AIM

Agroecology + Innovation Matters

October 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

THE AIM INITIATIVE IS HIRING!

By Hannah Tomlin, AIM Initiative Soil Health Outreach Associate

Are you passionate about protecting our natural resources? Would you enjoy working with farmers to improve soil health and increase productivity and profitability of their fields while reducing nutrient loss? A spot on the AIM team just might be for you! AIM is the Conservation Capacity Building Initiative, a partnership between USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Illinois Department of Agriculture, and Sangamon County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), which includes Conservation Planners and Coordinators who manage the program. Conservation Planners work in SWCD and NRCS offices alongside their staff to assist producers in implementing conservation practices.

The primary focus of this initiative is to expand Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS) efforts in Illinois and increase Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) technical assistance, but Planners also work on more general conservation efforts as needed by their specific offices. Planners often perform site visits for CRP and other compliance checks, so there are plenty of opportunities to spend time outdoors in this position! Many have expressed satisfaction with the chance to see the fruits of their labor when performing a site visit for a field after developing a conservation plan for that property.

Biweekly virtual meetings are held with the AIM team, giving Planners the opportunity to touch base with each other and the AIM Coordinators. Guest speakers from different agriculture organizations discuss their conservation work at these meetings monthly, offering professional development opportunities for the Planners. If you would like to see where current Planners are located, please click here. **The AIM Initiative is currently hiring a Monroe County Conservation Planner. To learn more about this position and apply, please click here.** This program is currently operating under a one-year grant extension through August 31, 2027, with the hope of continuing this work if new funding becomes available. More Conservation Planner job postings will be coming out soon in different counties, so if you are hoping to find one closer to your location, please keep an eye on our social media pages and check the next newsletter for updated listings!

CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

JASON MCKINLEY

By Hannah Tomlin, AIM Initiative Soil Health Outreach Associate

Randolph County Conservation Planner Jason McKinley

Randolph County Conservation Planner Jason McKinley grew up in a close-knit farming community where everyone knew each other. During high school, he gained hands-on experience working on several local farms, taking on a variety of tasks—from milking cows and baling hay to planting and harvesting row crops. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a bachelor's degree in business. Jason completed an apprenticeship program with Boilermakers Local 363 and worked with the union for 20 years, eventually serving as president. He then served as president of a building and trades council before moving to Kansas City where he worked for Black & Veatch.

Jason also worked at an insurance agency for several years before deciding that he was ready for a change. He learned about the Conservation Planner program from a friend who worked for the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC) and joined the AIM Initiative in March of 2024. Currently a Level 2 Planner, Jason said the practices that he works on most frequently are filter strips, field borders, grassed waterways, and vegetative fire breaks, along with some tree planning that he works on with the local Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) forester. Speaking on the impacts of these practices, Jason said, "Improved soil health in CRP areas, more terrestrial habitat for wildlife… I feel like filter strips are a good practice for catching a lot of sedimentation, pesticides or nutrients that might run off the field before they go into the waterway."

Jason works frequently with Randolph County NRCS Soil Conservationist Cole Zeller. Describing Jason's work with CRP, Cole said, "I think he's really brought back the technical aspects to the program where it has been kind of lacking in the past. You got to the point where a producer would sign up, sign some documents and be sent on their way. And I think he has really done a good job of turning that around… sitting down with them, having that technical conversation and really making sure they know what they are getting into and know the requirements of the program and that we're all on the same page, and I think it has resulted in better relationships with our customers and better contracts in the end."

According to Jason, working with producers who are truly interested in conservation is his favorite part of the job. He stated, "Some folks just want to get a little income off the land, but there's a good share of landowners who really want to get into the conservation aspect. That is their motivation, and they are the most fun to work with. Just basically sitting down and trying to figure out exactly what they want, what they can handle, and helping them get a plan together that meets their needs, and they are going to be happy with."

