



SOIL HEALTH SUMMIT
KAYLA JEFFERS

APRIL 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

On March 10-11, AIM hosted the Soil Health Summit for Conservation Planners and the Admin Team in Macomb, Illinois. The goal of the Soil Health Summit was to provide the in person lab trainings for those enrolled in Soil Health Courses with WIU’s Dr. Joel Gruver as well as to build team unity amongst the Conservation Planners.

“We chose WIU for this summit because of its strong reputation in soil health research and applied conservation practices,” said Whitney Miller, AIM Education Coordinator. “Throughout the event, participants learned from top experts like Dr. Gruver and gained hands-on experience in various aspects of soil health management—knowledge they can use to help landowners and farmers address challenges they face every day.”



Participants of the Soil Health Summit in the WIU Soils Learning Laboratory.

Across the two day event, participants performed multiple experiments in the Soils Teaching Laboratory as well as venturing to both to a farm where Dr. Gruver and his team has been performing a multi-year study on soil health as well as the Allison Organic Farm. Participants were able to take what they had learned earlier in the day in the Soils Teaching Lab and classroom and apply to what they say in the field.

“We designed this summit to give conservation planners the chance to move beyond theory and truly engage with soil health concepts. From classroom discussions to soil testing in the WIU lab and fieldwork on research farms, every part of the experience was structured to provide practical, real-world applications they can

take back to their work,” Miller said.

As part of their training, Conservation Planners take a variety of courses to further education and reach each Level of certification. AIM took the initiative to provide our Conservation Planners with easy acces to soil classes. “This summit wasn’t just about learning soil health principles—it was about giving conservation planners the tools and confidence to apply them in the field,” Miller said.



AIM Conservation Planners at the Soil Health Summit.

“By working directly with soil samples, cover crops, and conservation systems, they gained hands-on skills that will help them guide farmers and landowners toward more sustainable land management practices. The knowledge and connections made here don’t just stay at WIU—they go back with the conservation planners into their communities. Our goal was to equip them with new insights and practical techniques that they can immediately put into practice, helping to improve soil health and conservation efforts across the state,” she concluded.



Participants of the Soil Health Summit taking part in one of the soil activities.



Participants of the Soil Health Summit.

Front Row L to R: Whitney Miller, Elizabeth Thornberry, Andrew Parks, Ainslee Stroup, Alexander Daniel, Courtney Lercher, Olivia Winters, Chaurda Hathaway, Grace Clark, Kasey Ellis, Leticia Talifero, Taylor Hartke, Ashley Barry

Back Row L to R: Hunter Cejka, Dr. Joel Gruver, Adam Sickles, Reed Best, Charlie Cole, John McNally, Chris Emerson, Shannon Kuffel, Aidan Woltman, Cole Crawford, Branyn Staples, Nick Werries, Ben Miller, Tim Blackwell, John Anians, Aron Virden, Brad Buchanan, Jason Qualich, George Hickman, Michael Devine, Agnes Molek, Hannah Tomlin.



Participants had the chance to retrieve soil samples from the field under the direction of Dr. Gruver.



Dr. Gruver demonstrated two different tests for examining soil in the field.

CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

AIDAN WOLTMAN & OLIVIA WINTERS



Aidan Woltman, former Conservation Planner



Olivia Winters, Conservation Planner

Working in the collar counties of Illinois, Conservation Planners Aidan Woltman and Olivia Winters were like two peas in a pod. Although Aidan was the McHenry County Conservation Planner and Olivia represents Kane County, they were able to split up their workload between Lake, McHenry, Kane, and DuPage counties. When asked about their favorite part of the position, both said, “Working together.” However, after spending two years as a Conservation Planner, Aidan began a new position as the McHenry-Lake County Resource Conservationist on March 20th. Although their local SWCDs had not been involved with NRCS work over the past two years while Aidan was working as a planner, he was excited to share that the SWCDs both in Woodstock and St. Charles recently signed agreements to assist with the CRP program. He said, “I didn’t want to lose conservation planning, because I’m a planner too. I got a lot of job approval authorities. I like this kind of work.” Mentioning that he’s looking forward to picking up the additional duties that come with the RC position as well, he added, “I still want to be working with the producers in as many ways as I can.”

Although many planners across the state focus largely on CRP, Aidan and Olivia said this makes up a very small percentage of their work. Instead, they are working more with producers who have small acreage and focus mostly on EQIP. Aidan said, “CRP probably makes up 10 percent, maybe less, of our overall workload. A lot of the work that we do is helping producers who have, for the most part, less than five acres and are trying to grow vegetables or cut flowers in urban environments. The word kind of spread around throughout our four counties that NRCS is here to help provide cost share for high tunnels... We try to influence these producers to follow through with other environmentally beneficial practices with their high tunnels, and those are usually pollinator habitats, cover crops, sometimes conservation cover if erosion is an issue, but a lot of the times these people are just installing things in their backyard, so we don’t get that practice too often.”

