

CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE

Iowa Solutions for a Sustainable Farming Future

Working with Iowa farmers, we take a balanced approach to sustainable agriculture, with a shared goal of benefiting the land and their bottom line.

What's at stake?

Iowa has been a leader in the production of corn and soybeans for decades, shaping our communities and driving our economy. With over 85% of land dedicated to agriculture, farmers deeply value the land and have a lot at stake.

However, conventional farming practices have left our valuable soils vulnerable to erosion by wind and water. Increased nutrient runoff impacts our drinking water and poses threats to human health and wildlife, underlining the need for change. Not only is the environment being impacted, but also the farmer's bottom line.

Farmers love their land, and The Nature Conservancy in Iowa recognizes them as among our greatest conservation allies. Fortunately, science shows strategies are available to enhance conservation and resiliency while increasing farmers' profits.

In Iowa, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is actively collaborating with farmers and agricultural organizations statewide to offer educational opportunities, establish learning networks, explore diverse markets and pilot new tools that align with shared goals. By working together, we can cultivate change that supports robust crop growth, improves water resources, sequesters carbon and rebuilds soil that is better equipped to withstand extreme weather events—a win-win for all.



Iowa BY THE NUMBERS

1 in 5

Iowans are employed in positions connected to the ag industry

#1

In production of corn, pigs, eggs, ethanol and biodiesel

#2

In soybean production

\$26B

Industry

30 million

acres of ag land

HOW WE WORK

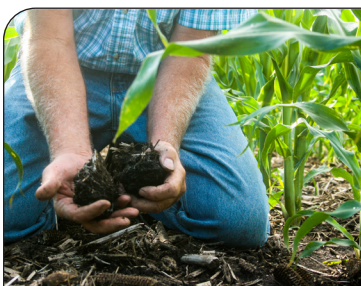
Farmers Leading Change

Farmers learn from one another and are some of the best problem solvers. Supporting farmer-led peer networks is critical to enabling widespread change across the landscape. One example of how TNC works with farmers and industry is by facilitating the development of farmer-led learning networks focused on increasing adoption of conservation practices like cover crops, reduced tillage, nutrient management and edge-of-field practices in the northern Little Sioux and Des Moines watersheds. Project coordination and technical support will be provided to farmers to enhance conservation practices in the region.

Farmer Advisors

Agricultural retailers and agronomists are critical conservation partners. They can provide invaluable technical support to farmers to help them successfully navigate changing practices, like adding a cover crop. Therefore, broad awareness and understanding of regenerative practices and their benefits to the farm are essential. This is why TNC and a coalition of agriculture partner organizations developed the 4R Plus program. The program promotes 4R nutrient stewardship “Plus” conservation practices.

4R Plus offers five free continuing education courses for Certified Crop Advisors and has brought together nearly 60 different organizations for networking. According to the 2021 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, this coalition has successfully reached nearly two-thirds of Iowa farmers. Partnerships forged through 4R Plus have been pivotal for continuing to drive conservation forward in Iowa.



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Find out more

Educational resources and more information about the 4R Plus program can be found online at [4rplus.org](https://www.4rplus.org).



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“Right now, we have historic levels of funding for conservation practices in this country. To achieve successful implementation, we need more technical assistance to support farm families and their operations. This program is another catalyst in the Iowa Great Lakes region to support Iowa farmers and their conservation journey, keeping soil in place and further advancing Iowa’s Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.”

- Adam Herges with The Mosaic Company



Efficiently utilizing fertilizer by the 4Rs (right place, right time, right source, right rate) can save money and improve yields. Additionally, cover crops hold valuable soil in place and provide weed suppression. © Shutterstock



Farmer Aaron Thompson shares that their farming practices are based on the principles of 4R Nutrient Stewardship. © Isaac Shaw

Corporate Engagement

Changes in landscape-level food systems require efforts from the whole supply chain. By leveraging market forces and corporate social responsibility, we can create enabling conditions that support the adoption of regenerative practices.

Iowa is an important part of a large global food system. Because of this region's significance for food production and biodiversity, TNC is working to shift millions of acres of agricultural land to regenerative practices in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin. TNC is working on the ground to adjust supply chain incentives and expand market access to diverse crops.

Innovation

Making any change to one's farming operation can feel inherently risky. TNC has partnered with a financial technology company to pilot a warranty-backed yield guarantee for farmers who add cover crops to their operation. Farmers opt into the warranty program through their ag retailer and receive a per-acre payout if they see a yield decline. This guarantee provides some peace of mind for the farmer and their ag retailer, who advises the farmer on the new practice. Innovative approaches like this can help "de-risk" conservation practices, leading to greater confidence and increased practice adoption.