Jason is particularly proud of one of his first big CRP project, which included several fields that totaled roughly 70 acres. The landowner had previously leased the land for farming but wanted to get away from the chemicals and focus more on conservation. Jason said, "He took me on a side-by-side ride, and we rode all around the property and looked at stuff, kind of learned the history of the property. I could tell he was proud of the property, and was coming into it motivated by conservation, so that's always nice."

On approximately six plots, Jason developed a plan that included fire breaks and conservation cover, including short grass and long grass, and a very diverse seed mix with lots of forbs established to have something blooming each season. He said, "It was a pretty big one, and it worked out really well. He's super happy with it. It looks really good. I've even had other producers tell me how good it looks." According to Jason, there is a small network of producers in the area who help each other, especially with prescribed burns, and this landowner is part of that group.

Jason McKinley poses during a site visit.

When asked what stands out about their district, Cole mentioned they are fully staffed and have no issues getting all their work done by the deadlines. He said, "So that's always nice, and then we lend a helping hand out to the other districts that are kind of short staffed, so I think that's pretty unique that we are able to get our work done and then help other people."

When asked about his future career plans, Jason said, "I plan on staying here as long as possible or until I'm ready to leave, which would be a few more years, and I am just going to use the knowledge to get better at it every year. And I see that I have. Each year that I go through it, it gets a little easier, and I'm just more knowledgeable of the practices and the whole process."

Jason McKinley studying vegetation on a site visit.

THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Hannah Tomlin, AIM Initiative Soil Health Outreach Associate

Illinois STAR Expansion Highlighted by ISA Partnership

The Illinois STAR program is designed to recognize and reward agricultural producers for implementing conservation practices that improve soil health, protect water quality, and support long-term sustainability across Illinois farms and communities. Through the STAR evaluation process, producers receive a rating based on the conservation practices they use, along with guidance and technical support to help them continuously improve.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture designated STAR as the required soil health assessment tool for all state-funded conservation practices, making it a core component of programs such as the Partners for Conservation Cost-Share program (PFC), the Illinois Healthy Soils Initiative, the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, and the IDOA-NRCS Planner Grant program. Numerous additional programs and entities use STAR to evaluate conservation practices and guide continuous improvement, including the Illinois Soybean Association's (ISA) new collaboration with the program.

On October 15, ISA launched the ISA-STAR Producer Rewards Program (PRP), which offers financial incentives to soybean farmers who participate in STAR during the 2026 and 2027 crop years. The PRP offers tiered per-acre payments to producers who complete STAR evaluations. Payments are based on STAR ratings, including a $3-per-acre bonus for first-time STAR participants. These are participants who have not previously completed a STAR form for any crop.

Producers who do not achieve a 5-STAR rating in Year 1 will have the opportunity to receive support identifying practice changes for Year 2. Those who do not qualify for improvement payments will be encouraged to participate again and can access resources and technical support through the STAR Tool. Improvement payments will range from $10 to $20 per acre for rating increases, with $25 per acre for 5-STAR ratings. Those who increase their STAR rating from Crop Year 2025 to Crop Year 2026 will also be eligible for an improvement payment.

Although producers may receive the flat incentive of $25 for 5-STAR ratings on multiple years, the improvement incentives are only given once per rating for each field. The improvement incentive includes $10/acre for 1>>2 STARs, $15/acre for 2>>3 STARs, and $20/acre for 3>>4 STARs. Improvement payments are paid at the rating level reached. For example, if someone jumps from 1 to 3 STARs, they will receive $15/acre, and any increase to 5-STARs will result in the $25/acre payment.