When working on high tunnel applications, Olivia said, “To increase their environmental quality incentives, we usually plan [NRCS Conservation Practice Standard] 420 wildlife habitat planting along with it... It could be .01 acres, it could be 10 acres, but basically it involves wildflowers and native grasses getting planted for the benefit of pollinators. That’s basically, as Aidan likes to call it, our bread and butter.” Aside from high tunnels, producers have come to Aidan and Olivia for assistance with brush management and getting rid of buckthorn and reed canary grass, which they work on replacing with pollinator habitats.

Both said their interest in conservation began in college. While pursuing her degree in zoology at Olivet Nazarene University, Olivia took courses that focused on conservation and worked for a private contracting company where she focused on eradicating invasive species from forest preserves around Cook County. During this time, she learned quite a bit about plant identification and realized how much she enjoys working outdoors. She also worked in the organic preparation department of a lab in Naperville, testing soil and water samples. Shortly after graduating, she started the Conservation Planner position. Describing her love for this work, she said, “I just can’t wait to get outside and conserve soil and water and just help people- because that’s also a big portion of this job I enjoy as well. Not only caring for the environment, but also



Olivia and Aidan at the Kane-Dupage Soil & Water Conservation District

caring for people in the process, and we do that with our farmers.”

Aidan graduated from Illinois State University in December 2022 with a degree in biology and a minor in environmental studies. His interest in conservation began when he took a geography course focused on National Parks, and from there decided that he wanted a job where he could work to preserve natural resources. Describing one of his favorite work activities, he said, “I love doing compliance reviews. It’s just so fun. Once a year in the early summer, we go out and we review these randomly selected tracts that are either highly erodible land or they have wetland in their tract, or it could be both. And you just go out, walk the field, look for gullies, look for any other crazy signs of erosion, at least for highly erodible land. And if you’re looking at a wetland, you’re just making sure that the aerial imagery matches what you’re looking at now and that all the trees that were there maybe 10 years ago are still there now, and just making sure that people aren’t destumping trees in wetlands. So, it’s just a great time to walk around at all these different fields and do some investigating.” Olivia agreed, adding,

“I would echo that. It’s kind of like a puzzle, but an outdoor puzzle.”

They have also been partnering with the American Bird Conservancy on some plans related to RCPP2727- Improving Oak Ecosystems Health in the Great Lakes Region. Aidan said, “We have worked very closely with the American Bird Conservancy to set up forest management plans for our producers in our four counties if they are interested in signing up. And now those forest management plans are coming back to us, and they are looking to install these practices that include brush management, timber stand improvement, tree and shrub establishment, tree and shrub site prep, and other things, but it’s all centered on adding oak habitat for migrating birds... The American Bird Conservancy hired some foresters to help do these plans, so we get to work with them often as well... They really know their stuff. When we go on field visits with them, I always feel like I learn a lot.” While Aidan has moved into his new position, Olivia will continue working on





this project. She added, “We got so many applications, and they all went through. So, we’ve got a lot of forest management plans, and now it’s onto the next step.”

Regarding the importance of protecting birds, Aidan said, “When we do these endangered species reports and get the roster of the species that could be in the area, I’ve been noticing that they are mostly all waterfowl or birds that nest in ponds, and that’s due to us draining these wetlands and creating farm fields with it. So, learning that kind of stuff is really eye opening to me.”

Aidan said that another one of his favorite projects to work on has been focused on Glacial Park, which encompasses over 3,400 acres and includes more than 490 acres of nature preserve. “Glacial Park, in my opinion, is one of the prettiest places in McHenry... So, I get to work with McHenry County Conservation District in creating these things called compatible use agreements, so that they can do their prescribed burns,

they can do trails and walkways and other kinds of maintenance work, so it’s done to NRCS specs and standards,” he said.

According to their District Conservationist Michael Brennan, Aidan and Olivia have provided a great deal of support and allowed their offices to reach a broader population and serve more clients. He said, “Aidan and Olivia have been very open to taking on whatever has been thrown at them. They’ve worked on forest management plans, they have worked on nutrient management plans, they have worked on urban agriculture, kind of a whole array of things.” He added, “We value the opportunity to work with them. They have been a breath of fresh air, so we appreciated having them.”



