



As stewards of vast swaths of land, farmers and landowners are important allies in conservation. © Shutterstock/Zoran Zeremski

In the Midwest, 62 percent of all farmland is rented. For generations, successful farm operations on rented ground have run on trust and handshakes. Every year across the region, landowners entrust their land to farmers who steward its health and productivity.

This trust remains one of every farm's greatest untapped resources. What if there were a way to unleash this trust and empower a new level of productivity and security for you and your landowner?

There is a way. And it starts with a conversation.

Unleash Your Farmland's Potential

Meaningful conversations about conservation agriculture practices can lead to a more productive environment for growing your crops, your business and your professional relationships. Building soil health can lead to...

Empowered Farms

When farmers and landowners partner on conservation, everyone wins, and nature thrives. Operating costs can drop, profits can rise, and security can grow.

Enhanced Incentives

Landowners can access tax, government cost-share, and other incentives by partnering with farmers on conservation activities.

Increased Security

Land can remain productive and protected for generations to come when landowners commit to empowering farmers to steward it through co-investment in conservation activities.

Healthier Soil

Collaboration between farmers and landowners can improve soil health, microbial growth and residual nutrient recycling in the soil.

Improved Resilience

Farming operations are better equipped to handle extreme weather and market disruptions when farmers and landowners jointly commit to conservation practices.





Start Your Conversation at the Ground Level

Research shows the average landowner age in the Midwest is about 70 years old. About half have operated a farm. The other half either have never farmed or have helped out on a family farm. Advances in agronomy, soil science and farming technology mean our understanding of soil health today is much greater than when many landowners actively farmed. Many landowners might be unaware of the role conservation practices play on a healthy farm. They might not realize the time and financial investments required to achieve those benefits. This can change with a conversation.

In a recent survey, 80 percent of landowners identified the farmers they rent to as a critical source of conservation information. The average farmer-landowner rental relationship is about 16 years old and is rooted in trust. Farmers and landowners can build on this trust by collaborating to improve soil health.

The Basics of Conservation Farming

Landowners and farmers can explore the benefits of adopting these practices as a starting place for collaboration.

Conservation Tillage

Reducing tillage can reduce topsoil loss and erosion, keeping valuable nutrients and microbes on the farm. It can take decades to build healthy soil and it only takes one extreme weather event to carry it all away. Although no-till is effective in many areas, strip-till can be superior for wetter, colder regions.

Cover Crops

Cover crops can provide erosion control; improve soil structure, moisture and nutrient content; increase beneficial soil microbes; suppress weeds; provide habitat for beneficial predatory insects, pollinators and other wildlife; and become forage for livestock. Cover crops also add nitrogen to the soil and make more nutrients available, reducing fertilizer application needs over time.

Advanced Nutrient Management

Nitrogen stabilizers and split application of nitrogen with precision technology can help conserve nutrients and reduce runoff. Yield monitoring, soil sampling, tissue sampling and nutrient modeling can maximize the efficiency of inputs while enhancing long-term productivity and profitability of fields.

Edge of Field Practices

Terracing sloped land, adding buffer zones or prairie strips, constructing wetlands and installing bioreactors can all prevent erosion and nutrient loss from fields. These constructed conservation methods keep valuable topsoil and nutrients in the field and prevent them from impacting local waterways.



To jump start a conversation, start with these points:

Potential benefits to the land:

- Reduced erosion and soil loss
- Improved nutrient retention and fertility
- Enhanced long-term productivity, farmability and viability
- Improved environmental footprint, healthier local ecosystem

Potential benefits to the farmer:

- Healthier, more resilient crop production
- Reduced input, fuel and labor costs
- Greater farm business security and opportunity

Potential benefits to the landowner:

- Assurance that they are protecting their legacy, leaving a healthy reputation of land stewardship for the next generation
- Increased peace of mind around the security of the property's future productivity and value
- Improved access to financial incentive programs and tax benefits



By adopting practices like planting winter cover crops and reducing—or eliminating—tillage practices, farmers and landowners can significantly improve productivity, reduce soil erosion, improve water quality and increase carbon storage. © Chris Lee, USDA-NRCS

Buld Alignment Around the Basics

Conservation practices can have a powerful and positive effect on the land, local ecosystems and everyone who supports a farm.

But these effects can only be realized through sustained, consistent and comprehensive adoption—all made possible by collaboration and commitment between farmers and landowners. Trusted advisers such as a crop consultants, USDA-NRCS agents, Cooperative Extension staff, or a retail agronomist can help provide more information and local context. They can also help facilitate the discussion.

