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Illinois Field & Bean

A PUBLICATION OF THE ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION



Soil, Water & Resilience

The Conservation Edition

ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

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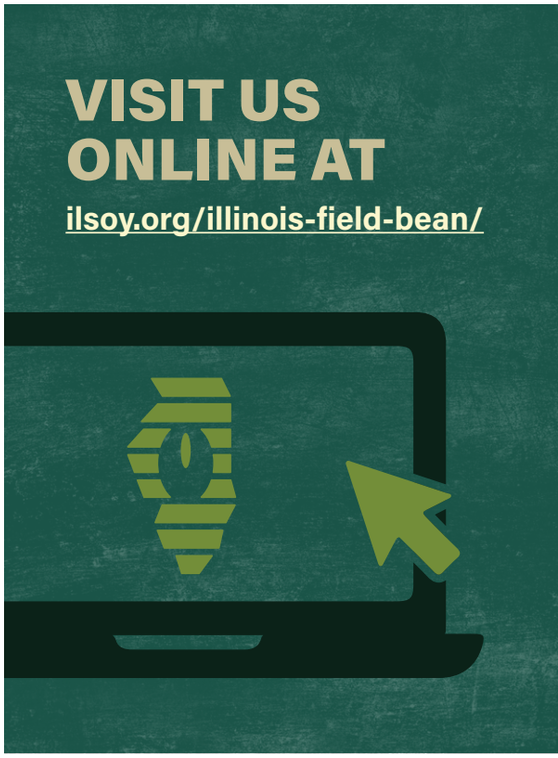
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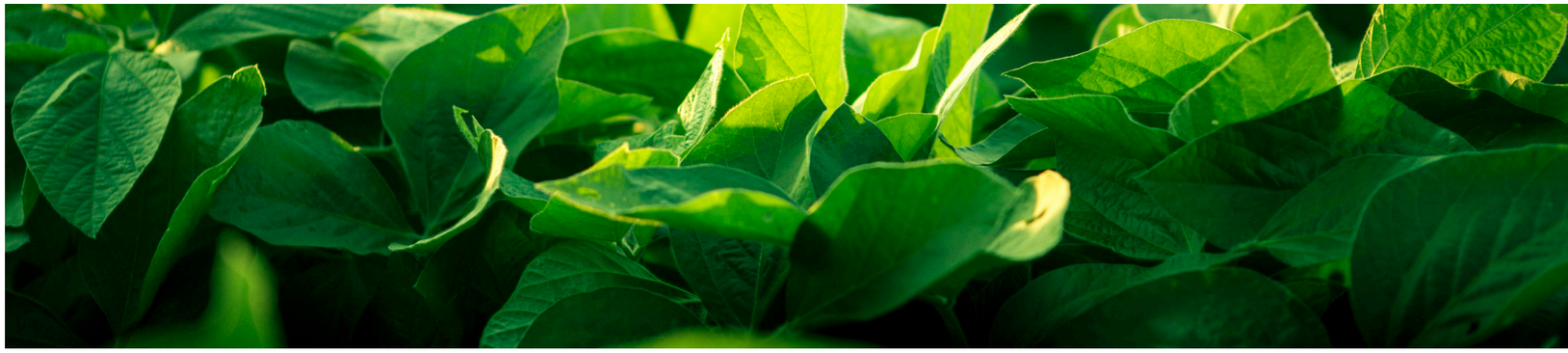
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This issue of ***Illinois Field & Bean*** explores how conservation fits into the realities of modern farming. From soil health and water management to economics and implementation, we're looking at both the benefits and the challenges—highlighting practices that can build long-term resilience without losing sight of profitability.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK



Jonathan Griffel
District 12 Director | Illinois Soybean Association

Where Stewardship Meets Reality

Sustainability has become a buzzword in agriculture. If you ask 10 farmers what sustainability means in their operation, you might get 10 different answers.

That's because every county, township and even field can have multiple soil types and elevations that shape the plan for growing a crop. On our farm, we utilize no-till, conventional till and cover crops. We fit the practice to the ground based on what is best for that soil's long-term success and what will ultimately be profitable.

Although the primary argument for sustainability is soil health and longevity, the key points really are risk tolerance and profitability. Any new practice that is introduced has risk. New equipment must be obtained, education must be acquired and—scariest of all for farmers—change must take place. Farming is inherently a risky industry. There are low margins, and many factors such as weather and international markets are out of the owner's control. Despite the risk, farmers remain optimistic year after year, and the generational nature of farming lends itself to doing what is right for the land.

I am the sixth generation on our farm, and when I encounter adversity or uncertainty, I gain hope from the knowledge that many generations of my family have survived economic and environmental disasters to keep the farm going. I know that I wouldn't have had the chance to farm if previous generations hadn't sacrificed to do what is right for the farm rather than for themselves. There are programs available that de-risk some of these practices, especially cover-crop programs, but they still are a cost-share, not a cost-covering, situation.

There is no sustainability without profitability. It's that simple. If a business suffers consistent losses, it shuts doors. A farm is no different. An unprofitable farm might survive the current generation of operators because of outside revenue or equity, but those financial challenges will deter the next generation from returning. It's like passing a boat with holes in it onto the next generation and then being shocked they don't take it out on the lake. Although the numbers shouldn't be the only reason to make a decision, especially a conservation decision, they must play a part. If I ignore the numbers, there is a good chance I won't be the one farming the ground in the future.

The key is balance. Find what practices fit the equipment you have access to, the knowledge you can attain and implement, and most importantly what fits the ground you have. You must be honest with yourself and create a plan that gets you to where you want to be. There are so many ways to invest your time and money in your operation. You have infrastructure investment, machinery costs, ever-fluctuating fertilizer, chemical and seed costs. Balance your sustainability choices with your ground, finances and time.

Farmers are the most pessimistic optimists I know. If you talk to one at any given point throughout the year, they are always very aware of what is lurking around the next corner, whether it's commodity prices, weather or ever-rising input costs, or ever rising input costs. To be honest, most of the time these concerns are justified because they either become the reality or are based on past battles. However, the farmer also goes counter to that pessimism and puts a crop into the ground with no certainty as to the outcome.

