



THE STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

The Illinois STAR (Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources) program was developed by farmers, for farmers. In 2017, two Illinois farmers teamed up with the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District (CCSWCD) to come up with a simple, free, and useful tool (the STAR tool) that farmers could use to evaluate conservation on their fields and tap into the benefits of conservation practices through a field level Conservation Innovation Plan. Practically speaking, farming operations are not simple (or free), so the STAR tool accommodates the unique operations occurring on each field while prioritizing local natural resource concerns. A major goal was to encourage farmers to implement new conservation practices, so the STAR tool takes into consideration financial, technical, and informational barriers to conservation adoption. Conservation partners across the state participated in the IL STAR Steering and Science Committees and ultimately produced a single page field evaluation form and scoring system that gives a field-level 1-5 STAR rating. Producers answer questions that are used to customize next steps for practice adoption and resources to help with implementation as part of a Conservation Innovation Plan. This provides clear direction for improvement and functions as a mechanism for communicating conservation progress to buyers and supply chain partners. The STAR tool also offers farmers a free field sign with their STAR rating as a way to recognize their accomplishments and share them publicly. The program grew across Illinois, into other midwestern states, and out west to Colorado and Washington. In September 2023, STAR was officially launched as a national scale non-profit organization to establish a consistent and standardized tool across all regions and production systems in the US. National STAR establishes individual STAR Affiliate agreements with state-specific organizations who work together with the state Steering and Science Committees to develop and administer the STAR program within their state.



Joe Rothermel with 4 STAR sign in 2022.

In Illinois, both the CCSWCD and the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) are STAR affiliates and therefore are responsible for the development and operation of the Illinois STAR program. The Illinois STAR program is run by Illinois STAR Coordinator Natalie Kerr (hired through IDOA's capacity building program, Agroecology & Innovation Matters (AIM)) and Illinois STAR Assistant Coordinator Bruce Henrikson (contracted by CCSWCD), under the direction of the Illinois STAR Steering Committee. The Steering Committee has volunteer members from CCSWCD, IDOA, Terra Economics LLC, The Nature Conservancy, Illinois Corn Growers Association, Illinois Soybean Association, American Farmland Trust, and National STAR, as well as farmers. The Illinois STAR Science Advisory Committee has members from the University of Illinois Extension, American Farmland Trust, Piatt County SWCD, USDA NRCS, and Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association, as well as farmers. These committees are responsible for establishing goals; maintaining the STAR tool, scoring system, and resources provided to farmers; developing and implementing rewards programs; and aligning with other conservation efforts across the state.

Participation in STAR is free and enrollment is available online through the STAR Web Tool; a paper copy is also available as a downloadable form or from local SWCDs. Farmers' data are protected through a strict data use and privacy policy. Soil and Water Conservation District employees in 30 counties in Illinois and 3 counties in Indiana have signed agreements with CCSWCD to be Illinois STAR Navigators and either already have or will soon be trained on the STAR tool to support producers in completing field forms and/or using the STAR Web Tool, and have agreed to provide technical support and facilitate connections to resources to support farmers implement conservation practices. STAR is also meant to be a resource for professionals to use when engaging farmers in conversations on conservation who can provide guidance

and technical advice based on a field's Conservation Innovation Plan. Currently, the Illinois STAR field form is required by the Illinois Department of Agriculture as part of the application process for the Partners-for-Conservation Cost Share funding, which SWCD employees help farmers complete. Illinois STAR also partnered with Siemer Milling Company this year to offer a producer rewards payment program, and the Illinois STAR Field Form was required as part of that application process. The Illinois STAR field form for crop year 2024 is currently available to all farmers in Illinois online at www.startool.ag, via pdf at www.IllinoisSTAR.org/get-started, and through Precision Conservation Management (PCM) specialists.

September Illinois STAR Updates

The Illinois STAR program held its September Steering Committee meeting with participation from members representing Illinois STAR farmers, Affiliates IDOA and CCSWCD, and Illinois STAR partners including American Farmland Trust, Illinois Soybean Association, Illinois Corn Growers Association, The Nature Conservancy, and Terra Consulting. Here are the key updates and decisions from the meeting:

Conservation Innovation Plan Progress

The committee reviewed mockups for the upcoming Conservation Innovation Plan feature, which is being developed for integration into the STAR Web Tool. This tool aims to enhance user experience and provide guidance on additional conservation opportunities, more streamlined access to conservation resources, and a direct connection to technical assistance.

Contractor Positions Approved

The Steering Committee approved the search for two contractors to be hired through CCSWCD. The first contract will be for approximately 15 hours per week for 10 months. This contractor will conduct the literature review and data extraction component of the STAR science development process, with a focus on adding new tool capabilities for urban agriculture, diversified food systems, and specialty cropping systems in Illinois. The second contractor will sign a data use agreement and analyze aggregated crop year 2023 data to provide insights for future planning, training, outreach and education strategy. Official job postings will be out shortly, and anyone interested in the contracts can contact natalie@starconservation.org.

Expansion of the Science Committee

Six new members will be invited to join the Science Committee, expanding the expertise and capacity of the group. This will help drive the development and refinement of the STAR program's initiatives, ensuring robust scientific backing for conservation practices.

National STAR Updates

National STAR is conducting a comprehensive literature review focused on the North Central and Midwest CEAP region. This review will produce a matrix that quantifies the impact of conservation practices on natural resources. Additionally, a desktop evaluation will be conducted to highlight the priority natural resource concerns, cropping systems, and conservation practices in Illinois, along with other relevant agronomic and agricultural information, to help guide future field form and scoring system revisions and development. . The results will guide the Science Committee in setting revision and development priorities for crop year 2025. The next Science Committee meeting will be scheduled for the week of October 21st.

In other exciting news, National STAR has been accepted into the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership (ISAP). Illinois STAR Coordinator Natalie Kerr, STAR Program Director Jake Deutmeyer, and IL STAR Steering Committee President Steve Stierwalt will represent STAR in ISAP working groups, further integrating STAR's conservation efforts into state-wide sustainability initiatives.

Enrollment Success in the Siemer Producer Rewards Payment Program

The Producer Rewards Payment program offered through Siemer Milling Company has seen significant growth this year, with 13 farmers submitting fields for enrollment, up from a single applicant last year. The team is currently verifying eligibility and expects to process payments by December. The next step will involve a verification process, where a random selection of fields, determined by the square root of the total enrolled fields, will be reviewed. Fields not associated with the Siemer program enrolled after the priority deadline (November 1st) will be included in the next Illinois STAR verification round, tentatively scheduled for Spring 2025.

A verification FAQ and checklist of criteria have been provided to assist participants. Verification will be conducted by IDOA Conservation Planners, who will ensure confidentiality of the information collected in accordance with STAR's privacy policy.