



May 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

CAREER-SPARK STEAM EXPO

By Delaney Akers, Communications Coordinator

AIM had the opportunity to participate in the third annual CareerSpark STEAM Expo at the Orr Building on the Illinois State Fairgrounds, April 14-15. The two-day event welcomed more than 1,800 eighth graders from 26 schools across Illinois, and they had the opportunity to stop by nearly 60 different booths. The STEAM Expo gives students the opportunity to explore careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) in an exciting and interactive way. Students can directly engage with professionals while interacting with the displays and demonstrations that exhibitors and agencies bring.

Participating at the AIM Illinois booth, we had Scott County Conservation Planner Courtney Lercher and Sangamon County Conservation Planner Nick Werries, along with Soil Health Outreach Associate Hannah Tomlin. Describing how the tabletop rainfall simulator works, Hannah said, “This demonstration showcases the difference that cover crops make in preventing soil loss and improving water infiltration. One sample had cereal rye growing in soil that had not been tilled in over 16 years. The other was bare, conventionally tilled soil. When you pour water over the top, simulating a rainfall event, you can see the difference in the amount of soil runoff between the two samples. While quite a bit of the bare soil washed away, the cover crop sample remained intact quite well.”

Conservation Planner Courtney Lercher shared, “Many students were able to grasp the concept right away and came up with several benefits the cover crops provide on the soil before I even presented all the facts to them!” She added, “Most students already had an understanding of the concepts we were explaining- soil loss and erosion- but it was clear that they were able to make a new connection to these concepts and see how it can impact real life.”

Overall, it was an amazing opportunity to engage and interact with students, showcase a career in the field of agriculture, and illustrate the importance of conserving soil to protect farmland for the future. Explaining the impact of the AIM Illinois booth, Courtney said, “I had many interactions with students that didn’t know jobs like ours were out there. A lot of the students seemed to have a passion for protecting the environment and working in a field like this.



Left to right: Nick Werries, Courtney Lercher, & Hannah Tomlin.



The most memorable interaction that comes to mind was with a student who spoke with me about their family's farming operation. They didn't plant cover crops yet, but they asked a lot of questions about what types are available, when to plant them, how to plant them, and how to terminate the cover crops before planting season.”



We are very grateful for the chance to share our work experiences with the future generation, along with information about different opportunities in the field of conservation agriculture. AIM Illinois has participated in the CareerSpark STEAM Expo each year since it began, and we hope to continue our involvement as an exhibitor in the future.





CONSERVATION PLANNER SPOTLIGHT

JOHNNY ANIANS

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

With his technical background, McLean County Conservation Planner Johnny Anians brings a unique skill set to the AIM Initiative. Combined with a strong work ethic and curiosity, his contributions could help drive meaningful improvements for Conservation Planners more broadly. Before joining the AIM Initiative in June of 2023, Johnny worked at State Farm as part of a specialized technical assignment team tasked with piloting a new department that the company ultimately chose not to move forward with. Although he was initially disheartened by this decision, he looked forward to the opportunity to try something new.

Johnny learned about the AIM Initiative from a friend who was working as a Conservation Planner in the McLean County Office at the time and informed him of an open position in Pontiac.

Once his friend found a position working at a SWCD in the fall of 2023, he transferred to the McLean County Office. According to Johnny, his district has a very high workload in terms of CRP, EQIP and CSP, with 198 CRP contracts in 2025 alone, and his assistance is greatly appreciated by McLean County Soil Conservationist Devin Jefferson. Describing Johnny's work, Devin stated, "He's very flexible, no matter what the task or job is- office work or field work. We're able to show him what we are looking for, and he can run with it. He's very good at asking questions and making sure things are done properly."

According to Devin, the most frequently utilized NRCS practices in their district include cover crops, no till, reduced till, grassed waterways, and pollinator planting, but Johnny has also had the opportunity to assist a couple fruit and vegetable farmers with their high tunnel and alley cropping applications. Describing a visit to a local farm last year, Johnny said, "We got to see the whole operation, got to see sort of how he ran things, and to get a better idea of what he was wanting to accomplish as far as species and other details go. I was there for a lot of pre-planning and then Devin, our Soil Con, took the lead from there."



