



Exploring Opportunities for CLC Support in NRCS Programs

Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW) is singularly focused on Continuous Living Cover (CLC). We act as a connector, collaborator, convener, and communicator serving our broad network of partners in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Our network includes universities, researchers, educators, producer associations, environmental groups, businesses, nonprofits, governmental agencies, policy makers, and practitioners.

Project Description

For a number of years, GLBW has been working with partners to expand support for Continuous Living Cover (CLC) systems in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. The goal of CLC farming is to keep live plant cover and roots in the ground on farmland all year long. GLBW promotes five CLC farming strategies: agroforestry, perennial biomass, perennial forage, perennial grains, and rotations/winter annuals/cover crops in the Upper Midwest.

In most cases, CLC strategies align closely with the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) practices to address resource concerns. Through this project we set out to learn more about how different states are communicating, funding and/or prioritizing CLC practices through the various conservation programs, and to identify opportunities for expanding CLC practices in these programs. To that end, we interviewed state NRCS staff from Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota. This report summarizes our interviews and highlights potential for building awareness, education, and implementation of CLC practices in NRCS programs. Following the cross-state summary below are individual state reports outlining Observations, Successes, and Opportunities in each state.

Cross-State Summary

While states face similar challenges, especially lack of funding and limitations on fund usage, each state also has unique characteristics that influence the degree to which CLC practices are funded. Similarly, each state has creative approaches to promoting and expanding CLC practices in their programs. Despite the differences among states, we found several common elements with potential to build on prior successes:

- The relatively new Conservation Application Ranking Tool (CART) is a comprehensive scoring tool that allows practices to be evaluated across multiple funding pools, and rewards practices that address the greatest vulnerabilities. Leveraging this tool can allow states to further prioritize CLC practices.



- Supporting progressive addition of practices is an important way to elevate adoption of impactful CLC practices and systems. For example, staff can work with producers to incorporate cover crops through EQIP and then move to multi-species cover cropping through CSP. Likewise, state staff expressed an interest in access to more long-term funds to encourage producers to continue practices for longer periods. These program partnerships will increase incentives and opportunities for producers to access funds and implement CLC practices.
- Agroforestry is an area with lots of potential to complement conventional farming and provide opportunity to reduce risk in marginal areas.
- Training for technical service providers is a major opportunity for expanding CLC practices funded by NRCS programs. The staff we interviewed indicated that they often see hesitancy to promote new practices because staff are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with them. Specifically, training could be improved by:
 - Expanding education on CLC successes
 - Hosting more trainings and field days highlighting CLC
 - Supporting demonstration projects
 - Developing fact sheets and case studies to assist NRCS in providing information to producers
- Establishing new partnerships and leveraging existing partnerships is another opportunity to promote CLC within these programs. Potential partners identified in our interviews include:
 - Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA)
 - Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
 - Bureau of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)
 - BWSR One Watershed, One Plan program (1W1P)
 - Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)
 - Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)
 - Rural Water Partners (RWP)
 - The Nature Conservancy (TNC)
 - Dovetail Partners
 - Native American Tribes



**Exploring Opportunities for CLC Support in NRCS Programs
State Opportunity Report: ILLINOIS**

Interview Date: May 21, 2021

IL NRCS Staff Interviewed

- Jamie Alderks, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Illinois Conservation Stewardship Program Specialist
- Stacy Zuber, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Illinois State Soil Health Specialist

Interviewers

- Erin Meier, Director, Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW)
- Linda Meschke, President, Rural Advantage and GLBW Contractor
- Marjorie Hegstrom, GLBW Contractor
- Kris Reynolds, Midwest Director, American Farmland Trust and GLBW NRCS Cohort member

Observations

- Funding is limited funding, and Illinois has traditionally received less than neighboring states.
- States are required to spend 50% of EQIP funds on livestock projects and 10% on wildlife related projects, which potentially limits the availability of EQIP funds for cropland CLC practices.
- As Illinois agriculture is predominantly cropland with less livestock production than neighboring states, the state has a backlog of approximately 400 applications, mostly in cropland.
- Staff identified the following barriers to adoption of cover crops:
 - Revenue concerns/cost to implement
 - Farmers are less likely to be aware of soil health concerns in Illinois due to the flat topography, limited runoff, and high organic matter in soils, particularly in central and northern Illinois.
 - The high percentage of rented land (around 60% of acreage in Illinois is rented) combined with verbal yearly leases is a challenging structure for changing farming practices.



