NLRS AWQPF Meeting
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, July 23, 2025
1:30 – 4:00 pm
At Illinois Department of Agriculture's John R. Block Auditorium

Meeting Summary

Key Question 1: What is the current lay of the land and impacts to NLRS Ag Sector?

Facilitated by Amanda Christenson, Illinois Extension

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA)
Illinois EPA is operating at full staffing capacity and continues to support NLRS-aligned practices through multiple federal and state funding streams, including $4.5M annually in Section 319 grants, $4.1M in Gulf Hypoxia funds through FFY26, and $1.5M in Section 604 funds for FY25. While current funding supports program goals, long-term funding is uncertain and dependent on federal appropriations.

Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA)
IDOA reports sufficient staffing and has secured $106.1M in funding over the next five years to meet growing farmer demand for conservation programs. The Fall Covers for Spring Savings program has supported 700,000 acres since its inception, indicating strong demand and adequate funding to meet it for now.

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)
FSA delivers over $170M annually through CRP in Illinois, but is constrained by national acreage caps, making it challenging to accommodate all producer interest. While conservation funding remains substantial, staffing limitations and enrollment limits hinder the agency's ability to fully meet demand.

Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD)
AISWCD faces persistent funding and staffing challenges, with flat operational budgets (~$4.5M) since the 1990s despite high and growing demand. Many districts report demand for conservation services far exceeding available cost-share and personnel capacity, especially due to the lack of engineering support.

Nutrient Research & Education Council (NREC)
NREC has stable funding ($3.5M–$4.2M annually), which will grow by ~$1.5M starting in 2025 due to a fertilizer assessment increase. Although operating with only two staff, NREC meets research and outreach demand by funding partners and has a strong track record of impact and leveraged investments.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
NRCS is investing $20–22M annually in EQIP, including $7.5M specifically for NLRS priorities in 2024. However, staffing shortfalls and hiring freezes have left the agency unable to fully meet the demand for conservation technical assistance, despite strong producer interest in NLRS practices.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR)
IDNR shared that about half of its $40M CREP funds support easements. IDNR is finally hoping to improve CREP staffing numbers and recently posted one backfill position for hire. It will begin reporting all CREP acres tied to NLRS, significantly expanding reported acres.

Financial Incentives Database (FIND) Tool

Helen VanBeck, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership Developed by the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership, the FIND Tool helps farmers and conservation professionals explore over 60 public and private financial assistance

programs in Illinois. It offers filters by location, production type, and practice, promoting transparency without endorsing specific programs. With low funding rates for major programs like EQIP (2%) and CSP (10%) in FY25, tools like FIND are critical for helping producers identify alternative or supplemental funding sources. Users can compare program details, including carbon-related incentives, and access summaries or links. Regular updates are planned, including integration of the Advancing Markets for Producers program. Access the tool at: ilsustainableag.org/FINDTool.

Key Question 2: How does the AWQPF respond to help fill the gaps?

Facilitated by Brian Rennecker, IDOA and Amanda Christenson, Illinois Extension

In-Field Practices *Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust*

Kris Reynolds emphasized the need for sustained support for annual practices like no-till, strip-till, cover crops, and nutrient management. Programs like FCSS have expanded to 200,000 acres, but demand far exceeds funding. With only 82 of 3,500 NRCS applications funded and a $193M EQIP backlog, Reynolds noted that NLRS scenarios estimate a $400–800 million annual need and called for more private funding and RCPPs to boost in-field investment.

Edge-Of-Field Practices *Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy*

Megan Baskerville highlighted a Knox County pilot using a "Batch n Build" model to streamline edge-of-field practice implementation. The approach targets priority watersheds and bundles farmer projects for greater efficiency.

Perennial Practices *Fred Iutzi, Savanah Institute*

Fred Iutzi emphasized the role of perennial practices such as riparian buffers, windbreaks, and alley cropping in improving water quality, and outlined both ready-to-implement and emerging agroforestry options.

