



July 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

AISWCD SUMMER CONFERENCE RECAP

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Representatives from over 20 organizations gathered at the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts' (AISWCD) 78th Annual Meeting and Summer Conference to exchange ideas on agricultural best practices and reaffirm a shared commitment to investing in natural resources and supporting farmers throughout Illinois. AISWCD Executive Director Eliot Clay encouraged everyone to speak with him during the conference and share one change they would like to see in their offices this year, underscoring his commitment to listening to every perspective and using that input to help shape his plans.

This was the first year the conference took place in Peoria, with training being held at the Hilton East Peoria Riverfront Hotel and Conference Center from July 13-15. The topics of these trainings ranged from soil health to grants management and district relevancy. During the Monday evening dinner, the Sand County Foundation presented Greg and Janis Thoren with the **2026 Leopold Conservation Award**, and a video was played featuring the history of their farm, their fenceless grazing system and other innovative practices. To learn more about their farm, please watch that video by clicking [here](#).



Greg and Janis Thoren receiving the
2026 Leopold Award

There were also multiple field trip options, including a visit to Wildlife Prairie Park on Monday morning and an opportunity to see Professor Pete Fandel's Edge of Field Practices at Illinois Central College (ICC) on Tuesday afternoon, which included cover crop plots, a bioreactor, a constructed wetland, and a floating wetland. Showcasing his wide variety of cover crops, Pete said that selection depends on what a farmer is wanting to accomplish. He picked up a sample of hairy vetch to show how much biomass it can produce. Although it is great at fixing nitrogen, Pete said, "My advice ahead of corn is to use one of the other grass plants like winter barley or triticale. They don't have allelopathy. They also don't grow as quickly in the spring, so then you have more time to get it killed before it's going to get out of hand."

ICC's floating wetland consists of 30 islands, each 5 ft by 10 ft, that are connected by a cable. Each island came with pre-drilled holes for planting, and Pete and his team planted eighty 2-inch plugs into each last year. Multiple buoys with sensors measure the nitrate, total nitrogen, dissolved reactive phosphorus and total phosphorus in the pond water, taking readings about every minute. These buoys are strategically placed to measure how much nutrients the roots are absorbing as the water passes beneath the islands.

Explaining their data collection process, Pete said, “In addition to the sensors taking readings every minute, we do some hand sampling in the water every so often to make sure the sensors are accurate. There’s also a water control structure here on the outflow of the pond, the little solar panel right here. There’s a water control device in there that is connected to the overflow, so whenever there is flow going out of the pond, it sucks water out of the overflow pipe, and there are 36 bottles inside this little work box right here. It fills those 36 bottles, and then we have students come and collect those, take them back to our freezer. We freeze them, and once a semester, our Chemistry Department takes all our samples from across the campus, thaws them all out, and we run them in a lab with a discrete analyzer to confirm all the numbers.” He added that this has become a multidisciplinary endeavor, with students from Biology, Chemistry and Ag departments all working on different aspects of the project.

Throughout the conference, it was inspirational to learn about all the work that different conservation professionals are doing. Some of these individuals were recognized for outstanding achievements in their fields at a dinner on Tuesday evening. Below is a list of recipients who were honored at the Award Dinner.



Floating Wetland on ICC Campus

- AISWCD President’s Award – Ashley Curran
- AISWCD Legacy Award – Terry Bogner – Marshall Putnam County
- AISWCD Director of the Year – Kenny Hawthorne – Ford County
- Lawmaker of the Year – Rep. Jason Bunting
- AISWCD Conservation Woman of the Year – Claire Shipp, American Farmland Trust
- AISWCD Conservation Teacher of the Year – Annamaria Farris – Williamson County
- Land Use Council of the Year – Land Use Council #2
- Forester of the Year – Curt Sinclair
- Friend of Conservation – Illinois Soybean Association
- Conservation Farm Family of the Year – Lazy B Farms - Lawrence County
- McKibbon Scholarship – Owen Kocher – Richland County

Come See Us At The Fair!

