



2022 Year In Review

GROWING SOLUTIONS FOR CLEAN WATER & WILDLIFE

Farmland Conservation Partnership in Action

Illinois is geologically blessed with some of the most productive soils on the planet. The state's varied soil types support a leading farm economy as well as a wide range of natural habitat, including the soil-shaping tallgrass prairie which once graced our landscape for thousands of years. However, both urban and low-density residential development increasingly threaten Illinois farmland as well as wildlife species already vulnerable due to lack of adequate habitat.

Imagine if efforts to stave off farmland conversion could also grow wildlife habitat and clean water, yielding benefits both in place and downstream. Enter the **Illinois Working Lands, Water & Wildlife Conservation Partnership** — a statewide initiative launched by The Conservation Fund and partners to work directly with Illinois farmers and landowners on wildlife and clean water solutions by:

- Implementing sustainable farming practices that keep healthy soils in place and provide natural habitat for important Illinois wildlife species
- Permanently protecting farmland to safeguard future agricultural productivity, preserve Illinois' rural heritage, and benefit wildlife, through voluntary agricultural conservation easements
- Increasing access to land and resources for diverse, next-generation producers who are developing new, conservation-forward farm operations like organic; perennials; and specialty crop production
- Coordinating financial resources, technical expertise, and capacity
- Building public awareness for healthy farms, healthy nature, healthy people



Why this work matters:

Farmland acres are increasingly being converted to non-farming uses across Illinois. (Go to [American Farmland Trust's Farms Under Threat 2040](#) to download the summary for Illinois.)

Water run-off and soil erosion from Mississippi basin cities and farm fields, including those in Illinois, contribute to the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico—an area spanning millions of acres that is devoid of oxygen and aquatic life.

There are over 420 species of native wildlife in the state whose populations are declining or at risk of declining and in need of habitat conservation as identified in the [Illinois Wildlife Action Plan](#).

EFFECTING CHANGE ON THE FARM

Financial Support for Farmers and Landowners

In 2020, the Partnership received an \$8M award under the [USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCPP\)](#). As a result, from 2021-2026, agricultural producers and landowners can receive **3 types of financial support**:

Land Management

Cost-share payments for conservation practice adoption

Land Rental

Replacement of loss rental income during transition to organic; perennial farming systems; or to support next-generation land access

Agricultural Easements

Payments for the sale of permanent conservation easements protecting farmland and wildlife habitat

2022 IMPACTS

Year One by the Numbers

16
LANDOWNERS

9
COUNTIES

engaged in the Agricultural Easement program, totaling over **900 acres**

106

Land Management and Land Rental applications received from **22 counties**

\$1.38M

of direct cash payments committed to farmers and landowners for conservation implementation

\$6.8M

in state and local dollars of partner support delivered as contributions to support habitat and water quality outcomes

26

different sustainable farming/conservation practices made available to farmers and landowners

13,159

acres impacted with conservation adoption - and counting

15

minority farmers engaging with USDA financial assistance programs for the first time

2022 HIGHLIGHTS

PEMBROKE FARMLAND RESTORATION

KANKAKEE COUNTY



Program partner Blacks Oaks Center is using the Partnership's RCPP funding to support their Pembroke Farmland Restoration (PFR) program. The PFR program is working to support Black farmland retention, access to USDA resources, and increased farm and ranch viability.

15 farmers who meet NRCS's definition of Socially Disadvantaged applied for financial support from USDA for the first time in 2022. These farmers are now USDA clients and will be able to access multiple forms of USDA support. **The Partnership** helps cover the costs of sustainable farming practices adopted as well as the transition to organic and perennial farming systems that are healthier for land, water, and people, achieving Black Oaks Center's goal of increasing community resilience.

[Learn more about our partnership with Black Oaks Center Here.](#)

COVER CROP PILOT STATEWIDE

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) owns and manages agricultural leases on 36,000 acres of cropland interspersed with state-owned forest, wetland, and prairie. Before 2019, IDNR leases did not allow for the use of cover crops. As part of the **Illinois Working Lands, Water & Wildlife Conservation Partnership RCPP**, IDNR is not only modifying leases to allow for cover crops but is moving towards making the sustainable farming practice mandatory. By the end of 2025, cover crops will be required on 25 percent of IDNR agricultural lands.



IDNR's pilot helps tenant farmers transition from conventional crop production to a cover crop/reduced tillage rotation. Priority is placed on locations suitable for grassland birds and some of the pilot sites are adjacent or near state parks, extending the benefits beyond the farm fields. To assess project outcomes, IDNR is collecting soil samples and working with University of Illinois on bird surveys and other identifying metrics of soil health, including carbon sequestration.

[Learn more about our partnership with IDNR here.](#)



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HUDSON FARM // 120 ACRES CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

The Partnership is helping Savanna Institute (SI) to establish conservation cover, pollinator habitat, and alley cropping at Hudson Farm in Urbana, Illinois. Alley cropping—intercropping rows of trees among common row crops—is an innovative agroforestry technique that reduces nutrient loss from the land.

“Working with NRCS through the RCPP Program to establish conservation practices that reap water and wildlife benefits at Hudson Farm in 2022 helped us build stronger relationships with our local and state NRCS office and understand the program better,” reports Kaitie Adams, IL Community Agroforester with SI shown right.

“These lessons are already directly impacting the work of SI advisors and experts who provide agroforestry support to farmers and landowners in Central Illinois.”