Farmer Engagement *Jean Brokish, American Farmland Trust*

Jean Brokish shared updates on FLASH, a farmer-led soil health initiative active in NLRS priority watersheds. With 73 applicants and 8,100 acres approved for cover crops, the program supports both experienced and new adopters. In 2026, $4.2 million in RCPP funds will support a new "Batch and Grow" cover crop program.

Participants discussed effective programs, barriers, and collaboration strategies for advancing NLRS goals.

- **In-Field Practices**: Programs like EQIP, FCSS, and RCPP are working, but oversubscription, staffing gaps, and communication barriers persist. Suggestions included sharing funding alternatives and improving storytelling and data.
- **Edge-of-Field Practices**: Past agency collaboration was effective, but success now depends on stronger local leadership, engineering support, and partnerships with municipalities and nurseries.
- **Perennials**: CRP and CREP were noted as effective; more support is needed for market development and technical assistance, with interest in new stream buffer programs and crops like hazelnuts.

- **Farmer Engagement**: Tools like FCSS, Extension resources, and the FIND Tool help, but challenges remain in reaching nonresident landowners and bridging science-to-practice gaps. Ideas included stacking programs, leveraging trusted networks, and engaging decision-makers.

Update from Extension: NLRS online data portal & WOA Updates

Joan Cox and Rachel Curry, Illinois Extension

Joan Cox shared that NLRS reporting is moving to an interactive online data portal launching December 1, 2025. Rachel Curry reported strong outreach metrics and introduced new staff Luke Zwilling, supporting watershed outreach, and Jessica Rudnick, supporting climate and resilience efforts. Attendees were reminded of the July 31 proposal deadline and invited to the November 5, 2025 NLRS Conference.

Partner Sharing

Partners shared program updates and future priorities:

- **NRCS:** Awaiting approval of no-cost extension for AISWCD Conservation Planners through Aug 2026.
- **IL Corn:** Released new *Business Case for Conservation* with 10 years of PCM data.
- **IDNR:** Reporting more CREP acres; watching Farm Bill and CRP outlook.
- **AFT:** Called for continued momentum through follow-up discussions or a working group.
- **IDOA:** Stressed the importance of partner input to drive progress.
- **IEPA:** Reflected on 10 years of NLRS and 40+ new programs; emphasized adaptive management and collaboration.
- **TNC:** Highlighted need for clear staffing goals and more engineering support.

Meeting Minutes

In attendance: Beth Baranski, Jo Daviess Co. Soil and Water Health Coalition; Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy; Erin Bauer, Illinois State Water Survey; Dennis Bowman, University of Illinois Extension; Jean Brokish, American Farmland Trust; Travis Burke, University of Illinois Extension ; Amelia Cheek, Illinois Farm Bureau; Amanda Christenson, University of Illinois Extension; Eliot Clay, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts ; Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension; Michelle Curby, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Rachel Curry, University of Illinois Extension; Chris Davis, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Jane Fornes, University of Illinois Extension; Omar Garcia, Prairie Rivers Network; Nicole Haverback, University of Illinois Extension; Julie Hewitt, Nutrient Research and Education Council; Fred Iutzi, Savanna Institute; Natalie Kerr, STAR Program; Jill Kostel, The Wetlands Initiative; Elliot Lagacy, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Richard Lyons, Illinois Association of Drainage Districts; Justin Ramey, Illinois Department of Natural Resources; Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Dan Schaefer, Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association; Claire Shipp, American Farmland Trust; Shelley Sweatman, USDA Farm Service Agency; Guanglong Tian,

Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Helen VanBeck, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership; Tammy Willis, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service; Greg Goodwin, Illinois Corn Growers Association; Luke Zwilling, University of Illinois Extension

Key Question 1: What is the current lay of the land and impacts to NLRS Ag Sector?
Facilitated by Amanda Christenson, Illinois Extension
This session focused on assessing the current landscape and identifying potential implications to the agricultural sector's NLRS strategy. It featured a panel of representatives from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (Illinois EPA), Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA), USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD), Illinois Nutrient Research & Education Council (NREC), and USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) was inadvertently left off the panel and also reported verbally. Each agency presented updates on funding levels, staffing capacity, conservation practice implementation, and other impact metrics.

