



Green Lands
Blue Waters

Examples of NRCS program support for CLC farming

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Why prioritize CLC Farming Systems in NRCS programs?

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) are USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs that improve water quality, soil health, and address many other agricultural resource concerns. Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW) promotes five Continuous Living Cover (CLC) farming strategies in the Upper Midwest: agroforestry, perennial biomass, perennial forage, perennial grains, and rotations-cover crops-winter annuals. The goal of CLC farming is to keep live plant cover and/or roots in the ground on farmland all year long. EQIP and CSP use conservation practices and enhancements to address “resource concerns” like soil erosion, soil quality degradation, water quality degradation, inadequate feed/forage for livestock, inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife, and greenhouse gas emissions. Support for CLC farming is a highly efficient use of NRCS funding because these systems can significantly improve conditions and address multiple resources of concern. There is great potential to improve conservation outcomes if more of these program funds are prioritized to invest in CLC systems.

Find more information in the GLBW paper, [NRCS Opportunities for Increasing Continuous Living Cover Farming Systems](#).

This paper provides tables identifying specific CLC strategies by the CSP and EQIP practices and enhancements that could support them.

Learning from each other across state lines

State NRCS staff and technical committees and local work groups can prioritize practices for funding through targeted application rankings, funding pools, and cost-share strategies. In addition, practice guidelines or technical notes can be broadened to include approved new crops.

Because NRCS programs operate on a national palette, some practice options are not offered in each state. A few examples of state programs that promote CLC approaches are described below. There are many others, including national landscape, water quality, soil health, and habitat initiatives that include CLC crops and systems on core practice lists and in which a number of states participate.

We offer the following examples to encourage explorations of similar CLC support channels across states. If you identify a practice that would benefit your state, but is not offered, let us know. You can

also work with your Local Work Group and State Technical Committee to get the practice offered in your state.

Illinois – Funding Pools and Priority Practices

Illinois has a number of EQIP funding and ranking pools for cropland, livestock, and organic farms, as well as beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. Practices that lend to CLC crops or systems are prioritized within these pools, such as alley cropping, conservation crop rotation, contour buffer strips, cover crops, forage and biomass plantings, grassed waterways, riparian buffers, silvopasture, and tree/shrub establishment. Illinois NRCS has also designated six high priority practices targeting water control and nutrient management that may receive increased payments. One of these practices - saturated buffers – provides the opportunity to establish perennial biomass, forages, or grains to uptake captured nutrients and remove them from the system.

Iowa – CSP Grasslands Conservation Initiative and RCPP

In FY19, IA NRCS introduced a new CSP Grassland Conservation Initiative that rewards livestock producers for conserving eligible land through grassland conservation contracts, which helps to protect grazing lands as well as improve soil, water, and habitat resources. Contracts are for five years at a rate of \$18 per acre each year.

Also in Iowa, as in other states, the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) brings partners together to deliver conservation in new and innovative ways, such as perennial buffers, extended crop rotations, and grazing. By working together, partners can harness collective resources to produce greater results for conservation and agriculture.

Minnesota – Intermediate Wheatgrass in Buffers and Filter Strips

In February 2017, supported by scientific input provided by GLBW partners, the Minnesota NRCS State Technical Committee approved changes that allow for planting Kernza® Intermediate Wheatgrass in 100% stands under three practices: contour buffer strips, filter strips, and cross wind traps. This change may also encourage other perennial plantings in buffers and filter strips, such as forages, bioenergy crops, and agroforestry. Even though this is a small change on paper, it is a significant opportunity to apply alternative practices to comply with Minnesota’s Buffer Law, requiring perennial vegetative buffers of up to 50 feet along lakes, rivers, and streams and buffers of 16.5 feet along ditches.

Additionally, having Kernza on the approved plant list has helped open doors for source water protection projects where municipalities and counties are planting Kernza in wellhead protection areas to reduce nitrate pollution in drinking water. Find examples of these types of projects at <https://greenlandsbluewater.org/resources/papers-guides/#source-water-protection-with-kernza>

Missouri – Agroforestry and Woody Crop Establishment Funding Pool

Since FY17, Missouri has offered an Agroforestry Initiative EQIP sub-account funding pool. The state ranking points promote the implementation of five traditional agroforestry practices:

- Alley cropping;
- Silvopasture;
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt;
- Riparian forest buffer;
- Multi-story cropping.

Local ranking points are based on:

- Planned greenhouse gas reduction, using COMET-Planner (see www.comet-planner.com);
- Diversity of woody plant species planned for planting;
- Historically underserved and veteran farmers.

Wisconsin - Special Initiatives

Wisconsin NRCS participates in a number of nationally-framed efforts, including the Soil Health, Honey Bee Pollinator, and Source Water Protection initiatives. Practice lists for these initiative include cover crops, as well as forage and biomass cropping systems. The Source Water Protection initiative identifies priority watersheds and then targets a subset of the national Source Water Protection Conservation Practices to receive a 90% payment rate if that practice is in a priority watershed. Forage and biomass plantings is included in this subset.

Potential benefits of regional coordination and communication

Green Lands Blue Waters is facilitating a regional cohort of state technical committee members interested in promoting CLC through NRCS program funding.

As states continue to shape their Soil Health Strategies, opportunities will increase to encourage priority funding for soil health initiatives and also enhance initiatives by calling for the inclusion of more transformative CLC practices, such as winter annuals and agroforestry.

Another cross-pollinating potential is to create synergies among programs and across states. For example, the practice of alley cropping, planting rows of trees or shrubs to create alleys for agricultural or horticultural crops, could be coupled with planting mixed herbaceous species for pollinator habitat, as supported through the Honey Bee Pollinator Initiative. However, alley cropping is not always included on state practice lists in all Midwest states and not all states have pollinator funding pools. The opportunity is to 1) add alley cropping to state practice lists; 2) promote national and state-level revision of technical guides to ensure inclusion of CLC crops and systems; 3) create Honey Bee Pollinator EQIP funding pools in all states; and 4) integrate alley cropping with CLC options in states' ranking criteria.

This type of regional communication and collaboration can have partners “singing the same CLC song” across the Midwest!

Green Lands Blue Waters is a vision for productive, profitable agriculture in the Upper Midwest based on the straightforward concept of getting as much value as possible from farmlands by growing crops that keep the soil covered year-round—what we call farming with Continuous Living Cover. The values from the crops we promote can be measured in yields and farm profits, but also as reduced risk, improved outlook for long-term productivity from the soil, more jobs, more wildlife, cleaner water, and resiliency in the face of a changing climate.

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