

NLRS AWQPF Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

1:30 – 3:30 pm

At Illinois Department of Agriculture's John R. Block Auditorium



Meeting Summary

Strategic Planning for NLRS Agricultural Sector

Michael Woods, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Michael Woods urged the agriculture sector to take action to address its unmet NLRS goals with the development of a comprehensive tactical plan. He asserted that it is important to engage early and middle adopters, producers, landowners, ag leaders, and others to elevate implementation rates. Michael pitched the idea that the AWQPF should create subcommittees with SMARTER goals to ensure all partners are working towards a common set of objectives. SMARTER is an acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based, Engaging, and Resourced goals. He asserted that pooling resources with state and federal funding can help us to achieve our collective goals and asked for feedback on this idea.

Tactical Plan Structure Discussion

Michael Woods, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts

The discussion involved Ag Water Quality Partnership Forum Members and guests sharing thoughts on creation of a tactical plan to achieve ag implementation goals. Participants emphasized the necessity of realistic goal-setting. The conversation touched upon the importance of targeted educational efforts, better marketing tactics, and the need for adaptive management approaches that consider local variations and economic constraints. Leaders advocated for both grassroots and high-level strategic planning, highlighting the potential of subcommittees to tackle specific issues related to adoption of in-field, edge of field, and perennial conservation practices.

To expand cover crop acreage, the group discussed setting realistic targets and enhancing financial incentives, referencing the Lake Decatur program aimed at middle adopters. They discussed how to advance marketing and education to change farmer behaviors and increase adoption by addressing practical barriers like knowledge and timing, seed availability, timing, and finances. Ideas included custom application programs, innovative branding techniques with ag industry marketing experts, and showcasing of both aesthetic and economic benefits of cover crops.

Another common theme in the discussion was enhancing the overall marketing and education of all NLRS agricultural conservation practices. Several members suggested expanding partnerships and discussions to highlight co-benefits of nutrient reduction along with climate change mitigation, risk reduction, and economic resilience. With unified messaging, producers could better understand that the same practice could achieve several outcomes, including 45Z tax credit coming to biofuels, sustainable aviation fuel, Illinois proposed low carbon fuel standard, public greenhouse gas reduction goals, and mitigation requirements under EPA's Endangered Species Act proposals, etc. Members

discussed diversifying outreach to drainage districts, local businesses, politicians, bankers, and media. Several members feel a better understanding of marketing tactics and social marketing principles is important, while others feel messaging should shift to risk management education to better address producer hesitations. Economic framing of conservation farming was a common theme. Localized approaches and farmer-to-farmer marketing pilot programs were mentioned, as were simplification of cost-share paperwork, and incorporation of the new phosphorus research in agronomy and streambank erosion.

The last major theme focused on enhancing agricultural programs by starting with a needs assessment, or review of the current status and recommendations. The current programs and projects can be found in Chapters 4 of the biennial report and expanded on in the Partners Appendix, and future recommendations for the agricultural sector are summarized in Chapter 8. Members discussed highlighting programs, products, and projects that are currently working well and identifying ways to leverage additional resources to support effective initiatives and amplify the current successes.

The meeting ended with a solicitation to members to consider the formation of a new subcommittee aimed at steering a cohesive tactical plan that effectively integrates economic viability with environmental stewardship.