[Learn more about Savanna Institute and agroforestry here.](#)

Through on-the-ground practices, as well as learning, partnerships, and demonstrations, the **Illinois Working Lands, Water & Wildlife Conservation Partnership** is paving the way for a more widespread application of NRCS programs to advance the adoption of agroforestry practices that grow trees and shrubs around or among crops or pastureland as a conservation innovation in Illinois.



Photo courtesy of Savanna Institute

Trees and tree crops on working lands:

- ✓ boost soil health
- ✓ keep soils in place
- ✓ improve plant diversity
- ✓ restore native plant communities
- ✓ reduce soil erosion
- ✓ conserve energy
- ✓ store carbon
- ✓ diversify farm income
- ✓ support beneficial organisms and pollinators

2022 HIGHLIGHTS

BISHOP FARM // 120 ACRES

TAZWELL COUNTY

One of the first easements under the [Illinois Working Lands, Water & Wildlife Conservation Partnership](#) will protect a working farm south of East Peoria, Illinois. The easement, to be held by program partner [Prairie Hills Resource Conservation and Development/Prairie Lands Conservancy](#), protects cropland and woodlands within a priority area of the [statewide plan](#) for conserving wildlife habitat.



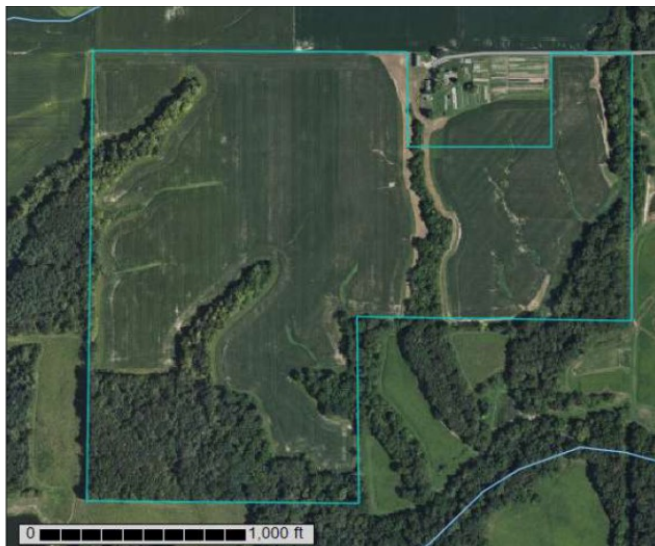
“ This property has been farmed by the same family since the 1800s... I really hate to think that someday this beautiful farm

will become yet another subdivision of nondescript houses. I hope it will continue to feed the Peoria community and be a place where people can come to see how their food is grown and talk with those who feed them.”

— Dave Bishop, Landowner



[The Partnership](#) is purchasing easements on land currently used for crop, forest, and pasture, as well as other rural and agricultural lands. To maximize wildlife impacts, properties like Bishop Farm, which are near existing protected lands, located along rivers and streams, or otherwise shown to benefit wildlife, are prioritized. In addition to 65 acres of working farmland, Bishop Farm contains 35 acres of oak/hickory forest, which is preferred habitat for a wide variety of Illinois wildlife. For example, an acoustic survey recorded nine different species of native bats on the property.



Carbon Emissions Avoided

As part of [the Partnership](#), The Conservation Fund hired the science team from American Farmland Trust to model the climate benefit of putting this farm under permanent agricultural easement. We are excited to report that placing the full Bishop Farm in an agricultural conservation easement avoids an estimated **19,541 metric tonnes (t) of carbon-dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) emissions in the first 30 years**. In addition, an estimated **8 t of non-GHG air pollution** can be avoided. The climate mitigation from the avoided CO₂e emissions equate to avoiding **48.5 million miles** driven in a gasoline-powered passenger vehicle!

NEXT STEPS IN 2023



Support More Farmers

Already this year, we are implementing a second round of support for farmers to adopt conservation practices and transition to sustainable systems.



Permanently Protect Acres

Over 900 acres will continue to advance through the NRCS easement funding process with closings starting late spring 2023.



Grow the Partnership

If you would like to be part of the solution that grows clean water and wildlife habitat, please contact ebrawley@conservationfund.org or acollins@conservationfund.org.



From left to right: Photo courtesy of The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, Photo courtesy of Natural Land Institute, Photo Courtesy of Savanna Institute.

We reached a total of 3,000 individuals in 2022 through outreach, presentations, field days and other demonstrations.

FOR HELPING TO MAKE 2022 A SUCCESS...THANK YOU!

This type of multi-objective, targeted approach to conservation is only possible via a robust partnership of nonprofits, governmental entities, private funders, agriculture producers and landowners. All 14 program partners listed at the end of the report were active in 2022 and contributed to impact.

FUNDING PARTNERS

In addition to program partner investments, Illinois foundations have stepped up to the plate in support of achieving our shared goals for farmland, water and wildlife. Funding partners include but are not limited to the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, Food:Land:Opportunity, funded by the Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, Grand Victoria Foundation, and Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation.

Thank you!

PROGRAM PARTNERS



HELP US SPREAD THE WORD IN 2023!

Share this report with interested parties and contact ebrawley@conservationfund.org for information and ready-made flyers on financial assistance opportunities.

For more information, contact:



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Thank you for supporting the work of the Partnership. Our collective efforts are improving working lands, water resources, and wildlife habitat in Illinois.