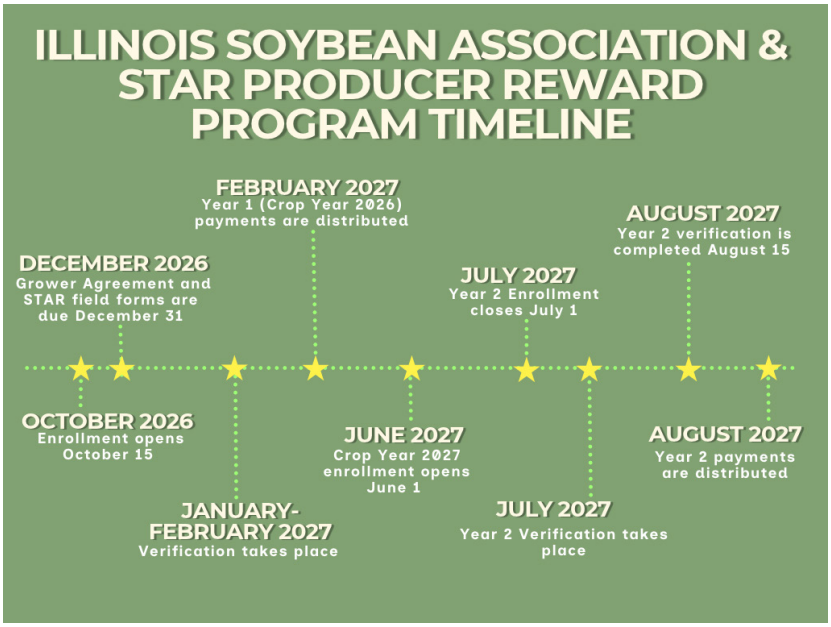
Priority enrollment goes to producers who have never completed a STAR form and are not currently receiving payments from other conservation programs. A 200-acre payout per producer, per year cap ensures the funds are distributed broadly.

Whitney Miller, Agronomic Services Coordinator for ISA, explained how she believes the STAR Tool aligns with ISA's priorities around soil and water quality, resource stewardship and farmer education. She said, "The farmer leaders who guide ISA's checkoff investments have identified conservation, agronomic education, and on-farm profitability as important priorities. The ISA-STAR Soybean Producer Rewards Program supports those goals by providing financial incentives to soybean producers who are already implementing conservation practices and encouraging others to explore opportunities for continuous improvement."

Another example of STAR in action is the successful partnership with Siemer Milling Company. IL STAR Program Manager Natalie Kerr described how PRP's model is based on this partnership and that it is being adapted to encourage more first-time STAR participants. She said, "Illinois Soybean Association's involvement in this project is a great way to engage more soybean farmers in conservation. We have successfully offered a similar reward program for wheat growers with Siemer Milling Company for the last three years and are thrilled to expand STAR Rating rewards to include soybeans. In this ISA program we have taken it a step further by including the first-time completion bonus for those who are new to the STAR Tool but don't qualify for a STAR Rating-based payment. We want farmers to use the STAR Tool to access resources and make decisions that improve farmland resiliency and health."

Explaining their long-term goals for this program, Whitney expressed hope that more soybean farmers will take advantage of the opportunities offered by STAR and increase the adoption and maintenance of practices that contribute to healthy soil. She said, "Ultimately, success means recognizing and rewarding farmers for the conservation work they're already doing, helping them tell their conservation story, and providing tools and resources that support both profitability and long-term stewardship. We hope this program serves as a successful model for future farmer-focused conservation incentive efforts and encourages broader participation in conservation programs across Illinois."

The STAR program continues to support conservation efforts across Illinois, providing a consistent, science-based framework for evaluating soil health and guiding continuous improvement across farms, programs, and partnerships. As more organizations adopt the STAR Tool, including new efforts like ISA's PRP, STAR strengthens collaboration, expands producer engagement, and supports Illinois' long-term goals for resilient soil, clean water, and sustainable agriculture. ISA's PRP is funded with Illinois soybean checkoff dollars. For more information on ISA's PRP, please contact Bruce@STARconservation.org or click here.



FEATURED PRODUCER SPOTLIGHT

Minnesota native moves to Illinois for the soil and contributes to tile nitrate loss research

By Hannah Tomlin, AIM Initiative Soil Health Outreach Associate

Although his family had farmed in Minnesota for generations, Eric Miller relocated to central Illinois to carry on the tradition on more fertile farmland. He explained that he moved here specifically for the good soil and agriculture infrastructure, stating, "East-central Minnesota is poor farm country. It was all pine trees and timber, and then it all got logged off in the late 1800s, early 1900s, and instead of replanting trees and coming back 50 years later and cutting them down again, people actually decided to farm that part of the world, and that was a mistake… So anyway, I thank the generations that preceded me for toughing it out and giving me the opportunity to relocate."

