



Together, landowners and farmers can adopt conservation practices that improve their bottom lines and ensure a sustainable food system for a growing world. © Shutterstock/Fotokostic

The average landowner-farmer relationship has been in place 16 years. Most of these partnerships involve family, friends and years of earned trust. However, most land-lease agreements are only year-to-year and many are handshake agreements without a formal written contract.

This guide is designed to help farmers and landowners work together to achieve the sustainable benefits of conservation farming. Together, you'll build on that foundation of existing trust to identify common goals that add value to the land and the environment. Developing and using a longer-term lease will add the security both of you need to adopt a multi-year conservation plan.

Growing soil health takes time. Short-term and sustainable rewards make it worthwhile.

The long-term benefits of soil health include higher rates of productivity and profitability. But some benefits can be seen almost immediately. Those benefits include the security of longer-term lease agreements and the potential for sharing the costs and rewards of conservation practices.

Additional long-term benefits to farmers include the opportunity to grow crops in soils that are increasingly healthy and can lead to lower levels of inputs.

Landowners can also enjoy the near-term advantages of improved soil health. Over the long term, a focus on soil health will ensure farmland remains viable and valuable for future generations while responding to growing public demand for cleaner and greener on-farm stewardship. This forward-thinking approach can help build trust among farmers, landowners and consumers.

Beyond the farm gate, communities across the U.S. benefit from the soil health decisions of farmers and landowners. Positive outcomes of stewardship decisions include improved water quality, filtration and storage, as well as richer biodiversity. Soil health practices can even play a role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions through carbon sequestration.



Landowners and farmers can work with facilitators such as:

- Lenders
- Cooperative Extension Specialists
- Farm Managers
- Attorneys



Conservation Ag Leads to Economic Returns

A growing body of research indicates that investing in conservation agriculture can provide positive economic returns. The following sources can help farmers and landowners set goals and benchmarks, measure soil health investments, and maximize your return on investment:

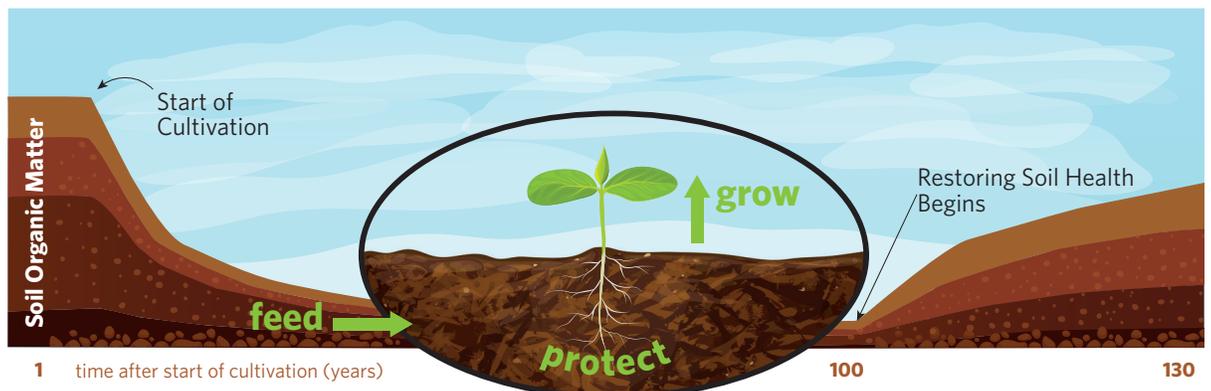
- Agronomists with conservation ag experience
- Cooperative Extension soil health specialists
- NRCS agents
- Other conservation-minded farmers



Conservation practices can help improve profitability and productivity. © Christine Griffiths/TNC

