



CREDIT MICHAEL DEVINE, LIVINGSTON COUNTY CONSERVATION PLANER.

JULY 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.



# CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

## JOHN MCNALLY



John McNally  
Conservation Planner

Prior to joining the AIM Initiative, Vermillion County Conservation Planner John McNally was already immersed in conservation agriculture through his work on local farms and his lifelong fascination with nature. Growing up in Kankakee, he spent a lot of time outdoors and visiting the surrounding state parks. He said, “I grew up in a historic neighborhood, so I spent my childhood surrounded by towering oak trees that are hundreds of years old. I also grew up 2 blocks away from the Kankakee River, so I spent much of my childhood along the river either wading, swimming or just exploring the riverbank.” He added, “The Kankakee River will always hold a special place in my heart. I had no idea when I was a kid that the freshwater mussels that I found so abundantly were very rare in other rivers in the state.”

In 2013, he moved to Urbana. While living there, John worked on a few different diversified vegetable farms, including Sola Gratia (a nonprofit farm focused on fighting food insecurity), Hendrick House (a five acre farm that includes a rooftop herb garden and grows for multiple dining facilities at U of I), and his own operation- Green Island Gardens, which sold produce to local chefs, Common Ground Food Co-op, and the Urbana Farmers Market. Describing these experiences, John said, “Vegetable farming is without a doubt the most challenging and rewarding thing that I have ever done with my life. The act of dedicating all your time to grow healthy and nutritious food for your community is extremely gratifying. Small scale vegetable farming also has some absolutely crushing realities that make it very challenging. Slim profit margins, high expenses, and having little time for anything else make vegetable farming extremely difficult to do small scale. With that said, I would go back to it in a heartbeat if I could find a way to support my family while I was doing it. It is my personal opinion that vegetable farming is a community service, and it should receive a much higher level of governmental and social support than it currently does because it benefits the entire community and the planet as a whole.”

After seeing a post about our program on the Illinois Stewardship Alliance Job Bord, John said, “I was drawn to the AIM Initiative because it offered me the chance to make a positive impact on the world in an area that I have already dedicated lots of time and energy.” Describing the role that conservation plays in his life, he said, “Not only is it my job, but it has become one of my life goals to learn to live in harmony with the planet. Collectively we are faced with the choice of either changing how we live on this planet or becoming extinct. For all our faults, I still love humans, and I think we are worth saving. Conservation plays a major role in finding creative ways that we can sustain ourselves without destroying the planet.”

Describing one of the biggest lessons that he has learned in this position, he said, “That corn and bean farming is way more complicated than it appears to be from the outside looking in. This position has also



Conservation Planner Courtney Lercher and John McNally.



reinforced something I already knew, which is that positive change happens slowly, and it requires a persistent and sustained effort to make a measurable impact.”

Along with Pheasants Forever, John said he works very closely with the SWCD staff in his office. He said, “I have learned an abundance of new skills from my colleagues, but I would say the most valuable thing that I have learned from them is how to have difficult conversations with farmers and figure out solutions for tough situations without many good outcomes. Because CRP contracts last for a very long time I have been in the position of inheriting some absolute nightmare situations with landowners, and I had to come up with a way forward that both meets NRCS standards but is also something practical that landowners can do. I feel like these problem-solving skills will be valuable to me for the rest of my life.”

Vermillion County SWCD Resource Conservationist Mitchell Killough said their county is very active in CRP, and that John has assisted greatly with this workload. He said, “He has traveled all throughout the county to conduct site visits for expiring contracts and to verify the successful establishment of newly enrolled contracts. In addition, he has helped in the office by completing status reviews, conservation plans, and contracts that provide landowners with cost-share for their conservation efforts.”

Along with CRP, Mitchell described other SWCD projects that John has worked on. He said, “In the past, John has helped with planting oak trees for a new oak savannah project at a nearby park. He has also participated in the annual local Lake clean-up day. As a Master Naturalist, John very much enjoys assisting customers and producers at the counter by answering a variety of questions. John has even helped the staff with the semi-annual fish pick up day. If there is ever a way to assist others, John has always been very willing to lend a hand.”