Photo provided by Zach Stephenson



Describing an additional producer who he was able to assist, Johnny said, “One of our local small farmers was able to secure funding for a high tunnel, a pollinator planting, and mulching for the high tunnel. When you’re a small operation like that, it tends to be more meaningful to have cost share on projects because it allows them to expand a bit more.”

Along with helping farmers work through the steps to complete cost-share applications, Johnny has had the opportunity to put his technical skills to use by working with his DC, Allan Hertzberger, in ArcGIS Pro to recreate a piece of software that Conservation Planners are no longer able to access due to the migration to Amazon Web Services. This shift created extra steps for Johnny when preparing for site visits, including the need to pull extra documents and drive to different offices to gather necessary paperwork. However, he believes that all the helpful features that were offered by the Status Review Map App can be built into ArcGIS Pro, which can be housed on a desktop and tends to be more user friendly than web-based tools.

Explaining this project, Johnny said, “It’s not entirely too complicated on its own, but my goal is to add improvements to the areas that I found inhibiting and get rid of other aspects that cluttered up the data. It is a work in progress, but hopefully I can document enough of it along the way so that others could eventually incorporate it into their own counties.”



Farm in Bloomington where Johnny assisted in conservation planning

Using his tech skills, Johnny is looking forward to exploring the potential within this program. He said, “There are so many things I think we could use it for, but the truth is that it is a very intimidating program. Most people learn what they need to get on with whatever they need and move on. This is quite understandable, since, again, it’s a powerful program that reaches across a large swath of industries. Most of us aren’t going to go learn Python when we just need to delineate watersheds. But I find an interest in that, so I kind of want to foster that for now and see how much I can grow with it.”

Although Johnny is a self-described introvert, he values the knowledge that he’s able to gain from the colleagues in his office who have years of experience under their belts. Describing his work environment in the Normal, IL office, he said, “We have 8 or 9 people working in the same space. Over time, I’ve gotten to know everyone quite well. On top of that, we have several people here between the SWCD and NRCS that have over 20 years of experience, which I’d wager is quite rare since people like to move around a lot for grade bumps. It has been quite the boon for me whenever I’ve felt lost on technical documents or the way different parts of the contracts work, surveying, among many other topics.”

Devin agreed that everyone in their office works together quite well and understands the work that needs to be done. When asked about how Johnny contributes, he stated, “He’s been great to work with... a very good independent worker... We can trust he’s going to do the job and do it right. So, he’s been a great asset for the office.”



THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Crop Year 2026 Opens in June!

STAR enrollment for CY26 will open on June 1, marking our third year of using STARtool.ag, and producers can begin completing their field forms with the help of STAR Navigators! While celebrating the start of a new Crop Year, we would also like to reflect on some of Illinois STAR's achievements over the past year. In 2025, all districts were required to become STAR Navigators and complete training, and we would like to share some highlights of their accomplishments with STAR farmers. Jo Daviess County turned in the most field forms, with 187 total submitted forms in CY25! Crawford County had the highest average STAR rating (4.92) for CY25, and Shelby County had the highest increase in average STAR rating from CY24 to CY25, with a rise of 2.13 points! 54% of Navigators uploaded paper field forms in CY25, revealing their importance in assisting producers who may not use computers as frequently.

For producers who prefer to complete their own paperwork on [STARtool.ag](https://startool.ag), below is an image of how fields are laid out on the STAR Tool dashboard.