Sustainability practices aren't a one-size-fits-all solution. We must trust farmers to do what is best for their land. My dad has always referred to the family farm as *our* farm, never *his*. He takes ownership and responsibility for the outcomes while honoring those who came before him and leaving a brighter future for those to come. That sounds pretty sustainable to me.

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CEO'S MESSAGE

Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff



John Lumpe
CEO | Illinois Soybean Association

The Conservation Conversation

Conservation has never been a hard sell to Illinois soybean farmers. You care deeply about the land you work. Many of you are farming ground your parents or grandparents farmed before you. Taking care of that soil is already built into your mindset.

What is not always acknowledged by those outside of agriculture is the business side of conservation. That's where farmers are running the numbers, looking at tight margins and asking an important question: Does conservation make financial sense? With input costs remaining high, that question matters.

And it's a fair question. In fact, it's one this issue of ***Illinois Field & Bean*** is designed to explore.

Conservation matters. ISA believes that. But conservation is only truly sustainable when it also makes sense as a business decision. A practice that improves soil health but drives an operation toward red ink is not a long-term solution. Eventually, the numbers have to pencil out. The goal is to find approaches that work agronomically, economically and operationally, year after year.

Of course, what works is going to look different from farm to farm and region to region. Every conservation practice has to earn its spot, starting with whether it fits your soil and your operation. A practice that works well on one Illinois farm might require a different approach just a few counties away. Soil type, drainage, weather, crop rotation and available equipment can all influence what makes sense. Effective stewardship means adapting tools such as cover crops, buffer strips, reduced tillage and split-nitrogen applications to the realities of your operation.

Farming has to be profitable. ISA is a farmer-led organization, and that means pursuing conservation in a way that recognizes the financial realities farmers face every day. Profitability is not a dirty word. It is what keeps farms viable and, for many families, makes it possible to pass them on to the next generation. To me, that's an important part of what sustainability really means.

At the same time, the case for conservation has gotten stronger in recent years. Healthy soils hold moisture better, which matters when a dry summer hits. Good water management pays dividends whether conditions are wet or dry. And the market is paying attention. Buyers, processors and export customers are asking more questions about how soybeans are grown. That can create opportunities for farmers who are already putting conservation practices to work.

ISA's job is to help close the gap between conservation's promise, the practical reality of putting it to work on your farm and the potential opportunities in the marketplace. We do that through checkoff-funded research that generates real data from Illinois fields, including work shared through ***www.FieldAdvisor.org*** on topics such as cover crop timing, residue management and soil health.

Through a formal partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA's NRCS), we are connecting farmers with practical guidance and helping them navigate the funding programs available to put those practices in place. We also offer workshops, field days and downloadable resources to help farmers prepare for conversations with their local NRCS office.

Ultimately, the best conservation practice is the one you can make work on your acres, in your financial situation, with the equipment and labor you have. Talk to your agronomist, your neighbors and other trusted advisers who have tried these practices. Ask the tough questions. Run the numbers. And find what works for your farm.

You can also "Grow Your Ground Game" by visiting ***www.ilsoy.org/conservation***. There, you'll find resources your checkoff dollars have helped build to support those decisions. And if you have questions, reach out to us directly. As always, it's our honor to support and serve you.



Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff



Next-Generation **Conservation**

How Illinois is developing a new crop of soil health leaders

A decade-old soil health education and leadership program primarily funded for the past three years by Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) is paving the way for conservation implementation at scale—one relationship at a time.

Launched in 2017, the Soil Health Leadership Program (SHLP) convenes cohorts of Illinois farmers plus professionals from nonprofits, private industry and institutions of higher education. Together, participants undergo 18 months of intensive soil health education and hands-on learning held at farms and research facilities.

They graduate as Soil Health Ambassadors prepared to serve as knowledgeable resources in their local communities. They advise on issues such as attaining greater levels of soil organic matter, strengthening aggregate stability, improving water infiltration and water-holding capacity, and minimizing soil erosion, compaction and surface crusting.

"Keeping our soils healthy and strong will lead to cleaner water, cleaner air, more resilient and profitable farms, and healthier communities," explains Helen VanBeck, Manager, SHLP. "We all need mentors and advisers to help guide the work we do, and developing soil health leaders is a critical component of equipping farmers with the systems of support they need to sustainably and responsibly care for their soils."

REACHING SOIL CHAMPIONS, INFLUENCING ILLINOIS ACRES

Training is administered by the nonprofit Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership (ISAP) and coordinated by experts Jim Isermann, ISAP Soil Health Specialist; Alex Ramirez, University of Illinois Extension Program Coordinator; and Maddy Kangas, ISAP Coordinator.

The program has graduated 129 people spanning six completed cohorts. As of this writing, 25 participants are enrolled in the seventh cohort now under way. Nearly 75% of surveyed Soil Health Ambassadors report influencing management on more than 500 acres, and 25% influence more than 10,000, according to ISAP survey data.

"We conduct annual surveys of the Ambassadors, and they overwhelmingly report that they continue to share relevant soil health information with their local network and that they stay in contact with other graduates from their cohort," VanBeck says.

EVOLUTION OF A SOIL HEALTH PROGRAM

That kind of knowledge sharing—central to conservation agriculture, in which farmers collaborate with agronomists and nonoperating landowners partner with environmental professionals—is at the heart of SHLP.

HOW THE PROGRAM EQUIPS SOIL AMBASSADORS

A deep personal commitment to soil health drives VanBeck, the program manager, and the other experts who help train SHLP enrollees.

"My great-grandfather was a farmer in northwest Iowa, and while my grandmother



Soil pits such as this one on a corn-and-soybean farm near Marion are used as demonstration tools by Jim Isermann, Soil Health Specialist with Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership. They allow for close-up observation of many soil properties including horizon depths, colors, texture, structure and root depth. Credit: Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership

did not farm the land herself, she was very involved as a nonoperating landowner, which I got to witness growing up," VanBeck explains. "My personal commitment to this work stems from a strong reverence and respect for the work of land stewardship and food production and a growing concern for how our intensive, industrialized systems are impacting natural resources such as clean water, functioning ecosystems, clean air and healthy soils, on which our whole society relies."

