



THE ILLINOIS STAR REPORT

SAVING TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE RESOURCES

By Natalie Kerr, STAR Coordinator

ADVANCING CONSERVATION WITH ILLINOIS STAR: A YEAR OF GROWTH AND INNOVATION

Over the past year, Illinois STAR (Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources) has continued to grow as a vital tool for farmers and conservation professionals. With the support of dedicated partners like the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District (CCSWCD) and Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), we've expanded opportunities for training, research, and producer rewards—helping farmers advance conservation efforts across the state and gain well-deserved recognition for their efforts.

Founded in 2017 by CCSWCD board members Steve Stierwalt and Joe Rothermel, Illinois STAR has evolved from a local initiative into a national nonprofit, providing a standardized tool to evaluate conservation efforts across different regions and production systems.

In 2024, Illinois STAR launched several key initiatives to expand conservation support:

Expanding Training Opportunities: The new STAR Ready Microcredential Training, developed with support from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was piloted and feedback is being incorporated to perfect the two, short, asynchronous sessions that are part of the training.

Diversifying STAR's Reach: Efforts are underway to adapt the STAR Tool for Urban Agriculture and Specialty Crops, ensuring a broader range of producers can access conservation guidance.

Advancing Data Analysis: Illinois STAR is analyzing anonymized producer data to assess conservation trends, with insights helping inform future program developments to strengthen Illinois STAR's impact.

Rewarding Farmers for Conservation: Through a partnership with The Nature Conservancy and Siemer Milling Company, Illinois STAR provided \$65,000 in payments to farmers implementing conservation practices that resulted in improved or outstanding (5-STAR Rating) environmental outcomes.

Another major advancement in 2024 was the launch of the Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP), a new feature within the STAR Tool. The CIP helps farmers set conservation goals, address production challenges, and access tailored technical, educational, and financial resources. It also provides reports that farmers can share with landowners and lenders to highlight their conservation progress and future plans on a set of fields. The CIP underscores the STAR Tool's value as a comprehensive resource for planning and taking conservation action.

Looking forward, the Illinois STAR Science Committee is finalizing revisions to the field form for Crop Year '25, an Urban Ag working group is forming, and the STAR Ready training is being perfected for Navigators and agricultural leaders to equip them with tools to integrate STAR into conservation planning.



Illinois STAR Science Committee met on January 27, 2025.

At its core, Illinois STAR is more than just a rating system—it's a decision-support tool designed by farmers for farmers. Whether you're curious about your conservation status, looking to plan your next steps, or simply want to join the conservation conversation, the STAR Tool is there for you. It's a tool that grows with you - from recognizing where you are today to guiding where you want to go tomorrow.

We invite you to explore the STAR Tool and see how it can support your farm's success. By working together, we can build a more resilient and sustainable agricultural future.