



THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

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Illinois STAR, an Affiliate of the national, non-profit Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources (STAR) organization, is exploring the possibility of creating a new STAR Tool for evaluation of diversified food systems. Based on the nationally standardized STAR framework for evaluating and guiding conservation practice adoption, the free, voluntary STAR Tool, already available for row crops, is expanding to include urban/community based agriculture. The STAR framework not only helps producers to better understand the impacts of their own practices, but it also offers them a Conservation Innovation Plan with locally tailored recommendations and resources.

While urban/community based agriculture has several social, economic, and environmental benefits, there are unique conservation concerns when compared to conventional, large scale agriculture. There are many exciting urban agriculture initiatives gaining momentum in Illinois and across the nation. Illinois STAR seeks to support and amplify these initiatives with the innovative STAR tool to serve and reward farmers, and to advance conservation within our food systems.

Development of the science-based STAR Tool is informed by state STAR Affiliate Science Committees – with additional guidance and input from state Affiliate Steering Committees and national STAR – and is designed to optimize the potential for positive conservation impact. The STAR tool includes field forms comprised of a set of questions that address local natural resource concerns and relevant farming practices. Based on their responses to the field forms, farmers receive a simple field-level rating of 1 to 5 STARs, helping to enable consistent evaluation and tracking of conservation progress, as well as a guided opportunity for innovation and improvement through the STAR Conservation Innovation Plan.

While the expansion of the STAR Tool began with a focus on urban agriculture, this also presented the opportunity to look at specialty crops grown in Illinois including specialty grains, vegetables, orchards, berries, and greenhouse production. Diversified food systems, urban/community based agriculture, and specialty crops all come with unique conservation concerns and best practices. In order to capture these nuances, Illinois STAR is working with stakeholders across the state and incorporating feedback from other state STAR Affiliates across the country to determine appropriate next steps to implement this expansion while following National STAR's rigorous science development process.

These processes include developing state-specific field forms, scoring systems, and outcomes estimation methodologies that evaluate the implementation of conservation practices within a given cropping system to address local natural resource concerns. Step One involves completing a landscape assessment to gather critical agronomic and conservation information in the state to help set priorities for issues and practices to be included in the expansion of the STAR Tool and to help inform how practices are scored. The landscape assessment is done in two phases - the desktop evaluation and science assessment. The desktop evaluation identifies the production context – including local natural resource concerns, predominant crop types and production systems, and current and emerging conservation practices. This is followed by a science assessment to gather both quantitative and qualitative evidence for possible practices to be included in the field forms and their conservation impact potential. Currently, the desktop evaluation draft is complete and will be reviewed by stakeholders in the coming weeks. This work is made possible through a NACD/NRCS Technical Assistance Grant awarded to the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District.



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