AMERICA'S CONSERVATION AG MOVEMENT

RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP PLANNING

A guide to advance your conservation efforts one step at a time.

Produced by Farm Journal in Partnership with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service

START SMALL — BUT KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

Amy Skoczlas Cole
Executive Vice President,
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As a farmer or rancher, you seek to leave the land in better shape than you found it. You rarely get credit for the conservation investments you have made. Yet you continue to search for new information and insights to help sustain and even grow your business, lower your environmental footprint and preserve your operation's legacy for the next generation.

As much as we depend on the Earth to provide for us, our planet depends on us to nurture it in ways that allow it to sustain life for generations to come. The purpose of America's Conservation Ag Movement is twofold:

- Recognize and applaud those investments you have made — and are making.
- Create a community that empowers you to take the next step in your conservation ag journey to improve economic and environmental outcomes for your business.

That's where we hope this resource stewardship planning guide comes in. The planning process — starting small but knowing where you're going — is the bedrock of a farm's commitment to soil and water conservation.

Everything in this guide is focused on providing a path to address a problem or helping you make progress on a goal — whether that involves cropland, associated agricultural land, pasture or livestock facilities. This guide will help you gather your thoughts and information to advance your conservation efforts one step at a time.

In short, we hope each page answers the questions: "What's in it for me and my farm? How does conservation ag add value to me?"

Amy Skoczlas Cole

The resource stewardship planning guide is the first in a series that will also address soil health and water quality. Visit *AgWeb.com/ACAM* to learn more.

Craig Swartz
Swartz Farms
Emington, Ill.

Make a Plan — and Write it Down

As a farmer in the Vermillion Headwaters watershed, I recognize the importance of developing and maintaining a resource management plan. While some farmers might keep their plan in their mind, there is real value in writing it down to remind ourselves what we're trying to accomplish and to share with NRCS and our banker to evaluate progress. Our plan is a flexible document, updated when we make changes, such as buying more land or refocusing priorities to be less labor intensive.

I hope you'll find this workbook to be a helpful tool for initiating resource stewardship planning for your operation. It likely doesn't address every situation or consideration for every operation. However, it should give you a good start to consider what needs to be evaluated when trying to balance planet-friendly agriculture practices with the economics of making a crop or livestock operation profitable, pleasing and practical for this generation — and those to come.

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GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD!

Resource management, stewardship, profitability planning — farmers seem to innately know how to do it. If they didn't, they wouldn't survive long in a business with thin margins that requires expertise in agronomics, livestock management, economics, mechanics and technology. Farmers do much of this strategic planning in their head. A new idea might occur while in the cab or checking cows, but somewhere along the way, they come up with solutions.

So, if farmers are already good at doing this, why talk about it? Like most of farming, it's the little changes that make the biggest difference and can leapfrog results into something that has a far greater impact than expected. What's the change? Write it down — not just the business strategy but also the plan to manage resources and make improvements over the next five years, decade and generation to come.

WHAT IS CONSERVATION PLANNING ALL ABOUT?

By definition, conservation is, according to Merriam-Webster, "planned management of a natural resource." The word plan is "a detailed formulation of a program of action." So together it basically means writing down how to use a farm's natural resources in as detailed a fashion as you can.

"The most important factor of a conservation plan is it has to be either the farmer or the landowner's plan. It can't be a plan someone else draws up for them," says Mark Berkland, a conservation consultant, NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider and former NRCS agent. "If the decision-maker isn't involved in the plan, it's just a piece of paper that will never get implemented. If they're involved, it'll get done, and it should improve the environment and farm economics."

It's typically best to start small and not try to do it all at once, Berkland advises. "We'd love it if the whole farm eventually had a comprehensive plan, but this is something where you jump in and start somewhere, and that's usually on a problem spot," he adds. "Once you solve the problem, that's as far as a lot of farmers want to go, but the ultimate goal is to have a conservation plan on all the land a producer owns or operates. There are benefits to having a comprehensive plan, and it's something farmers are starting to get more proactive about. "

WHAT CONSERVATION PLANNING IS NOT

Many farmers hear "conservation planning" and immediately think of government regulations, forms and boring office visits. Quick! Before your eyes glaze over and you stop reading, we'll let you in on a secret some farmers already know: Conservation planning is a good idea even if you're not seeking to participate in a government program.

Why? It can make you a better, more profitable farmer. You might keep detailed financial records because the IRS requires it, but studying those numbers gives context to the greater picture and can lead to insights that save money. Sure it's not always a requirement to keep a conservation plan, but, by doing so, wise farmers know they have the keys in place to tweak the plan so they can make S.M.A.R.T.E.R. decisions and goals.

Work SMARTER

In 1981, George T. Doran coined the acronym S.M.A.R.T. in the publication Management Review to describe how objectives could be achieved more readily. While some have substituted letters in the acronym over time, Doran's original criteria was:

Specific: Target a specific area for improvement.

Measurable: Quantify, or at least suggest, an indicator of progress.

Assignable: Specify who will do it.

Realistic: State what results can realistically be achieved given available resources.

Time-related: Specify when the result can be achieved.

Over time, two additional criteria are sometimes added to the list:

Evaluate: Assess the goal and if it has been achieved.

Revise: Adjust behavior or set a new goal.

WHY WRITE IT DOWN?

Farmers are good at thinking on their feet and storing vast amounts of information about a field and its production history in their heads for instant recall. So why write it down?

- **Accuracy is one big reason.** "It's easy to get lost in the variables," says Farm Journal Field Agronomist Ken Ferrie. "Every year farming is different, but it's also a system. Figuring out how everything works together so you can do your best to replicate ideal conditions or make up for less-than-ideal conditions takes paying attention to a lot of different factors. If you don't write it down, you might not remember a detail that was really important."

- **It's a road map.** How do you tell a trusted adviser, retailer or fellow farmer where you are and where you're headed?

  "When you have a written plan, others can look at it and say, 'have you thought about trying this?' It's a way to look at what someone is doing and see if you can tweak it so they're able to do it with less money or for a greater result," says Dan Towery, independent crop consultant for Ag Conservation Solutions in West Lafayette, Ind., and former NRCS agronomist.

- **Save time, money or both.** By having a written plan, you might gain a valuable piece of information from someone who can save you time or money. A written plan allows you to focus on each step in the process, and in turn see if there's something you can tweak to improve the result. Farming is a business of tight margins; money and efficiency are gained in small amounts over time, which can add up across acres.

- **Prove you're doing a great job.** "I frequently hear farmers say they want to leave the farm better than they found it," Towery says. "A farmer might be doing an excellent job on conservation but miss how just one area is having a detrimental impact because it's hard to see incremental changes when they're around regularly. By writing down your goals and making them measurable, you have the numbers to back up you're doing a good job."

  For example, if you develop a profit zone map for every field every year, you can look for variations in wet or dry years. It might take three to five years to see soil improvements (such as organic matter and water-holding capacity). Start with 10% to 20% of your acres, or enough you are invested to make it work. That data, coupled with photos, serve as a benchmark of the progress made.

Who should you keep in the loop and/or share your plans with for feedback?

_____

_____

_____

"If you don't write it down, you might not remember a detail that was really important."

PHOTO: LINDSEY POUND

- **It's not hard.** Contrary to popular belief, plans don't have to be complicated. "I've seen basic conservation plans that simply list the crop rotation and primary tillage intentions," says Nick Guilette, conservation coordinator for Ebert Enterprises in Wisconsin. "They can also be incredibly complex when you start adding things like comprehensive nutrient management planning, feed management and pest management. It all depends on how far a farmer needs or wants to go, but for most farms the basics include your rotation and soil loss calculations."

- **You're already doing it – kind of.** Farmers come by planning naturally. It's part of walking the fields and making observations from the seat of the tractor or combine. You make mental notes about that flush of marestail defying your best efforts to kill it, or that wet spot that just never produces enough, or that area where the big rain eroded the slope of a hill. Next, you consider ways to solve those issues as you're listening to the beep of the yield monitor.

  A conservation plan is just writing down what you did, what you're trying to accomplish and what you think will work to accomplish it. It can be as simple or as complex as you desire. It'll likely grow more complex over time as you see how writing down your goals gives you greater results. You'll naturally want to push more of those questions to have resolutions and tweak the plan. That is when you start getting insights to increase your efficiency or save money. You'll be working smarter, not harder, and then the process becomes easier because you no longer must remember every detail in your head.

"Just because you write it down doesn't mean you're married to it forever."

And remember, it's just a plan, and plans change. "A lot of people don't want to do conservation planning because they think: 'If I write it down they're going to hold my feet to the fire,'" explains Julie Falcon, a resource conservation consultant and NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider. "Just because you write it down doesn't mean you're married to it forever. Things change. It's a moment in time, in two weeks you could add another 200 acres. It's OK that it changes, it's supposed to be flexible."

SHOW YOUR HOMEWORK

Preparing your conservation legacy starts with assembling information into one place where it can be easily accessible. You can start by gathering information on a farm-wide basis, or alternately for each part of your farm depending on how you use the land (see page 12). Here we'll start with the overall approach and fill in with more specifics based on land use as we go.

Describe your farm operation:

_____

_____

_____

My farm has: *(check applicable boxes and list acres or number of head)*

☐ Cropland *(see page 13)* _____

☐ Associated agricultural land/Non-cropped acres *(see page 18)* _____

☐ Grazing, rangeland or pastureland *(see page 23)* _____

☐ Animal feeding/concentrated animal feeding operation and/or livestock *(see page 29)* _____

Describe your typical crop rotation, including production methods and equipment:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Describe your livestock operation, including life cycle of an animal from birth/purchase to sale/harvest, including typical time frame for the cycle:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Documents to Obtain

Check the box if you have the item or need to obtain it and cross out the item if it's not relevant or available to you. Fill in the blank on where you need to obtain the information, who will do it and give yourself a deadline of when you'll have it done by.

If this list looks daunting, the best place to start is with a farm map, says Glen Franke, NRCS resource conservationist in Illinois. "Many times farmers start with just a farm map and start walking us through the farm field by field and telling us information. They know the most about their farm, and we learn a lot by just listening to them point to the map and tell us about their farm."