Rather than emphasizing abstract scientific topics, SHLP educators emphasize a hands-on approach to learning the ropes of good soil health.

"The most recent cohort and the current cohort will follow the same training program, visiting geographically and agronomically diverse locations across the state including Tazewell, Piatt, Marion, McDonough, Jo Daviess and McLean counties," VanBeck explains.

The first session features table-top soil demonstrations including the slake test, the slump test and a rainfall simulator. Participants also conduct an in-field soil health assessment created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA's NRCS). Other farm visits include soil pits, cover-crop plots, equipment demonstrations and often research strips or trials.

"ISAP's Soil Health Specialist, Jim Isermann, who leads the SHLP facilitation, never walks out into a field without a shovel," VanBeck says. "He is always digging up the soil to show participants what's going on under their feet."

After the education wraps up, there's always plenty of time for Q-and-A discussions. Each training session includes dinner at a local restaurant for more casual networking. Past graduates are invited to these meals to help build connections across cohorts of the program.

"The diversity of operations, farmers and research that is featured throughout the six two-day sessions encourages the idea that there is some troubleshooting involved and that conservation is going to look different county to county and farm to farm, but that's not a reason not to try it," VanBeck says. "Having the farmer hosts talk about their own conservation journeys is always really impactful for the participants, as well."

A COMMUNITY OF GO-TO SOIL HEALTH STEWARDS

Ultimately, organizers are hopeful that SHLP graduates can become resources to Illinois farmers in their local area who might have questions about soil health principles and practices.

"While we don't expect our graduates to know the answer to every question they might receive from a farmer, the intent of the program is also to provide them with professional relationships and connections across the state through fellow graduates, educational institutions, or other farmer leaders," VanBeck concludes.

The wetlands debate isn't over. It just moved to Springfield.

The wetlands issue didn't end with the Sackett decision. It's moved back to the States. As Illinois determines what qualifies as a wetland, future legislation could affect how farmers manage their land. The Illinois Soybean Association is following every development so you can stay informed and stay engaged.

WATCH THE VIDEO AND STAY INFORMED
@ ILSoy.org/Wetlands

Paid for by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff program.



ILLINOIS SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

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LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SOIL HEALTH LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

For more information about the Soil Health Leadership Program and to stay tuned for details about registering to participate in future cohorts, sign up for the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership's email newsletter, The Aggregate, at ***ilsustainableag.org***.





Trainees use a tarp to analyze seeding density and coverage after a drone-seeding demonstration on a farm in Tazewell County. Drones can apply cover-crop seed aerially into a standing cash crop before harvest, giving the cover crop an earlier start to build roots and top growth before winter. Credit: Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership



THE CONSERVATION QUESTIONS

Farmers Are Asking Right Now



By Brooklyne Luessenheide, Communications Coordinator, Illinois Soybean Association

Although many soybean farmers in Illinois believe that conservation practices are beneficial to the soil, nutrient management and more, many are still skeptical and have questions. They are unsure whether conservation practices will work on their operation, whether they are worth it financially and how hard it might be to implement these practices. Farmers can also be confused or overwhelmed by the number of options out there.

But beyond that, what are the real questions farmers are asking about conservation practices? Here's what Nathan Johanning, a farmer and University of Illinois Extension Commercial Agriculture Specialist, had to say.

Q: *How can farmers protect nutrients and get more value from their fertilizer investment?*

According to Nathan Johanning, nutrient conservation is increasingly on farmers' minds because of rising fertilizer and input costs. Cover Crops can help keep those nutrients within the system rather than allowing valuable nutrients to sit vulnerable to loss between growing seasons. That's because cover crops "hold onto nutrients" throughout the winter and gradually release them back into the soil.

Johanning also emphasized that farmers do not need high seeding rates or expensive cover-crop programs to see benefits. Relatively low rates of cereal grain cover crops can help capture nutrients while also providing benefits such as erosion control and weed suppression. He noted that incorporating cover crops can create a more continuous nutrient cycle, reducing the amount of nutrients left exposed to weather and environmental losses between cash crops.

Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff



Extension expert Nathan Johanning tackles common farmer questions about conservation issues such as cover crop termination, nutrient management, erosion, compaction, economics and more.

Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff



Q: *What is the best way for farmers to implement cover crops without taking on a lot of risk?*

Johanning recommends starting simple. Rather than investing heavily in complex seed mixes or changing an entire farming operation overnight, he says, producers should to start with proven, straightforward practices that allow them to learn about the system while minimizing risk. The practices he generally recommends starting with are:

- **Use cereal rye, wheat or another type of small grain**
- **Keep seeding rates relatively low**
- **Terminate the cover crop a few weeks before planting**
- **Start with a small plot of land before expanding to full fields**

Johanning cautions against trying every conservation practice at once, noting that many successful cover-crop users began with a basic system and refined it over time. Although practices such as planting green have gained attention in recent years, he believes growers new to cover crops should first focus on establishing a simple, repeatable program that works within their existing management system.

"Don't try everything at once," Johanning says. "I don't necessarily always advocate planting green on the first go-around." By starting with a low-risk approach and making adjustments over time, farmers can learn what works best for their operation while capitalizing on many of the benefits these practices can provide.

Q: *Can cover crops help with weed resistance?*

Johanning reported that the impact of cover crops on weed resistance has become one of the most interesting emerging questions in conservation, particularly as herbicide-resistant weeds continue to challenge crop production across Illinois. Increasing weed resistance, particularly waterhemp pressure, has been driving more interest in cover crops.

"There's a lot of interest in how cover crops can be a beneficial asset to managing weeds," Johanning said. "Methods that can reduce the pressure on herbicide performance and help farmers out a little bit are pushing them more toward cover crops."

According to Johanning, cereal rye has gained interest because it provides benefits beyond soil health and erosion control. When managed properly, it can help suppress early-season weed growth. As farmers look for ways to strengthen weed control programs and preserve the effectiveness of existing herbicide tools, cover crops are increasingly being viewed as an additional layer of defense rather than as a standalone solution.