Successes

- Illinois used recent high levels of CSP funds to fund the backlog of CSP cropland applications.
- There is lots of interest in cover crops, especially in CSP.
- The new Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART), allows them to utilize one application across a number of programs (such as CSP and EQIP) and practices. The focus is on addressing priority resource concerns, and rewarding applications that demonstrate an environmental benefit.
- CART supports whole-farm planning, and assists with addressing the most vulnerable resource concerns and Illinois's priority resource concerns..
- Outreach and education about nutrient loss reduction strategy from numerous Illinois partners has been strong. This has been particularly successful when coupled with encouraging in-field practices (versus edge-of-field only) that can give multiple advantages at the same time.
- Two new soil health resource concerns recently added are aggregate instability and soil organism habitat degradation.

Opportunities

- Collaborate with external partners to develop RCCP projects to increase available funds for Illinois producers.
- Categorize CLC practices under grazing to help more producers get involved. For example, Illinois is developing a pilot program to do more grazing on cover crops using South Dakota and Indiana programs as examples. This pilot supports funding for cropland farmers to add fencing/water systems, allowing them to use some of the livestock-allocated funds on croplands to impact soil health resource concerns.
- Focus on securing funding pathways so producers can continue these practices once the NRCS program funding runs out.
- Leverage a new ranking pool to focus on soil health practices, similar to the Iowa Soil Health Initiative.
- Illinois has a new soil health specialist, soil health sub-committee, and draft strategic soil health plan to be implemented in 3 year blocks.
- Create new ranking pools in collaboration with local work groups and state technical committee and subcommittees. This will increase ability to track/record outcomes, assess baseline resource concerns, and evaluate what benefits will accrue with additional practices.
- Use the Illinois EQIP web page cataloguing historically-funded practices and ranking pools to cross reference with the CLC practices we want to prioritize.
- Use the Forestry Specialist to promote agroforestry transition from CRP and identify other programs to incentivize continuing the practices.



- Support progressive addition of practices in the following ways:
 - Encourage cover crops as an effective way for producers to try a new practice that is relatively low risk.
 - Promote enrollment in multiple programs as practices are added. For example, a producer can implement cover crops through EQIP and then utilize CSP to expand to multi-species cover cropping.
 - Encourage addition of small grains and reintegration of livestock as subsequent practices to cover cropping.
 - Support producers in transitioning to regenerative grazing (especially for those that want to do more with direct marketing).
- Increase incentive for Innovators and early-adopters to commit to practices long-term, and ultimately these producers can be examples for demonstrating to other farmers.



**Exploring Opportunities for CLC Support in NRCS Programs
State Opportunity Report: IOWA**

Interview Date: June 6, 2021

IA Staff Interviewed

- David Brommel, Conservation Stewardship Program Coordinator
- Jeff Matthias, Acting Environmental Quality Incentives Program Coordinator, State Grassland Specialist
- Kevin McCall, State Resource Conservationist
- Katherine Timmerman, Iowa Acting Assistant State Conservationist

Interviewers

- Erin Meier, Director, Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW)
- Marjorie Hegstrom, GLBW Contractor
- Jeff Jensen, Field Coordinator/Program Manager, Trees Forever and GLBW NRCS Cohort member

Observations

- States are required to spend 50% of EQIP funds on livestock projects.
- National initiatives (monarchs, quali, etc.) subdivide the monetary allocations reducing local authority to drive priorities.
- Adding new practices can be challenging if state employees are not familiar enough to feel comfortable promoting it to farmers.
- Promoting the new soil health initiative to state offices has faced the following challenges:
 - State and area soil health experts need increased capacity to talk about a wider variety of topics.
 - It has been difficult to promote multiple practices effectively.
 - State staff find it easier to accept, understand and implement one or two practices rather than a whole new system.
 - For example: EQIP applications reflect a variety of practices but staff may not be prepared to tie the whole thing together in order to be eligible for the soil health initiative.



Successes

- Soil Health Initiative - State staff started from the premise that over-application of nitrogen is detrimental to soil health, then worked for two years to develop the initiative in collaboration with the state technical committee.
 - The initiative encourages producers to integrate practices that address soil health and water quality - for example, cover crops, intensive grazing, diversified crop rotation (addition of small grains), fertility management (especially over-application of nitrogen).
 - Through a systems approach to conservation, the initiative rewards producers for implementing a full system rather than just one or two practices.
- Next year, there will be a new Conservation Incentives Contract(CIC) for establishing forage/pasture that is separate from the soil health initiative. Modeled after a similar program in Indiana, this CIC allows producers to plant annual forages that can be harvested mechanically or through grazing. Next year, this will be considered an “interim practice” that can get full approval after 3 years.
- There is a new bundle of CSP practices including no-till enhancement, crop rotation, nutrient management, cover cropping that will hopefully continue to expand in the future.
- Implementation of the Grassland Initiative, a one- time contract for land that’s been seeded down since 2009 to be compensated at \$18/acre for 5 years.