Click Card to Filter Table

Submitted Forms: 0	Completed Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP): 0	Field Form Selected for Verification: 0
Forms Not Started: 11	Incomplete Forms: 5	Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) Not Started: 5
	Incomplete Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP): 0	Fields without Mapped Boundaries: 9

List View | Map View | Reports

Actions	Field ID	Field Name	Acres	County	State
	3805	clu test field	80.39	Sangamon County	Illinois
	3804	clu test 2	80.21	Sangamon County	Illinois
	3798	verification demo field	43.6	Sangamon County	Illinois
	3651	extra test	123	Sangamon County	Illinois

Actions	Year	Field Form Status	Current Year Crop	Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) Status	STAR Rating
	2026	In progress	Alfalfa	Not Started	None

Over the past couple years, the use of STAR has grown significantly across the state. Partially driven by the requirement that producers use the STAR Tool to participate in any state cost-share programs, we received 2,050 field forms spanning 121,000 acres in 2025, up from 1,207 field forms covering 67,000 acres in 2024. On field forms, farmers indicate whether they are participating in any soil health and conservation programs. Of these 2,050 CY25 field forms, 727 were marked as Partners for Conservation (PFC), 320 were marked as Farmer Led Advances in Soil Health (FLASH), and 161 were marked as Precision Conservation Management (PCM). For CY25 NRCS program enrollment, there were 79 fields marked EQIP, 98 marked CSP, and 31 marked NRCS Other. We hope to encourage a greater number of STAR farmers to take advantage of NRCS cost-share programs in the upcoming crop year.

Numbers are projected to grow even more this year due to the state's Climate Pollution Reduction Grants (CPRG) Program, which may increase STAR enrollment fivefold! Fortunately, STAR has received financial support from additional partners to expand the use of the Tool, including a recent grant from Cargill's Success from the Ground Up program. Alayna Jacobs, Conservation Agronomist at Cargill, stated, "At Cargill, we're focused on supporting farmers as they build more resilient and productive operations. Through Success From the Ground Up, we work with local partners to help farmers adopt key conservation practices that improve soil quality, improve crop productivity, and support economic viability for future generations."

Illinois STAR is very grateful for the support we've received from our partners and look forward to expanding the usefulness of our Tool for all farmers and conservation professionals! For producers who wish to complete paper forms in CY26, a PDF link for a printout version will also be posted on June 1st. STAR Navigators can set up accounts for producers, draw field maps, and upload paper field forms after they've been signed and completed by producers. All paper forms **MUST** be entered into the STAR Tool by the Navigator as soon as possible once they have been received. When completing a paper form, please be sure that you are using the correct Crop Year Field Form. The most up-to-date field form can be downloaded directly from the Illinois STAR Website at illinoisstar.org.

The below image illustrates where paper field forms **MUST** be signed by the producer.

IL STAR – 2024 Field Form
 "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it." - Peter Drucker

Farmer/Owner Information

1. Name: _____
 Email: _____ Phone: (____) _____
 Street/City/Zip _____ / _____ / _____

2. Field name: _____ 3. 2024 crop: _____
 4. Acres: _____ 5. County where field is located: _____
 6. Field ID: FSA Farm #: _____ FSA Tract #: _____
 FSA Field #: _____ Lat/Lon coordinates (optional): _____
 7. Is this field owned or rented by you? Owned Rented
 8. Is this field the correct point total and STAR rating? Yes No

I understand this field may be randomly selected for verification. To the best of my knowledge, this information is correct.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

IMPORTANT! Before proceeding, please review these instructions. Accurate responses will help ensure your field is correctly mapped and the correct point total and STAR rating is assigned.

If you have any questions about your STAR account or CY26 field forms, please contact Illinois Technical Lead Jake Deutmeyer at jake@starconservation.org.

PRODUCER SPOTLIGHT

Professor Shares Cutting-Edge Research With Students and Broader Community

By Hannah Tomlin, Soil Health Outreach Associate

Along with implementing conservation practices on his own family farm, Illinois Central College (ICC) Professor Pete Fandel shares his passion for soil health with countless students who participate in the advanced research projects that he conducts on campus. He has taught at ICC for 16 years and previously worked for Illinois Extension, where he collaborated with and learned from Mike Plumer and has tried to continue some of the conservation work that Mike was promoting. On his own farm, Pete has implemented several NRCS practices, including cover crops, pollinator habitats, and filter strips.



According to Pete, the filter strips on his farm have had a great impact, including crop insurance benefits, water quality improvement, and less damage from wildlife. He said, “Lo and behold, it was probably one of the best decisions that I had ever made to take that outside 30 feet out of the production because it pulled the yield average for the whole rest of the field up much higher, and then I also noticed the wildlife damage further in the field is less, because even though you think they would just go further into the field and do damage, they don’t. So instead of having 8 to 10 rows destroyed by wildlife, you might have the outside row a little damaged.”