Q: *What's the most cost-effective conservation practice to start with?*

For farmers interested in beginning to adopt conservation practices, Johanning recommends starting with no-till, reduced tillage or cover crops. All of which can provide meaningful benefits without requiring a major overhaul of an operation.

One of the points he stresses is that producers don't necessarily need expensive mixes or full-field adoption right away in order to see the benefits of conservation. Instead, starting with smaller acres can help them target highly erodible areas, compacted headlands or problem spots. Rather than focus on perfection, Johanning encourages, growers should look for practical opportunities to improve soil protection, reduce erosion and enhance long-term productivity in ways that fit their operation and budget.

Johanning says the biggest point he wants to make to farmers is that adopting conservation practices does not mean they have to give up everything they have been doing and adopt new practices all at once.

"Just take a little time to think about some concepts," Johanning says. "I think there are certainly areas that farmers can get into that are not super high-risk. There are lots of things you can do that are hardly any different than what they are doing. You're just adding an extra level in there."

Q: *Will conservation practices actually pay for themselves?*

The economics of conservation remain one of the most common topics Johanning hears from producers. Although the value of conservation practices are difficult to accurately quantify, he says, producers often see benefits such as better weed control, reduced erosion, less time spent repairing erosion damage and long-term improvements to soil productivity.

Johanning acknowledged that conservation practices do not always generate an immediate return after the first growing season. Instead, many of the economic benefits accumulate over several years as soil structure improves, nutrient cycling becomes more efficient and erosion losses are reduced.

For that reason, he encourages farmers to evaluate conservation investments with a long-term perspective rather than expecting instant results. "A lot of farmers who have been in this have really been in it for the long haul, and they see the benefits of adopting conservation practices," Johanning said.

More information about Illinois Soybean Association's conservation efforts and research can be found at *ilsoy.org/conservation/and FieldAdvisor.org*.

U.S. soybeans: The sustainable alternative to petroleum

U.S. Soy, powered by the Soy Checkoff, has been a trailblazer in the development of biobased products for decades. U.S. Soy offers a sustainable alternative to petroleum-based materials, including some linked to chemicals like PFAS, helping protect the environment while opening new markets for the crop farmers grow.

Over the last 40 years, U.S. soybean production has more than doubled — which is exactly why the Soy Checkoff has funneled additional research and development dollars into industrial uses. More bushels means more product to move, and industrial applications give that product somewhere new to go beyond fuel, food and feed.

Barry Alexander, a Kentucky soybean farmer, leads the industrial work group for the Soy Checkoff. His work group oversees these partnerships and decides where investments will be made in the research and development of industrial uses.

"Our funding is basically a pipeline. We start funding on the research side, and then it rolls out to companies like BioSpan, DGP, Fuchs, Goodyear and a lot of our other partners," Alexander says. "It truly works as a partnership."



Barry Alexander is a soybean farmer from Western Kentucky who currently leads the Soy Checkoff's industrial work group.

Checkoff funding typically shows up early, in the unproven science that private companies aren't yet willing to invest in. By the time a product like BioSpan's Replay or PoreShield reaches market, farmers have already de-risked the hardest years of its development. That upfront risk-bearing is a key reason the return numbers run so high; the ROI reflects risk farmers absorbed long before a company ever turned a profit.

Looking at the soybean oil market breakdown, industrial uses are still a small slice of the pie with 5% of soybean oil going towards industrial applications. But that sliver punches well above its weight, delivering a return of $42.88 for every dollar invested, based on a study by the National Oilseed Processors Association.

Lindsey Hermes serves as CEO of BioSpan Technologies, a diversified chemical engineering firm dedicated to solving complex challenges in the built environment and energy sectors using biobased products. "BioSpan was founded with a simple vision: take something renewable, U.S. soybeans, and turn it into high-performance materials that can replace petroleum across the entire industry," Hermes says.

One of the company's most popular products is Replay, a biobased pavement preservation solution designed to extend the life of asphalt surfaces. Soybean oil in polymers offers a low-cost, cleaner alternative for the rejuvenators and binding agents used in asphalt.

According to the National Asphalt Pavement Association there are more than 2.7 million miles of paved roads and highways in the United States with 94% of them surfaced with asphalt. This makes the potential runway for soy-based pavement products enormous.



Goodyear Tires, Sketcher's Shoes, and Syn Lawn are just a few soy-based products that the Soy Checkoff invests in.

Every mile of highway that gets resurfaced with a soy-based rejuvenator instead of a petroleum one is a mile of recurring demand, since pavement preservation is a maintenance cycle.

Scott Porter is the founder and CEO of Dynamic Green Products (DGP), which uses soybean oil to formulate bar and chain oils, wire rope lubricants, drilling oils, and maintenance products for professional and consumer markets. DGP estimates that the U.S. total loss lubricant market — oils and lubricants that by design can be used only once and not recovered, like chainsaw bar oil — represents 1 billion gallons annually that could be replaced with biobased alternatives. "Our mission as a company is to develop superior performing products that replace conventional petroleum," Porter says.

That total-loss category is a natural fit for soy because this specific segment includes applications which don't allow used oil to be recycled or recovered. Biodegradability matters more than in a closed lubrication system, making soybean oil the best option.



Barry Alexander gives Scott Porter, CEO of DGP, a tour of his farm in Cadiz, Kentucky.

The global agricultural lubricants market is projected to grow to $8.95 billion by 2031, a $1.4 billion increase from 2026, according to a MarketsandMarkets report. Agricultural lubricants, mineral oil-based, synthetic and biobased formulations, are essential for reducing friction and extending the life of farm equipment. This represents another avenue where soybean oil-based options can compete directly with petroleum incumbents.

These products have the potential to create meaningful new demand for soybeans, giving farmers another market for their crop. Even with modest adoption, they can expand soybean utilization, while broader market acceptance could establish an entirely new demand category for the industry. That's the difference between a niche product and a genuine new demand category.



DEWALT now sells a soy-based biodegradable bar and chain oil in 1,300 Home Depot stores nationwide.