Both Aidan and Olivia plan to continue working in conservation. Olivia said, “the more I work this job, the more I love it.” Describing the impacts that she believes they are making, she said, “You can do so much just from small changes on your field. Because we are so far up the Mississippi River, and everything basically goes down, I think it’s so important in our state to implement those practices, because Illinois is a huge agricultural state. If we can make a big impact by small changes, I think it’s worth it.”





THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator

STAR NAVIGATORS: EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR ILLINOIS FARMERS

The Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts Act (70 ILCS 405) mandates the use of a soil health assessment for state-funded conservation practices. The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) has selected the STAR Tool to meet this requirement, making STAR a key part of conservation efforts across the state.

To help farmers meet this requirement and get the most out of STAR, SWCD staff will be trained as STAR Navigators—local technical support providers who assist farmers in using the STAR Tool and connecting them to available conservation resources.

WHAT IS A STAR NAVIGATOR?

A STAR Navigator is a local technical expert trained on the STAR Tool to help farmers implement conservation practices. Navigators support producers in using the STAR Tool and play a critical role in guiding them through the process. They also adhere to the STAR Data Privacy Policy and Data Use Agreement outlined in the Navigator Agreement.



KEY RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE:

- Assisting farmers with completing STAR Field Forms including support for entering data into the STAR Web Tool
- Helping farmers understand their STAR Ratings and connecting them to available financial, technical, and educational resources through the Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP)
- Supporting long-term conservation planning by using STAR Reports as a reference tool for future discussions

Q: ARE STAR NAVIGATORS EMPLOYEES OF STAR?

A: No—STAR Navigators are not employees of STAR. In Illinois, they are typically staff from local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), or other partnering organizations. These individuals are trained to use the STAR Tool and support farmers in their region.

Q: WHAT QUALIFICATIONS OR EXPERIENCE DO NAVIGATORS HAVE?

A: Navigators often have experience in conservation, agronomy, or agricultural outreach. Many serve as Resource Conservationists or Educators who already work directly with farmers.

Q: ARE FARMERS ASSIGNED A NAVIGATOR?

A: STAR Navigators are formally assigned to specific regions—either by geography (such as county boundaries) or by project (such as a specific cost-share program). Farmers can connect with the Navigator responsible for their region or project area to get support using the STAR Tool and accessing resources. Navigator access is limited to their assigned regions to ensure farmer data privacy and local expertise.

**LAST CALL TO GET YOUR
CY24 STAR SCORE**



FIELD FORM IS CLOSING APRIL 17TH

GET YOUR FREE SCORE AND SIGN AT [ILLINOISSTAR.ORG](https://illinoisstar.org)





WHAT DOES A NAVIGATOR-FARMER EXCHANGE LOOK LIKE?

At its core, being a STAR Navigator is about building relationships and opening the door to conservation conversations—without pressure or complexity. The interaction can be as simple as:

“Would you be willing to take five minutes to fill out this form? You will receive a report that we can walk through together.”

This small ask sets the stage for a much larger impact. With just a few minutes of a farmer’s time, the Navigator receives a clear picture of what’s happening in the field—planting

decisions, tillage practices, nutrient management – and opportunities for additional conservation activities along with resources for implementation. It’s a shared starting point, not only for evaluating conservation, but for building mutual understanding.

Having the STAR Score Report in hand means the Navigator is no longer relying on memory or scattered notes to recall a farmer’s practices. Instead, they can reference a field-specific, annual document that can evolve over time. If printed, it becomes a working tool—something to bring to the field, jot notes on during a field walk, or revisit at the next meeting.

When paired with the Conservation Incentive Plan (CIP) feature in the STAR Tool, that report becomes even more powerful. Navigators can use it to quickly identify financial or technical resources that align with the farmer’s goals, turning a five-minute conversation into an actionable, tailored plan. The CIP asks the farmer about their goals, challenges, and interests in new practices, then connects those responses to a curated list of relevant next steps and support options.

HOW STAR FITS INTO IDOA’S COST-SHARE PROGRAMS

IDOA provides funding through the Partners for Conservation (PFC) Fund to support conservation practices. STAR provides a framework to help ensure this investment leads to meaningful, long-term improvements.

The IDOA PFC Programs outline that all state-funded conservation practices must include a soil health assessment to qualify for cost-share payments. The STAR Field Form meets this requirement by collecting detailed, field-specific information about management practices that directly impact soil health—such as tillage, cover cropping, nutrient application, and crop rotation. This information is evaluated against a locally adapted, science-based scoring system to generate a STAR Score, which serves as a standardized and practical assessment of soil health outcomes. If another method is used (such as soil health sampling), the cost is the responsibility of the applicant.