During his time at ICC, Pete has conducted many studies, including a large herbicide trial that examined herbicide carryover injury on different cover crop species, a paired field study comparing nutrient loss through tile water, variety trials and water quality studies on cover crops, a bioreactor, and a one-acre artificial wetland. Most recently, Pete designed a floating wetland on the campus pond at ICC, studying the ability of plants to remove nitrates and phosphorus from the water.



Image of the floating wetland at ICC, provided by Pete Fandel

Inspired by the 5 by 10 foot floating islands along the Chicago River shorelines that were constructed with recycled materials to house plants, Pete had the idea of using these for more than aesthetic purposes. These were planted in the spring of 2025, but results from the first year were skewed by the drought that occurred between August and October last year, which caused the pond to drop two feet, increasing the concentration of nutrients. With the spring rains, the pond is now full again, and Pete placed the sensors back in the water last month. This is a three-year study, so he plans to collect results for the rest of this year and next year.

Describing the floating wetland study, Pete said, “A lot of people are watching that project because it’s very unique, and I think there are a few other colleges we are working with in other states through the Community College Alliance for Agriculture Advancement that may be interested in trying something similar on some of the ponds on their campuses if they get funding to do that. I think other schools will start trying it depending on how my results pan out, so I’m hoping some other schools do it too.”

Pete teaches many agriculture courses, including soil fertility, crop sciences, crop production, integrated pest management, ag business, and ag math, and enjoys involving students in his research and incorporating these projects into the classroom. He said, “We have a big nitrogen trial that we run every year on the campus, and the students get to run that trail as part of the soil fertility class to learn about how you set up, search and monitor plots. Then in the fall, my crop science class harvests that plot and crunches all the numbers off the plot and learns how to do that. So, we involve the students in the research that goes on here as part of the coursework.”

Along with ICC students, Pete also shares his knowledge with other agriculture professionals through continuing education programs, community events, and represents ICC as a member of the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership (ISAP). Helen VanBeck, Midwest Program Manager at American Farmland Trust, said, “Pete has represented Illinois Central College in ISAP since the group formed in 2017. Beyond his valuable contributions informing ISAP’s soil health programming and resources, Pete also connects ISAP to the community college system, a critical resource in developing and preparing agricultural professionals throughout Illinois. ICC’s membership and Pete’s contributions have helped ISAP’s soil health programming remain relevant and additive to broader soil health education efforts across the state.”



Pollinator habitat on Pete’s farm

Sharing his experience using ISAP’s rainfall simulator at different community events, Pete found a way to reach more farmers by further emphasizing the water infiltration aspect of cover crops. He said, “I take that tray, which is only like three inches deep... and after you’ve done that whole rainfall experiment, you can take that bare soil tray, dump it out, and the soil on the bottom of that tray is bone dry, the water never got to it. That has caught a lot of people’s attention... they realize all that water that’s running off is not infiltrating into the soil, therefore you don’t have any stored water in your soil profile for later use for the crop. To me, I’ve had more of an impact with farmers on flatter ground seeing that than the erosion side of that demonstration.”

In August, the '26-'27 cohort of ISAP’s Soil Health Leadership Program will kick off their first session with Pete at ICC. Emphasizing the value that Pete adds to this program, Helen said, “The demonstration sites on Illinois Central College’s campus highlight a variety of in-field and edge-of-field conservation practices, making it the ideal place to host the first session of ISAP’s Soil Health Leadership Program. The field tour at ICC will include a soil pit showcasing the benefits of no-till, cover crops on soil structure, a demonstration plot of dozen cover crop species. These opportunities to see the soil health practices up close and in action are a critical component of the Soil Health Leadership Program. In the first session, Pete shares a wealth of knowledge on soil fertility and the impact of conservation practices on soil health, drawing from his experience as a professor of agriculture at ICC and his own personal experience on his farm.”

