

Title: The Conservation Potential of Converted Farmland

Description: Paul Botts, the Executive Director of The Wetlands Initiative, will discuss the impressive potential and measured impact of restored farmland within Illinois' conservation equation. Highlights will include the remarkable story of resiliency in converted farmland, improving water quality and expanding habitat by working with landowners to transition low-producing farmland and the very real steps, **challenges, opportunities, and rewards in working with farmers** to achieve mutual goals for the land.

First, a quick refresher on the stakes involved. Here is some language from a key section of the Wetlands Initiative's draft new 5-year strategic plan:

"TWI's vision is of a world with "plentiful healthy wetlands improving water quality, climate, biodiversity, and human well-being." In the Midwest, that aspiration must include working with farmers....

Solutions to the nutrient-runoff dilemma must be shown to work, environmentally and economically, in the context of the Midwest's vast farming landscape....

*One effective practice is constructed wetlands, which if carefully designed and sited can provide remarkable low-maintenance, natural treatment of the excess nitrogen leaving farm fields via tile drainage. **To make a difference at scale, this farm-based wetland practice must one day become routine across the Midwest...."***

There are some exciting things happening and a lot of new collaboration underway in Illinois between conservationists and the farming sector.

IDNR farmland!



NEWS & NOTES RESOURCES NO-TILLAGE CONFERENCE COVER CROP SUMMIT DRYLAND NO-TILLER

HOME ABOUT » EVENTS LOCAL FOOD » POLICY WORK » CONSERVATION WORK »

« All Events

Soil Health Caucus Kickoff

March 12



is Max

or zero

019

📍

Illinois Incentivizes Planting Fall Cover Crops in 2020 Budget



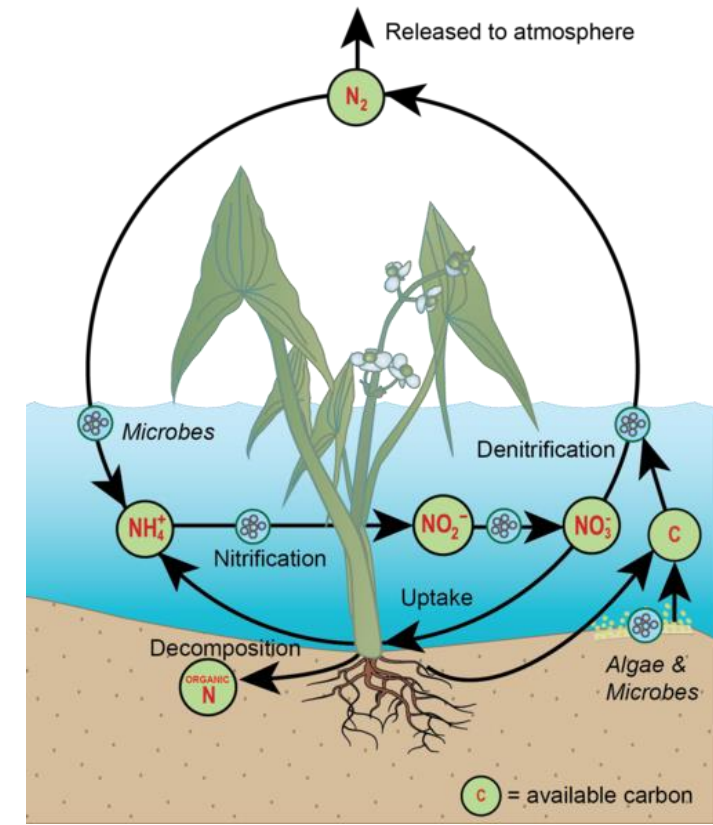
June 3, 2019 | Posted in Seeding & Planting, Cover Crops, Nutrient Management, Soil Health

Source: American Farmland Trust press release

Crop Insurance Reward Pilot Program promotes cover crops as an in-field management practice.

HOME ABOUT PROGRAMS RESOURCES BLOGS EVENTS CONTACT

- TWI's farm wetlands project is about getting farmers to build and maintain small "in-line wetlands" on their farms.
- Carefully designed and precisely placed, these little wetlands can provide remarkable and entirely natural nutrient removal. They're easy to maintain; take up small bits of the farmer's worst farmland; and we now have hard field data showing that they work if anything even better than we predicted.
- The financial model is a mix of outside funding, Farm Bill enrollments, and farmer volunteerism from a mix of motivations. Some farmers can install it themselves; some want ancillary benefits; some want to feel like they're doing something explicitly "green"; and our farm-sector partners (trade groups) are prodding them about "getting ahead of" the nutrient issue.
- It feels to us now as if this thing has gained traction and is picking up speed. We've built several of the wetlands with more in the works; we have more farmer prospects now than we can handle; our project team members are becoming leaders in conservation work with farmers in Illinois generally; etc.
- But let's talk about the **context** of that project and others that you're hearing about.



How did we tree-huggers spend the '90s and '00s talking about farmers and farming?

