



THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, Illinois STAR Coordinator

STAR NAVIGATORS: EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR ILLINOIS FARMERS

The Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts Act (70 ILCS 405) mandates the use of a soil health assessment for state-funded conservation practices. The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) has selected the STAR Tool to meet this requirement, making STAR a key part of conservation efforts across the state.

To help farmers meet this requirement and get the most out of STAR, SWCD staff will be trained as STAR Navigators—local technical support providers who assist farmers in using the STAR Tool and connecting them to available conservation resources.

WHAT IS A STAR NAVIGATOR?

A STAR Navigator is a local technical expert trained on the STAR Tool to help farmers implement conservation practices. Navigators support producers in using the STAR Tool and play a critical role in guiding them through the process. They also adhere to the STAR Data Privacy Policy and Data Use Agreement outlined in the Navigator Agreement.



KEY RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE:

- ☑ Assisting farmers with completing STAR Field Forms including support for entering data into the STAR Web Tool
- ☑ Helping farmers understand their STAR Ratings and connecting them to available financial, technical, and educational resources through the Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP)
- ☑ Supporting long-term conservation planning by using STAR Reports as a reference tool for future discussions

Q: ARE STAR NAVIGATORS EMPLOYEES OF STAR?

A: No—STAR Navigators are not employees of STAR. In Illinois, they are typically staff from local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), or other partnering organizations. These individuals are trained to use the STAR Tool and support farmers in their region.

Q: WHAT QUALIFICATIONS OR EXPERIENCE DO NAVIGATORS HAVE?

A: Navigators often have experience in conservation, agronomy, or agricultural outreach. Many serve as Resource Conservationists or Educators who already work directly with farmers.

Q: ARE FARMERS ASSIGNED A NAVIGATOR?

A: STAR Navigators are formally assigned to specific regions—either by geography (such as county boundaries) or by project (such as a specific cost-share program). Farmers can connect with the Navigator responsible for their region or project area to get support using the STAR Tool and accessing resources. Navigator access is limited to their assigned regions to ensure farmer data privacy and local expertise.

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WHAT DOES A NAVIGATOR-FARMER EXCHANGE LOOK LIKE?

At its core, being a STAR Navigator is about building relationships and opening the door to conservation conversations—without pressure or complexity. The interaction can be as simple as:

“Would you be willing to take five minutes to fill out this form? You will receive a report that we can walk through together.”

This small ask sets the stage for a much larger impact. With just a few minutes of a farmer’s time, the Navigator receives a clear picture of what’s happening in the field—planting

decisions, tillage practices, nutrient management – and opportunities for additional conservation activities along with resources for implementation. It’s a shared starting point, not only for evaluating conservation, but for building mutual understanding.

Having the STAR Score Report in hand means the Navigator is no longer relying on memory or scattered notes to recall a farmer’s practices. Instead, they can reference a field-specific, annual document that can evolve over time. If printed, it becomes a working tool—something to bring to the field, jot notes on during a field walk, or revisit at the next meeting.

When paired with the Conservation Incentive Plan (CIP) feature in the STAR Tool, that report becomes even more powerful. Navigators can use it to quickly identify financial or technical resources that align with the farmer’s goals, turning a five-minute conversation into an actionable, tailored plan. The CIP asks the farmer about their goals, challenges, and interests in new practices, then connects those responses to a curated list of relevant next steps and support options.

HOW STAR FITS INTO IDOA’S COST-SHARE PROGRAMS

IDOA provides funding through the Partners for Conservation (PFC) Fund to support conservation practices. STAR provides a framework to help ensure this investment leads to meaningful, long-term improvements.

The IDOA PFC Programs outline that all state-funded conservation practices must include a soil health assessment to qualify for cost-share payments. The STAR Field Form meets this requirement by collecting detailed, field-specific information about management practices that directly impact soil health—such as tillage, cover cropping, nutrient application, and crop rotation. This information is evaluated against a locally adapted, science-based scoring system to generate a STAR Score, which serves as a standardized and practical assessment of soil health outcomes. If another method is used (such as soil health sampling), the cost is the responsibility of the applicant.

This year, the IDOA Bureau of Land and Water Resources has strengthened STAR’s role in the PFC program by asking SWCDs to become IL STAR Navigators and continue to use the STAR Tool for soil health assessments. The PFC-1 form has also been updated to reflect STAR data requirements, including STAR Points, STAR Rating, and STAR ID#, all of which are generated in the STAR Tool.

IDOA sees STAR as more than a cost-effective tool measuring progress on Soil Health activities at the field level — it is a way to connect producers to resources that support long-term conservation success. At the same time, IDOA recognizes the critical role SWCDs play in supporting conservation on the ground and is committed to equipping them with tools and training—like STAR—to make that work more efficient, consistent, and impactful.