The Illinois EPA has multiple funding streams supporting water quality and conservation efforts. Many come from USEPA, such as Section 319, Gulf Hypoxia funds, Section 604 funding, and Overflow and Sewer Grants. IEPA's Section 319 grants provide $4.5 million annually from the U.S. EPA, with the same amount projected for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025 and future funding yet to be determined. IEPA's Gulf Hypoxia Program funding has allocated $4.1 million through FFY26, though congressional approval will be needed to renew funding through the states. The Section 604 grants range from $750,000 to $1.5 million, with $1.5 million allocated for FFY2025; 40% of these funds must be directed to Areawide Planning Agencies. The Overflow and Sewer Grant program (OSG) Program has received $1 million annually since FFY2020 and this continued into FFY2025. The Green Infrastructure Grant Opportunity (GIGO) initiative, funded by the State of Illinois, provided $20 million over four years, with $5 million allocated for FY2025 and future funding being unknown.

Illinois EPA's Watershed Management Section includes 10 staff members: one NLRS Coordinator, three in the Planning Unit (focused on Total Maximum Daily Load programs), five in the Nonpoint Source Unit, and one Section Manager. This team supports the implementation and oversight of conservation practices aligned with the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS). Illinois EPA reported being at maximum staffing capacity in their watershed division, noting that this has not happened in some time.

All agricultural conservation practices recommended by NLRS are eligible for Section 319 grant funding. These practices are tracked by acres or other relevant units, and reported based on estimated reductions in nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment loads. Financial assistance under the 319 grant follows a 60/40 cost-share model. Additionally, the Gulf Hypoxia Program supports the IDOA Fall Covers for Spring Savings cover crop program with $200,000 annually through FY27 while also funding a new NLRS Priority Watershed Implementation Grant for NLRS edge of field practices (constructed wetlands, bioreactors, and saturated buffers) at $788,000 with an 80/20 cost-share

IDOA has secured a total of $106.1 million in funding over the next five years to support conservation practices. This includes several major agreements: the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant (CPRG), a $73

million five-year partnership with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA); I-Cover, a $20 million five-year Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and the Conservation Planner Initiative, a $12.9 million agreement also with NRCS. Additionally, the Fall Covers for Spring Savings (FCSS) program is allocated $960,000 from the Illinois state budget.

The FCSS program, which offers cover crop premium discounts, has seen increasing allocations over the years to meet farmer demand. From 2019 to 2025, funding has grown from $330,000 to $1.21 million, with contributions from the General Revenue Fund (GRF), Gulf Hypoxia Program, and unspent Risk Management Agency (RMA) funds. Since its inception, the FCSS program has helped apply cover crops to a total of 700,000 acres. The original data shown on the slide during the meeting was incorrect. The presentation and the minutes have been updated post-meeting to reflect the correct information. These investments reflect a growing commitment to incentivizing cover crop adoption across Illinois.

In terms of staffing, IDOA currently has eight full-time employees (FTEs) supporting conservation delivery, including one contracted worker and one dedicated FTE for FCSS. The agency reports that current staffing levels are sufficient to meet farmer demand, and there have been no recent changes affecting program delivery. They reported that they have been increasing FTE positions and noted they are nearing full staffing capacity, something not seen since the early 2000s.

IDOA supports NLRS practice implementation through multiple programs including Partners for Conservation, I-Cover, and CPRG. Funding sources vary, with Partners for Conservation and FCSS receiving annual appropriations from the Illinois General Assembly, I-Cover supported by NRCS funds, and CPRG backed by Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding distributed through IEPA.

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) provided a comprehensive overview of recent Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) funding and operations in Illinois. In 2024, the state had 794,871 acres enrolled under 72,472 contracts, with rental payments totaling $173 million. For 2025, 71,025 acres are set to expire, with 57,083 already accepted for renewal. Similarly, 7,392 contracts are due to expire, and 5,971 have been accepted so far. Estimated payments for 2025 are projected at $175 million, scheduled for disbursement in October. Looking ahead to 2026, 121,260 acres are expected to expire, with funding levels yet to be determined.