What	Already Have	Need to Obtain	Where to Obtain	Who Will Do It	When
Farm Maps	☐	☐	*FSA office*		
Yield Maps	☐	☐			
Spray History	☐	☐			
Soil Maps	☐	☐	*Web Soil Survey*		
Soil Sampling History	☐	☐			
Nutrient Management Plan	☐	☐			
	☐	☐			

Do you have an overall farm philosophy that guides all your decisions?

It's not required, but if it affects your decision-making this is a good place to get it on paper. (For example: Leave it better than we found it; take care of the soil and it will take care of you; we are farming for the next generation; we want to reduce inputs and maximize profitability.)

"Farmers tend to come up with a conservation plan when they are trying to solve a problem, want to implement a practice or have a program they want to participate in," says Dan Towery, independent crop consultant for Ag Conservation Solutions in West Lafayette, Ind., and former NRCS agronomist. "But it's not just about getting involved in some cost-sharing program. The best way to improve outcomes is to formulate a plan, write it down and then measure the results. Too often we skip the final step of evaluation."

PROBLEM OR PROGRESS

What problem are you trying to address, or what goal are you trying to make progress on? (Make it **Specific**, including where the problem is located.)

PRACTICE

- What practice do you want to implement? Why?
- What are the next steps for you to implement this practice? (**Assignable**)
- Do you need any additional equipment or can you hire out the work? (**Assignable**)
- How much will it cost? (**Realistic**)
- Can you implement it in one year, or will it take you multiple years? (**Time-related**)
- What result will you need to see to make the practice successful? (**Measurable**)

PROGRAM

- Is there a program that can provide beneficial cost-sharing or expertise?
- Who can you contact for more expertise?
- What is your time frame for rolling this out?

After you've implemented your above goals, come back to your plan and:

Evaluate ▶ Was this a success?

Revise ▶ What changes did I make to my farm, and what's my next problem/progress I want to address?

FARMER JOHN DOE'S EXAMPLE

PROBLEM OR PROGRESS

What problem are you trying to address, or what goal are you trying to make progress on? (Make it **Specific.**)

Reduce soil erosion on the West 80. Address the cause of gullies and remove them.

PRACTICE

- What practice do you want to implement?

Grass waterway, cover crops and maybe a terrace.

- What are the next steps for you to implement this practice? (**Assignable**)

Talk to NRCS office about which practice(s) is most effective.

- Do you need any additional equipment or can you hire out the work? (**Assignable**)

No extra equipment for waterways or cover crops. Might need to hire to build terrace.

- How much will it cost? (**Realistic**)

Seed for waterway = $100/acre @ 70 lb./acre plus fuel and labor. Cover crop seed = $20/acre and fuel/labor/machinery = $15/acre. Need more info for tile, machinery and maybe seed costs to build a terrace.

- Can you implement it in one year, or will it take you multiple years? (**Time-related**)

1 year for waterway and terrace. Multiple years for cover crops.

- What result will you need to see to make the practice successful? (**Measurable**)

No more gullies on the West 80.

PROGRAM

- Is there a program that can provide beneficial cost-sharing or expertise?

EQIP

- Who can you contact for more expertise?

NRCS agent

- What is your time frame for rolling this out?

Next spring for waterway and terraces. If implementing cover crops can try to seed this fall if I can source seed and forgo EQIP funds. Next fall if need EQIP funding.

After you've implemented your above goals, come back to your plan and:

Evaluate ▶ Was this a success?

Implemented cover crops (oats and radishes) after soybeans before corn, but it wasn't enough.

Revise ▶ What changes did I make to my farm, and what's my next problem/progress I want to address?

Gullies were reduced after the first year, but we used a cover that winterkilled and did not provide enough protection against early spring erosion. Might consider a cover crop that does not winterkill such as cereal rye. Will reconsider waterways and terraces.

TYPES OF LAND BY USE

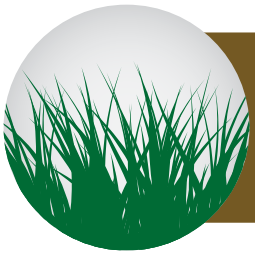
Most farmers own and/or operate two or more types of land — and every decision has bearing on the bigger landscape. Be mindful of how the dots are connected to avoid random acts of conservation and adversely impact your conservation legacy.

CROPLAND

Examples: Corn, soybeans, cotton, wheat, sorghum, sunflowers and canola

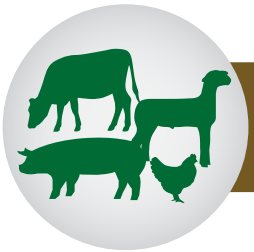
ASSOCIATED AGRICULTURAL LANDS

Examples: Idle center pivot corners, odd areas, ditches and watercourses, riparian areas, field edges, and seasonal and permanent wetlands



GRAZING/RANGELAND/ PASTURELAND

Examples: Pasture with managed native and/or managed species of forage, rangeland (native forage) and cropland used for seasonal grazing



LIVESTOCK

Examples: Confined animal spaces such as outdoor pens, feedlots, barns and confinement facilities

CROPLAND

In its most basic form, a conservation plan begins with field maps, soil assessments and profitability maps. Every farm should have a plan to conserve the resources necessary for production agriculture, such as soil and water. The best farmers start there and add to it as they go.

"A soil loss assessment by a professional will take into account your field's slope and rate of soil loss," says Nick Guilette, conservation coordinator for Ebert Enterprises in Wisconsin. "From there you plug in your rotation and see what practices you can use to slow that rate of soil loss or improve soil health."

Having a conservation plan can mean working with FSA or NRCS, but it doesn't have to. It also can mean a simple document farmers can produce on their own, or it can mean working with a trusted adviser or retailer.

In the most basic form, cropland assessments start with the land. Every practice that's added to the basics can add a level of complexity to a conservation plan. On the next page you'll find a list of additional considerations, such as irrigation, drainage concerns or grazing, that might intensify your planning activities. The additional planning creates opportunities to conserve more resources and thereby increase return on investment.

THE ROLE OF A TRUSTED ADVISER OR RETAILER

"A lot of our customers don't have the time or don't want to deal with a government program, but they still want what's best for their farm," says Gary Farrell, president of Ag Enterprise Supply Inc., in eastern Washington. "We believe retailers can help farmers with conservation. We believe in conservation, we promote conservation and we talk with our customers about their goals. We can help them plan as they move forward. After they've decided what they need to do, we help develop a practical application for their plan to accomplish their goal and maintain profitability. We deal with the realistic and the practical while helping our customers realize their conservation goals to keep their farms going."

The ultimate way for any conservation specialist, government or private, to help a farmer is to get out there and walk the land.

"One of the best things a conservation planner can do is get out there and familiarize themselves with the land," says Mark Berkland, a conservation consultant, NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider and former NRCS agent. "I need to be as familiar with the land as possible before I start working with the land and the landowner. It's what I always told new conservationists during training: Pull out the soil maps and get in a vehicle with the landowner to go see the land. There's no substitute for walking the land when developing a plan."

CROPLAND HOMEWORK

Use the following to answer questions about a field or management zone you want to address. For farm-wide conservation planning, you'll want to eventually answer these questions for every field or management zone you farm.

Field Nickname: _____ **Location:** _____ **Size:** _____

Production practices: (*describe crop rotation, tillage, nutrient and pest management, etc.)*

_____

_____

Define the problem you are addressing or what zone you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

_____

This field/management zone has the following additional considerations:

☐ Irrigation *(describe)* _____

☐ Drainage *(describe)* _____

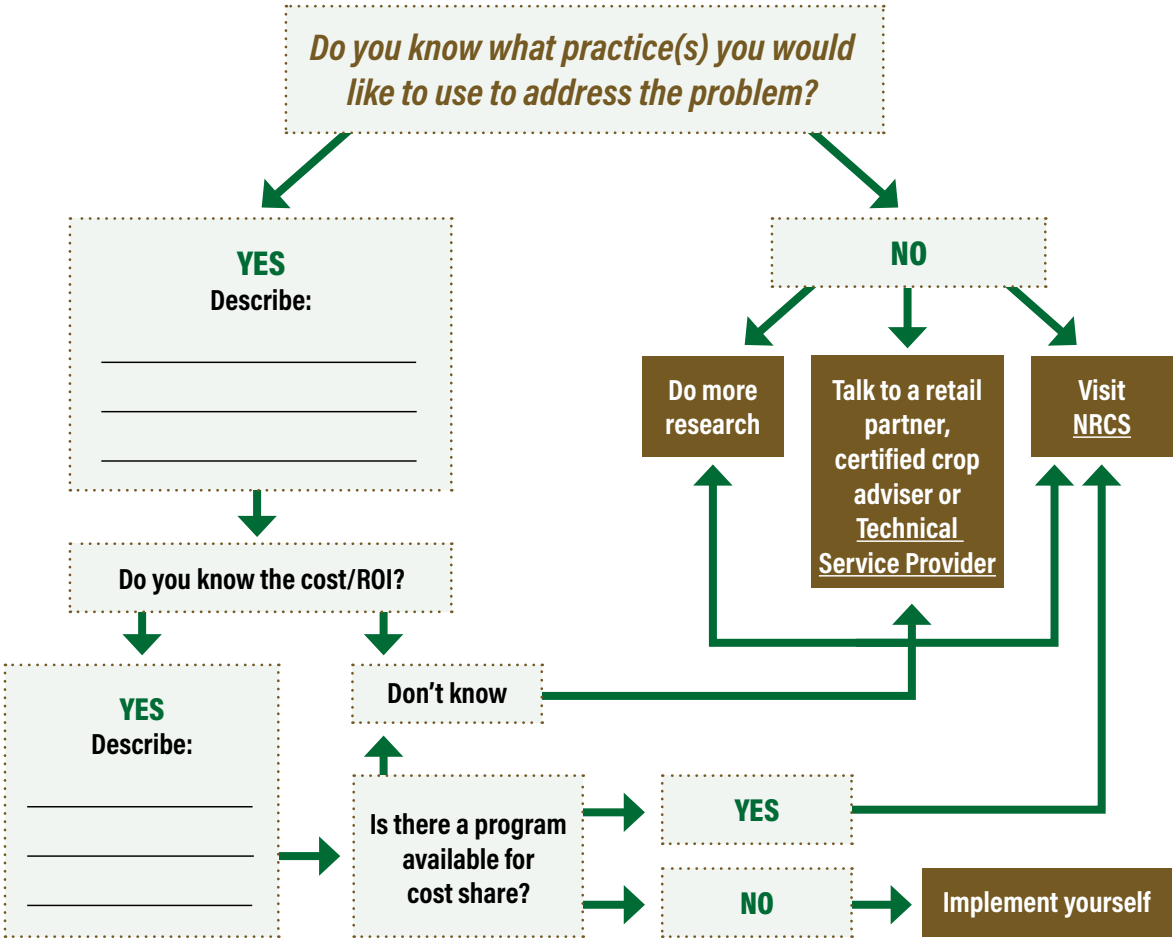
☐ Flooding or ponding *(describe)* _____

☐ Also used for grazing *(describe)* _____

☐ Organic or transitioning to organic *(describe)* _____

☐ Near wetland, stream or body of water *(describe)* _____

☐ Rental ground *(include duration of lease)* _____



Based on cost and available labor, resources, etc., what are the best next steps in the coming year to roll out this change? What about two to four years down the road? (Realistic)

How will you know if it was successful? (Measurable)

After you've implemented your goals, come back to your plan and Evaluate. Was this a success?