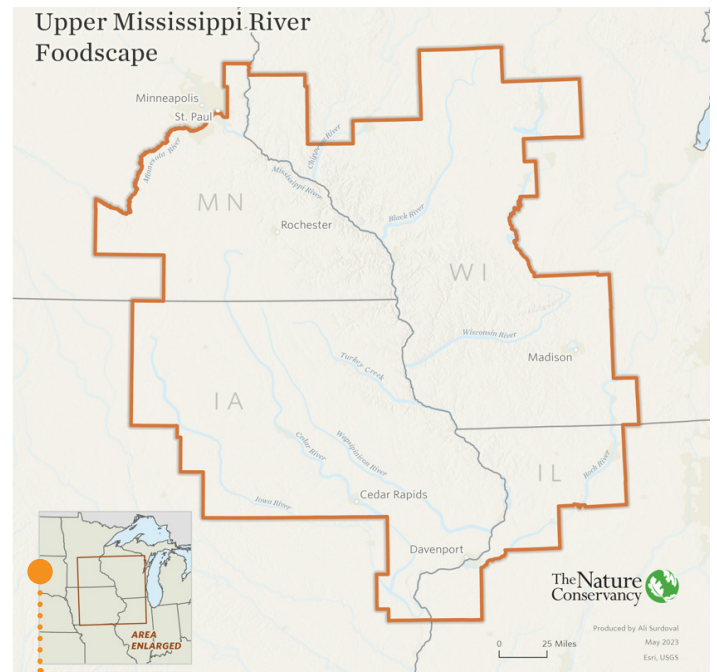
Policy



In 2010, 63% of Iowans voted for a constitutional amendment to create the Natural Resources and

Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, commonly known as IWILL.

If funded, it could have an enormous positive impact on Iowa farmers. The majority of the dollars could go toward water quality improvement projects, including soil and water protection and enhanced flood protection. The Trust Fund emphasizes sustainable agriculture and will aid farmers in adopting voluntary conservation practices outlined in the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. TNC is working with the legislature and a coalition of stakeholders to pass funding for these important needs.



The Upper Mississippi River Basin Foodscape is part of a larger global network of foodscape projects designed to create global transformation by supporting environmental, economic and social change at local and regional scales.



Foodscapes

Learn more about how TNC is transforming food systems as a central solution to meeting climate and biodiversity goals at [nature.org/foodscapes](https://www.nature.org/foodscapes).

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Flooding can damage crops, erode soil and disrupt planting and harvesting, leading to potential financial losses for farmers. Regenerative agriculture practices supported by the Trust Fund could improve soil structure and water retention, reduce runoff and erosion, and promote better recovery and yields. © Carlton Ward Jr.

Regenerative Grazing

TNC partners with local producers, agencies and organizations to support livestock graziers by promoting sustainable grazing practices. We demonstrate conservation grazing on our preserves, showcasing methods that enhance ecosystem health while benefiting livestock. TNC hosts field days and workshops with partners to share perspectives on these practices, providing hands-on learning opportunities and highlighting how these efforts achieve ecological and economic goals. Recently, TNC initiated a virtual fence pilot project on southeast Iowa's Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve, taking on the risk of demonstrating new technology and helping producers make informed decisions.



Virtual fencing uses GPS collars and virtual boundaries managed via phone or computer. This technology can replace traditional fencing in sensitive areas and floodplains, promoting biodiversity while maintaining cattle grazing as a key management tool. © Elizabeth Owens

Floodplain Restoration

As some of the state's most sensitive and rare habitats are in floodplain ecosystems, TNC recognizes the critical need to balance agriculture, development and conservation efforts. Guided by science, we work with producers in identified priority areas to improve habitat or permanently protect land in places that are not profitable or unsuitable for farming. We may be able to provide funding and technical assistance to protect or restore wetlands in frequently flooded crop fields along priority rivers and streams. These efforts can create a buffer against flooding, protect crops and infrastructure, support wildlife, and contribute to healthier, more resilient ecosystems and local economies.



Since 2011, TNC and partners have restored 122 oxbows. These naturally formed, U-shaped wetlands, separated from meandering rivers, provide additional water storage and help mitigate flooding. Oxbow wetlands also improve water quality by filtering pollutants and creating habitat that enhance biodiversity. © Nick Walters

OUR MISSION

To conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

OUR VISION

At The Nature Conservancy in Iowa, we envision an Iowa where healthy, functioning lands and waters allow biodiversity to thrive and where we embrace transformative climate action for the benefit of all people and nature.

Contact Iowa Agriculture Program Director Paige Frautschy at paige.frautschy@tnc.org

The Nature Conservancy in Iowa

505 5th Ave #630, Des Moines, IA 50309

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