FSA's budget is directly tied to the number of acres committed by producers under 10- to15-year contracts. This year's General and Grassland sign-ups, including two recent sign up extensions, have been challenging due to difficulty of conducting all the required sign-ups while staying under the acreage caps. Illinois typically ranks second in the nation and consistently places in the top 15 for total CRP acres. While 2024 figures are finalized, the 2025 numbers are still pending approval, with sign-ups for General and Grassland CRP still underway.

Programmatic changes began with the 2018 Farm Bill, which mandated annual general sign-ups and introduced initiatives like CLEAR 30 Continuous, offering 30-year contracts for water quality practices. The Forest Management Incentive (FMI) was also launched to promote sustainable forestry. Since

then, the types of practices and sign-up options have remained stable, with further changes anticipated in the next Farm Bill.

FSA supports NLRS practices through financial assistance and relies on NRCS and IDNR for technical assistance. Producers receive annual per-acre payments for contracted land under approved conservation practices. The agency also offers a 50% cost share and additional incentives to install practices, with some cost share available for practice maintenance. NRCS and IDNR provide feasibility assessments, practice designs, engineering plans, and periodic status reviews throughout the contract period.

Staff capacity remains a concern. Currently, each of Illinois's 102 counties has a dedicated CRP Program Assistant, and four staff members in the state office focus on conservation work aligned with NLRS goals. However, like many agencies, FSA faces uncertainty about future staffing levels.

FSA conservation programs aim to retire environmentally sensitive lands without disrupting the local farmland market. Program design is shaped by producer feedback and broader national and international concerns, particularly around Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and wetland provisions. Practices like prescribed burning, haying, grazing, and nutrient management are promoted through CRP. Producers generally adopt practices that align with NLRS goals when they make financial sense, support long-term generational planning, and reflect practical knowledge.

The Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts (AISWCD) is projected to receive $4.5 million for operations and $4 million for Partners For Conservation cost-share programs in FY 2026. With 97 districts across the state, this equates to roughly $40,000 per district for direct operational support, including staff salaries and benefits. While SWCDs received $8.5 million in operations funding in FY23 and FY24, state funding has remained largely flat since the mid-1990s. A chart presented illustrates funding trends since 2005, underscoring the funding constrictions in the last few decades. This has forced districts to seek supplemental funding through other means, including administering federal grants from NRCS, managing state cost-share dollars, and generating revenue through local initiatives such as tree and fish sales, and farm equipment rentals. Financial conditions vary widely across districts, with some better positioned than others to sustain operations.

Ideally, each district would employ two staff members, a Resource Conservationist and an Administrative Coordinator, to manage field work and administrative duties. While this staffing model is not mandated by law, it is considered optimal. However, current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the growing demand for conservation services due to limited staffing and cost-share funds. Many districts report that demand for conservation programs far exceeds available resources. After two years of receiving $4.5 million in operations funding, some districts are uncertain how they will maintain current staffing levels moving forward.

A significant barrier to expanding conservation work is the lack of in-house engineering capacity. Many districts are unable to take on larger or more complex projects due to this bottleneck. AISWCD is actively exploring the feasibility of providing shared engineering resources to support districts statewide.

SWCDs are required under their agreements with NRCS to convene local work groups to identify and address region-specific resource concerns. Find more details on local working group handout at the end of this meeting's presentation slides. Many districts have recently hosted local work group meetings to bring together landowners and stakeholders to discuss local conservation needs. These concerns vary significantly across the state. For example, southern Illinois faces challenges that are not adequately addressed by current agricultural programs. There is a growing call for more flexible, locally tailored conservation programs, such as terrace and edge-of-field practices, to address erosion and other issues that cover crops alone cannot solve. Producers and SWCD staff alike have expressed interest in more adaptable programs that reflect local realities. SWCDs play a vital role in community engagement and professional development.