REFLECTIONS ON 2026 ILLINOIS ENVIROTHON

Non-Point Source Pollution: It Begins At Home!

By Courtney Lercher, Scott County Conservation Planner

This April I had the opportunity to volunteer at the Illinois Envirothon competition hosted by the Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts. This year's Envirothon took place on April 29th and 30th at the 4H Memorial Campground in Monticello, IL.

For those who are not familiar with the Envirothon competition, "The Envirothon® is an environmental and natural resources conservation problem-solving, leadership experience and academic competition for secondary school (high school) students (grades 9-12 or ages 14-19) across the United States, Canada, China, and Singapore. Incorporating STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) principles, hands-on learning, and outdoor field experiences, the Envirothon fosters student learning in the areas of AQUATIC ECOLOGY, FORESTRY, SOILS and LAND USE, WILDLIFE, and CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES" (envirothon.org).



Envirothon participants, provided by Cara Clark

To compete at the state level, teams must first participate in a county or land use council (LUC) Envirothon. The competition includes listening to a twenty-minute presentation on each of the five topics noted above, followed by a twenty-minute testing period for each topic. From this local level competition "each participating LUC sends one champion team to the Illinois Envirothon, for a total of sixteen teams" (illinoisenvirothon.org). Additionally, an FFA team can attend Illinois Envirothon for testing day only. The Illinois Envirothon competition is a fun, educational, and meaningful experience for both students and volunteers. This was my second year volunteering, and each year seems to be better than the last.

Day one of the competition was testing day, like the local competition, but this time students traveled to various stations around camp and listened to a notable speaker for each of the five topics. This year I was a team guide for Monticello (LUC6), and I helped bring them to each station. After the testing was completed for the day, the students had break time before dinner. During this time, students were walking the trails, playing basketball, fishing in the pond, and hanging out with other LUCs. After the break, teams, volunteers, and chaperons all gathered in the main dining hall. Each team got the opportunity to show off their custom LUC shirts and introduce their teams before we all had dinner together. After dinner, the next section of the Envirothon began.

Students voted on best LUC shirt, and a team spirit award before they learned their oral presentation prompt for the next day. The oral presentation for the second day followed the fifth presentation category the students were tested on during day one. This year's prompt was about non-point source pollution. The students were to design a conservation plan for a particular watershed with certain monetary parameters and present their plan while explaining their conservation practice options, reasons for choosing each practice, and expected costs and outcomes of their plan. After they heard the prompt, students were given three hours preparation time after dinner where they brainstormed with their team and made their presentation. This year, the Envirothon went digital for the first time, so students made a virtual PowerPoint on a flash drive. They were also allowed to make notecards that they could use the day of their presentation. Following preparation time, students finished out the night with fun activities like a bonfire and ice cream sandwiches until lights out at 11pm.

Day two began bright and early with a 7:30 am breakfast for everyone. After breakfast, the teams split up into their groups and were given less than an hour to prepare for the oral presentation portion. The initial presentation for each team was given in front of four judges who grade, time, and ask questions at the end of the presentation. After each team presented in front of their initial judges, the top three scores were selected, and the top teams gave a final presentation in front of a new group of judges. This group of judges picked the top presentation of the three and the winner gave their final presentation in front of everyone during lunch time. This year's ranking of the 2026 IL Envirothon is as follows: first place Olney High School (Richland County), second place was Lane Tech (Cook County), and third place was Stewardson Strasburg (Shelby County). Since Olney High School was awarded overall high score of Envirothon, test scores and oral presentation included, they are invited to the National Envirothon competition in Mississippi this July.

As someone who never had the opportunity to experience competing in Envirothon, local or state, I truly can't explain how special and important this unique occasion is for high school students. From my perspective as a two-year volunteer, Envirothon is a challenging, character-building, and collaborative event that not only allows students to compete against other LUCs, but also to have a fun time while learning about great conservation challenges. Each year I am more impressed by the new groups of students competing. As a conservation professional, it gives me such pride and a sense of ease at the next generation of conservationists – our land will be in good hands with them.



Volunteer Group, provided by Cara Clark



First Place, (Olney), provided by Cara Clark



May 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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