It is almost time for the Illinois State Fair! Each day of the fair (Aug. 13- 23), AIM will have a booth in the Illinois Department of Agriculture tent from 10 am- 4 pm. Along with meeting our Conservation Planners and learning about our program, visitors can participate in a scavenger hunt that is fun for the whole family! Stop by our booth to get started by collecting your ticket and map and find the AIM signs at different locations where you can punch your ticket. After completing the hunt, head back to the booth to turn in your ticket and win a prize! Those who successfully complete the hunt will also be entered into a raffle for a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift card! For a chance to get an extra raffle entry while on the scavenger hunt, look for an AIM sticker. If you find one, return to the booth and show it to the Conservation Planners for an extra entry into the raffle! We are excited to be a part of the Illinois State Fair once again and can't wait to see everyone who stops by!



CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

ADAM SICKLES

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

On July 27, 2026, Conservation Planner Adam Sickles began working as the new Resource Conservationist (RC) for Piatt County SWCD! After joining the AIM Initiative in October 2023, his colleagues in Piatt County quickly appreciated his contributions to their office. Shortly before Adam joined the office, Bri Gates began working as the Piatt County RC and expressed how helpful he was in sharing the CRP workload. She's now the Horticulture Program Director at Parkland College, and Adam filled her RC position.

Describing her work with Adam, Bri said, "I think he started less than a year after me, so we went through a lot of the same trainings together. So, it has been nice to have him to lean on. Sometimes having a partner when you are trying to learn new things is helpful. He's open to working on things like that. He's working on his RMS plans right now too, so he's making it a priority to get through the Conservation Planner levels. I know he's going to get to the third one, probably this year. He's very proactive."



Adam was born in Germany and lived there for about 11 years while his father served in the Army. His father was then stationed in Arizona before moving to Illinois, where Adam completed high school. Adam continued the family's military legacy by serving six years in the Air Force, where he was stationed in Montana. He later obtained a degree in Human Geography from Eastern Illinois University and originally wanted to become a game warden before learning about the Conservation Planner program.

Currently a Level 2 Planner, Adam said that he mostly works on CRP status reviews. According to Adam and Bri, the most common NRCS practices in Piatt County include cover crops and field borders, along with strip-till/no-till, nutrient management, and (to a lesser extent) grassed waterways and terraces. Describing the role of Conservation Planners, Adam said, "Just being open and listening to the ideas and concerns of producers when they talk to you and having answers for them so they can feel more confident in your work and the government. Giving them that peace of mind."

Piatt County has been successful in building up their NRCS Local Work Group meetings, going from only one person attending last year to 20 participants this year. Bri said she believes these meetings have a direct impact in getting conservation on the ground, explaining that one person heard about the CREP program through that meeting and signed up for it as a result. Describing these meetings, she said, "All our partners are enthusiastic about attending. At the one this spring, the DNR Biologist Stephen spoke about their CREP programs. NRCS was present. We had a lot of representation from our partners, and I could tell that folks attending appreciated that and learned a lot from them."

Along with these Work Group meetings, PCSWCD stays active in the community by attending the farmers market, utilizing Champaign County's rainfall simulator for student presentations, participating in Arbor Day (including sharing trees with 3rd grade students), and supporting DeLand-Weldon High School in establishing their outdoor learning center. This part of the job is the most appealing to Adam. He said, "What I am looking forward to the most in my new position is reaching out to the community more and educating the younger generation on the importance of resource conservation."