Revise. What changes did I make to my farm? What's my next problem/progress I want to address?

PHOTO PROVIDED BY CRAIG SWARTZ

FARMER PROFILE: CRAIG SWARTZ, EMINGTON, ILL.

About an hour south of Chicago, Craig Swartz raises field crops with his dad, his wife and three children. The farm is approximately 3,000 acres of corn and soybeans with a little dabbling in cover crops. After 30 years of no-tilling, Swartz says they're really starting to see the benefits of it, especially on their highly erodible land (HEL).

With HEL, the Swartzes have found writing conservation plans necessary — and not too difficult or time consuming. "It's no worse than doing taxes; it takes like 25 minutes tops (per field) to write a conservation plan, and there are a lot of benefits to it." Swartz says. "It's not that big of a deal, they want to know your fertility practices, your fertility plan, your spraying aspirations, they just want to know what you're doing and if you have enough residue on top. It's not complicated, it's just paperwork."

CONSERVATION PLANNING TIPS FOR CROPLAND

1. Create an inventory of what you have and what you want.

"Have an inventory of what you're currently doing and a list of what you think you want to do in the next five years," says Adam Wyant, district conservationist for NRCS in Livingston and McClean counties in Illinois. "Start pulling all those materials together when you're not as busy, in the winter or in down times. You have to be able to look at the things you're thinking about implementing and have a basic plan in place so you can capitalize on it. If you don't, you might miss a critical planting window for something such as implementing cover crops because you weren't prepared."

2. Start on it before you need to implement it.

"Our goal is to work a year ahead rather than try to put in a cost-share application on the day it's due," Wyant says. "Working ahead allows you to plan around any time and resource constraints to ensure a successful application and implementation process."

3. Use the same email address for FSA and NRCS.

Via the Farmers.gov website, farmers can conduct business with NRCS online — from requesting conservation assistance to electronically signing documents and tracking payments. "Establishing and activating an account with Farmers.gov can be intimidating," says Glen Franke, NRCS resource conservationist in Illinois. "As you can imagine, USDA takes gaining access to the network seriously since it has a lot of information behind the firewalls. The key for a smooth activation is to set up the account using the same email address as you have on file with FSA."

4. Your smartphone is your best planning tool. Use it.

"When farmers are out in the fall, they need to take a photo when they see a problem and send me a text or an email along with identifying the field," Wyant says. "If they notice a gully where we might need to implement a waterway, for example, I can come up with options before we start planning for next year's crop.

5. Write it down.

"Farmers start planning for next year's crop far in advance," Wyant says. "They just aren't doing the related conservation elements at the same level. Write it down, and get the steps in place early."

6. This is a journey not a destination.

"You're not going to get this done in one year," says Julie Falcon, a resource conservation consultant and NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider. "Make goals to move the planning process forward, but give yourself permission that it's going to take time. It's like farming. You're never truly done; there's always going to be something to work on, and that's OK."

For additional information, visit:

- Farmers.gov. A comprehensive site to request assistance; sign and submit applications and contracts; and track payments. Tip: Use the same email associated with your FSA account to save paperwork issues.
- Get started with NRCS. Learn about the five-step process to get technical and financial assistance through NRCS.
- Find your local NRCS office/agent.

ASSOCIATED AGRICULTURAL LANDS

Associated agricultural land (AAL) is the odds and ends of a farm that don't really fall into a neat category. It's what NRCS defines as "land associated with farms and ranches that are not purposefully managed for food, forage or fiber and are typically associated with nearby production and/or conservation lands."

Essentially, it's the land leftover from primary farming and ranching activities — the idle pivot corner, grass waterway, riparian buffer, ditch, wetland and field edge. It's the land that doesn't have an obvious productive purpose, but can be the worst problem spot or shining conservation treasure.

"It's possible to take the biggest problem on your farm and make it the spot where you practice the greatest amount of conservation."

"Natural resources are, by their nature, holistic: one impacts another," says Glen Franke, NRCS resource conservationist in Illinois. "When walking a field with a producer, they might point to a waterway and mention they used to hunt there, but they're not seeing quail or pheasant anymore. It might not be something we address right away, but it might be right to put in a field border that offers more wildlife habitat and addresses another problem. Those conservation wins make sense for the farm and make it a joy for the farmer."

AN OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE

While farmers might use similar techniques to address problems, each AAL spot has quirks.

"Every farm has a trouble spot," says Dan Towery, independent crop consultant for Ag Conservation Solutions in West Lafayette, Ind. "It's possible to take the biggest problem on your farm and make it the spot where you practice the greatest amount of conservation. It's great if you can turn it into something useful, but we for sure want to stop trouble spots from damaging resources further and, if possible, reverse it. You can tell a lot about how a farmer values his land by how creative he is in managing non-productive areas. Why farm areas of a field you are loosing money on? You can increase the profitability of the field by not putting inputs on the areas that don't pay."

AAL assessments are not the easiest for farmers to do themselves, although it can be done. Start by assessing problem or low-productivity areas that might be better suited for another use. You can also walk the farm with a trusted farmer-friend, retail partner, adviser or local NRCS agent to get feedback.

There are many ways to turn a problem spot into a conservation jewel, but only you can judge which one is right for your operation.

PHOTO: DALLAS GLAZIK

ASSOCIATED AGRICULTURAL LAND HOMEWORK

Use the following to answer questions about an area you want to address. For farm-wide conservation planning, you'll want to eventually answer these questions for every area you farm.

Nickname for Area: _____ **Location:** _____ **Size:** _____

Current Purpose: _____

_____

Reimagined Purpose: _____

_____

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

This area has the following additional considerations:

☐ Irrigation *(describe)* _____

☐ Drainage *(describe)* _____

☐ Also used for grazing *(describe)* _____

☐ Organic or transitioning to organic *(describe)* _____

☐ Near wetland, stream or body of water *(describe)* _____

☐ Wildlife habitat *(currently have or want to create)* _____

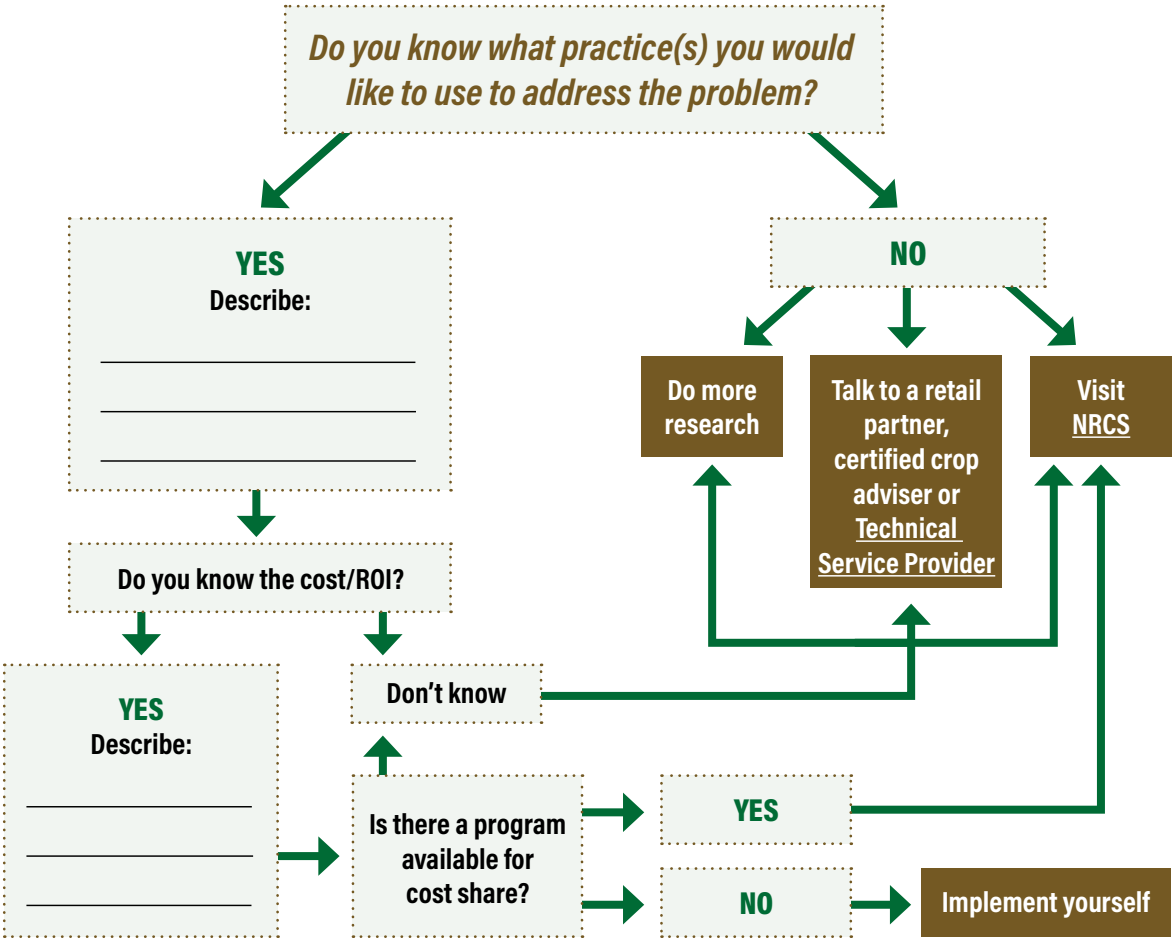
☐ Rental ground *(include duration of lease)* _____

I want/need a solution that: *(reduces soil erosion; protects water quality; provides pollinator habitat, livestock forage, livestock shelter and/or livestock habitat; etc.)*

_____

_____

_____



Based on cost and available labor, resources, etc., what are the best next steps in the coming year to roll out this change? What about two to four years down the road? (Realistic)

How will you know if it was successful? (Measurable)

After you've implemented your goals, come back to your plan and Evaluate. Was this a success?