Opportunities

- In order to expand agroforestry options - continue to update practices that include wildlife and forestry aspects in the agroforestry funding pools, including silvopasture-based contracts and alley cropping; for example, include funding to support tree protection in silvopasture plans to allow for establishment of a more mature tree base.
- Develop CSP enhancements and practices that have the flexibility to meet the goals of different types of producers and target different resource concerns.
- Leverage program partnerships to increase incentives. For example, Iowa is currently looking to combine CSP and EQIP to promote prairie strips practices and support a payment in lieu of income. Another example is the RCPP Prairie Pothole Working Lands Project.
- Work to build practices that can be adopted progressively. For example, add a practice standard that rewards producers for adding a 3rd crop into a cover cropping system.



**Exploring Opportunities for CLC Support in NRCS Programs
State Opportunity Report: MINNESOTA**

Interview date: June 1, 2021

MN Staff Interviewed

- Kristin Brennan, Minnesota Assistant State Soil Scientist, State Soil Health Specialist
- Shannon Carpenter, USDA-NRCS State Water Quality Specialist, State Technical Service Coordinator
- Ryan Galbreath, State Resource Conservationist

Interviewers

- Linda Meschke, President, Rural Advantage and Green Lands Blue Waters (GLBW) Contractor
- Marjorie Hegstrom, GLBW Contractor

Observations

- MN has limited funding and is only able to serve about 1/3 of the applicants each year.
- Due to funding limitations, and lack of shared office space, it can be challenging to maintain a strong working relationship between USDA and SWCD offices at the local level.
- District planners tend to stick with familiar practices and may not be comfortable researching new practices. For example, state staff felt they should have done more to educate district staff and encourage them to promote filter strips and Forever Green practices when the new buffer law was introduced.
- Bringing on a new practice standard takes resources (time, money, certification, training, implementation). It can be difficult to justify this investment when ultimately they may not have funding to support these new standards.



Successes

- Minnesota is second in the nation for State Technical Service Providers [TSP] programming and training.
- Minnesota does a good job of communicating training opportunities and updates to field guides to TSPs, and maintains an active statewide TSP Communication Network
- Minnesota exceeds the 50% livestock requirement of EQIP funding.
- CLC practices have received fairly high priority depending on the funding pools and program opportunities. For example: The Pasture Pool gives priority to conversion from row crop to pasture; cover crops are a high priority based on the resource concerns they address.
- Farmers and TSPs are both proactively driving enrollment in NRCS programs.
- The Conservation Application Ranking Tool (CART) is an NRCS practice scoring system is advantageous for prioritizing CLC practices:
 - It is program neutral, allowing a practice to be considered for all pools of funding, not just one.
 - It can prioritize certain vulnerabilities, like drinking water sources, and prioritize the practice solving the highest risk.
 - The tool evaluates both structural and management practices.
- Local Work Groups determine priorities for their county and each has funding to address those needs, in addition to any state funds for which they may be eligible
- There has been more emphasis on conservation planning in recent years. The level of planning is dependent on the extent of practices the producer is interested in, and might be implemented on an individual field or as a whole-farm conservation plan. Programs like the Minnesota Water Quality Certification Program or CSP may require full farm planning or progressive planning.
- Soil health practices have really been elevated in the last five years. Many practices are grouped under soil health because of the comprehensive impact on soil improvement. Local leadership, in collaboration with NRCS/SWCD, several soil health coalitions have formed around the state. These coalitions have active farmer-to-farmer mentoring networks.
- The top three practices or plans utilized are forestry-related, nutrient management, and comprehensive nutrient management plans.

Opportunities

- In Minnesota, the NRCS and BWSR work closely on staff training. Weekly online “Tech Talk” series touches on some training related topics including conservation cover practices. Suggested future topics include: agroforestry, carbon, greenhouse gas mitigation, climate smart agriculture, biochar practices, and grazing.
- Expand technical assistance provider mentoring (train the trainer), and farmer to farmer mentoring.



- Expand agroforestry training and help staff understand linkages between these practices and those they are already utilizing regularly.
- Leverage partnerships with other groups promoting CLC including MDA RCPP, BWSR 1W1P, MDH, RWP, TNC, Dovetail Partners, Tribes.
- Option for rankings that could be developed include converting cropland to pasture, grazing cover crops, systems approaches, and extending practice lifespans.
- Expand education on CLC successes including:
 - More training and field days to keep CLC visible
 - Host field days for producers on adoption of CLC practices
 - Support demonstration projects
 - Develop fact sheets and case studies to assist NRCS in providing the producers with relevant information
 - Coordinate training with BWSR
- Explore cross-state collaboration in adding new practice standards in order to streamline development of payment scenarios.
- Recent changes to NRCS Practice #328, Conservation Crop Rotation, that will be favorable to CLC. This is a good opportunity to communicate to field staff about applicable practices.
- The Biden Administration is exploring Climate-Smart Agriculture so there is a lot of interest in looking at how this might be incorporated into NRCS funding and programs.