Meeting Minutes

In attendance: Kenny Adesina, AIM; Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy; Dennis Bowman, University of Illinois Extension; Jean Brokish, American Farmland Trust; Travis Burke, University of Illinois Extension - Agriculture/Agri-Business; Amelia Cheek, Illinois Farm Bureau; Amanda Christenson, University of Illinois Extension; Emily Conover, Farm Service Agency; Dylan Cook, American Farmland Trust; Albert Cox, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension; Rachel Curry, University of Illinois Extension; Chris Davis, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Megan Dwyer, Illinois Corn Growers Association; Emma Eldridge, Illinois Extension; Albert Ettinger, Mississippi River Collaborative; Nicole Haverback, University of Illinois Extension; Robert Hirschfeld, Prairie Rivers Network; Liz Hobart, GROWMARK; Jennifer Jones, Illinois Soybean Association; Shibu Kar, University of Illinois Extension; Natalie Kerr, IDOA - STAR Program; Corey Lacey, Illinois Soybean Association; Richard Lyons, Illinois Association of Drainage Districts; Mila Marshall, Sierra Club; Whitney Miller, AIM ; Lisa Muirheid Martin, Illinois Certified Crop Advisor Program; Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau; Justin Ramey, Illinois Department of Natural Resources; Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Dan Schaefer, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association; Sanjay Sofat, Illinois Farm Bureau; Steve Stierwalt, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts; Shelley Sweatman, U.S. Department of Agriculture - Farm Service Agency; Guanglong Tian, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Michael Woods, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts; Helen VanBeck, American Farmland Trust / ISAP; Hannah Tomlin, IDOA- AIM Initiative; Kristen Ragusa, IDNR CREP

Strategic Planning for NLRs Agricultural Sector

Michael Woods, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Michael Woods started by acknowledging that we have an amazing group of organizations and people dedicated to addressing NLRs, but that something must change within the ag sector in order to reach its implementation goals. We know exactly where point sources are coming from and they are making progress, but we are trying to make changes to over 23 million acres of farmland with thousands of producers and there are fundamental differences between the sectors. As highlighted in the biennial report, strategy alone is not enough.

Tactics, or the individual day-to-day steps and decisions, are needed to reach goals. Michael urged the group to act by developing a comprehensive tactical plan. He emphasized members must engage early and middle adopters to elevate implementation rates. He urged the group to take bold steps to engage landowners, producers, and leaders in agriculture to ensure progress. He noted that we have the science to move us forward but need to engage producers and asked members to revisit, renew, and reform outreach efforts. Do we need new types of farm field days and a fresh look at untapped markets? How do we attract new producers to these events or find unlikely partners who can come together and involve new audiences? Can we look to other partners who are not at the table yet?

Michael proposed that the Ag Water Quality Partnership Forum should create subcommittees and set SMARTER goals, which is an acronym that stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based, Engaging, and Resourced to ensure all partners are working towards a common set of objectives. He noted that Illinois receives 4 RCPP awards budgeted at about 25 M each and each year has 100 M spread over 5 years. He encouraged partners to look at a plan reaching to 2040, 16 years away. The RCPP notice of funding is coming out next week. Do we have a plan? Michael urged the group to pool their resources with state and federal funding to achieve their goals. He said we also need to have conversations about legislation. Legislation should be productive and supportive without being punitive to producers. If we pool our resources with state and federal funding and have a plan, we can achieve this. We have great brain power sitting in this room and, collectively, we can achieve our goals.

Tactical Plan Structure Discussion

- Dick Lyons, IADD: I think this is a good idea. We have several different perceptions in the group in terms of where we need to go. What is our common ground? What do we really want to accomplish? Nutrient Loss in general is too broad. All of us need to look at our focus and how it fits into the bigger picture. Kris Reynolds, AFT, has been leading to get additional acres of cover crops. In my area, we want to work with nutrient loss through tile drainage or drainage districts. Let's look at our main foci individually and how those fit into the bigger picture.
- Michael Woods: Sometimes we need to digest things, so we are not asking for people to sign up [on to a plan committee] today. Travis, do you see anything on the University or Extension side of this?
- Travis Burke, Extension: We are building our staffing and looking at coordinating things around regenerative and sustainable agriculture. It is a little different across Illinois to implement these practices. It is going to take some time, but Extension is putting together our team.
- Michael: Time is an issue, but we also have many acres. We've been doing this for 10 years. So, what are we going to do for the next 10 years?

