



Green Lands  
Blue Waters

# Executive Summary: Changing Non-Operator Landowner Conservation

*Cate Family Farm, Wisconsin. Credit Susie Theis*

## Context

[Green Lands Blue Waters](#) (GLBW) is focused on increasing Continuous Living Cover (CLC) on the Upper Midwestern agricultural landscape through a wide range of strategies and partnerships with universities, researchers, educators, producer associations, businesses, nonprofits, governmental agencies, policy makers and practitioners. One avenue to establishing more year-round plant cover on farmland is to connect with non-operator landowners (NOLs), who may be in a position to support farmer-operators in implementing and funding conservation practices. Especially since land ownership is changing rapidly, **non-operator landowners have the potential to be a key constituency to drive on farm practice changes on the landscape.** Researchers and non-profit practitioners see work with NOLs as a way to achieve conservation goals on working agricultural lands at a local and regional scale, support gender and racial equity, protect farmland, and support rural communities. GLBW convened a group of people with expertise on NOL work in May 2019 to explore successes, resources, tools, unknowns, and future directions for work and research.

## The Role of Researchers and Nonprofits with Non-Operator Landowners

The non-profit organizations represented at the convening play unique roles within the world of sustainable agriculture, conservation, land stewardship, land access, and rural vitality. All of the organizations attending have programming specific to reaching non-operator landowners, including: [The Women Food and Ag Network](#) focuses on approachable information transfer and field walks to encourage women farmers and landowners to take conservation action. [The Land Stewardship Project](#) hosts workshops, programming, and field days that build relationships with farmers and landowners and offer tangible information and resources for farmland conservation. [American Farmland Trust](#)'s efforts include learning circles, research, network building, and policy work, as well as their national Women for the Land Initiative. [The Nature Conservancy](#) looks at economic and policy avenues to facilitate NOL conservation actions, paired with soil health workshops and broad outreach. [Liberty Prairie](#) works on a small, local scale, with a focus on land access and conservation on publicly owned farmland, as well as building farmer-NOL relationships. [Practical Farmers of Iowa](#) focuses on beginning farmers and farm transfer, including



connecting new farmers and NOLs, supporting farm transfer planning, and workshops on writing leases to encourage conservation.

Researcher attendees presented recent work and participated in discussions with non-profit attendees. Dr. Pranay Ranjan of Purdue University focuses on examining the dynamic interactions between society and environment and evaluating how these interactions affect human behavior and collective decision making. Dr. Ranjan presented work on barriers and incentives to NOL conservation action. Dr. Peg Petrzelka of Utah State University is currently looking at barriers that prevent women landowners, and their tenant operators, from adopting sustainable agricultural leases, with the goal of developing and implementing a project that results in improved conservation practices on the land and empowerment of women landowners. Dr. Petrzelka presented research done in partnership with The American Farmland Trust on NOL willingness to implement conservation practices and related dynamics. Dr. Linda Prokopy of Purdue University looks at human threats to the environment with a focus on understanding how to encourage more people to become engaged in environmentally friendly behaviors. Dr. Prokopy and Dr. Ranjan facilitated a discussion on barriers to adoption of conservation practices on rented land.

Collaboration between researchers and nonprofits has already led to meaningful findings and opportunities for conservation action, and participants confirmed the importance of continued collaboration to maximize the efficiency of research and the effectiveness of NOL-focused conservation outreach and support. Collaboration also helps identify unknowns and future research directions.

## Summary of Discussions and Breakouts

Participants discussed three topics related to NOL-focused conservation, producing useful insights for future work.

**Power Differentials:** Land ownership is complex and layered with multiple gender, social, and racial power dynamics; these must be considered for outreach and action to be effective.

**Honing Existing Tools and Resources, Exploring New Tools:** Learning circles, mailings, certain regulations, and connecting with early adopters are aspects of NOL work that work well. More tools are needed for outreach and continuing to build trust is essential.

**Reaching Farmland Owners:** There is no single strategy. It's important to use multiple channels and appropriate wording that makes all NOL demographics feel invited and welcome. Trust, connection, communication, and follow-up are essential.

## What Does Success Look Like?

Nonprofit attendees responded to the questions, "How can we better define success and how can we measure the big vision?" and "How can we use technology to track success?" Participants mentioned the use of follow-up surveys and calls after workshops and learning circles, tracking action over several years, and asking NOLs about confidence levels before and after events. The Nature Conservancy also tracks data through surveys and remote sensing, which offers valuable data but needs refining to better reflect specific agricultural practices. Better coordination across nonprofits and other groups could help improve data collection by avoiding duplication and providing access to other relevant information.



# Recommendations for Next Steps for Research, Practice, and Collaboration

Throughout the convening there was deep discussion on what is needed to move this work forward from both research and practice perspectives. Attendees outlined several areas where additional research was needed to better inform practitioner programming and key opportunities for growth.

## Seven key focus areas for additional research were identified:

1. Better understanding who non-operator landowners are
2. Improving outreach methods and expanding reach
3. Digging deeper into non-operator and landowner relationships
4. Studying how well what we're currently doing is working
5. Better utilizing current research and data and improving research through collaboration
6. Widening the stakeholders aware of and supporting this work
7. More tangible, timely opportunities to encourage researcher-practitioner collaboration.



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Green Lands Blue Waters and partners are conducting essential research, improving the genetics of old and new crops, translating knowledge into Continuous Living Cover farming systems, developing new extension and outreach capacity, working in farm fields, shaping policy, building profitable markets for new crops, and changing the narrative around what's possible through agriculture. The value of Continuous Living Cover farming comes in yields and profits, but also in improved soil health, cleaner water, new economic opportunities, diverse agricultural communities, more wildlife, reduced risk, and resiliency in the face of a changing climate.

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