Revise. What changes did I make to my farm? What's my next problem/progress I want to address?

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JIM IFFT

FARMER PROFILE: JIM IFFT, FAIRBURY, ILL.

The Ifft family farm consists of approximately 1,800 acres of corn, soybeans and cover crops in north-central Illinois and a Yorkshire hog breeding operation. Jim, his wife, Julie, and son, Josh, run the farm together. A few years ago, Jim took on a new rental farm with a reputation for being wet.

"An area of that field was undrainable. It was a nightmare trying to get a crop out two years out of every seven," Ifft says. "After several years of frustration, I talked to the landlord and convinced him we should restore that area of the field to a wetland. We restored 28 acres through the Wetlands Reserve Program and farm the remaining 75 acres. It's off to a good start.

"Yes, it's work to organize paperwork and get everything filled out right, but the conservation programs are the shining star of working with the government programs. If you care, and your end goal is to farm right, you're going to make it work," he adds.

CONSERVATION PLANNING TIPS FOR ASSOCIATED AGRICULTURAL LAND

1. Problem spots can be turned into big opportunities.

"The biggest problem spot in your field can hold the biggest opportunity for improvement," says Missy Bauer, Farm Journal Field Agronomist. "Look for ways to turn that hassle spot to your advantage and conserve resources at the same time. Once dealt with, the worst areas on a farm can actually be the best spots to show off how well you're managing your resources."

2. Bring in an outside opinion.

"If all you can see is trouble, it's time to get an outside perspective on your worst problem area," Bauer says. "Many times another trusted farmer, a retail partner or an NRCS agent will have ideas you've never thought of. When you're out of ideas, get some from others."

3. Get creative.

"You may end up repurposing a spot for something entirely different that makes it function better," Bauer says. "I'm always amazed at the ingenuity of farmers and what they can come up with. Think through how your worst trouble spot can be a help to your operation."

4. Make it a money maker, not taker.

"There are all kinds of programs through NRCS and local and regional initiatives," Bauer says. "If you have a trouble spot or an area of ground that's non-productive, using a program to turn it into a buffer strip or a pollinator area, for example, might make more economic sense than what you're currently doing. Take the time to do some research, make a plan and determine what funds are available to help you."

5. Make it a win-win.

"There are times when working with a program to install a conservation measure can actually help save you money in another area or make your land more useful or enjoyable to you," Bauer says. "Maybe it can provide habitat for game birds you can hunt yourself or develop into a side business, or constructing beneficial insect habitat might provide more advantageous predatory insects. There are possibilities that provide a financial benefit for you as well as the land. The trick is figuring out what that might be."

For additional information, visit:

- CSP Enhancements and Bundles. Find the latest details on additional Conservation Stewardship Program activities that can take conservation efforts to the next level.
- Field Office Technical Guide. Find 140 enhancement programs to address resource concerns. Choose your state and then refer to the conservation practice standards and quality criteria for resource concerns, which can be found in sections II and III.
- EQIP. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program provides financial and technical assistance to help farmers implement hundreds of conservation practices.
- CRP and CREP. Learn more about the Conservation Reserve Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, which pays an annual rental rate for removing environmentally sensitive land from production and establishing plant species that will improve environmental health.

GRAZING/PASTURELAND/RANGELAND

A grazing management plan comprises, at minimum, a plan for the land and animals. By nature these plans have more components than a land-only plan. However, a well-managed grazing operation maximizes profitability and the payoff is worth the effort.

Grazing involves some level of infrastructure. The good news is you can start small and make improvements at your pace, according to Sarah Flack, a grazing consultant and author of The Art and Science of Grazing. Infrastructure planning typically involves:

- **Fences:** including perimeter fences, interior fences for subdividing paddocks, interior fences for rotational grazing and potentially fencing cows out of wet areas (interior fences can be permanent or movable electric fencing suitable for managed/rotational grazing).
- **Water system:** including adding waterlines along the edge of pastures, or adding water tubs.
- **Lanes:** animal pathways to move herds back and forth between barns and paddocks (primarily needed for dairy systems, can be hard surfaced or grassed).

With such a large amount of fixed costs for infrastructure, farms usually create multiyear timelines and often gauge what they need immediately and what they can add later.

"For instance, a couple things we might do this year for a farm is run water lines and fence the cattle out of wet areas," Flack says. "At the same time, we're working with NRCS knowing it might take two years to get funding for some of the other fencing that's needed for animal lanes and interior paddocks."

While initial costs can be daunting, that's when working with federal and state agencies to obtain cost-share funds is a key to success.

Wisconsin, for example, is experiencing a large number of cropland acres going back to pasture, especially for operations focused on the organic and grass-fed markets, and a renewed interest in grazing. Managing forage for maximum production requires good fences.

"Fencing makes the top five things NRCS cost-share dollars help pay for."

"Some of the cost sharing for new conversions of row crop to grazing comes in at multihundreds of dollars per acre to provide all that infrastructure," says Brian Pillsbury, USDA state grazing lands specialist for Wisconsin. "Grazing provides dividends in conservation, perennial soil health and lower runoff. It's great for the environment, and that's why fencing makes the top five things NRCS cost-share dollars help pay for."

PHOTO: TODD KLASSY

GRAZING HOMEWORK

Use the following to answer questions about a pasture or area you want to address. For farm-wide conservation planning, you'll want to eventually answer these questions for every pasture, field or area in your operation.

Pasture Nickname: _____ **Location:** _____ **Size:** _____

☐ **Permanent Paddock(s)**

☐ **Movable Fence**

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

_____

I have filled out the overall farm homework from page 9, including:

☐ Irrigation *(describe)* _____

☐ Soil tests *(describe any compaction, crusting, high water table issues, etc.)*

_____

Additional information to gather for grazing assessment:

☐ Forage assessment *(describe plant diversity, density, growth rate)*

_____

☐ Forage quality tests

☐ Dry Matter Demand (DMD)

☐ Estimated Available Dry Matter (ADM) per acre *(amount to be consumed)*

_____

☐ Estimated head/herd size this land will support and for what time period *(DMD/ADM = acres required per day)*

_____

Describe reliable water source(s) currently available for livestock. *(For example: any lanes needed to travel to a water source, do multiple paddocks share a water source, are water lines with portable tubs used or a combination of water sources.)*

_____

_____

Describe potential improvements to water availability you'd like to accomplish.

_____

_____

_____

Describe your fencing situation. *(Include permanent fencing, movable electric fencing and fenced moving lanes if relevant.)*

_____

_____

_____

Describe potential improvements to fencing you'd like to accomplish.

_____

_____

_____

This pasture/rangeland/field has the following additional considerations:

☐ Irrigation *(describe)* _____

☐ Organic or transitioning to organic *(describe)* _____

☐ Near wetland, stream or body of water *(describe)* _____

☐ Pasture contains forest/timber resources _____

☐ Native range/introduced pasture _____

☐ Rental ground *(include duration of lease)* _____

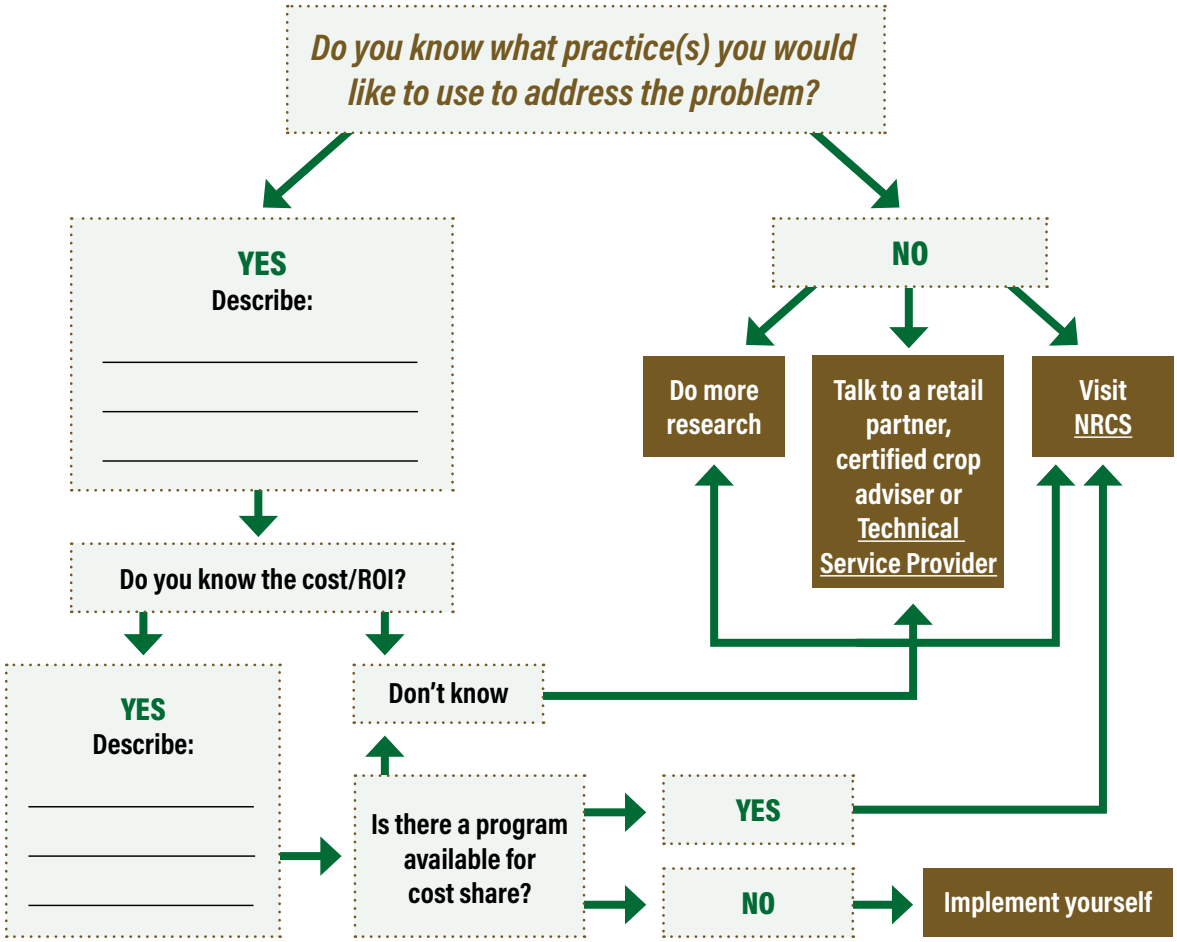
Describe any visible erosion issues such as gullies, etc.

