



CEREAL RYE GRASS
PHOTO CREDIT: EDWIN REMSBERG AND USDA-SARE

MARCH 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

The weather is slowly starting to warm up as we approach the first day of Spring on March 20th. As things begin to pick up, let AIM know about any conservation events that you think should be highlighted in the AIM Newsletter, contact AIM Communications Coordinator [Kayla Jeffers](#)

AIM has added three new planners to the Conservation Planner Program. Ian Vandeventer joined the Lincoln Field Office in Logan County, the Vandalia Field Office in Fayette County welcomed Aron Virden, and Jason Qualich started at the Watseka Field Office in Iroquois County. Welcome everyone!

Did you happen to catch AIM's Webinar during Soil Health Week? If not, you can view a [recording of the webinar on the AIM Youtube Page!](#)



CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

LETICIA TALIAFERO

When she's not helping farmers as a Conservation Planner in Rock Island County, Leticia Taliafero spends her time working on her own certified organic operation, Sowing Seed Urban Garden Center, where she specializes in microgreens that are sold at her local farmers market. Growing up in central Virginia, her family always had a vegetable garden. With a laugh, she said that hardly any cucumbers made it into the house unless her mom was pickling, which she did once per year. The rest of the vegetables were consumed fresh. While she was looking for somewhere to settle down, space for a garden was a priority to her. Eventually she found a place where she could build a high tunnel, which was funded through EQIP. She and her husband built the structure themselves and regularly grow tomatoes inside of it.



She had several different careers before becoming a Conservation Planner, including military service in the Navy, where she wore many different hats, including air traffic control and supportive equipment mechanic. She completed 8 years of service in New Orleans and 3.5 years in Pennsylvania. After sustaining injuries during their military service, she and her husband were placed on anti-inflammatory diets, which is what piqued her interest in growing their own food. She said, "I was really studying hard on what is in our food... why is our food not as nutritious as it used to be? And that takes you down the whole rabbit hole of how we need to work on our soil and make sure our soil has the minerals and vitamins that are needed to produce food that is healthy to eat."

Explaining how she began specializing in microgreens, she said, "The



Conservation Planner
Leticia Taliafero



farmers market opens in May, and you don't have much else to sell in May. So, I took two trays of microgreens the first day, and we sold out in two hours." This will be their eighth year at the farmers market and sixth year being certified organic. She was a fulltime producer prior to joining the Conservation Capacity Building Initiative.

Discussing her collaboration with colleagues, Leticia said she mostly works with Soil Conservationists. She recently assisted a with a grazing plan after completing a grazing management class with Soil Conservationists in her district. Describing the complexity of a grazing plan, she said, "It's like a bunch of small puzzles that go into a larger puzzle. So there's the regular planning that needs to be done to figure out how many cows you can graze on this piece of land and how many paddocks are needed for it to sustain the cows, how will they get watered, how far do they need to walk to get the water, what are we going to plant for the cows to eat, how many months is that going to sustain the cows, what are they going to eat in the months that you don't have grass, where is that going to go, where are the cows going go in the winter, all of the fencing involved to fence the outside perimeter, all of these small little paddocks."

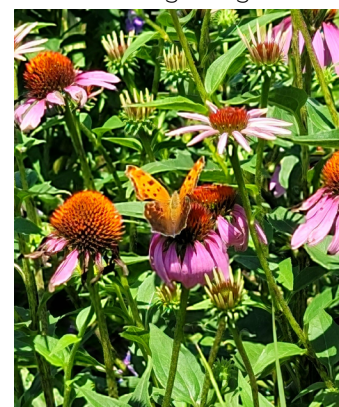


According to Soil Conservationist Jodi Martin, grazing has become increasingly popular in



their district with a lot of smaller farms wanting to implement it recently. She said, "Grazing seems to be a pretty hot topic around here. We have a lot of landowners that are wanting to get into grazing, whether it be with sheep or goats." She said they have also worked on grazing plans for horses, cattle and alpaca.

Jodi Martin has worked with Leticia on several different projects. She said, "It's very beneficial having her as a planner... you know, when we need plans written, she knows what to do. She can go in and write the plan, do the job sheet. She's had all the





necessary training. It's probably easier for the client, because then he doesn't have to continue to wait for somebody else to sign his plan or do everything else that she does do. I think the more planners we have on staff, the better off we are."

Along with their local SWCDs, they also work with Pheasants Forever and National Great Rivers Research and Education Center (NGRREC). Jodi said, "People are really willing to just get in there and help and do whatever needs to be done. I like having the variety of different groups that we work with because somebody might think of something

that somebody else did not. Everybody's got ideas, and you can piggyback off those."