Photo provided by Bri Gates,
Former Piatt County RC



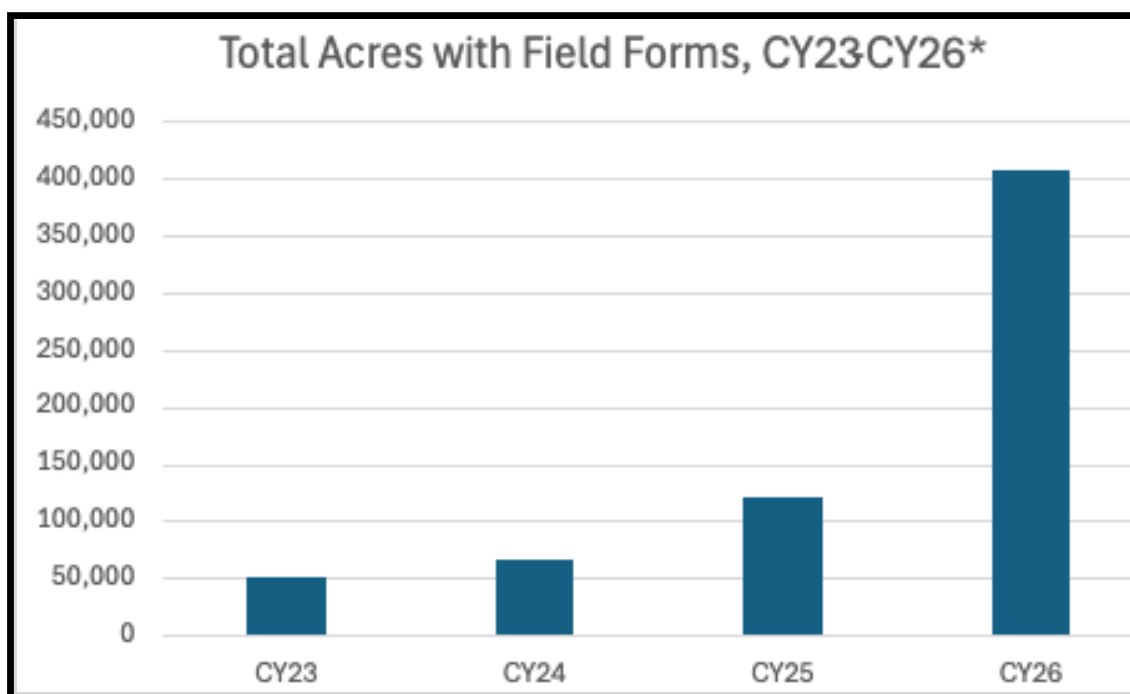
THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

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

CY26 Numbers Soaring over CY25, Revealing Huge Demand for STAR Tool

Less than two months into Crop Year 2026, Illinois STAR has surpassed the total number of acres using the STAR Tool for CY25 by over a quarter million! As of July 21, 654 producers across 89 counties entered field forms, covering 407,046.4 acres. This is tremendous growth, particularly when considering that CY23 ended with just 50,500 acres total for the whole year. CY24 had 67,000 and last year (CY25) had 121,000. The program has grown 140% in enrolled acres in two years (from 2023 to 2025). This is real growth and, while anticipated, is incredible to watch in real time.



*as of
7/21/26

Our Siemer Milling Company Producer Rewards Payment Program also launched on June 1 and already has 95 fields from 15 producers, spanning 4,959.66 acres! Over 3,700 acres registered in the first five days! This is also a huge increase from the one singular farmer who applied when we launched the pilot program in 2023.

The acres that have received STAR Ratings so far for Crop Year 2026 are clear evidence that farmers are pursuing conservation and using the STAR Tool. One of the greatest strengths of STAR is the STAR Navigator network of SWCDs who spend hours advising and providing technical assistance to producers. These Navigators have done so much to ensure that producers receive a STAR rating and meet eligibility requirements for cost-share programs, as over half of them uploaded paper forms for these farmers! We truly appreciate their work and would like to celebrate the progress this program has made over the past 3 years.

Below are some more detailed stats on the current enrollment (as of 7/21/26).