_____

_____

_____

_____



Based on cost and available labor, resources, etc., what are the best next steps in the coming year to roll out this change? What about two to four years down the road? (Realistic)

How will you know if it was successful? (Measurable)

After you've implemented your goals, come back to your plan and Evaluate. Was this a success?

Revise. What changes did I make to my farm? What's my next problem/progress I want to address?

PHOTO: CURT DENNISON PHOTOGRAPHY

FARMER PROFILE: DEBBIE LYONS-BLYTHE, WHITE CITY, KAN.

In the Flint Hills of Kansas, Debbie Lyons-Blythe and her family run 250 cow–calf pairs on tall grass prairie and grow a few crops. She defines sustainability as: "taking care of the land, taking care of the animals, taking care of the people who live and work on the land and making money."

She recognizes ranching is an interconnected system and to do the best job in one area, you have to pay attention to things that might seem only semi-related but really are closely tied. She asks other ranchers in her work on the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef: "'Do you have a grazing management plan?' If you have a grazing management plan, then you're paying attention to your water quality."

Creating a grazing management plan and executing it shows their commitment to stewardship. "Farmers and ranchers are the original environmentalists, but I can't just say that. I have to prove it," she says. "So we need data, we need to be able to prove we're doing it right."

To learn more about how Lyons-Blythe is shaping the conversation around conservation agriculture, click here.

CONSERVATION PLANNING TIPS FOR GRAZING

1. Do a comprehensive land-based assessment.

"I ask lots of questions and walk around the farm with the farmer to make sure I understand the goals and how the grazing system fits in," says Sarah Flack, a grazing consultant and author of The Art and Science of Grazing. "I have to make sure the land base is suitable to the number and types of animals."

2. Use the animals as part of your improvement plan.

"Good grazing management can cause the mix of plant species in a pasture to change even without tillage and reseeding, simply as a result of animal impact," Flack says. "In just a few years animals can convert weedy brushy pastures into highly productive pastures capable of supporting more animals and providing a higher quality of forage."

3. Assemble a team.

"Work with someone who will look at your operation with a holistic approach," Flack says. "I don't make recommendations not fully aligned with a farmer's financial, ecological and quality of life goals. I'll pull in a vet, someone from the conservation district or NRCS, a nutritionist and whoever else makes sense to work with the farmer in the planning process."

4. Work with someone who listens to you but will also challenge you.

"A farmer has to have someone who listens to their overall farm goals, their specific objective for this grazing system and any other ideas," Flack says. "To help with the math, the layout and putting it all in writing, listening is key."

A good listener doesn't shy away from challenging a farmer. "Sometimes farmers have a certain thing in their mind, like they need a manure pit or a barnyard. We look at the whole operation and calculate if that makes sense," says Brian Pillsbury, USDA state grazing lands specialist for Wisconsin. "Maybe it turns out they don't need what they thought they did and something else is better and less costly."

5. Consider hiring a trusted guide.

"It's nice to have an independent consultant or advocate who understands local and federal programs," Flack says. "In addition to NRCS programs, there might be local grant money, a local watershed project and a district conservation initiative all with different requirements, eligibility and timing. It's a process to work through, but the cost sharing is often worth it."

Who needs to be on my team?

_____

_____

_____

For additional information, visit:

- Sarah Flack Consulting. Find links to articles and videos, including how to calculate dry matter and calculating paddock size.
- Understanding and Using a Feed Analysis Report. The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Publication G1892 provides tips on how to interpret and use a feed analysis report.
- Noble Research Institute. Learn about the basics of forage quality and when and what to sample.

LIVESTOCK

A livestock conservation plan is complex to develop because it encompasses, at minimum, animals, feed, animal waste, land management and protection of water and air quality.

Usually, to build or expand an existing animal feeding operation (AFO), a comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP) is required prior to construction. A CNMP is a type of conservation plan that meets state regulations and local ordinances involved in waste management projects.

"A lot of the plans I assist in developing happen because the farmer wants cost share on a waste storage facility," says Mark Berkland, a conservation consultant, NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider and former NRCS agent. "If a waste storage facility is needed, a permit will likely be needed."

One of the key considerations for an AFO is manure storage, handling and application. If not handled properly, manure can have negative effects on both water and air quality.

"When assisting in developing a plan I look at how waste material is applied," Berkland says. "If you have neighbors to the north and a good 30 mph south wind it's probably not a good idea to apply liquid waste with a traveling gun. If you can knife it in to minimize odor and put in barriers, such as trees, to keep things out of sight and out of mind put those options in your plan."

ASK FOR HELP TO MEET REGULATIONS

Farmers can certainly write a livestock management plan themselves, but it can be useful to enlist help.

"On one hand, it isn't rocket science," Berkland says. "On the other hand, if it's not something you do frequently you might want help to keep up with the science and changing regulations and recommendations. It's like anything else, if you have not done it before, it takes a while to get used to it. Once you get use to the comprehensive nutrient management recommendations and the calculations, you will be fine."

AFO and CAFO Defined

Animal feeding operations (AFO), defined by EPA as any enterprise where animals are kept and raised in confined situations, are subject to regulation by EPA.

When more than 1,000 animal units are present (an animal unit is 1,000 lb. of live weight), EPA adds the word "concentrated" to the acronym and designates it a CAFO. Any size AFO that discharges manure or wastewater into a natural or man-made ditch, stream or other waterway is a CAFO, regardless of size. Usually a state environmental agency implements the CAFO regulation for EPA and might add its own requirements to keep water clean.

PHOTO: LINDSEY POUND

LIVESTOCK HOMEWORK

Use the following to answer questions about a particular site you want to address. For farm-wide conservation planning, you'll want to eventually answer these questions for every site or management area in your operation.

ANIMALS

AFO or CAFO Nickname: _____

Location: _____

Size: _____

Number of Head: _____

Estimated Pounds of Live Weight: _____

# of EPA Defined Animal Units *(est. pounds live weight/1,000)* _____

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

Describe the life cycle of an animal on your operation from entry (birth or purchase) to exit (sale or harvest), including typical time frame for the entire cycle.

_____

_____

Describe potential improvements to the size or scope of your herd/flock you'd like to accomplish.

_____

_____

_____

MANURE

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

Describe the manure handling practices on your operation from animal excretion to application. Include everywhere manure is located or stored, hauling distance to each disposal site and all application methods used to dispose of manure.

_____

_____

_____

Define each area from above where waste requires testing.

Waste analysis can test different if it's fresh, packed in a lot, in storage, separated to liquid and solids, etc. A comprehensive fertility management plan requires a separate waste analysis of samples taken from each building or lot and every separate storage area. If areas have different purposes or herd sizes during the season, you'll want separate samples for those times. Identify them in the blanks below and check the boxes when you have received test results.

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Describe potential improvements to waste handling you'd like to accomplish.

_____

_____

_____

FEED

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

_____

Describe your feed handling process.

_____

_____

Describe your herd/flock's rations.

Describe potential improvements to feed handling or nutrition you'd like to accomplish.

LAND

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

I have filled out the overall farm homework from page 9, including:

☐ Farm maps.

☐ Description of crop rotation for each field.

☐ Current soil tests *(within past three years — check regulations for your state as to what is considered current for manure application purposes).*

☐ Soil maps: *Soil maps from the Web Soil Survey will provide slope range and potassium values, (erodibility factor), the last remaining item to gather for each field is length of slope (which a professional can help you with).*

Describe estimated yield for each harvested crop in each field, and seeding rate for non-harvested cover crops.

Describe any water feature on the field maps, including wells, streams and ponds, and mark on field maps.

_____

_____

_____

I plan to apply manure:

☐ Based on nitrogen removal rates *(For example, phosphorus will likely be stored at a higher rate than crops can use.)* _____

☐ Based on phosphorus removal rates *(I have high phosphorus levels in the soil and need to minimize manure applications based on the use level of phosphorus.)* _____

☐ Other *(describe)* _____

Describe your goal for waste handling you'd like to accomplish.

_____

_____

_____

After you've assembled the above information in the manure and land sections, you'll have enough detail to use the Manure Management Software developed by Purdue University and recommended by NRCS. It contains current recommendations for each state.

AIR

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

_____

_____

_____

Describe any mechanical and natural means you have installed to mitigate air quality concerns.

_____

_____

_____

Describe any natural or man-made barriers that will affect air quality and movement (trees, windbreaks, other buildings, etc.).

WATER

Define the problem you are addressing or what area you are trying to progress to the next level. (Make it Specific.)