This year, the IDOA Bureau of Land and Water Resources has strengthened STAR’s role in the PFC program by asking SWCDs to become IL STAR Navigators and continue to use the STAR Tool for soil health assessments. The PFC-1 form has also been updated to reflect STAR data requirements, including STAR Points, STAR Rating, and STAR ID#, all of which are generated in the STAR Tool.

IDOA sees STAR as more than a cost-effective tool measuring progress on Soil Health activities at the field level — it is a way to connect producers to resources that support long-term conservation success. At the same time, IDOA recognizes the critical role SWCDs play in supporting conservation on the ground and is committed to equipping them with tools and training—like STAR—to make that work more efficient, consistent, and impactful.

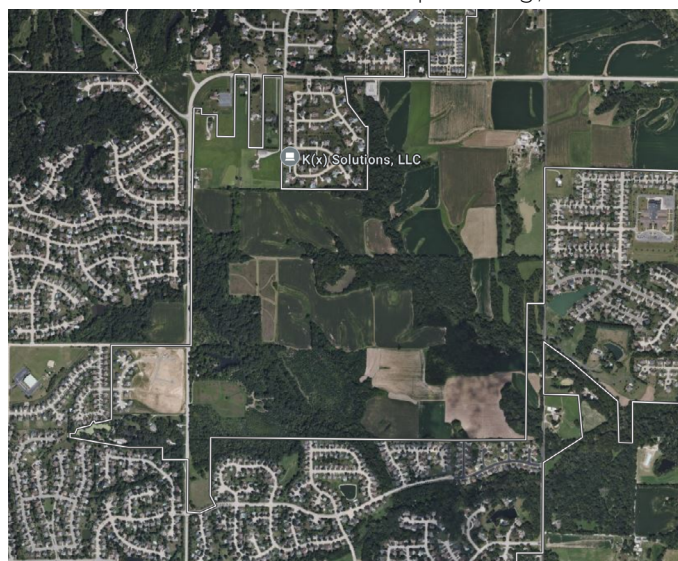
SOIL HEALTH

FORMER BUFFALO FARM CONTINUES TO PROVIDE PRECIOUS HABITAT FOR O'FALLON WILDLIFE

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Although the bison have been gone for quite some time, many of the O'Fallon area residents still fondly refer to the Brown Family's property as The Buffalo Farm. According to Stephen Brown, the family's involvement with the farm dates to around 1860, and his grandfather was born on the farm around 1890. During the 1950's, there was a drought out west that caused buffalo to start starving. Stephen explained that an appeal went out for people to house some, and his grandfather agreed to take four. He said, "And the story was that they had all been neutered or they were all females... I can't remember what it was, but that was not true, and the herd expanded to 16 pretty quickly. And he maintained them for many years until he felt he was too old to manage it in his seventies, and then he sold them off. But the old timers around here still know the farm as the buffalo farm, and that's what we call our LLC—Buffalo Farm, LLC. At one time, it was like an O'Fallon landmark. And if you came up into O'Fallon via Highway 50, there was a billboard that said O-Fallon—Home of the Buffalo Farm."

What started out as an 80-acre farm grew to 380-acres as his grandfather made money in the car business and purchased more plots over time. Located just north of O'Fallon, the farm has 64.4 acres of CRP land, which has been in the program since 2003. While his primary focus is to bring more wildlife onto the farm, Stephen has implemented several NRCS practices, including 18.7 acres of hardwood tree planting, 4.5 acres of pollinator habitat, 19.6 acres of upland wildlife



Birds Eye View of The Buffalo Farm

habitat management, 8.4 acres of forest stand improvement, 13.2 acres of conservation cover (native prairie). They also complete prescribed burning and tree thinning every four years for mid-contract management. The plant species growing on the property include little and big bluestem sideoats grama, wild rye, four species of coneflower, partridge pea, black-eyed susan, prairie dropseed, troublesome sedge, several asters, wild bergamot, prairie blazing star, compassplant, goldenrod, butterfly and common milkweed, ashy sunflower, foxglove beardtongue, golden zizia, rattlesnake master, bluejacket spiderwort, and white and blue wild indigo. Along with putting some of their land in the CRP program, the Brown Family farm was the first property to be put into [a conservation easement by Heartlands Conservancy in 2001.](#)

With suburban development quickly growing around their farm, this was a way for the family to protect their land.