- Steve Stierwalt, AISWCD: I know everyone here has been figuring out how to crack the nut to get farmers to do conservation, I don't have a magic bullet. Being a farmer, we talk about the technical support and education and all the things that go into making us farmers make changes. The missing link, and it seems simple, is that farmers must want to do it. The missing link is middle adopters. There will never be enough money from the government to get us where we need to go. First and foremost, the farmer must be open to making a change. As we think about tactics, that is what we need to keep in mind. Michael may lead the charge, but it is not all on him for details.
- Kris Reynolds, AFT: We should look at our practices and develop subcommittees. Who should lead the charge? Maybe Michael but it doesn't have to be, nor should all the details fall on the leader. Subgroups could be formed for in-field, edge of field, and perennial land use changes. Looking at in-field cover crops, we looked at 90% adoption of cover crops earlier in the Fall Covers for Spring Savings talk at the PWG this morning, but 90% is not realistic. We need realistic goals for the next few years. Within the subgroups we need to look at what currently exists for each of the practices, taking a look at ISAP resources that Jean discussed at the PWG this morning, and upgrade programs that are working well and figure out how to leverage additional resources to help the lift. Jean will soon be kicking off a program that is watershed-based farmer network through ISAP.
- Michael: Showed Scenario NP8 from the 2023 Biennial Report and asked about the strategies to put tactics into motion. What do we need to do? Increasing cover crops and tillage are low-hanging fruit. We are exceeding at MRTN, conservation tillage, nitrogen management. We need a different strategy on bioreactors, wetlands, cover crops, buffers.
- Steve: Farmers don't think in terms of strategies for NLRs. We think in terms of "What is my goal at the end of the day and what is the market that I am working toward and what do I need to do to get there?" Before we get to all these strategies the farmers have to be on board. Once that is clear, the farmer will figure out how to do it. We must figure out what will make the farmers make a change.
- Dick: This year of all years there won't be a lot of extra money to spend on something else. It is not an economically good year for farmers. You can go to Farmdoc to see profitability. We must add economics to it our strategy and tactics. Nutrient loss is not as compelling to a farmer as dollars per acre. Environmental and economic goals must come together.
- Raelynn Parmely, IFB: ILFB reported \$40 billion loss across the agricultural industry for profits. It is good we are bringing in more money through RCPP, but \$100 million allocated or spent doesn't mean anything to the farmers. It doesn't help them understand where it fits in to their bottom line. MRTN is easy, so is soil testing. When we start to get in to cover crops, it is not low hanging fruit for a lot of farmers. In a year like 2024 a farmer will not consider adopting cover crops unless there is more incentive. Lake Decatur RCPP is offering \$104 per acre for cover crops to encourage middle to late adopters. That program has a paid farmer advisory group with paid travel as well as good cost share. What is important is how many dollars per acre can a farmer get?
- Elliot Legacy, IDOA: The Partners for Conservation cost share for cover crops is \$40 per acre.
- Mark Schleusener, USDA NASS: Raelynn, did you have to do it wrong the first time?
- Raelynn: Yes, the first RCPP grant was turned down, then they redid a 319-grant application. They had to restart and do a watershed plan and that helped revamp the plan. It takes a long time to get a grant.
- Erin Bauer, ISWS: The Lake Decatur project found that some of the biggest hurdles were not getting the applicant paperwork done correctly, and lack of understanding about what could be stacked. The current awarded project is providing assistance to make sure they can get signed up for these programs

correctly. The key point is that part of the resistance is the paperwork. It is too much paperwork and then they may not get the cost-share contract anyway.