Total Fields: 5,963

Total Producers: 654

Total Acres: 407,046.4

Counties Represented: 89

Crop Types Represented: Alfalfa, Corn, Double Crop Barley/Sorghum, Double Crop Barley/Soybeans, Double Crop Corn/Soybeans, Double Crop Soybeans/Oats, Double Crop Winter Wheat/Corn, Double Crop Winter Wheat/Sorghum, Double Crop Winter Wheat/Soybeans, Durum Wheat, Grass Hay, Millet, Oats, Pasture/Grass, Pumpkins, Rye, Snap Beans, Soybeans, and Winter Wheat

Repeat forms (going back through CY24): 710 <-- *this means that we have 5,253 fields that are first time users of STARtool.ag!*

Average STAR Rating: 3.55

Program Acres

FLASH: 3,724.26

Delta Project: 6.28

FS Cover Crop Program: 94.96

IDOA CPRG: 260,128.15

IDOA I-Cover: 6,054.25

IDOA PFC: 10,693.75

Lake Decatur RCPP: 0

NRCS CSP: 20,901.5

NRCS EQIP: 2,359.88

NRCS Other: 1,629.25

PCM: 30,522.15

Siemer-STAR PRPP: 4,959.66

SWOF: 11,525.15

Sustainability oriented cert: 0

Total acres across all programs: 292,740

Total acres not enrolled in any programs: 114,012.4



2026 STAR Sign Photo

It has been so inspiring to see more and more farmers working to put conservation on the ground and witness the improvements this has made to the soil health and water quality on their land. We are also incredibly grateful for everything that our Illinois STAR partners, Steering and Science Committees, Navigators, Verifiers, Diversified Ag Working Group, family and friends have done to support us in these achievements and look forward to watching these numbers grow as the Crop Year continues!

FEATURED PRODUCER SPOTLIGHT

Everything is Built With Conservation in Mind at Bloomington Vegetable Farm

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Observing the dedication and hard work that go into maintaining The Table Farm and Workshop in Bloomington, Illinois, offers a truly inspiring example of thoughtful stewardship. The fact that everything is done by hand, without even using a tractor, speaks volumes about Kyan Glenn's commitment to the soil. When he purchased the property in November 2019, it was just a house in the country, but he has now transformed it into a 4.5-acre quintessential example of permaculture, with every square inch being utilized.

Kyan began his tour by showing me a small pond that he built near the house, which serves multiple purposes as do most of the structures found on his farm. Explaining his thoughts behind this construction, he said, "The way we built it is intentional because if you look, there's a berm on the backside here. This will catch a two-inch rain event and keep all the water here. So, all the runoff from all my roofs and stuff, it used to come right here and would flood my pasture, and all of that would be unusable for weeks. So, we built a pond, and then we intentionally built this berm on the backside to slow this water and keep it here. Because we have a stable water source, this attracts all kinds of native wildlife."

USDA-NRCS funded two large high tunnels on the property, and the second one was just built last fall. So, this is the first growing season that he has been able to grow tomatoes and peppers in one while housing greens, root vegetables and other winter crops in another. Now that he has two, he can rotate from year to year. The one that houses the tomatoes and peppers also includes basil and flowers, along with juicy cucumbers and the sweetest, most crunchy Hakurei turnips that he kindly shared with me. In late spring, the other tunnel included collards, mustard greens, chard, kale, lettuce, carrots, bush beans, and celery. They also improve the soil in their high tunnels by rotating their chickens through these structures in the winter.

As Kyan explained, "The chickens don't need to come in here during the winter, but the water does not freeze in here. When the tomatoes and whatnot are done here in December, we will put the birds in here for a month or month and a half, and they will completely clear everything out for me, while also fertilizing it. They will be in that one for about a month, month and a half, then rotate to the other one for a month, month and a half. So, we are still getting animal rotation into that cropping system, and I don't fertilize beyond that."