AISWCD also organizes an annual conference and supports a dedicated employees association that offers training opportunities for SWCD staff and directors. While these efforts are valuable, there is a recognized need to strengthen collaboration with partners to expand and enhance training efforts across the state.

Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council (NREC) has invested over $42.9 million in research focused on nutrient management and water quality since its inception in 2012. Annual funding typically ranges between $3.5 million and $4.2 million. Beginning in 2025, the fertilizer assessment that funds NREC will increase from $0.75 to $1.00 per ton, generating an estimated additional $1.5 million annually to support expanded research and outreach. The nutrient statute allows NREC to collect money outside of the state government so it can't be swept to Illinois' General Revenue Fund. NREC can set the assessment rate by working with IDOA.

NREC operates with a small team of two full-time staff: Executive Director Julie Hewitt and Research Manager Dr. Shani Golovay. While the organization conducts some direct outreach, including its annual NREC Investment Insights Live event, it primarily relies on partner organizations to deliver information and programming to farmers. Most staff time is dedicated to program administration and coordinating research efforts.

The core of NREC's mission is to fund university-level research that directly supports the adoption of practices aligned with the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS). These projects provide the peer-reviewed scientific foundation for conservation practices. NREC's research portfolio is diverse, with 38% of projects focused on cover crops, 16% on systems approaches, 14% on the 4Rs of nutrient stewardship, 10% on edge-of-field practices, 8% each on phosphorus management and streambank stabilization, and 6% on novel or emerging practices like struvite, which have the potential to be in the NLRS someday.

Beyond funding research, NREC has had a broad impact on the agricultural and scientific communities. Over 100 NREC-funded projects have been published in peer-reviewed journals. Researchers supported by NREC have successfully leveraged these investments to secure additional federal and private funding. NREC grants have also supported the academic work of numerous students. NREC's

research has contributed to the development and refinement of NLRS practices and has historically funded USDA-NASS farmer surveys used in NLRS reporting.

Illinois USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is supporting nutrient loss reduction efforts through a Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) NLRS Special Project, which provided $7.5 million in additional conservation practice cost-share funding to Illinois in 2024. This is beyond the typical $13–15 million EQIP allocated annually in Illinois. This funding has been directed toward the Nutrient Loss Reduction ranking pool applicable in NLRS Priority Watersheds and specifically targets non-point nitrogen and phosphorus pollution. Supported practices include cover crops and no-till residue and tillage management.

Illinois NRCS currently employs 251 full-time staff, with 232 directly involved in conservation delivery. Current staffing numbers cannot adequately meet the farmer demand. The impact of decreased staffing numbers varies across Illinois. Staff are operating in multiple roles, taking on additional tasks and responsibilities while the demand and workload steadily increases. Staff work to be efficient in providing program assistance, addressing compliance issues concerning wetlands and highly erodible land, and addressing interests in easements. Recent staffing reductions—due to the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP) and a hiring freeze—have further impacted the agency's ability to deliver conservation programs and provide technical assistance to producers.

NRCS supports a wide range of NLRS-approved practices. These include Cover Crops (CPS 340), Nutrient Management (CPS 590), and related strategies such as MRTN (Maximum Return to Nitrogen), soil phosphorus testing, nitrogen inhibitors, and split nitrogen applications (e.g., 50% fall and 50% spring preplant, or spring-only applications). Additional practices include Terraces (CPS 600), Water and Sediment Control Basins (WASCOBs, CPS 638), Wetland Restoration (CPS 657), Pasture and Hay Planting (CPS 512), Saturated Buffers (CPS 604), and stream buffer practices like Filter Strips (CPS 393) and Riparian Forest Buffers (CPS 391).

In terms of outreach, NRCS plans to participate in major public events such as the Illinois State Fair (August 7–8) and the Farm Progress Show (August 26-28). At the Farm Progress Show, NRCS will be featured in the "Partners in Conservation" tent alongside 12 other conservation organizations. These events are expected to draw large crowds, with estimated attendance ranging from 100,000 to 200,000 people, offering significant opportunities for public engagement and education on conservation practices.