According to Leticia, the farmers in her district have been very friendly and welcoming. Although she was initially nervous about doing her first CRP visits alone, she was pleasantly surprised to find that some farmers even offered to give her full tours of their land. When speaking with farmers, she believes it is important to always be clear about any potential risks involved with implementing a particular practice. She said, "Just try to be more transparent about what the risks are and understanding their hesitations and objections and be able to comprehend that information." Along with continuing to connect farmers to resources, this year Leticia plans to make some upgrades to her own high tunnel, where she's planning to grow tomatoes as well as watermelons.





THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator

SIEMER MILLING COMPANY AND STAR PARTNER AGAIN TO REWARD CONSERVATION-MINDED FARMERS

STAR and Siemer Milling Company are once again partnering to recognize and reward Siemer customers in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky who implement conservation practices that improve soil health and water quality. Through the 2025 Siemer-STAR Producer Rewards Payment Program, participating farmers can receive financial incentives based on their STAR Rating, providing flexibility to adopt conservation practices that best fit their operations.

The STAR Tool (Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources) evaluates in-field management practices and assigns a 1-5 STAR Rating based on the impact to local natural resource concerns. The higher the STAR Rating, the greater the potential for positive environmental benefits—and now, the greater the financial reward through this program. Unlike programs that mandate specific practices, the STAR Rating allows farmers to choose the conservation approaches that work best for their fields while still being eligible for recognition and payment.

The Siemer-STAR program first launched in 2023 with just one producer signing up. In 2024, participation grew significantly, with 13 growers submitting fields and 10 meeting the eligibility criteria. A total of \$65,000 was distributed to reward these farmers for their conservation efforts. This increase demonstrates growing interest in conservation among wheat producers and the value of a flexible, recognition-based approach to rewarding sustainability.

Looking ahead, Siemer Milling Company has committed \$75,000 per year for the next three years to continue supporting their customers who prioritize soil health and sustainability.

HOW PAYMENTS WORK

Producers can qualify for payments in one of two ways:

- 1. Achieving a 5-STAR Rating** – Fields that receive a 5-STAR rating automatically qualify for a payment of \$25 per acre.
- 2. Showing Improvement Over Two Years** – If a field receives a lower rating (1-4 STARs), it can still qualify if the producer has two years of STAR Ratings and demonstrates improvement. For example, a field that scored a 3-STAR in 2024 and a 4-STAR in 2025 would be eligible because of the increase from 3 to 4 STARs. With guaranteed funding for the next 3 years, fields receiving their first STAR Rating in 2025 will have time to demonstrate improvement in 2026 and 2027.

ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

- Available on a first-come, first-served basis for producers in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky
- Limited to 400 acres per producer (maximum payment of \$10,000)
- Must have been a Siemer Milling customer (delivered wheat) within the last five years or will deliver 2025 Harvest Wheat

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

To participate, growers must:

- Sign a **Grower Agreement** with Siemer Milling Company
- Use the **STARTool** ([STARTool.ag](https://startool.ag)) to receive their STAR Rating(s)

The STAR Tool includes a verification component. By submitting a field for a STAR Score, farmers acknowledge that their fields may be randomly selected for verification.

KEY PROGRAM DATES:

- **Enrollment Period:** June 1 – August 31
- **Verification Window:** October – November
- **Payment Distribution:** December (following successful verification)

Siemer merchandisers and local STAR Navigators will be available to assist farmers in using the STAR Tool and understanding their results.

For more information, visit illinoistar.org or contact [Natalie Kerr](mailto:Natalie.Kerr@siemer.com). To check out the STAR Tool, go to [STARTool.ag](https://startool.ag)

SOIL HEALTH

FEATURED PRODUCER: AL DECRANE, HENRY COUNTY

Wildlife habitat enhancement is a family affair for Al DeCrane on his farm in Galva, IL, which includes pollinator plots, three large ponds, and over 20 acres of trees, including white pine and a few different varieties of oak (red, white, black, and bur). Describing his family's involvement on the farm, he said, "Both of my grandkids deer hunt, so we have gotten to hunt deer every year... We're having a lot of fun, and it's exposing them. They helped me plant the trees, help me prune them." His wife also grows wildflowers and keeps honeybees.



Al DeCrane's Granddaughter was named Little Miss Ag and posed with the Pollinator plot.

Working with NRCS, his conservation plans included cool season grasses, warm season grasses, wildlife food plots, and a riparian buffer, along with hardwood tree plantings, which he described as his favorite. He said, "Before you plant the trees, they wanted a bluegrass established, a Kentucky bluegrass. And that did help in some areas with the weed control." Other grasses that he has planted include big blue stem, little blue stem, and Indian grass.