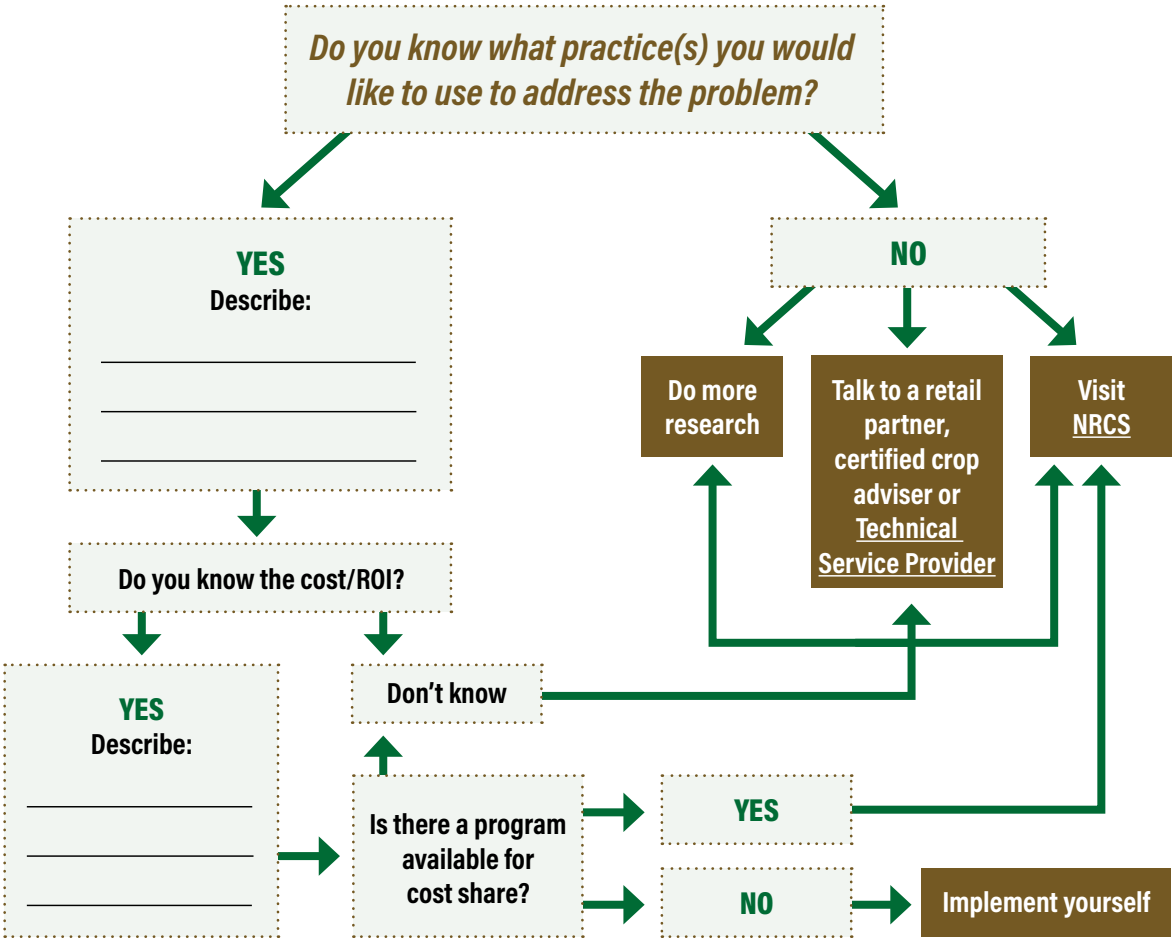
Describe water sources available for animal consumption.

See Land section and make sure all natural water sources (wells, streams, ponds, etc.) are marked on the field map.

Describe potential improvements to water quality or availability you'd like to accomplish.

This AFO or CAFO has the following additional considerations:

- ☐ Field maps _____
- ☐ Organic or transitioning to organic *(describe)* _____
- ☐ Near wetland, stream or body of water *(describe)* _____
- ☐ Grass-fed _____
- ☐ Rental property *(include duration of lease)* _____



Based on cost and available labor, resources, etc., what are the best next steps in the coming year to roll out this change? What about two to four years down the road? (Realistic)

How will you know if it was successful? (Measurable)

After you've implemented your goals, come back to your plan and Evaluate. Was this a success?

Revise. What changes did I make to my farm? What's my next problem/progress I want to address?

PHOTO: NATIONAL PORK BOARD

FARMER PROFILE: BRAD & PEGGY GREENWAY, MITCHELL, S.D.

Brad and Peggy Greenway know livestock. Their operation raises 14,000 hogs a year, they have a cow/calf herd and they farm 2,800 acres to produce feed for their livestock.

The couple started with one hog barn and six years ago added another. The second barn was identical to the first, except for new pig drinking water equipment that results in using 150,000 fewer gallons of water per year.

"Every gallon of water that's wasted into the pit costs us more money," Greenway says. "When water is wasted in the pit it's an expense for the water itself, it dilutes our higher value manure and we have to pay to haul it to the field. We were spending more at every step. When we saw the difference [in the new barn] we converted our other barn over to that new equipment also."

The Greenways believe in efficiency and have also installed a roller mill instead of a grinder to get their feed to the perfect size for better pig feed efficiency.

To learn more about how the Greenways strive to do better today than they did yesterday, click here.

CONSERVATION PLANNING TIPS FOR LIVESTOCK

1. Ask for help.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help," says Mark Berkland, a conservation consultant, NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider and former NRCS agent. "Things are more complicated in many ways and technology is better, more sophisticated. Sometimes you need to ask somebody who makes a living in that area."

2. Economics and labor.

"By the time you get to actually developing a comprehensive conservation plan the producer will often have the economics, staffing and labor sources figured out," Berkland says. "This part is usually figured out before I get involved, but it doesn't make it any less important to actually go through a thorough planning process for your livestock operation."

3. Do you have enough land for manure applications?

"Often I get involved when an operation wants to increase livestock numbers," Berkland says. "When talking expansion, having enough land to spread the waste on safely is always a concern. When you start expanding, all of a sudden you're going to run short of land."

4. Calculate, calculate, calculate.

"One of the most important things I do as a Technical Service Provider [doing comprehensive nutrient management planning] is calculate the amount of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium that can be safely applied to the land based on a number of factors, such as percent slope, soil type, crops and buffers," Berkland says. "You have to look at all of these factors at the same time when determining how many tons of manure can be applied to a specific acre of land."

5. Location, location, location.

"I can't tell you exactly how many acres are necessary until you tell me factors such as how steep the field is, the yield, the slope, the erodibility, etc.," Berkland says. "It's a bit of an educated guess where we're constantly adjusting the calculations and the number of acres based on field specifics."

6. Applying for nitrogen or phosphorus?

"You have to understand how much nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium the crops are going to take up versus the amount in the waste material," Berkland says. "You can't apply more than is being used. You can apply at nitrogen or phosphorus removal rates. If you apply at nitrogen rates you're generally building phosphorus in the soil. That will catch up with you. Future soil tests will show a high phosphorus amount and then you might only be able to apply at phosphorus removal rates."

7. It depends.

"No two farms and no two fields are the same," Berkland says. "You can't just calculate it for one field and apply it for every field. You have to do these calculations for every field."

For additional information, visit:

- Comprehensive nutrient management plans for AFO and CAFO. Learn more about managing manure and organic byproducts.
- Manure Management Planner. The computer program, created by Purdue University, helps producers allocate manure.
- Manure sampling for nutrient management planning. The why, when and how to sample.

EVERYONE NEEDS SKIN IN THE GAME

FARMER PERSPECTIVE: TIPS TO DEVELOP LANDLORD BUY IN

You have a one-year lease on 100 acres, and there are areas you know would benefit from more conservation practices. However, it's not your land, and you can't justify taking on the investment yourself and pay the full rent on all the acres. What do you do? Here are some tips on how to convince your landlord to invest in sustainability or how you can invest in it by convincing your landlord to lower the cash rent or remove unprofitable acres from your lease.

1. Create a profitability map.

Run a profitability analysis and create maps on an acre-by-acre or the same 2.5-acre soil test grid for every field you farm. If there are unprofitable acres, you have the first key in talking to your landlord.

2. Share the data.

"Growing up, when you'd ask how the field yielded, my dad would tell me but then say 'but don't tell the landlord, or he'll raise the rent,'" says Steve Bruere, CEO of Peoples Company in Des Moines, Iowa. "If you have problem areas and are unwilling to share that information with the landlord, how can they fix them? Where you're ineffective at turning your inputs into a commodity is where there are likely environmental issues. This is a useful tool when a landlord and tenant sit down to negotiate a lease."

3. Negotiate for a longer lease.

"If you're trying to build soil heath by planting cover crops, or pretty much any other

conservation practice, it's not going to make a big difference in one year," says Julie Falcon, a resource conservation consultant and NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider. "You have to negotiate for a longer lease, at least three to five years to give that practice time to work. If you educate your landlord, they will be more likely to give you a longer-term lease."

4. Negotiate for cost share.

"If you have a practice you'd like to employ that improves the land, negotiate with them for a break on the rent in exchange for doing the practice," Falcon says. "The key is arming yourself with information about the practice, how it will improve their land and having a long enough lease to benefit both of you. Start with a jumping off point and see where it goes."

5. Walk through the math.

"Landlords don't know what they don't know," Bruere says. "If you can take 20 minutes and walk them through it and say 'every year we lose dollars on these 10 acres,' and then negotiate where to go from there it's helpful. If you show them the math, you can change their minds on how to protect their investment and not charge you for acres that aren't producing."

6. Educate yourself.

"Be aware of the latest and greatest cost-share programs," Bruere says. "A great way to differentiate your operation and establish credibility with your landlord is being consultative. Showing them what they can do with their problem acres and how it can benefit them to take those acres out of production or investments to fix those acres can set you apart."

7. Put yourself in their shoes.

It's always beneficial to understand the other person's perspective in a negotiation to know how to position a solution that's a win for both sides. See page 40, especially No. 1.

How to Start the Conservation Discussion on Rented Ground

Starting any conservation practice takes time, research and effort. What would it mean if you could convince your landlord of the value of long-term conservation?

"Often times I hear from both landowners and tenants questioning how to incorporate specific conservation practices into leases," says Angie Rieck-Hinz, Iowa State University Extension field agronomist. "The first step to take is for both parties to meet and have an open discussion about the goals of including specific practices."

While farmers might understand the benefits of sustainable practices, not all landlords will. Here are a few tips on how to start the conversation with landowners:

- **Social media:** Create a farm page on Facebook, Instagram or other platform to educate followers on practices. This is an easy way to showcase conservation wins.
- **Hand-written notes:** When mailing a rent check, include a note that tells your landlord what practice you're excited about or what success you've seen on their land from sustainability efforts.
- **Host a field day for the public and landlords:** Work with NRCS or other experts to showcase the before and after of using a conservation practice.
- **Wildlife:** Conservation practices, such as cover crops and buffer strips, can create wildlife habitat. For some landowners, hunting is a huge draw to a practice.