Panel Questions:

- Question (Amanda Christenson): What is currently known about future of Hypoxia Task Force and other over-arching federal programs that impact NLRS work?
- Answer (Trevor Sample): Hypoxia task force is still going. There is a hybrid meeting in Washington DC in Sept. As far as Trevor knows everything is still a go.
- Question (Amanda Christenson): How can AWQPF members best support/direct farmers given constraints on funding and staff capacity?

- Answer (Trevor Sample): Keep doing what you do with what you have. We have financial and technical support programs and should keep doing what we can.
- Question (Amanda Christenson): Regarding the funds from IEPA for the Illinois Climate Action Plan, there is a category for climate-smart ag practices like cover crops and no till. Does IDOA or any other organization have any information on this?
- Answer (Brian Rennecker): IDOA is working on intergovernmental agreement that spells out details. He should have more information in the next couple week and the details will published.

IDNR was inadvertently left off the panel and shared some details during Partner Sharing session. Approximately half of $40 million is used for the implementation of easements. IDNR is finally hoping to improve CREP staffing numbers and recently posted one backfill position for hire. FSA and IDNR staff are awaiting new Farm Bill and CRP outlooks. IDNR will start reporting empirical data on all CREP NLRS practice acres to the NLRS, not just the acres coming to the state program through FSA Federal CREP easement transitions. This will capture substantial additional acres related to NLRS implementation.

Financial Incentives Database (FIND) Tool
Helen VanBeck, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership
The FIND Tool—short for Financial INcentives Database—is a resource to help farmers and conservation professionals navigate over 60 financial assistance programs available in Illinois. The tool allows users to filter programs by geography, production type, and conservation practices to identify the most relevant opportunities. It was developed by the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership with support from the Illinois Soybean Association Checkoff Program and is designed to promote transparency and accessibility without endorsing any specific program or provider.

The tool is particularly timely given the low funding rates for major conservation programs in FY25. For example, only 10% of Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) applications and just 2% of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) applications in Illinois were funded. This highlights the need for tools like FIND to help producers identify alternative or supplemental funding sources.

FIND includes detailed information on program eligibility, payment structures, contract terms, technical assistance, and whether programs include carbon-related incentives. It also covers both public and private sector offerings, including Climate Smart Commodities programs with and without carbon components. Users can view program websites, print summaries for later review, and explore options tailored to their specific farm operations.

The presentation also featured a case study and demonstration of how to use the tool. Helen demonstrated the experience for a fictional “Farmer Joe” from Sangamon County, who grows corn and soybeans but has never used cover crops. Through the FIND Tool, they can explore programs that support first-time cover crop adoption and other conservation practices suited to his operation.

ISAP emphasized that the tool is a neutral platform aimed at facilitating informed decision-making and data sharing across farmer networks. This tool will be updated regularly and there are plans to integrate the Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) program this fall. It is available online at ilsustainableag.org/FINDTool.

Key Question 2: How does the AWQPF respond to help fill the gaps?

Facilitated by Brian Rennecker, IDOA and Amanda Christenson, University of Illinois Extension

Lighting Presentations

Four lightning presentations were delivered by Kris Reynolds (American Farmland Trust, AFT), Megan Baskerville (The Nature Conservancy), Fred Iutzi (Savanna Institute), and Jean Brokish (AFT).

In-Field Practices

Kris Reynolds discussed the expansion of in-field practices through programs like Fall Covers for Spring Savings (FCSS), which has grown from 50,000 to 200,000 annual acreage enrollments and achieved significant reductions in nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment loads. He also mentioned other programs that present opportunities to expand in-field conservation practices, like the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant, NRCS programs, and private programs like Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP), Carbon Markets and Precision Conservation Management.

Kris emphasized the importance of helping farmers succeed with annual practices like no-till, strip-till, cover crops, and nutrient management—practices that require consistent, year-over-year implementation. While initial incentives help get farmers started, ongoing support is essential to ensure they continue.