The retail side is already taking shape. Through a partnership with the Soy Checkoff, DEWALT now sells a soy-based, biodegradable Bar & Chain Oil at retail locations nationwide, as well as through Bomgaars, Mac Tools, Grainger, and Amazon — putting a checkoff-funded, farmer-backed product directly into the hands of everyday consumers.

From asphalt highways to chainsaw bar oil, from firefighting foams to new paint formulations, the throughline remains the same: checkoff-funded research turns into commercial partnerships, and commercial partnerships turn bushels into demand that wouldn't otherwise exist. Industrial uses may be a small percentage of the soybean oil market, but the return on that investment, and the opportunity for growth in categories like pavement preservation and total-loss lubricants, makes the case for why farmers continue backing this pipeline, one dollar and one bushel at a time.

Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff

The Missing Link:

Why Custom Applicators Matter for Conservation Success

By Ashley Rice-Haddon, Lead Writer, Illinois Field & Bean

Cover crop adoption often depends on a farmer's ability to get seed applied quickly and efficiently, yet many regions lack the application capacity needed to meet demand.

That's why the Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership (ISAP) is bringing the Cover Crop Business Accelerator program to Illinois. Through the Accelerator program, custom applicators can receive financial support, agronomic expertise and business development resources to expand custom cover crop application services.

At the end of the day, supporting local cover crop businesses creates new economic opportunities while helping more farmers implement conservation practices.

Frank Rademacher, Conservation Agronomist with The Nature Conservancy, will be coordinating the Accelerator program for ISAP. Rademacher is also a Certified Crop Adviser and farms with his father in Champaign County.

Field & Bean:
When did the Cover Crop Business Accelerator program officially launch in Illinois?

Rademacher: The program officially launched this year, and the application is currently open until Dec. 31, 2026.

Field & Bean:
Who is eligible for the program?

Rademacher: This program is for farmers and entrepreneurs looking to open or grow a cover crop application business in Illinois.

Field & Bean:
Why are custom applicators an important component of farmers implementing cover crops?

Rademacher: Farmers may not always have the time or equipment necessary to plant cover crops. Custom applicators help bridge that gap because they already have the equipment, the labor and the knowledge to get the seed planted in a timely fashion. Farmers often rely on ag retailers for products, services and agronomy knowledge. If any of those pieces are missing for conservation practices, it can be a real struggle for farmers to get started. Supporting local farmers with the equipment and experience can be a way to fill that gap.



Frank Rademacher
Conservation Agronomist
with The Nature Conservancy

Field & Bean:
What are the program requirements?

Rademacher: Applicants must have a strong desire to grow an existing cover crop application business in Illinois or to create a new business that applies cover crops. Throughout the program, participants will engage with ISAP team members and have mentorship and networking opportunities.

Field & Bean:
What are the benefits of the program?

Rademacher: The program includes both financial and business coaching support. Participants can take advantage of a capital cost-share of 10% of the cost of business or equipment expenses, up to $5,000. Additionally, we offer a custom-seeding incentive of $3/acre, up to $5,000. Other support includes business growth, agronomic and outreach resources. Our goal is to go beyond just the financial incentive and provide holistic support for continued business success. That might be connecting a business with agronomic resources, outreach/networking channels or whatever they identify as a barrier to long-term viability and growth.

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Field & Bean:
Who is funding this program?

Rademacher: For the first year, the program is being funded by The Nature Conservancy, but we're hoping to get other funders on board to grow the program for future years. This year, we're able to fund four custom applicators.

Field & Bean:
What is your role with the program?

Rademacher: My role is to help coordinate all aspects of the program. Some of that includes logistical work, helping people apply, hands-on personal training for participants and acting as a liaison. The other aspect is to build partnerships with ag retailers and ag businesses to help with the program. Ultimately, we want to support participants where they need the support to the most, and so we ask them that directly.

Field & Bean:
Where did the idea for the Business Accelerator program come from?

Rademacher: The idea came from Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and Iowa Soybean Association, which have been successfully running their own Cover Crop Business Accelerator program since 2020. With the support of their partners, PFI and Iowa Soybean have reached 106 cover crop businesses across Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota, investing more than $650,000 into those businesses. Through ISAP, we thought this program could be easily replicable and scalable in Illinois, and certainly beneficial for Illinois farmers.

Field & Bean:
How does this program benefit farmers?

Rademacher: Many of the cover crop businesses we fund will likely be farmers themselves. We'll be helping support a key source of income that supports their farm, and a way for them to monetize their cover crop equipment and experience. Additionally, their farmer customers will receive continued or new access to a local cover crop application capacity and experience.



Field & Bean:
How does this program support Illinois' greater conservation/nutrient-reduction goals?

Rademacher: Cover crops are one of the most effective conservation strategies. They specifically help reduce nutrient and sedimentation runoff from fields. They're an incredibly flexible strategy that can be catered to any growing system and goal. Growers have a variety of species and management options. Illinois research has shown that even just 6" of cover crop growth can have 30% or more reduction in nutrient loss. With this program, we hope to increase access to cover crops throughout Illinois.

Field & Bean:
Where can I learn more and apply for the program?

Rademacher: Visit ***ilsustainableag.org/programs/soil-health/cover-crop-business-accelerator/*** or email me at **frank.rademacher@tnc.org**.



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What Farmers Really Think About Cover Crops

The 2026 National Cover Crop Survey shows farmers are finding value in cover crops, but economics, time and management remain real considerations. Experience, however, might change the equation.

Will farmers pay? Will there be enough time to get them planted during harvest? What happens if cover crops create problems when it's time to plant corn or soybeans next spring? And will they actually work on *my* farm?

For farmers considering cover crops, those are practical questions with real implications for the bottom line. The 2026 Survey offers a look at how farmers across the country are answering them, capturing perspectives from experienced cover crop users, intermittent users and farmers who have yet to try the practice.

For Dr. Rob Myers, director of the University of Missouri Center for Regenerative Agriculture and a longtime leader of the national cover crop survey effort, three findings stood out: continued growth in cover crop acreage, adoption of technologies such as drones and virtual fencing and farmers' willingness to continue using cover crops after financial incentives end.