PHOTO: NATHAN BRAUSE

LANDLORD PERSPECTIVE: MAXIMIZE INVESTMENT, CONSERVE LAND

Caring for land, yet having it appreciate as an asset, takes management. "Landlords hold the most leverage in getting conservation improvements on their land, and it's to their benefit because it takes care of their asset," says Steve Bruere, CEO of Peoples Company in Des Moines, Iowa, which sells and manages farmland for investors. Use these tips to have this conversation with your renter.

1. Understand your asset.

"Historically, in Iowa, land has a 4% cash yield (rent) and 7% appreciation per year," Bruere says. In the farm management industry the primary driver has been maximizing cash rent — renting the most amount of acres for the most money. We think that's shortsighted. You're focusing on the smaller return component if you're only focused on cash yield."

PHOTO: ISTOCK

2. Require data sharing in your lease.

"We require yield history from the tenant every year," Bruere says. "We know the inputs and the seeding rates so with that information we can see where the problems are and fix them."

3. Create a profitability map.

If your renter hasn't already shared a profitability map, use the data shared in your lease to create one and identify the problems on your land. See item #1 on page 38.

4. Have long-term leases.

"Landlords and farmers both need to have a vested interest in implementing conservation practices that sustain the land. You can't change the conversation until you have a five-to-10-year outlook for the farm," Bruere says. "If you can't write longer-term leases the conversation won't change."

5. Do the math.

"How are you going to get a farmer to pay for cover crops? It's the landowner's soil that's eroding, along with nutrients. If you believe cover crops will improve yield and soil health over time how do you engage?" Bruere asks.

Say you think cover crops will yield an additional 5 bu. after five years:

- If corn is $3.50 per bushel that's $17.50 in additional revenue per acre per year.
- If the landowner pays for five years of cover crops at $30 per acre per year that's $150 per acre of cover crops invested.
- If the land now produces 5 bu. per acre more, and I go to sell that land and the investor wants a 3% return, that $17.50 in additional revenue means I can sell the farm for $583 more than it otherwise would have. "All for $150 investment. That's great return," Bruere says.

6. Charge only for profitable acres.

"Transparency runs both ways," Bruere says.

7. Put yourself in their shoes.

It's beneficial to understand the other person's perspective in a negotiation. See page 38.

SHOW THE MATH — A CASE STUDY EXAMPLE FOR CONSERVATION

Walking a landlord or a renter through the math of why conservation practices should be adopted and can benefit both parties doesn't have to be complicated, but it does have to start with good information, says Steve Bruere, CEO of Peoples Company in Des Moines, Iowa, which sells and manages farmland for investors.

For easy math, Bruere shares the following example:

10 acres of a 100-acre field are unprofitable because they typically flood

Rent = $300 per acre Inputs = $500 per acre

x 10 acres = $8,000 invested in land that isn't returning a profit

As a renter, you will need to pick up $88 per acre on the remaining 90 acres to make up for the 10 acres that are a total loss.

In reality, the rent on this farm should be $212 per acre for the 90 profitable acres instead of having the farmer subsidize 10 unprofitable acres.

Instead of renting out the 10 unprofitable acres, Bruere suggests the landlord would be better off renting the 90 good acres and working to get the 10 unprofitable acres in a conservation program where they could earn perhaps $225 an acre or investing in an improvement for those acres that would make them profitable.

"So instead of that 10 acres being an $8,000 loser, with a $225 per acre conservation payment of some kind it creates $2,250 of revenue. That's more than a $10,000 swing on the bottom line," Bruere says. "The overall economic picture looks better for the farmer, it looks better for the landowner and the asset, the land, will appreciate at a higher level in the future because you're not subsidizing your bad acres with the good acres."

It doesn't matter who runs the numbers on unprofitable acres — it can be either the landlord or the renter. The important part is to run the math and walk the other side through it with an eye for what makes it work for them and what makes it work for you.

For a more comprehensive analysis of conservation payback, see a white paper by Peoples Company.

"It doesn't do anybody any good to farm acres you can't make money on — there's no winner in that."

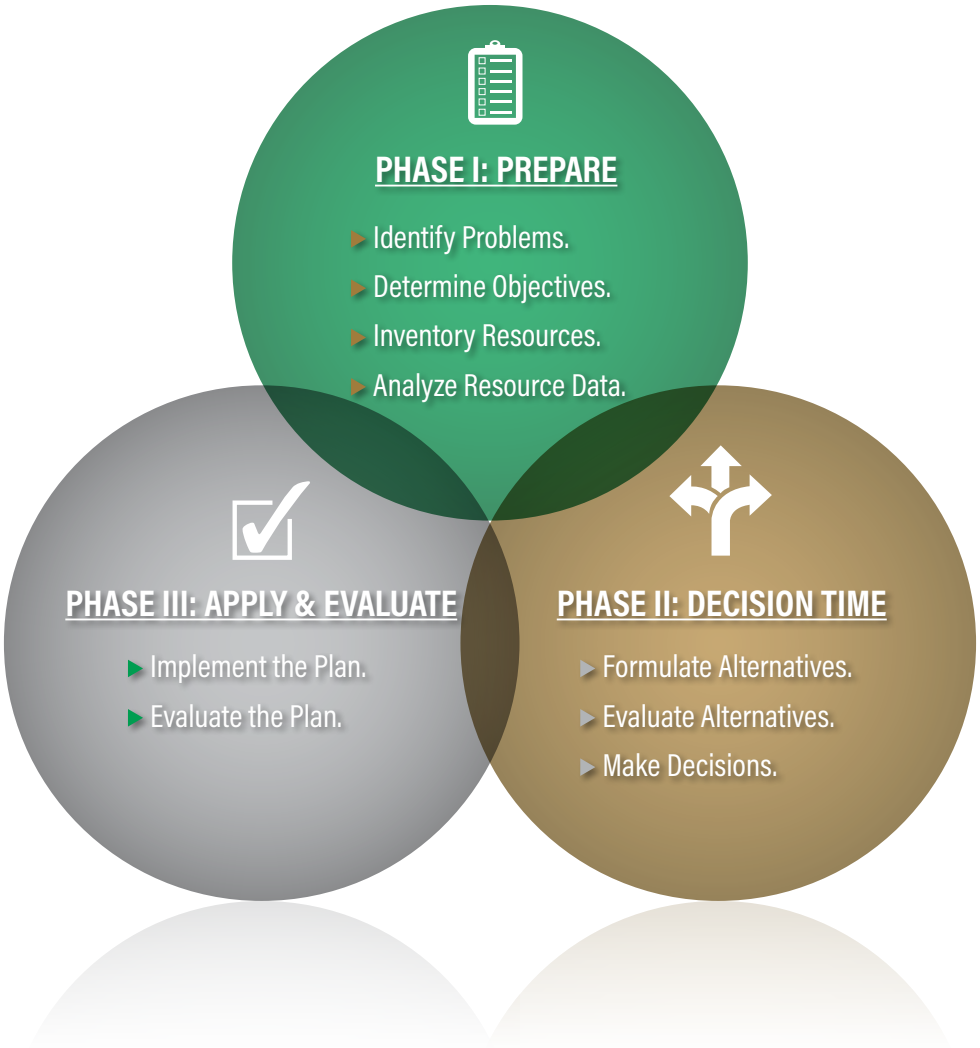
—Steve Bruere, CEO of Peoples Company

PHOTO: MARGY ECKELKAMP

A SUMMARY OF THE PLANNING PROCESS

The conservation planning process can start with any of the first three steps or even step nine. Cycling back to previous steps is often necessary, and some planning activities might overlap.

After working through the questions in this guide that pertain to your operation, you will have a plan in motion, which should better prepare you for decision time. Remember — start small, start somewhere to advance your conservation legacy.



WHO CAN YOU CALL WHEN YOU NEED HELP?

While NRCS is a service prepaid by taxpayer dollars, there are reasons to consider help elsewhere. "I view a Technical Service Provider [TSP] as a backup to NRCS," says Mark Berkland, a conservation consultant, NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider and former NRCS agent. "If NRCS is too busy and a producer needs immediate help, that's when a Technical Service Provider can step in. I have a farm in northern Iowa. If I wasn't a TSP myself, when I needed help, NRCS is where I'd start."

WHY CHOOSE NRCS?

It's free. Your tax dollars pay for it.

- They are knowledgeable, well-trained experts on conservation. They reach out to each other with questions and information.
- They know federal conservation cost-share programs inside and out.
- There are dollars available for cost share on many improvements that can help your operation's bottom line.
- Their sole existence is to help farmers do the best job conserving resources and be a liaison between the farmer, the land and the federal government.

WHY CHOOSE A TECHNICAL SERVICE PROVIDER OR HELP OUTSIDE NRCS?

1. Timeliness.

"Sometimes farmers can't wait for NRCS," says Sarah Flack, a grazing consultant. "With NRCS, the planning and ranking process can take a year or two for the funds to be available. Sometimes farmers can't wait that long — they have things that need to be implemented right now. This is why I work with multiple organizations, one of which is NRCS. We might do part of our plan quickly and then go through the slower process with NRCS for later stages in the project where we might get cost-share assistance that will help the farmer's bottom line."

PHOTO: NRCS/SWCS, LYNN BETTS

2. Skin in the game.

"Sometimes farmers just need to have skin in the game to really feel like the advice they're getting is valuable," says Julie Falcon, a resource conservation consultant and NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider. "When you're paying for it, the person is working on your timeline, for the betterment of your operation, and they can pull in as many resources as needed to get you the best possible solution for your farm."

3. They're working with multiple agencies and sources.

"TSPs know about government and wildlife benefit programs your agronomist might not know about," Falcon says. "They'll know, for instance, Iowa DNR has a program, Pheasants Forever has a program, there's a local watershed initiative or they can get cost assistance from NRCS and Practical Farmers of Iowa if they're trying to implement cover crops."

4. You can choose who you work with.

When you visit your NRCS office, whoever is there is who you get. When working with a TSP, you can choose who you work with and find someone you like. "Many TSPs used to be NRCS agents, and now they're focused on the disciplines they like best and can really dig into those areas," Falcon says.