With 3,500 NRCS applications submitted and only 82 funded, the scale of oversubscription raises serious questions about whether current funding levels are sufficient to meet NLRS goals—estimated to cost $400–800 million annually according to the scenarios developed in the initial strategy in 2015. While Illinois brought in an additional $7.5 million in EQIP funds last year thanks to efforts by IL Corn, IDOA, and NRCS, those funds were quickly used. Kris underscored the urgency of supplementing programs like Fall Covers for Spring Savings (FCSS) with private funding and called for exploring more RCPP agreements that could deliver additional in-field dollars directly to producers.

Edge-of-Field Practices

Megan Baskerville introduced the “Batch n Build” model in Knox County, which streamlines the implementation of edge-of-field practices by bundling projects for cost efficiency. She emphasized its importance given the 16 million acres of drained land in Illinois. This model includes targeted outreach in priority watersheds, broadly inviting approximately 100 farmers to opt in, then batches sites to be investigated and evaluated, surveyed, designed, and built within a relatively targeted area. She mentioned Kara Downin at the Knox County SWCD assisting with the pilot program. She asked that anyone with expertise in bidding or procuring materials reach out to her.

Perennial Practices

Fred Iutzi emphasized the role of perennial practices such as riparian buffers, windbreaks, and alley cropping in improving water quality, and outlined both ready-to-implement and emerging agroforestry options.

Farmer Engagement

Jean Brokish highlighted the FLASH, or Farmer Led-Advances in Soil Health, initiative, which is a statewide program in Illinois where farmers are leading efforts in priority watersheds to improve soil health and protect water quality. FLASH groups are organized by farmers, for farmers, with each group tailoring conservation efforts to address local needs and priorities. Five FLASH groups are currently active across Illinois, each based near or in an NLRS priority watershed. The program has 73 applicants over 10,500 acres with 8,100 acres approved for cover crops. She reported that 39 of the participating farmers had over 3 years' experience with cover crops while 18 applicants were new to cover cropping. In 2026 FLASH will have $4.2 million in RCPP funds for a "Batch and Grow" cover crop program modelled after the "Batch n Build" program discussed earlier. Learn more and engage with FLASH groups at https://farmland.org/flash.

Key Question #2 BREAKOUTS

Breakout discussions followed, where participants explored successful programs, barriers to implementation, and strategies for collaboration. Breakout discussion summary:

Expanding In-Field Practices

- Effective Programs:
  - EQIP, FCSS, RCPP, PCM, Conservation Innovation Grants.
- Barriers:
  - Funding gaps, oversubscription, lack of prioritization.
  - Limited staff, technical assistance, and flexibility.
  - Communication challenges around non-economic benefits.
  - Crop insurance system misalignment.
- Collaboration Ideas:
  - Share alternative funding info with non-funded applicants.
  - Improve storytelling and data collection.

Scaling Edge-of-Field Practices

- Effective Models:
  - Past NRCS-SWCD-Extension synergy.
- Barriers:
  - Limited funding and material access.
  - Need for community trust and local champions.
  - Lack of long-term producer incentives.
  - Need for more engineers, technical assistance staff, and management funding.
- Collaboration Ideas:

- Engage local nurseries and farm managers.
- Prioritize pay for performance funding and reaching new audiences.
- Partner with public utilities and municipalities.
- Address staffing needs (IDOA, Extension, AISWCD).

Perennials

- Effective Programs:
  - CRP, CREP, the historic state and federal program pushes for stream buffers implementation using CRP. A new Stream Buffer Program would be great. Examples: Lake Springfield (19 miles via CRP), Hazelnut market potential.
- Barriers:
  - Limited technical assistance for perennial management.
- Collaboration Ideas:
  - Support market development and farmer orgs (e.g., Hazelnut Growers of IL).