Make a Plan to Co-Invest in Soil Health

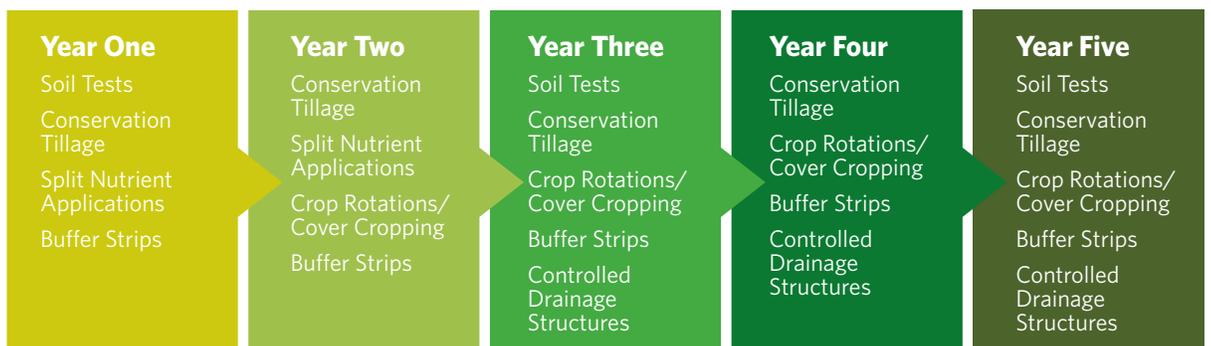
It doesn't take many seasons to make a significant improvement in soil health. Within four years, cover crops can reduce nutrient runoff, increase soil biological activity, and potentially increase soil organic matter concentrations. Farmers that use no-till have the potential to increase surface soil carbon within 5 years, and in up to 10 years, they can improve the soil structure and decrease nutrient runoff and erosion. Changes now can keep your land productive for the next generation of farm operators.



Long-held farming practices have inadvertently degraded soil health. But once conservation practices are adopted and maintained, soil health can dramatically improve within 10 years and be fully restored and delivering benefits at 30 years. © TNC

Healthy soils help break down nutrients in a way that makes it easier for crops to use them. They also protect against plant disease and pest damage while stimulating plant growth. What powers this process? The natural beneficial relationships of microbes and other species that thrive in healthy soils.

The framework below demonstrates how you and your landowner can develop a long-term conservation plan. All farms are unique, so it's best to work with local experts to create a conservation system that best supports the land, the farm business and the landowner.





Landowners and farmers can work together to develop a long-term conservation plan to improve their profitability, enhance their productivity and safeguard their greatest co-investment—the farmland. © iStock.com/shotbydave

Discussions About Multi-Year Leases and Co-Investment Can Lead to Greater Conservation Agriculture Success

Discussing conservation agriculture opportunities with your landowner can yield a basic yet powerful document: a longer-term (multi-year) written lease.

As you've seen, conservation isn't an overnight decision. Instead, it takes years of planning, adopting and measuring to fine-tune the system that fits your farm business and your landowner's land.

Once you are both on the same page about the value of these soil health investments, asking for a multi-year lease agreement can be an excellent next step. When developing that agreement, be sure to identify specific ways you might work together to extend your conservation agriculture investments to meet both your objectives as a farm business and those of your landowner.

Co-Investing in Conservation Agriculture Can Yield Long-Lasting Economic, Social and Environmental Rewards

- Over 90 percent of landowners trust their farmer to make good conservation decisions.
- Eighty-four percent of landowners indicate that maintaining soil health is a very important quality for a farm operator.

Research also shows that landowners give high rankings to the following farm operator attributes: avoiding erosion, maintaining soil productivity and preventing waterway contamination. That means you most likely already share common ground with your landowner about the value of conservation agriculture.

Longer-Term Leases and Joint Conservation Investments Can Help Your Land and Your Farm Business

Multi-year lease agreements

- One of the best reasons to initiate a conservation conversation is the opportunity to gain longer-term lease security.
- Establish key goals and time horizons needed to measure success
- Discuss the need for multi-year time commitments
- Propose 3-to-5-year formalized land-lease agreements

Cost-sharing lease addendums

- The practice of cost sharing or rent reduction lease addendums with a co-investment strategy in conservation agriculture is gaining popularity.
- Discuss cover crops as a good starting point for building soil health
- Propose a 50-50 cost-sharing as a common cover crop co-commitment program
- Talk about co-commitments to build berms or other edge of field or drainage management practices



Conservation Collaborations Co-Investing in Conservation Agriculture



Creates Farmer Benefits

- Fosters communication and alignment of farm management goals
- Encourages security of longer-term lease agreements
- Improves profitability through lower-maintenance soils and reduced inputs
- Maintains higher rates of sustainable productivity
- Strengthens your reputation and alignment with the public's expectations for sustainable agriculture



Creates Farmland Benefits

- Builds better soil health
- Improves filtration and nutrient storage
- Provides richer biodiversity and natural disease resistance
- Reduces greenhouse gas emissions



Creates Landowner Benefits

- Stewardship language can be incorporated into trust and corporation establishment agreements
- Maintains higher rates of sustainable productivity and profitability
- Economic incentives offered through USDA and state government programs
- Adds value to the land for future generations
- Strengthens your reputation and alignment with the public's expectations for sustainable agriculture

The benefits are clear. The facts are strong.

Adapting conservation agriculture practices that build soil health and protect waterways is a win-win worth talking about. Get a conservation conversation going. It might just lead to greater lease security that comes from working together to invest in conservation agriculture in a way that benefits both of you.