



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 roots in the ground on farmland all year long. EQIP and CSP use conservation practices and enhancements to address “resource concerns” like water quality, soil health, wildlife habitat, pollinators, 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 farming systems.

Find more information in the GLBW paper, *NRCS Opportunities for Increasing Continuous Living Cover Farming Systems*, at

<https://greenlandsbluewater.org/resources/papers-guides/>

The paper includes 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 definitions can be broadened to include approved new crops. 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 the states.

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, 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 buffer, can be used to establish perennial biomass, forages, or grains.

Iowa – CSP Grasslands Conservation Initiative

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.

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.

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.

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