVANCING CONSERVATION WITH ILLINOIS STAR: A YEAR OF GROWTH AND INNOVATION

Over the past year, Illinois STAR (Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources) has continued to grow as a vital tool for farmers and conservation professionals. With the support of dedicated partners like the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District (CCSWCD) and Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), we've expanded opportunities for training, research, and producer rewards—helping farmers advance conservation efforts across the state and gain well-deserved recognition for their efforts.

Founded in 2017 by CCSWCD board members Steve Stierwalt and Joe Rothermel, Illinois STAR has evolved from a local initiative into a national nonprofit, providing a standardized tool to evaluate conservation efforts across different regions and production systems.

In 2024, Illinois STAR launched several key initiatives to expand conservation support:

Expanding Training Opportunities: The new STAR Ready Microcredential Training, developed with support from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was piloted and feedback is being incorporated to perfect the two, short, asynchronous sessions that are part of the training.

Diversifying STAR's Reach: Efforts are underway to adapt the STAR Tool for Urban Agriculture and Specialty Crops, ensuring a broader range of producers can access conservation guidance.

Advancing Data Analysis: Illinois STAR is analyzing anonymized producer data to assess conservation trends, with insights helping inform future program developments to strengthen Illinois STAR's impact.

Rewarding Farmers for Conservation: Through a partnership with The Nature Conservancy and Siemer Milling Company, Illinois STAR provided \$65,000 in payments to farmers implementing conservation practices that resulted in improved or outstanding (5-STAR Rating) environmental outcomes.

Another major advancement in 2024 was the launch of the Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP), a new feature within the STAR Tool. The CIP helps farmers set conservation goals, address production challenges, and access tailored technical, educational, and financial resources. It also provides reports that farmers can share with landowners and lenders to highlight their conservation progress and future plans on a set of fields. The CIP underscores the STAR Tool's value as a comprehensive resource for planning and taking conservation action.

Looking forward, the Illinois STAR Science Committee is finalizing revisions to the field form for Crop Year '25, an Urban Ag working group is forming, and the STAR Ready training is being perfected for Navigators and agricultural leaders to equip them with tools to integrate STAR into conservation planning.



Illinois STAR Science Committee met on January 27, 2025.

At its core, Illinois STAR is more than just a rating system—it's a decision-support tool designed by farmers for farmers. Whether you're curious about your conservation status, looking to plan your next steps, or simply want to join the conservation conversation, the STAR Tool is there for you. It's a tool that grows with you - from recognizing where you are today to guiding where you want to go tomorrow.

We invite you to explore the STAR Tool and see how it can support your farm's success. By working together, we can build a more resilient and sustainable agricultural future.

AIM TO HOST VIRTUAL PANEL WITH LEVEL 3 CONSERVATION PLANNERS DURING SOIL HEALTH WEEK



Conservation Planner
Andrew Parks



Conservation Planner
Courtney Lercher



Conservation Planner
Timothy Blackwell

The fourth annual Soil Health Week will be celebrated across Illinois on March 3-9, 2025, and AIM is excited to be hosting a virtual panel featuring our Level 3 Conservation Planners on March 4th from 11 am to 12 pm! Adams County Conservation Planner Andrew Parks, Scott County Conservation Planner Courtney Lercher, and Knox County Conservation Planner Tim Blackwell will share their experiences working with SWCD staff and producers in their districts to improve soil health. Register here to join us for the panel!

Last year, the AIM team traveled to Springfield, hosted a paint by numbers activity with soil-based paints at the Capitol, attended two soil health rallies, and participated in professional development activities. As visitors contributed to the soil painting, which was an illustration of Illinois agriculture, the Planners shared information about their work in conservation. During their professional development activities, they heard from a few different speakers, including the manager of Enos Park Neighborhood Garden and a local apiary inspector. Sharing her experience, Scott County Conservation Planner Courtney Lercher said, “Last year I attended my first Soil Health Week at the Illinois State Capitol, and the experience was so rewarding. Soil Health Week allows for like-minded professionals to share their passion for healthy soil and inspire new ideas to get soil health practices on the ground. I can’t wait to share and learn even more this year!”

Coordinated by the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, many different organizations host events, both virtual and in-person, throughout the week. Kendall County Soil & Water Conservation District is hosting a few different events, including a virtual book reading of *Erosion: How Hugh Bennet Saved America’s Soil and Ended the Dust Bowl*, geared toward schoolchildren. Other events include a forced air compost facility tour at SIU Carbondale and a tour of Enos Park Neighborhood Gardens near downtown Springfield, focusing on how they maintain healthy soils in an urban garden. There will be a Soil Health Advocacy Day held at the Illinois State Capitol on March 5th from 10 am to 3 pm with a rally at the Lincoln statue at 12 pm and a reception following at DH Browns at 4 pm.

On January 9th, Representative Charles Meier introduced HB0054, which aims to formally designate the first full week in March as Soil Health Week. In previous years, Representative Meier has introduced Soil Health Week resolutions, but this bill would amend the State Commemorative Dates Act, so the first full week of March would be recognized as Soil Health Week each year. Soil Health Week has the power to bring people together, as the health of our soil affects everything from the food we eat to the wealth of our local economies, along with helping to keep our waterways clean and storing carbon. If you would like to host an event for Soil Health Week this year, proposals may be submitted here until Feb. 10th!

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 Conservation in the Classroom lesson plan is Conservation Career Challenge Match, Explore, and Discover! This lesson is designed for grades 9-12 and to take sixty minutes to complete.

Students will identify key conservation careers within plant, food, and environmental sciences in Illinois agriculture. In this lesson, students will match job titles to their descriptions and required skills and analyze how different conservation careers contribute to sustainability in agriculture. As well as reflecting on their personal career interests and pathways.

In this lesson plan package, educators you will find the lesson plan, power-point presentation, game cards (career, description, & employer Cards), My Career Reflection worksheet, and “Career Research Resources” Document.

[Lesson Plan Hyperdoc](#)





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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