Along with growing corn, soybeans, and wheat, Eric regularly hosts community meetings and educational events on his farm, such as an annual 4R Field Day, Champaign County SWCD's (CCSWCD) Wheat Meeting, and the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership's (ISAP) advanced soil health trainings. Natalie Sutton, CCSWCD Research Conservationist, said, "While participating in ISAP's Soil Health Leadership Program, I was fortunate enough to visit Eric Miller's farm and learn about the nitrogen and water quality research being conducted. I was so impressed with Eric's level of involvement in not only the farm operations but the data collection and presentation of their findings. His passion has provided a place of learning for so many farmers, industry and conservation professionals alike. His farm shows us in real time the benefits of nitrogen reduction in tile drainage through conservation practices like cover crops."

Eric's APV broadcast seeder mounted to corn head

In the summer of 2014, Eric began having discussions with University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) Researcher Lowell Gentry about nitrogen loss through tile flow. They set up their baseline study in 2015 and have been conducting multiple research projects each year since. Eric listed three things that he believes have stuck out the most to him over the course of these studies. He said, "We can very quickly reduce tile nitrate loss in our drainage water, that would be one. It is very hard to get purchased inputs to show an economic benefit, that would be two. When we introduced wheat into the rotation, we found the 3-crop rotation is economically competitive with just a corn-soy rotation, that would be number three."

They are currently working on a study examining how four different tillage practices (no-till, strip till, strip till with a cover crop, and conventional tillage) affect tile water on a 50-acre field with 16 tile lines. This is the fifth year of that study, and he's hoping this research will continue for years to come. Their other two biggest projects are focused on examining different phosphorus products, both broadcast and banded when strip tilling, and studying alternative crops, such as winter canola and winter camelina, as potential cash crops.

When asked what he hopes people will take away from their visits to his farm, Eric said, "From a farmer perspective, I would hope that people will have a takeaway of they can select practices that can have real positive environmental impacts and will be profitable compared to our current production system." He explained that there are many different stages of what people can do when they are evaluating alternatives to a typical corn and soybean operation with conventional tillage and fertilizer practices, adding, "So, I guess that's what I would hope that we could present to the actual producers, that there are alternatives that exist. We can show the benefits of those alternatives, and we can show the economic success of those alternatives."

He also mentioned that he hopes people will walk away with an understanding about the level of involvement from people in the ag industry encouraging conservation practices, stating, "Trying to encourage producers to look at voluntary options versus, if we don't do things, there may be mandatory restrictions on what we can do. There may be legislation, there may be limits to what we can do when we're farming."

Along with participating in Lowell Gentry's research projects and preparing to host the November session of ISAP's Soil Health Leadership Program, Eric has been allowing some students from UIUC Professor Andrew Margenot's lab to conduct an earthworm study on his farm. He said, "They are looking at earthworm populations in different tillage environments or no tillage environments to see if they can use that as a proxy to quickly evaluate soil health… It's kind of a mustard treatment, and they mix that up into a slurry. It doesn't kill the earthworms, but it is an agitant to them, and they will come to the surface to try to get out of the slurry. And they have been counting the earthworms in these tillage sites that I mentioned previously… the no-till, strip till, and conventional till."

Eric has noticed many improvements to his soil because of his conservation practices, including better water infiltration, cooler soil temperatures, less soil loss, and better weed control due to his cover crops. He said, "We have noticed greatly improved weed suppression when we have cereal rye ahead of our soybean crop. Back to the earthworms and the earthworm counts… Much higher earthworm populations in the no till and strip till environments compared to almost no earthworm activity in conventional till. And that gets back to the water infiltration, I'm sure that helps improve that, but also just the cycling of plant residue that we leave on the surface."

Photos provided by CCSWCD Resource Conservationist Natalie Sutton.

Eric's tile gauging stations installed along a filter strip.

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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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