5. Skill level and attention.

NRCS agents are highly trained. Their job is to identify the practices and systems with the highest conservation priorities and then allocate the earmarked dollars. "There isn't anything I can do that an NRCS agent shouldn't be able to do," Berkland says. "But if you go to NRCS and they can't get to it or it's not going to happen with their workload, ask for a list of TSPs and go from there."

You can search for a TSP by state or specialty using NRCS's online directory.

PHOTO: NRCS/SWCS, LYNN BETTS

IN ADDITION TO TSPS, OTHER SOURCES FOR ASSISTANCE INCLUDE:

- **Trusted retail partners.** "Our approach involves working hand-in-hand with farmers on trust-based relationships and having their best interests at heart," says Gary Farrell, president of Ag Enterprise Supply Inc., in eastern Washington and former chairman of the board of directors of the National Ag Retailers Association. "We call our approach realistic agronomy; we look at the agronomics involved, what it takes to keep landlords happy and how to maintain profitability at the same time."

- **State and watershed programs.** Most often you'll hear about state-specific or watershed specific programs if you are involved in local, county, watershed or state conservation organizations. You might also hear about them through NRCS or FSA personnel, through a TSP, from your state's land-grant university or from a trusted retail partner or other farmers. These programs can often provide additional funding to make conservation improvements.

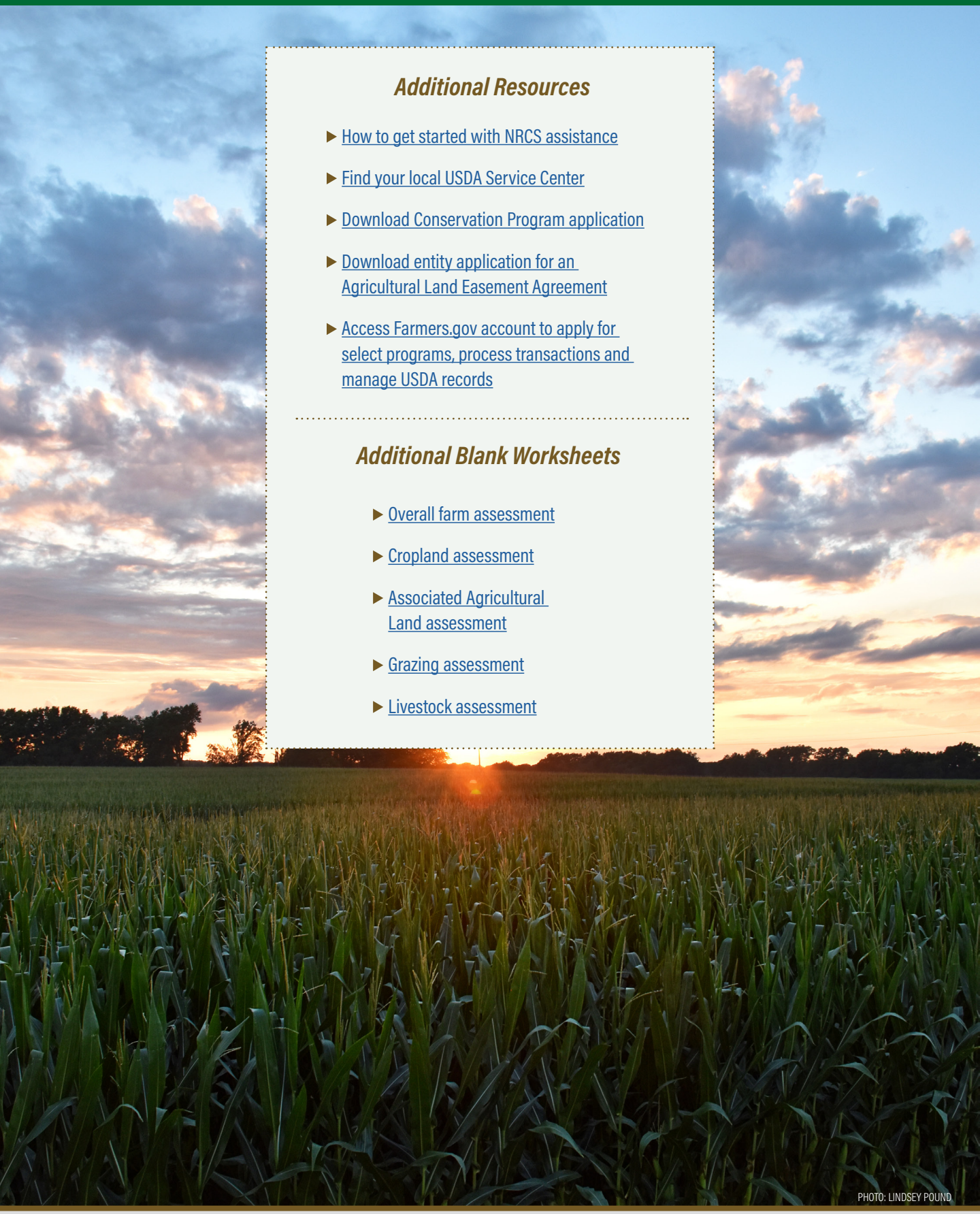
PHOTO: LINDSEY POUND

- **Other farmers.** It's much easier to walk a road that another has already traveled. This can be in the form of neighbors or farmers from far away who you connect with via farm shows, educational conferences or social media. Either way, it can be invaluable to have a trusted adviser who's also been directly in your shoes. "Stay away from the coffee shop talk," Falcon says. "That's where you have the most nay-sayers who aren't that helpful. Find other farmers who are walking the walk and are already doing what you're thinking about trying. That's who you want to connect with. Stay away from the guys who just want to tell you it's not going to work no matter what you do."

It Takes Teamwork Between Private and Public Sectors

Some retailers offer conservation planning services, but some don't. If you go that route, the old adage of "you get what you pay for," can hold true, so be cautious and understand the retailer's motives, warns Julie Falcon, a resource conservation consultant and NRCS-certified Technical Service Provider (TSP).

"TSPs are unbiased. If you hire someone from your local co-op, you have to look at their main business. A co-op has to make their livelihood, and their main source of revenue is selling products." Falcon adds. "I'm not trying to alienate the ag business community, many of them do a great job, but my primary objective when planning is to save the landowner money and make their whole operation better. Farmers just need to be informed."



Additional Resources

- How to get started with NRCS assistance
- Find your local USDA Service Center
- Download Conservation Program application
- Download entity application for an Agricultural Land Easement Agreement
- Access Farmers.gov account to apply for select programs, process transactions and manage USDA records

Additional Blank Worksheets

- Overall farm assessment
- Cropland assessment
- Associated Agricultural Land assessment
- Grazing assessment
- Livestock assessment

PHOTO: LINDSEY POUND

AMERICA'S CONSERVATION AG MOVEMENT

Farmers leading the way on conservation: past, present and future

America's Conservation Ag Movement connects with more than 1 million farmers across our country's most essential value chain. Together with these partners, the Movement helps producers accelerate the on-farm adoption of stewardship practices that ensure more food, fuel, and fiber for Americans today, and healthy soil and clean water and air for future generations. Because conservation agriculture is just good business.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service provides America's farmers and ranchers with financial and technical assistance to voluntarily put conservation on the ground, not only helping the environment, but agricultural operations, too.

www.farmers.gov
www.nrcs.usda.gov

American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust was founded in 1980 to save America's farms and ranches. As leaders in conservation agriculture, we have three priorities: protecting farmland, promoting environmentally sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land.

www.farmland.org

CORTEVA™ agriscience

At Corteva Agriscience, our purpose is to enrich the lives of those who produce and those who consume. We equip farmers with the solutions they need to produce what our food system and global population demands, while conserving resources and sustaining the land.

www.sustainability.corteva.com

DUCKS UNLIMITED

Ducks Unlimited Inc. is the world's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving North America's disappearing waterfowl habitats. Guided by science and dedicated to program efficiency, DU works toward the vision of wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever.

www.ducks.org

NATIONAL CORN GROWERS ASSOCIATION

The National Corn Growers Association represents nearly 40,000 corn farmers nationwide and the interests of more than 300,000 growers who contribute through checkoff programs in their states. Our vision is to sustainably feed and fuel a growing world.

www.ncga.com

pork checkoff

For more than five decades, America's pig farmers have been committed to sustainability and continuous improvement. We are guided by six principles embodied in our We Care commitment: Food Safety, Animal Well-Being, Environment, Public Health, Our People and Community.

www.porkcares.org

Sanderson Farms®
GOOD, HONEST CHICKEN

Sanderson Farms is committed to doing our part to promote a healthier planet. Our obligation to protect our environment by conserving natural resources, recycling resources utilized in our operation and creating renewable resources when possible is at the heart and soul of our farming process.

www.sandersonfarms.com/our-chickens/sustainably-raised/

syngenta

The Syngenta ambition is to help safely feed the world and take care of our planet. Syngenta Sustainable Solutions is working across the value chain to bring meaningful insights to growers, ag retailers, processors and consumer packaged goods companies to advance sustainable agriculture.

www.syngenta-us.com/sustainability/sustainable-solutions.

The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy has worked for years to develop strong, trusting relationships within the ranching community and the beef supply chain. We use our lands to work with and support neighboring ranchers, and to develop and test science-based management practices.

www.nature.org/workinglands

VALENT®

Valent U.S.A. is committed to supporting growers and ag retailers in enhancing the sustainability of their operations by providing proven solutions that can be used in cooperation with sustainable agriculture practices.

www.valent.com/sustainable-agriculture

SIMPAS

SIMPAS™ and SIMPAS-applied Solutions™ (SaS™) make it easy and profitable for farmers to prescriptively apply multiple insecticides, fungicides, nematicides and micronutrients in one simple pass. Available 2021.

www.SIMPAS.com

FARMJOURNAL FOUNDATION

The Farm Journal Foundation is a nonprofit corporation that works with farmers and producers, next generation populations and national-level policymakers to advance the capability and understanding of modern agriculture's leadership role in feeding the world.

www.farmjournalfoundation.org

TRUST IN FOOD
A FARM JOURNAL INITIATIVE

Trust In Food empowers farmers to catalyze economic, environmental and social improvements by explaining the why, how and what next of adopting on-farm conservation and sustainability practices.

www.trustinfood.com

www.agweb.com/acam