According to Mitchell, John’s biggest strengths are adaptability, patience, thoroughness, and his sense of humor. Describing how John has evolved as a conservation planner, he said, “John’s professionalism and willingness to engage with the public have evolved immensely in his position as an IDOA planner. He already has great interpersonal skills and has learned over time how to incorporate those skills with producers by using what he has learned through webinars, training, and interactions with other field office staff regarding soil and water conservation. He is willing to take questions from producers at the counter and send follow-up calls/emails to ensure quality customer service.”

Mitchell mentioned the high turnover struggles that SWCDs have faced over the past several years. He said, “Vermillion County has been fortunate with the addition of John McNally in that he is an employee who truly appreciates his work and is willing to take the steps to further develop his career in conserving our precious natural resources.”



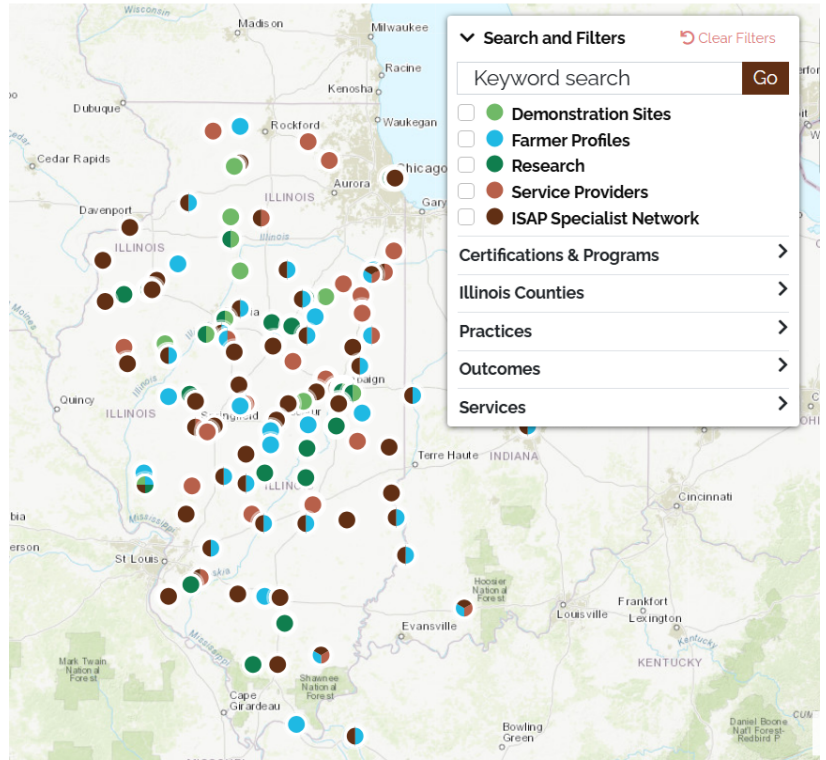
John plans to continue working in conservation agriculture, noting the importance of trying to figure out how to sustainably grow food for our future. Describing what he loves most about his work, he said, “Getting new conservation on the ground or going out to a farm and taking a tour with a landowner who cares deeply for their land. I love hopping on a side-by-side and getting a tour from an enthusiastic landowner. Knowing that how I am spending my most precious and finite resource, which is my time, to make the world a better place is rewarding to me.”



# THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

## SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

Illinois STAR is excited to be working with the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership (ISAP) to incorporate STAR users, producers, and specialists into their Conservation Story Map! The story map (found at <https://ilsustainableag.org/learn/conservation-story-map/>) is designed to assist people in connecting with individuals and businesses who are working in sustainable agriculture across the state. The map contains different layers, including Demonstration Sites, Farmer Profiles, Research, Service Providers, and ISAP Specialist Network. Map users can also filter their search by Certifications & Programs, Illinois Counties, Conservation Practices, Outcomes, and/or Services. Illinois STAR was recently listed under the Certifications & Programs, and the next step is to identify those who are already on the map and would like to have their STAR affiliation added to their profile.



ISAP Story Map.

ILLINOIS  
SUSTAINABLE  
AG PARTNERSHIP

### Put your pin on the map!

Complete this form to add your profile to the ISAP Conservation Story Map.