They also work with a local farmer who grows corn, soybeans, and wheat on part of their land. Stephen said, "He's a super nice guy and a very good farmer. And he's very helpful to us when we need things done. Like last year when we had an invasion of lespedeza, in one of the prairie grass areas, and he just came and mowed it all down to give us a fresh start in the spring and didn't charge us for it." According to Stephen, this farm income allows them to continue to fund their ongoing conservation efforts.

Monroe County Conservation Planner Charlie Cole began working with Stephen just a few months after he was hired in March 2023. Since this was the first wildlife habitat contract Charlie had worked on, he received quite a bit of assistance from NGRREC Land Conservation Specialist Annette Marshall. Charlie said, "It took a lot of back and forth before we got something really



Conservation Planner Charlie Cole at The Buffalo Farm in 2023.

He said, "I liked that there were multiple practices that all had to be there to work together for the overall goal, which doesn't always happen with agricultural practices. A lot of time, we just do a single agronomic practice to address one issue, whereas this was a goal we were trying to meet by using multiple practices, and the more that Stephen and his crew were willing to put into place only benefitted that overall goal of getting more wildlife and getting more species and diversity back into that area."

One of the biggest hurdles they have faced is battling all the invasive species on the property. It was one of the worst cases that Charlie has ever seen of Bradford pear completely taking over a hardwood planted area, where Stephen and his team had planted oak trees. Stephen said, "There was this one area where you could not see an oak tree. It looked like we would have to bulldoze the whole thing and start over again. But once we got in and cut them down, and then the oak trees... once they got some sunlight, started growing and came back very strong. So, that was immensely gratifying to me." Charlie added, "And now because they are gone, it is bare in between. It was so thick there was no vegetation underneath any of it. So now, we're going back in and getting some native seed in there, getting some grass, and getting some good cover to try to get some of those upland birds back."

Stephen explained that he's already seeing the difference these practices are making with wildlife on the property. He said, "I never saw a deer the whole time I was growing up on the farm, which we are talking 1950 until I went to college. So, never saw a deer, never saw a turkey, never saw a great blue heron, all the red-tailed hawks... These things now I see all the time... we did not see in the 1950s or 1960s. But now we have quite a herd of deer. After one of those big snowfalls, where you could see the deer tracks... I could not believe the number of deer tracks out there in the fields... I think we have a flock of something like 30 turkeys." He mentioned that he frequently sees lots of other bird species, like indigo buntings, now as well.

Stephen and Charlie are both eager to continue their conservation efforts on the Brown Family farm. Charlie said, "We are still ongoing. Steve has another CRP that's in another wooded area that had a hardwood tree planting in put 20 years ago... that's up for re-enroll, I believe this fall. So, it's not the end of the road by any means. There are multiple tracts out there. We've talked about other government programs that he may qualify for in other parts of the property for forest management." He added, "I've barely seen the property. I've only seen what we've worked on so far. I know that it's a lot bigger than I've explored yet, and so we'll keep working on it."

Stephen hopes that future generations will continue these conservation efforts as well. He said, "We're not trying to make money off the farm, but we're trying to be self-supporting, and ultimately, I would like the whole system to be sustaining. I'm also anxious to get the younger generation involved as much as possible for obvious reasons. My son wants to put a little house, like a summer house, on the property right on the spot where my grandfather's house originally stood." While bison are no longer housed in the barn or grazing the pasture, many other wildlife are thriving and happy to have a sanctuary on the Buffalo Farm.

concrete... So, it was a huge learning process on our end for the contract side, but Steve was there the whole time anytime we had questions for him or just needed some further input on what the end goals and everything were for the property and the direction he wanted to head with it. It ended up being a really great project to work on, and it is still... I mean, I was just out there with my daughter and the scouts, so it's like the gift that keeps on giving with the work that Steve is doing out there. I still get to keep visiting and sharing the story about it. Charlie recently took a group of scouts to the property as an educational opportunity to assist in meeting the requirements to receive their Fish and Wildlife Management merit badges.

According to Charlie, Stephen's contract is unique because it includes many different practices.

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 lesson plan is Cultivating Change: Conservation Agriculture & Advocacy. Through this lesson, students will understand the importance of soil and water conservation in agriculture. To achieve this, students will analyze key points from the article “Soil and Water: Why We Need Conservation Agriculture,” discuss the role of conservation agriculture in environmental sustainability, and develop a social media advocacy campaign promoting conservation agriculture practice.

This lesson is designed for grad levels 9-12 and will last approximately 90 minutes. This lesson plan includes the Cultivating Change presentation, the “Soil and Water: Why We Need Conservation Agriculture” article, the Cultivating Change worksheet, and the Advocacy Campaign Project instructions and rubric.

[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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2025 SOIL HEALTH SUMMIT
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