- Megan, ICGA: I met recently with 40 farmers and another time with 200 people in the room. Of the 200, only 6 people were aware of NLRs. There is not enough sense of ownership to make the NLRs stick with people. Looking at the data with PCM farmers, the top three things that stand out to them are the payment, the ease of paperwork, and the flexibility in how the practices are used and implemented. This Forum should look at how we collectively communicate practice co-benefits. We also need to have conversations about the overlap of NLRs, and the several other conversations that are happening with stakeholders on the exact same practices. For example, the same conservation practice can achieve outcomes for 45Z tax credit coming to biofuels, Sustainable Aviation fuel, Illinois proposed low carbon fuel standard, public greenhouse gas reduction goals, mitigation requirement under EPA's Endangered Species Act proposals, and the list goes on. I think there is an opportunity to rethink how we at the NLRs Ag Forum can work with some of these other partners because the same practice can achieve several outcomes. Since stakeholders are interested in the same practices, we should be pooling resources, dollars, technical availability into a comprehensive, yet easy program for a farmer. Somehow, though we'd also have to link in landowners and the overall environment for a farmer to be successful while transitioning. Bringing in these other topics and partners and collaborating is a way to use outside partners to achieve NLRs goals and make all these outcomes I listed more marketable to farmers.
- Corey Lacey, ISA: We can't afford to pay 100 an acre for cover crops across Illinois. There is a funding limitation. I think we are facing a marketing challenge, which is about behavior change. It is not a policy or science challenge. We need to interact with experts in ag industry who know how to help with a marketing challenge and change behaviors.
- Erin: It isn't going to be a general thing. If I were to build a tactic, I would have a tactic around the first thing the farmer should try and develop a plan for them. What is the first step for a farmer to ease into conservation?
- Mila Marshal, Sierra Club: I agree this is a marketing issue. Is there a large market for regenerative ag products? We have many local business owners and local political office holders who do not know anything about the environment and natural resources. Many professionals in conservation have never operated a business driven by the bottom line. We need a diverse approach to combat ecological ignorance using constant education. Bankers should be part of this conversation. We need a novel approach for marketing and branding. It is not solely a financial issue. And it should be solution-oriented and not telling people what to do. We need a novel approach to bring in new people and educate about environment. I don't hear anything on the radio, news, or TV up in Chicago, so we are not seeing how this issue engages with the economy.
- Michael: How can we come together to make this palatable for everyone to navigate?
- Dick Lyons: Do we as a group need a marketing strategy? Do we need marketing tactics? How do we sell conservation? There are 8 different buyer styles. What strategies do we know will work on early, middle and late adopters? What tactics can we use to sell conservation? The words Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy are probably not compelling. We need to be looking at social marketing principles.
- Erin: I disagree. Farmers may want to try, and are on the fence, but can't tolerate the risk. The tactical thing would be to show the steps they can take and the economics.
- Michael: It depends on the many variables. Some assume that conservation and farming are separate. Someone noted that this year is a tough economic time, we know that in those years people are less

likely to take risk. How do we frame messaging? Look at GMOs which was big ag marketing. Also, why is there the assumption that in the farm bill food stamps and conservation are separate from “farm”?

- Shibu Kar, Extension: Perhaps it would help to shift the use of the word “loss” in NLRs to wording that focuses on the benefits and profits. Think about the co-benefits with climate change and risk mitigation for the farm. Cover crops and agroforestry buffers, carbon sequestration can help farmers tap into revenue and build resilience. How do we open that market? If we set the goal and aim for those benefits, that will encompass the goals for the NLRs. That could bring in more partners.
- Whitney Miller, AIM: I have been listening to the conversation and respectfully disagree that profit and marketing strategy as being the most important. The thing that sells the best is something that worked for your neighbor. We need to put all the money toward getting conservation on the ground to show what works well on a farm next to another farmer. Too often only certain farmers know the right people to fill out paperwork to acquire cost-share. And while lenders are aware of this, there is no true incentive to adopt the practices. If you are talking with your banker it has nothing to do with not wanting to do conservation, it has to do with the money not being there to help. Farmers are always having to take calculated risk.
- Jean Brokish, AFT, ISAP: I am working with a watershed group using farmers are the marketing agent. Farmer to farmer information is so valuable, as is paying farmer leaders like in the Lake Decatur RCPP. We have 6 pilot watersheds using this approach and don’t need to recreate the wheel to how we invest in success. There are a lot of good ideas here. ISAP already has many resources.
- Michael: How can we support what is working?
- Lisa Martin, CCA: The cover crops are beautiful this spring, can we market how beautiful they are? Yes, we need more cover crops. Farmers are more than happy to spend money on tile drains. We need to work on showing the return on cover crops. For example, tile drainage was not always as important as it is now, but farmers saw the return and now tile drainage is everywhere. If we can do what they did for tile drainage, then maybe we can make a dent on cover crops.
- Justin Ramey, IDNR: Everyone has a different solution to the problem and customers don’t know what the problem is. It has to be solving a problem to resonate with producers. A new marketing approach would be a reinvention of the wheel. Let’s look at what we have done in the past, but instead reframe to say, “this is the problem, and this is the solution,” and then incentivize those solutions.
- Megan D.: Do we have a wholistic approach with lenders, non-operating landowners, capitol expenses of equipment, and the 20 other things that go into the decision-making process for a farmer? Something new and innovating needs to look at all the pieces. Take a grower with 500 acres, for example. They may try something new on 20-30 acres for these programs. But a 10,000-acre farm can’t only be trying something on 20-30 acres since everything is scaled to their size. Are we thinking about scalability when transitioning farmers to conservation? Management at different scales is complex.
- Michael: How do we look at this in a complex, adaptive way?
- Guanlong Tian, MWRD: Often timing prevents application of cover crops. Are there custom application solutions that get at the timing barrier? Need to develop a program to overcome farmer barriers including time and resources.
- Michael: Yes, also there are other limiting factors including financial, seed availability, time, resources, and knowledge. One of the things we did with the iCover RCPP was to provide support to farmers trying cover crops by providing custom applications. We know that a marketing is key, has anyone heard of ingredient branding? Conditioning branding, for example the INTEL tag on a computer, were we consumers look for it on a product without really thinking of it. Can we apply conditioning branding to