Once aligned around the benefits of building soil health, farmers and landowners can work together to develop a plan that is mutually beneficial.

Conversations Focused on the Future

The benefits of implementing conservation practices to build soil health can best be achieved through long-term, consistent investment.

The many benefits of conservation practices are within reach by making measurable changes to soil healthy through consistent, year-after-year implementation. Unfortunately, year-to-year lease agreements often make long-term access to the land uncertain—and without that, why should a farmer invest in something that requires long-term consistency?

Compounding this issue is the reality that some conservation practices might require upfront and maintenance costs which many farmers are unable to meet alone. This creates a barrier that farmers are unable to overcome—especially in light of volatile and low commodity prices.

But landowners can help. They can play a critical role by reducing or removing these challenges and empowering farmers to adopt conservation activities on their land. It starts with a conversation about multi-year leases and cost-sharing agreements.





Guide Your Conversation Beyond Barriers

Challenge: You would like to learn more about implementing conservation agriculture practices.

Solutions:

- Engage your trusted adviser to explain agronomic concepts and the benefits of conservation agriculture practices.
- Use a small test plot on the farm (or find a neighbor who is implementing the practice) to help demonstrate practices first-hand.
- Study the data and walk through the practice and expected benefits

Challenge: Landowners and farmers are reluctant to rock the boat during uncertain times. If your professional relationship has been in place for years, why risk it by introducing change?

Solutions:

- Work with trusted advisers (crop consultants, extension agent, NRCS staff, etc.) to understand the benefits and risks of the soil health practices you'd like to explore. These experts can put your mind at ease, reduce your uncertainty and help you plan for the conversation.
- Use data points, pictures and supplemental materials to better understand and communicate the conservation opportunities and benefits.'

Challenge: Landowners are concerned it will take a long time to see returns and measurable value from a conservation partnership.

Solutions:

- Work with a trusted adviser to understand the costs and farming seasons you will need to invest. Then demonstrate visually that some results will be immediate, others will take only a few years and still others will be achieved after many seasons.
- Explain the many benefits of conservation practices. Point out those outcomes can only be achieved by consistent implementation over extended periods of time.
- Understand and position the role of conservation practices to build farmland value through a long-term investment that protects, improves and secures its productivity for decades and generations to come.

Benefits of Multi-year Leases and Co-investment

Multi-year lease agreements:

- Unlock guaranteed access to the land, enabling farmers to adopt and steward practices consistently over time
- Provide security and peace of mind for landowners and farmers alike during uncertain market conditions and unexpected weather swings
- Ensure long-term stewardship of land and prevent potentially disruptive planting seasons

Cost-sharing lease addendums:

- Distribute cost increases for conservation practices across farmers and landowners, reducing barriers to practice implementation
- Provide potential tax benefits for landowners
- Demonstrate a commitment to protecting the environment and building soil health, which can put you on stronger footing with lenders you may be asking to approve future land-financing requests



Conservation Conversations Can Lead to Benefits for Everyone

Everyone wins and nature thrives, when farmers and landowners collaborate on conservation over the long-term.

The immense and full benefits of soil health practices can only be achieved when farmers and landowners work together.



The Farmer

- Produces crops in a more resilient environment
- Experiences potential input, fuel and labor cost savings
- Achieves greater business security and opportunity



The Landowner

- Attains greater peace of mind because of investments in farmland's future productivity and value
- Accesses potential financial incentive programs and tax benefits
- Leaves a legacy and a reputation of land stewardship for the next generation



The Land

- Protected from erosion and soil loss
- Nurtured through improved nutrient retention and fertility
- Strengthened long-term productivity and viability
- Improved environmental footprint and healthier local ecosystem



The Landowner-Farmer Relationship

- Improved communication channels
- Strengthened partnership foundation
- Enhanced trust

The Power to Transform Your Future

An estimated 41 percent of all U.S. farmland is rented. That percentage ranks much higher in the Midwest where 62 percent—and in some counties 80 percent—of all farmland is rented. Together, farmers and landowners have the power to transform millions of acres of American farmland when you develop a long-term business relationship with your landowners that prioritizes conservation agriculture.

Working together, farmers and landowners can reap benefits while building the prosperity and productivity of the nation's farmland for generations to come. Use this resource guide to help prepare for your discussion and bring it along to help guide the conversation.

Why wait? Start building soil health today.