DIFFERENT FARMS, DIFFERENT REASONS

There is no single reason farmers plant cover crops. For livestock producers, additional grazing might be the draw. Others are looking for another tool to manage weeds. Across the survey, however, one benefit was cited most often.

"The most commonly cited benefit to the cover crops, the farmers say, is soil health," Myers said. Farmers are looking for soils better equipped to handle extreme weather, from dry spells to excessively wet periods. Long-term cover-crop users reported improvements in soil health, with some seeing modest gains in soil organic matter over several years.

Myers said farmers report better water infiltration during heavy rains and greater moisture-holding capacity during dry periods. Some survey respondents described fields that previously held standing water but drain better after years of cover crop use.

Those improvements do not all happen on the same timeline. Changes in soil organic matter might take four or five years to become noticeable, Myers said. Other benefits can appear much sooner. Farmers might notice more earthworms during the first year, for example, while weed suppression, nitrogen contributions from legumes and grazing opportunities can provide more immediate value.

DOES IT PENCIL OUT?

For farmers who have never used cover-crops, cost remains a major barrier. Previous national cover crop surveys indicate it can take two to three years for cover crops to begin paying for themselves. Over the longer term, modest yield improvements might be accompanied by opportunities to reduce fertilizer and herbicide expenses.

This year's survey also revealed an interesting shift in seed costs. Farmers reported slightly lower cover-crop seed costs per acre than in previous surveys, even as the per-pound cost of seed has not necessarily declined.

Management appears to be part of the reason. Myers pointed to cereal rye as an example. Although a farmer might have seeded 50 to 60 pounds per acre at one time, some now use rates closer to 30 pounds per acre. The lower rate reduces total seed expense even if the cost per pound has increased. More farmers are also growing their own cover-crop seed, providing another way to manage costs. Still, making cover crops pencil out is about more than the price.

THE COST OF ANOTHER PASS

During harvest, time can be every bit as valuable as any other input. Farmers who have not adopted cover crops commonly cite concerns about fitting establishment into an already busy fall schedule. Farmers who use cover crops on only a portion of their acres often face the same challenge: They simply do not have enough time to seed every field.

Rotation matters, too. Some farmers are comfortable using cover crops ahead of soybeans but remain hesitant to use them before corn. The weather can further complicate the decision. An excessively wet fall might prevent establishment altogether, while a dry fall can make it difficult to justify spending money on seed that might not germinate.

For that reason, Myers cautions against viewing adoption as an all-or-nothing decision. Some farmers might use cover crops on certain fields or at specific points in their rotation. Others may skip a year when the weather does not cooperate and return to the practice the following season.

WHEN THE FIRST TRY DOESN'T GO AS PLANNED

The survey also offers insight from farmers who tried cover crops and stopped. Poor establishment was the most commonly cited reason. A dry fall can result in a disappointing stand, while residual herbicides can occasionally interfere with species such as radishes and some clovers. When a farmer invests time and money in a cover crop that fails to establish, trying again can be a difficult sell.

Spring management presents another potential stumbling block. A farmer new to the practice might allow cereal rye to grow too large before termination. If tall rye is terminated and planting is delayed by a week or two, the resulting residue mat can keep the soil wet and make planting more difficult. Large cereal rye can also tie up nitrogen if it is not managed appropriately.

Experienced growers might intentionally keep a cover crop growing later into spring, but they have learned how to adjust termination timing and equipment to manage the additional biomass. That distinction between beginners and experienced users shows up repeatedly in the survey.

EXPERIENCE CHANGES THE EQUATION

Farmers who had used cover crops for 10 years or more reported corn and soybean yield increases of more than 5%, Myers said. Across survey respondents as a whole, reported yield gains were more modest, at approximately a couple of percentage points, depending on the crop.

“As farmers gain experience with cover crops, they learn how to optimize that management,” Myers said. Long-term users tend to evolve their systems. They are more likely to use cover-crop mixes, allow covers to grow longer and experiment with practices such as planting green.

Instead of simply establishing a species that grows during the fall- and winter-kills, experienced users might begin managing cover crops to capture additional benefits. That learning curve also makes farmer-to-farmer education particularly important.

Myers said farmers want to know how others have made cover crops work, including how they handle establishment, termination and planting. Sometimes the necessary adjustments are relatively minor, such as changing closing wheels or how row cleaners are used on a planter. But finding someone with the right experience can be difficult.

“They may not have a neighbor that has the type of experience they're looking for,” Myers said. Connecting experienced cover-crop users with farmers who are just getting started might therefore be as important as simply providing information about the practice.

HELPING FARMERS THROUGH THE TRANSITION

Cost-share and incentive programs can provide another bridge through the learning curve. Farmers who have not yet adopted cover crops indicated that adequate incentive payments could make them more likely to try the practice, particularly when programs are easy to enroll in and flexible enough to fit individual operations.

For farmers already using cover crops, those dollars can serve a different purpose. Myers said some experienced users credit incentive payments with helping them through the first two or three years, when they were beginning to see soil benefits, including reduced erosion, but had not yet reached the point where cover crops provided a financial return.

Once they learned to manage the system and saw sufficient benefit, many continued to plant cover crops at their own expense. Meanwhile, concerns surrounding cover crops and crop insurance have declined over the years the survey has been conducted, Myers said.

ANOTHER TOOL AGAINST TOUGH WEEDS

For Illinois farmers, cover-crop discussions often center on soil and water quality. But Myers believes another finding deserves particular attention from soybean growers: weed control.

It's a topic that hits close to home. Myers grew up on a family farm near Blue Mound, Ill. During a recent visit to central Illinois, he noticed more fields struggling with weeds than he remembered seeing in decades. That observation stood out against this year's survey results.

“It was quite notable that they were really feeling the cover crops were helping with weed control,” Myers said. The benefit may become particularly important as farmers contend with herbicide-resistant weeds.

Experienced growers might intentionally allow a cover crop to produce more biomass in the spring because greater growth can provide additional weed suppression. For soybean farmers, that makes cover crops another management option to use alongside available herbicides rather than a replacement for them.