While he welcomes the deer on his property, they did cause some initial damage to the trees. Originally, he planted 5,000 white pine and 5,000 oaks trees and did not have tubes or cages around them. He contacted his former Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) District Forester Steve Felt, who taught him how to coppice the trees, and he started putting tubes around some after that. Describing the process, Al said, "cut it off about two inches at the bottom between the first of March and the 15th of April. Steve said those trees will grow about 5 ft in the first year because they have their base already established. So, I did that, and by golly—by the end of the year, every tree had grown up out of the tubes." He

added that he has cut back on the number of trees that he will plant at a time now—only planting 50 or 100 at once and putting tubes around all of them. He planted his trees in five different areas on the farm, focusing on hillsides to stop erosion. He was able to get approximately 75% of the cost of his trees covered through state and county programs.

His wildlife food plots include corn, beans, sorghum, sunflowers, and wheat, along with turnips and radishes for the deer in the winter. He said, "There's so much corn and beans around. The deer pretty much have a smorgasbord in this area. But after everybody gets their crops out, then they start hitting my food plots. I have what they call destination food plots. So, when the weather gets



Trees after pruning.



Trees after clean up.



Deer visiting DeCrane's farm.

bad, the deer come and eat." Al has also created brush piles along the edges of his timber to provide more nesting areas for wildlife.

His conservation work has attracted more turkeys to his land as well. He said, "Five years ago, we didn't have a turkey on the farm. The other day, we had 22 of them walking across the field." Like deer, turkeys can also cause occasional damage to cash crops. He said, "Last spring when the crops were coming up, I wondered why my corn looked so bad, and you could go over there and see where the turkey had dug the kernels out of the ground, and they went right down the rows. So, I went back and replanted that back to beans instead of corn."

Al also serves on the board of the Henry County SWCD, and he frequently volunteers his farm as a site for their events. They have also hosted 4H groups and Boy Scouts. He said, "We try to get the youth involved. I've had some high school boys who I've hired a couple times to come work, and I think they enjoyed it. They came back." He estimates they have had 20 different groups come out with local photographers for family photos or senior pictures just in

the last year. He said, "My wife says I've got the place looking like a state park. I want it to be functional, but aesthetic... make it look neat. And that way you can also help control the invasives."

He tries to encourage other farmers who have ground that isn't suitable for row crops to adopt some of these practices. He said, "My one neighbor is big in Pheasants Forever, and he's got the food plots and the prairie grass, and he does a lot of it. So that kind of helps having a couple in the neighborhood, so you can kind of maintain the wildlife. There's not a lot of animals around, so we kind of have to take care of them."

Last summer, Al received the 2024 Outstanding Forestry Contribution Award from the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD). Describing his reaction to receiving the award, he said, "I was shocked and pretty honored. Steve Felt started out as my Forester, and now it's Luke Koett. Both have been very helpful, very knowledgeable. I guess Luke helped me get the Forestry award... I was honored. I felt—man, this makes it all worthwhile."



Silky Dogwood and Grey Dogwood saplings.

If you have completed a CRP plan and want to be featured in the AIM Newsletter, please reach out to Soil Health Associate Hannah Tomlin at Hannah.Tomlin@illinoisgov.



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 is Agroforestry in Action. This lesson is designed for grades 9-12 and to last 60 minutes. In this lesson, students will define and describe five common agroforestry practices and explain their role in sustainable agriculture. Students will identify and explain the conservation benefits of agroforestry, as well as demonstrate understanding by creating a poster that defines an agroforestry practice, outlines its benefits, and illustrates its application on a farm. By the end of the lesson, students will communicate key information effectively through written explanations, visual design, and presentations of their agroforestry practice poster.

[Lesson Plan Hyperdoc](#)



FROM THE PLANNERS



During the first week of February, Conservation Planner Olivia Winters (Kane County SWCD) attended an Urban Agriculture Winter Workshop at Eden Place Farms in Chicago. "It was amazing to see and meet so many urban ag operations represented there at the workshop. You had everything from growing vegetables in raised beds to beekeepers there," Olivia said of the event.

NRCS, FSA, and the U of I extension were all that. They talked about available resources and soil health to small urban farmers, had a panel that took questions from the online viewers, and had an open mic for anyone to talk about who they were, what they did, and what they hoped to learn from the workshop. "Lots of people there also just wanted to learn more about community gardens and how they can increase their crop yield for their community, especially those wanting to learn on behalf of their community that doesn't have a grocery store with options for fresh vegetables. It was so inspiring and I'm glad I went!" Olivia concluded.



Conservation Planner Michael Devine (Livingston SWCD) visited a High Tunnel System in February. High Tunnel Systems were the **Featured NRCS Practice in the January 2025 AIM 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 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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PLANTING INTO COVER CROPS
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