



Green Lands Blue Waters

Midwest Status Update: Equipping CCAs/ Ag Retailers to deliver CLC-related farmer support

June 28, 2022

In prior phases of our work, Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW) and our partners completed a [gap analysis](#) to understand how farmers receive training and technical assistance for implementation of Continuous Living Cover (CLC) practices. Through this work, and our 2021 report, [Technical Assistance for Continuous Living Cover Agricultural Practices](#), GLBW and partners identified certified crop advisors (CCAs) and agriculture retailers as important, trusted sources of training and support for farmers. However, GLBW and partners are also aware of many potential challenges to working through CCAs and ag retailers, especially for delivering CLC-related Technical Assistance (TA). **Despite the challenges, GLBW and our partners believe working through CCAs and ag retailers present tremendous opportunities for expanding awareness, knowledge and implementation of CLC practices.**

For this phase, we scanned how existing GLBW partners and other regional and national entities are addressing these challenges and working to expand relationships with ag retailers and CCAs to build their capacity to provide CLC-specific or conservation related technical assistance. One of the most prominent challenges we heard is that CLC leaders aren't sure how to most effectively engage CCAs/ ag retailers. Many of the partners we spoke to are in an exploratory stage, but eager to share their work and talk to other peers about how to potentially better engage with CCAs/ ag retailers moving forward.

Snapshot of Highlighted Regional Projects

[Midwest Row Crop Collaborative \(MRCC\)](#)

Contact: [Ariel Kagan](#)

MRCC convenes a working group of partners engaged in the ag retail sector to foster shared learning and connection. Work group members include representatives from businesses working directly with ag retailers to expand conservation practices. [Here](#) is a summary of some current MRCC member projects.

MRCC is also working on a project to understand how agriculture co-ops approach conservation practices, what innovations they've developed, and where they've seen successes or challenges. Interviews are currently underway, and the final report will be available in the coming months.

[Minnesota Office for Soil Health](#)

Contact: [Anna Cates](#)

Through interviews, State Soil Health Specialist Anna Cates explored how and why CCAs include conservation practices in their businesses. While general service offerings are the most successful for many CCAs, some CCAs do focus on conservation practices, especially cover cropping and conservation tillage. Anna's conclusion is that there is opportunity for more advisors with this set of skills and offerings for farmer clients. Staffing and capacity is an ongoing limitation for retailers or agronomy service providers to offer more services on conservation practices. Anna suggests that partnership among NRCS/SWCD and ag retailers/CCAs presents good opportunities.

[UW-Madison, Conservation Professional Training Program \(CPTP\)](#)

Contact: [Kevin Erb](#)

CPTP is working to understand what motivates private sector technical assistance providers to seek training in conservation practices. Top factors include client (farmer) expectations for cutting edge and innovative approaches, the expectations of their employer (both staff time limitations during the busy season and the potential to generate revenue from providing services related to conservation practices and the requirements for obtaining/maintaining both the required knowledge to provide services and obtain/maintain additional conservation practice certifications

[Soil and Water Conservation Society \(SWCS\)](#)

Contact: [Joe Otto](#)

SWCS has cooperative agreements with NRCS through EQIP to partner with ag retailers to deliver conservation services. The \$2M project supports 6 midwest co-ops working with 57 growers to implement conservation practices on 8,000 acres of land. Key practices include precision nutrient management, cover cropping, and reduced tillage.

Some barriers they have encountered include limited personnel capacity, uncertainty among leadership around an unproven business model, and alignment across departments to provide support internally. Given that co-ops and private sector retailers must meet customer needs, but also generate revenue, they benefit from support in adapting business models to include new practices/services.

"This project allows retailers to develop conservation services that work for their clients, while reducing the risk that comes with trying something new," said Joe Otto, SWCS Director of Special Projects and Partnerships. "Our community of co-op conservationists supports its members as we grow, learn, and build up shared knowledge and experiences."

Field to Market

Contact: [Kelly Murray Young](#)

Field to Market developed an [online curriculum](#) for trusted farmer advisors (CCAs, retail agronomists, extension agents and NRCS field staff) to gain technical knowledge, business and relationship skills to deliver sustainability-focused support to farmer clients.

Field to Market also developed 5 case studies to demonstrate the economic benefits of implementing sustainability practices and to serve as a resource for CCAs/ag retailers to use when promoting these practices to farmers.

Additional Resources/Projects of Note

Nature Conservancy: Announcement of pilot project in Minnesota exploring incentives and support for farmers implementing conservation practices

Pheasants Forever: Announcement of partnership with Land O'Lakes SUSTAIN, a business unit launched by Land O'Lakes, Inc., to focus on supporting farmer-led stewardship through Land O'Lakes' trusted ag retailer network.

EDF Report: Report produced by Trust in Food and Environmental Defense Fund identifying opportunities and obstacles for ag retailers to increase their conservation agriculture products and services.

Summary

The projects highlighted above demonstrate the broad range of avenues and possibilities for engaging with CCAs/ag retailers. From education and training, public agency-private sector partnerships to ag retail business model development and financial incentive programs, there are a number of opportunities for expanding the capacity of these important farmer advisors to offer conservation approaches to their clients. Across these projects above, we noted several factors that support CCAs/ag retailers in promoting conservation practices. These include:

- Peer-to-peer mentorship
- Adequate training in conservation practices and current research
- Trusting relationships with farmer clients
- Creative approaches to business model development
- Understanding of farmers motivations and behavior change

These factors can serve as a starting point for organizations interested in encouraging and supporting CCAs/ag retailers to promote conservation practices to their clients.