“As people are dealing with weed challenges, think about how cover crops can be another tool to help with that challenging situation,” Myers said.

START SIMPLE

So what should an Illinois farmer do if the biggest question remains: "Will this actually work on my farm?" Start simple.

“Don't necessarily come in with a complex mix,” Myers said. “Maybe start with one or two species together.” Cereal rye ahead of soybeans is one system Myers considers well-proven. Farmers who are more concerned about managing covers ahead of corn could begin with winter-kill species such as oats or radishes, which can provide fall soil and erosion mitigation benefits without leaving a living cover to terminate the following spring.

Illinois farmers can also turn to resources from the Midwest Cover Crops Council, Precision Conservation Management, American Farmland Trust and Illinois agriculture organizations for management information and local recommendations.

For those still considering the practice, success does not have to mean adopting the most advanced cover-crop system across every acre on day one. It might simply mean finding the right place to start.

Funded by the Illinois Soybean Checkoff

FROM THE FIELD



Darby Danzl
Regional Technical Agronomist | Illinois Soybean Association



Whitney Miller
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One Farmer's 'Trash' is Another Farmer's Treasure

Farmers are constantly managing for higher yields, but as yields increase, so does the volume of crop residue left behind after harvest. That residue can become even more challenging to manage as growers reduce tillage, add double-crop wheat to their rotations and incorporate cover crops into their systems.

For some, this residue is seen as "trash" that gets in the way of planting the next cash crop, while others recognize that it provides important agronomic and conservation benefits. However, both farmers often agree that managing residue effectively can be one of the first challenges they face as they prepare for the next cropping season.

Uneven distribution behind the combine, slow decomposition, nutrient availability and proper seed placement are all challenges that farmers encounter. However, the same residue that can create challenges for the next crop can also provide valuable benefits.

Residue protects the soil surface from erosion, suppresses weeds, helps improve water infiltration and contributes to long-term soil health. As it breaks down, it also returns valuable nutrients to the system. As growers face rising input costs, increasingly variable weather and the need to protect long-term soil productivity, residue can play an important role in building more resilient cropping systems.

The challenge is figuring out how to make residue work for your system without letting it create problems for the next crop. That starts with effective residue management.

To help farmers better manage crop residues, Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) is hosting "The Residue Breakdown", a workshop scheduled for Dec. 10 in Bloomington and Dec. 11 in Baylis. This event is part of ISA's new Grow Your Ground Game Campaign, providing farmers with practical information and insights from Illinois-based research to support profitability and decision-making.

The goal of this workshop is to give farmers a clearer understanding of how residue functions in the field and what

management options might help them achieve their agronomic and economic objectives.

Nationally recognized soil health expert, Barry Fisher, will discuss intentional residue-management and its role in soil health and nutrient cycling. His session will connect residue management decisions made in the fall to planting conditions and crop performance the following spring.

University of Illinois researchers Dr. Andrew Margenot and Dr. Connor Sible will share insights from checkoff-funded research examining residue decomposition, nutrient cycling and management factors that influence nutrient availability. Their presentations will help growers understand the science behind residue breakdown and the implications for crop production.

Practical experience will also be part of the conversation. Lance Tarochione, Technical Agronomist for Bayer Crop Science and ISA At-Large Director, will address topics such as residue distribution at harvest, residue sizing, tillage considerations, biological products, fertility strategies and the interaction between cover crops and residue management.

The event will conclude with a farmer panel, offering perspectives from growers, researchers and industry members who have worked through these same challenges in their own operations.

As crop yields continue to rise and conservation practices evolve, residue remains both an opportunity and a management responsibility. Understanding how residue influences soil health, nutrient cycling, planting conditions and profitability can help farmers make management decisions that fit their farms today while building resilience for the future.

The Residue Breakdown is free to attend and includes lunch. Learn more and register at ***ilsoy.org/events***.



Emerging Advocates of Agriculture

Across Illinois, lawmakers from every corner of the state are helping shape the future of agriculture. From rural districts rooted in farming to urban communities connected to the food system, these leaders are championing policies, strengthening partnerships and engaging with the people who keep Illinois moving. Here are six legislators making an impact.



STATE REPRESENTATIVE MARY GILL

State Representative Mary Gill is a lifelong resident of the 35th district and she became its representative in 2023. When she entered office, she quickly went to work addressing the problems affecting her constituents and community members. She's supported first responders, individuals with disabilities and educational reform. She has also been an advocate of the agricultural community.

In 2024, Gill was honored as a "Friend of Agriculture" by Illinois Farm Bureau for her outstanding voting record on agricultural and economic issues. She was also named Vice-Chairperson of the House Agriculture and Conservation Committee. In this position, Gill has been a strong supporter of agricultural causes and has advocated for the Chicago High School of Agricultural Sciences, which provides hands-on agricultural education.

"Whether someone is working as a farmer, nurse, teacher or is a stay-at-home parent, everyone's life is connected, and it's only when we realize that can we build progress," said Gill. "We cannot move forward by neglecting our neighbors, rather we must build a state where everyone has the opportunity to grow and develop with one another."



STATE SENATOR PATRICK JOYCE

Fourth-generation farmer State Senator Patrick Joyce represents the 40th District, grew up in Reddick and now resides in Essex. He holds a bachelor's in agribusiness from Illinois State University. He is a 19-year member of the Kankakee County Farm Bureau Board of Directors and is a lifelong advocate for conservation and environmental awareness. Senator Joyce is the owner and operator of his family-owned farm. He is married and is the father of three children. He lost one daughter to leukemia in 2011 and has since become a team leader for The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, now Blood Cancer United.

Joyce passed Senate Bill 3275, which allows heavier farm wagons and similar agricultural equipment to qualify for existing code exemptions on the road. He has also passed Senate Bill 710, which gives farmers the ability to protect their crops from nuisance deer before they are damaged, and Senate Bill 1146 implementing Illinois' B20 incentive, simultaneously advancing the farm economy and clean air.

Joyce is currently working on Senate Bill 3019, which would assist first-time farmers with purchasing new equipment and real estate in light of changing economic conditions.