NLRS? Let's outline the strategies and tactics which include marketing, education, outreach, resources, and support. That is the next step forward.

- Chris Davis, IEPA: Regarding the word "loss" in the NLRS phrasing. We were very intentional about adding the word "loss" because we wanted to compel people to conserve what they have. The intent was to educate that it would save money and impact the bottom line. This should be key, and it should be continued. This is the most state and federal money I have seen coming in my 30-year career. We have to figure out how to get people to make the long-term changes. And the strategy steps up to this point have supported that.
- Albert Ettinger, MRC: I am a lawyer. When a voluntary approach fails, we are here. Why does regulation have to be punitive?
- Sanjay Sofat, IFB: We need a plan. I am new to this role and I am learning, but it is obvious that there are many reasons things are not happening. We want to sit down and think through things. Some ag groups would like to sit down and think through whether we are discouraging people with the water quality metrics for N and P? Things are happening, as evidenced by all of Chapter 4 in the Biennial Report. Farmers may have numerous reasons for not adopting conservation. Are we putting things in place for them to be successful through a voluntary approach? If we are truly talking about making change in the future, we need to be on the same side, and we need to learn more about farmer barriers. Groups should go back and talk and come up with solutions outside of this meeting and come back and report thoughts. Not everything is solved through litigation.
- Liz, GROWMARK FS: It has been a great discussion. It is tough when you look at the variables and complexity. We look at it farmer by farmer, field by field, and acre by acre as a business. It is complex with many controllable and uncontrollable variables. We must consider variables outside of farmer control that impact decisions on a year-to-year basis.
- Michael: Are their key areas or watersheds to focus on highest impact spaces?
- Dennis Bowman, Extension: Andrew Margenot's morning presentation at the PWG highlighted problem with phosphorus. We need to come up with some way to include those problems with P that we learned about this morning. Do we need to look at some programs to address streambank erosion? From an Extension standpoint, adoption is not linear. We need to keep the faith and continue working with farmers to adopt practices, we will get success. If we keep working on this, we will get past the core-value barriers.
- Michael: We have common ground to work with here. Next steps will be developing an ad hoc subcommittee of the AWQPF. Individuals willing to serve would be appreciated. Following today's meeting, Extension will send out a survey to find volunteers. We would also be looking for volunteers to focus on tactics and clear goals for the following practices: in-field, edge-of-field, and perennial conservation practices. There may be overlapping categories in some cases. Hopefully by the next meeting we can come up with a real plan.
- Jean: Before asking for volunteers, it would be helpful to define the goals and objectives, timeline, and set clear expectations for the volunteers.
- Michael: Yes, an Agricultural Tactical Advisory Committee would help frame this, starting with Jean's suggestions. Extension will solicit for volunteers to do this.
- Michael: This meeting is adjourned.