Increasing Farmer Engagement

- Effective Tools:
  - FCSS, IL Extension (podcasts/newsletters), ISAP Collaboration and FIND Tool, SWCD local work groups, Nutrient Stewardship field days, combining and stacking conservation programs.
- Barriers:
  - Reaching new audiences, especially nonresident landowners.
  - Translating science into practice.
  - Influence of ag retailers.
- Collaboration Ideas:
  - Stack programs and funding.
  - Leverage networks (e.g., sales reps, agronomists).
  - Bridge research gaps and engage decision-makers.

Update from Extension: NLRS online data portal & WOA Updates

Joan Cox and Rachel Curry, Illinois Extension

Joan Cox gave an update on the new NLRS reporting, which is transitioning from static biennial reports to an interactive, annually updated online data portal platform hosted on the Great Lakes to Gulf Virtual Observatory. The portal will feature downloadable data, interactive dashboards, and partner narratives. The static agriculture page is set to launch publicly on December 1, 2025, with interactive features coming in 2026. The 2026 NLRS update will include data through 2025 and an interim goal evaluation is planned for spring 2027.

Rachel Curry shared the latest watershed outreach metrics, including 12 editions of the NLRS newsletter reaching over 1,000 people monthly, a podcast with over 18,000 downloads, and a blog with 3,000+ views. They introduced a new NLRS team member: Luke Zwilling, Watershed Outreach

Associate with expertise in sustainable agronomy and ag technology. She also gave a shout out to the new Extension Climate Resilience Specialist, Jessica Rudnick, with a background in climate risk and community engagement. Jessica is interested in connecting with members of this forum to talk about ways that climate smart ag can benefit the NLRS and the IEPA Climate Action Plans. She could not make it to this meeting but can be reached at jrudnick@illinois.edu.

The meeting concluded with reminders about the July 31 deadline for submitting proposals to add or modify NLRS agricultural conservation practices and an invitation to the Hybrid Illinois NLRS Conference on November 5, 2025. The conference will feature updates on nutrient trends, the NLRS portal, and collaborative efforts across sectors. Attendees were thanked for their participation, and it was noted that meeting materials and minutes would be shared in August.

Partner sharing

- **Tammy Willis, NRCS:** Conservation Planners from AISWCD are hoping to receive a no cost-extension waiting to be signed. If would go to August 31 of 2026 if signed.
- **Greg Goodwin, IL Corn:** Newest version of The Business Case for Conservation is now available on website. 10 years of data collection on PCM program, nice milestone. This edition breaks down the 20% most profitable farmers in program and look from in field and ag conservation perspective.
- **Justin Ramey, IDNR:** half of the 40 M for implementation of easements. Anxiously watching farm bill and outlook on CRP. Reporting empirical data and take credit for additional acres not federal rollover.
- **Jean Brokish, AFT:** Thanks to steering committee to shift format of meeting to breakouts. What's next? Can we have another follow up discussion and pick up themes identified have a working group before or right after annual conference? I'd like to encourage forward momentum.
- **Brian Rennecker, IDOA:** Going forward information form everyone in this group is going to drive everything forward.
- **Trevor Sample, IEPA:** It has been 10 years since we release strategy, and this is the 14th ag forum meeting since 2015. Our strategy is not on the shelf. Other states want to know how we build strategy with everyone involved, how we form our working groups, and adaptive management. Adapting to new data, new NREC research, surveys, etc. With resource concerns, we'll have to adapt. The idea of AWQPF is collaboration. ISAP formation has been important. We don't have to do everything within the AWQPF. A lot of the groups and NGOs can pivot better than state and federal agencies. The biennial report showcases about 40 new programs emerged due to the NLRS Strategy. For example, the new FLASH program highlighted today. ISAP has been running and starting programs without AWQPF meetings. Continue this going forward.
- **Megan Baskerville, TNC:** What do we consider full staffing levels and what we need. I agree with Eliot Clay on needing engineering capacity. Iowa Dept. of Ag staff has 3 engineering

technicians on staff to help batch and builds. It is not always possible to bring in private firms. Think about next 10 years what we want agency staffing to look like.