"One thing I try to hammer home in the General Assembly is that agriculture is the No. 1 industry in Illinois. We farmers know this, but in the General Assembly, I have to be a voice for the industry and remind everyone that we need to support our farmers."



STATE REPRESENTATIVE EVA-DINA DELGADO

State Representative Eva-Dina Delgado has represented Illinois' 3rd District since 2019 and currently serves as Assistant Majority Leader. With a professional background in transportation, infrastructure and sustainable energy, her legislative work has included policies connecting transportation, energy and economic development.

Delgado was a primary House sponsor of Illinois' B20 biodiesel initiative. Enacted in 2022, the policy gradually increased the biodiesel blend required to qualify for Illinois' sales-tax incentive, reaching B20 in April 2026. ISA has highlighted the policy for expanding demand for soybean-based biodiesel and providing greater market certainty for Illinois farmers.

Delgado is continuing that work through HB 4399, which she introduced in 2026 to expand biodiesel use across state and local government, school, higher-education and transit diesel fleets. When B20 took full effect, Delgado said, "The biodiesel sales-tax exemption benefits all Illinoisans—supporting every corner of Illinois, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and reducing harmful particulates." She added, "It lowers prices at the pump and advances homegrown renewable energy."

Delgado has worked to strengthen markets for Illinois agriculture by expanding the use of homegrown renewable fuels. She was a primary House sponsor of Illinois' B20 biodiesel initiative, which uses the state's sales-tax incentive to encourage higher biodiesel blends. The policy reached its full B20 level in April 2026. Because soybean oil is a major feedstock for biodiesel produced in Illinois, the ISA has highlighted the policy for supporting demand for Illinois soybeans, providing greater market certainty for farmers and supporting rural economies.

Delgado is continuing that work through HB 4399, which she introduced in 2026. The proposal would expand the use of biodiesel in diesel vehicles operated by state and local governments, schools, public colleges and universities, and transit agencies, creating an additional potential market for Illinois-produced biodiesel and its agricultural feedstocks.

"Serving in the legislature has reinforced for me how interconnected Illinois really is. What happens on our farms affects our economy, our transportation system, our energy future and communities hundreds of miles away. Biodiesel is a great example of how we can create new markets for Illinois farmers while also addressing challenges in our cities and suburbs. I want to continue creating policies that support agriculture and benefit families and communities across the entire state."



STATE REPRESENTATIVE DAN SWANSON

State Representative Dan Swanson proudly serves the people of Illinois' 71st District, which stretches from Moline to Macomb and includes the communities of Galesburg, Knoxville and Monmouth.

Swanson is part of a sixth-generation family farm, where the Swanson family raises corn, soybeans, hay, cattle and hogs—along with dogs, cats and, as Swanson likes to say, grandchildren.

A retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, Swanson served more than 27 years in the military, including a year in Iraq. His military service earned him the Bronze Star Medal and Combat Action Badge.

Swanson attended Black Hawk College East Campus and Western Illinois University.

Swanson and his wife, Tammy, live near Alpha where they remain actively involved in their farm and community.

Swanson passed HR 748, which urged State Fire Marshal Michele Pankow and local fire departments to replace current foams with the non-carcinogenic, non-toxic, environmentally friendly SoyFoam.

He is currently working on HB4293, which aims to address the problem that the Illinois Department of Revenue does not recognize "production agriculture" to include scouting crops, inspecting or repairing fences used to raise livestock, tile mapping, and herding or inspecting livestock. This means farmers are paying sales tax on side-by-side purchases.

Swanson is also collaborating with Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Jerry Costello, to allow dyed fuels in farm-plated trucks when hauling grain to local elevators or home storage this fall.

"As a farmer, it is our duty to educate and advocate for our profession. Food doesn't just show up at the grocery store, the food chain begins at the farm!"



STATE SENATOR DORIS TURNER

State Senator Doris Turner, a lifelong resident of Springfield, was appointed to represent the 48th Senate District in February 2021 following a long and productive tenure on the Springfield City Council and Sangamon County Board. Prior to serving in the Illinois Senate, Turner worked for the State of Illinois for 33 years, spending 22 of those years with the Illinois Department of Public Health. Turner has been a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee since 2021, serving as chair during the 103rd and 104th General Assemblies. As a devoted member of the community, Turner has spent her life working to enhance the lives of those around her, serving on a number of boards in the Springfield area. She and her husband, Cecil, have three children and ten grandchildren.

Turner is currently working on the Family Farm Preservation Act (Senate Bill 2970), which reforms the current estate tax in Illinois. She has passed multiple pieces of legislation that are helpful to agriculture. Turner has expanded the Illinois Grocery Initiative to include farmer-owned grocery stores or markets (Senate Bill 3219/Public Act 103-0957) and has expanded agriculture education for FFA and 4-H students (House Bill 2802/Public Act 104-0250, House Bill 3814, Public Act 103-0560).

"Agriculture is a bipartisan issue in Illinois, as it is one of the driving forces for our state and plays a role in almost everything we do. As chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I will always be a voice for our farmers."



STATE SENATOR SALLY TURNER

State Senator Sally Turner has represented Illinois' 44th Senate District since 2021 and serves as Assistant Republican Leader. A lifelong Illinois resident, Turner previously served as Logan County Clerk and Recorder for 24 years. She currently serves on the Senate Agriculture Committee and has made supporting Illinois agriculture and strengthening opportunities for the next generation of farmers a priority during her time in the General Assembly.

Turner sponsored legislation (SB2372) creating the Farmland Transition Commission, which was signed into law in 2025. The Commission brings together farmers, agricultural organizations, educators and other stakeholders to examine the barriers facing farmers between the ages of 25 and 40 who are trying to purchase or access farmland. It will review existing programs and policies and develop recommendations to help the next generation of Illinois farmers gain access to the land they need to build successful futures.

"One of the most important things I have learned during my time in public service is the value of listening to the people who are directly impacted by the decisions we make in Springfield. Illinois farmers understand the challenges facing agriculture better than anyone. Hearing directly from them has reinforced how important it is that state policies recognize the realities of farming, support our rural communities and help ensure family farms can thrive for generations to come."

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