Multi-purpose pond built by Kyan



NRCS-funded High Tunnel

Kyan's farm is Certified Naturally Grown, which provides a more affordable and accessible alternative to organic certification for ecologically minded farmers. The most disturbance their soil ever gets is from a broadfork. The soil is always covered, either with compost or a tarp when a bed is not in use, and crops are regularly rotated across the farm. He uses heavy duty silage tarps to keep soil covered until it's ready to be planted, but also when he needs to flip a bed that has gone to weeds, covering it for a week in the summer before pulling the tarp and replanting it.



Vegetable Row Crops

Another way that he avoids disturbing the soil is by utilizing the Ruth Stout method for growing no-dig potatoes. Explaining how this method works, Kyan said, "You leave the potatoes on the soil surface and bury them in a minimum 8-inch layer of hay, and then when they are done, you just move the hay aside. We do something similar for the garlic, where I barely bury that in the soil and then do a heavy layer of hay, and what I notice is that wherever my garlic is... the following year, my soil is pristine after that. It's so healthy, because it consumes all that hay nutrients." When the potatoes and garlic are done, they use the hay as mulch somewhere else or compost it and fill that plot with a summer cover crop mix that includes Sorghum-Sudangrass, buckwheat and radish.

Kyan utilizes a silvopasture system for his livestock, which includes pasture grasses and apple trees along with an already established timber to provide shade for the animals. Since it is nearly impossible to grow a marketable apple organically, any apples they do not consume themselves are left for the pigs. As we approached the pig pen, they ran to us and squealed with excitement. Kyan explained that Idaho Pasture Pigs are known for being friendly and were bred to have an upturned snout for grazing on pasture. They happily munched on the turnip greens and cucumber scraps that we tossed over to them as we continued our discussion of his rotational grazing system.



Ruth Stout Potato Plot



Idaho Pasture Pigs

McLean County Conservation Planner Johnny Anians visited The Table Farm and Workshop while assisting with Kyan's EQIP application for a high tunnel, which was paired with funding for mulch, wildflower pollinator plots, and bird houses. Describing what he learned about silvopasture he said, "I had heard of the term before and had a general idea of the concept but had not ever (knowingly or thoughtfully) walked through one in action. So, I learned more about that from Kyan as he gave us the tour: how he rotates his animals, reasoning for his species selection, and so on. It also prompted the research bug in me to find out more information when I got back to the office."

Each week, he moves his entire pig system and chicken system (fence, water, shelter) to a new plot, mimicking nature and the way that herds move while being chased by predators. Describing the way this system affects the ground, he said, “It’s pure chaos, followed by a really long period of rest. And that cycle of chaos and disturbance followed by rest is the only way to regenerate soil, that’s what regenerative farming is.”

When everything moves, the chickens go to the plot where the pigs were to clean things up. Kyan said, “When the birds rotate behind, they are going to go through all that manure, scratch through it, pull those flies and larvae out, and spread it out to an appropriate amount. So, I have zero nutrient runoff, all the nutrients are going here into my soil and staying with us.”



Rotationally Grazed Chickens

Kyan has witnessed the difference this system has made in the soil over the past several years, explaining that grass can reach over 15 ft tall in the summer. He said, “It’s amazing how fast they can regenerate soil and bring it back to life. The first year we were here, I did not know any of this. Grass was so small and sickly, and I started panicking thinking we did not have any fertility. One year of chickens, and the grass was up to here. Then we had chickens and pigs, and the grass was up to my head. If I let it grow, I will have 15 to 20 ft grass in a single growing season, and then they come through and eat it in a week.”

Reflecting on his time visiting the Table Farm and Workshop, Johnny said, “It really takes forethought and good planning to design both a productive and beneficial system. It seems like the optimal method for smaller farms since you are fully utilizing the limited space while simultaneously providing habitat and reducing other harmful effects that can come about from conventional setups.”



Plants for Sale in Greenhouse



July 2026 NEWSLETTER

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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