“biodiversity deserts”



an Extraction
els, a Growing
ge

You Might

**THE
Nation.**

Politics World Climate Culture Shop

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES FACTORY FARMING

Whose Side Is the American Farm Bureau On?

“a dead zone for wildlife”

Pollutants from agriculture a serious threat to world's water

From a recent article in *Politico*:

“Farmers have long felt [REDACTED] blamed for all manner of environmental ills, from drinking water contamination in Iowa to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. It’s impossible for many to reckon with the fact that farming the land they love using widely-accepted growing practices could result in such destruction. It all feels like another **attack on their way of life and their livelihood.”**

It turns out that farmers listen to NPR too, and/or their relatives do. They know how we’ve been talking about them.

One day we at TWI realized that they look at websites, too.



For most of the 20th century, Hennepin & Hopper Lakes in Putnam County, Illinois, was drained to make way for cropland. But these backwater lakes in the floodplain of the Illinois River 40 miles north of Peoria roared back to life in 2001 when the Wetlands Initiative turned off the drainage pump and began restoration.

In 2001, the Wetlands Initiative began restoration, first by turning off the pump and disabling the drain tiles. Fed by springs, seeps, and rainfall, the lakebeds refilled within three months, and many native species of plants and animals returned to recolonize the site.

Through 2002 and 2003, restoration work focused on reestablishing native plant communities at the site and stocking the lakes with fish. A portion of the Refuge's rare seep community was officially designated as an Illinois Nature Preserve.

2004: Audubon designated the site one of Illinois' first Important Bird Areas. The Pied-billed Grebe



The Hennepin and Hopper site in 2000 before restoration began, drained and covered by agricultural fields.

Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge is one of the premier natural areas in Illinois 365 days a year. Where once only corn and soybeans grew, a savannas, and prairies now supports native flora and fauna. In 2012,

This is literally our “before” picture. As in “before we heroic conservationists rescued all that land from those evil farmers...”

A few minutes ago I said this about TWI's farm-wetlands project:

It feels to us today as if this thing has gained traction and is picking up speed. We've built several of the wetlands with more in the works; we have more farmer prospects now in more watersheds than we can handle;

That wasn't true a few years ago. What we had to learn on the fly sums up into two points:

- **How much less we actually knew** about modern Midwestern rowcrop farming and farmers than we thought we did; and
- That we in conservation needed to **reboot our credibility** with farmers. We can lecture farmers or we can successfully persuade them to do things differently: pick one.

A few years ago we were trying to recruit the Illinois Corn Growers Association as a project lead partner. Their staff (enthused) brought a committee of association members (not) to TWI's offices to hear our pitch firsthand....

SMART WETLANDS

[THE PROCESS](#)

[HOW OUR WETLANDS WORK](#)

[SMART WETLAND BENEFITS](#)

[OUR TEAM](#)

[SMART WETLANDS IN ACTION](#)

[RESOURCES](#)



a nutrient reduction solution
for tiled cropland.

We've had to learn how to talk with farmers not at them.

SMART WETLANDS

THE PROCESS

HOW OUR WETLANDS WORK

SMART WETLAND BENEFITS

OUR TEAM

SMART WETLANDS IN ACTION

R

BENEFITS OF SMART WETLANDS

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO MY FARM OPERATION?

There are a number of reasons to install a Smart Wetland as part of your nutrient loss reduction strategy:

- Removal of nitrogen and phosphorus from tile drainage
- Low annual maintenance requirement, if correctly designed and installed
- Long life (30+ years) practice
- No cropping system changes
- Compatible with most landscapes and farming operations
- Good alternative use of negative-revenue land



We've been reshaping our project tactics to the actual reality of 21st century Midwestern rowcrop farmers. Some of this is old news and some of it is new.

- they are **more** and **differently** networked than their parents or grandparents were.
- they're being pushed more and more to **a net-results view** of their business, which is a big change.
- locality is a very strong feeling: they don't describe themselves as Illinois farmers but as Bureau County or Woodford County farmers.
- they are not motivated **just** by their economic bottom line, **until** they think someone else is suggesting that they do something **in spite of** their bottom line.
- today's rowcrop farmers are swimming in powerful data about their soil and their fields.
- they are just as much motivated by **identity** as the rest of us human beings are.
- farmers aren't a monolith and don't all see issues or themselves the same way, but they won't let you see that until you're more than someone they just met.

The summary takeaway is that this effort (not just TWI's particular project) is really about **culture**. We are trying to make nutrient-treatment wetlands and cover cropping and a bunch of other nutrient loss reduction practices **normal** within the very distinctive and strong culture of Midwestern rowcrop farming.

In one sense that is daunting: "culture eats policy for breakfast", etc. **Culture has huge inertia**. Which means that we are, like it or not, **playing a long game** here.

The good news is the potential upside: as Sir Isaac Newton pointed out, **inertia cuts both ways**. Cultural shifts can be powerful and can outlast specific policies/programs. If tomorrow every law and public-service announcement about seat belts vanished would we suddenly go back to driving our kids around without them?