Type of Profile \*

On which map layer(s) would you like your information listed?

Demonstration Sites

Farmer Profiles

Research

Service Providers

ISAP Specialist Network

Contact Name \*

Contact Name. REQUIRED

Contact Title

Show name and title on the Story Map?

Yes

ISAP Story Map Pin Submission Form.

The different Illinois STAR options that may be added to your profile include:

- **“I use the STAR Tool.”**
- **“I am a STAR Navigator.”**
- **“I have received a 5-STAR rating on one or more of my fields.”**
- **“I have completed the STAR-Ready Microcredential Training.”**

If you are currently listed on the map and would like to have Illinois STAR added to your profile, please email [natalie@starconservation.org](mailto:natalie@starconservation.org) and let her know which of the above options you would like to have listed. We strongly encourage all STAR users, along with anyone else working in conservation agriculture, who is not listed to put your pin on the map by completing this form!

# FEATURED PRODUCER

## SANGAMON COUNTY FAMILY CONTINUES LEGACY OF CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate



The Stremsterfer Family has diligently cared for their farmland for several generations. In 1993, they were awarded the Sangamon County Conservation Farm Family of the Year by the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts due to the work of Norman Stremsterfer. The farm is now managed by his two sons, Travis and Lee. Travis focuses on the row crops and Lee handles their purebred angus cattle operation, which includes rotational grazing due to EQIP funding they used to install fencing and water lines.

Lee said, "When we purchased the property that we are currently on, it was neglected... basically no fence. It was very weedy, very brushy, it was not managed properly. With the help of EQIP, we were able to construct proper fencing with water lines that allowed us to manage the resources better. We did a better job of taking care of the pond with filter strips. We did grazing with water lines, put frost-free waters in. So, the cows had minimal distance to water. The cows could rotational graze, and we could manage our resources considerably better."

Although the family has raised cattle for generations, their purebred angus operation started in 1998. Lee said, "We concentrate on improving genetics to help the commercial cattlemen through the bulls they purchase from us to help them be more profitable."

When asked about what makes their cattle business unique, Lee said, "We are truly focused on quality. We are very, very family based. The cow herd is very productive, as evidenced by our bulls... We have sold them to anywhere from Oregon, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nebraska, Missouri, all the way east to North Carolina, along with Illinois and Indiana... People from across the country. We have also sold cattle to Mexico and the Philippines."

Lee said they learned a lot about conservation from Mel Holliday, who worked for the Sangamon County Soil and Water Conservation District for 27 years and passed away in 2009. He said, "He's a legend. Mel was the man. He was very instrumental and taught us how waterways were supposed to work and block chutes and terraces and all





about soil conservation and leaving something for the next generation. Really, that's what it's about... leaving it better than what we found. So that our descendants still have something to work with and can still provide food for the world."

Describing their current conservation practices, he said, "With the process that we went through, rotational grazing does work. You do increase your stocking capacity at the same time. It's more productive, and it actually leaves the soil in better shape because

you're not mining the soil or the grass. It works considerably better."

Along with corn and soybeans, Travis said they have grown wheat, oats, and some alfalfa. For over 10 years, they have also been growing cover crops, including cereal rye, turnips, peas, and oats. According to Travis, they have some CRP land, and they have applied to the Conservation Stewardship Program as well. With some of the practices they have implemented, including terraces and grassed waterways, Travis said he has noticed significantly less erosion. Another one of his primary goals is to increase their soil organic matter content.

When asked about what made him want to take over their family cattle business, Lee said, "You are born with a double recessive gene, especially in livestock. It's in your blood. You are just so passionate about it. It's what you want to do, it's what you think about, and it's how you make a living and provide for your family."





---

## 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.

---

## WEBSITE

[aimillinois.org](http://aimillinois.org)

---

## EMAIL

[ilaimproject@gmail.com](mailto:ilaimproject@gmail.com)

---

## FIELD STORIES

[kayla@aimillinois.org](mailto:kayla@aimillinois.org)

---

---

### FIND US ON:



CREDIT JAMIE HARRIS, CLARK COUNTY  
CONSERVATION PLANNER