

Advancing Regenerative Agriculture Through Farm Advisors

A COLLABORATIVE ROADMAP FOR ACTION

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Wisconsin farmer working to improve soil health © Patrick Flood

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Committed Collaboration

A coordinated, industry-wide commitment is essential to fully harness the potential of private-sector farmer advisors to drive the adoption of regenerative agriculture at a meaningful scale. To advance this effort, The Nature Conservancy convened more than two dozen thought leaders representing conservation organizations, agribusinesses, professional associations, farmer and commodity groups, supply-chain actors, and technical experts. Drawing on both on-the-ground experience and system-level insight, the partners developed a shared set of recommendations that identify priority areas of investment and workstreams needed to accelerate meaningful progress.

Over eight months, the partners engaged through a series of virtual meetings and an in-person workshop to build common understanding, identify priority barriers and align on where collaborative action and coordinated funding could have the greatest impact. Through an iterative process of discussion, synthesis, and advisory-group input, the coalition refined these efforts into a cohesive framework and set of recommendations. This Roadmap reflects a shared commitment to learning together, coordinating investments, and working across traditional boundaries to deliver durable environmental, economic, and production benefits for farmers, advisors, and communities.

Call to Action

This Roadmap is a call to action for public and private funders and investors, supply chain partners, agency decisionmakers, ag retail leaders, conservation organizations, and others engaged in the industry. Working collaboratively, these stakeholders can strengthen the role of trusted farm advisors and accelerate the adoption of regenerative agriculture at the pace and scale needed to deliver meaningful progress towards shared goals. This Roadmap provides a clear framework for aligning efforts across the public and private sectors, guiding investment, and coordinating action to successfully implement more ambitious and impactful projects.

Building on this shared understanding of how advisors can most effectively enable change, and which research, resources, and funding mechanisms they need to do so, will lead to more strategic investment, stronger partnerships, and ultimately more efficient delivery of technical assistance to farmers.

As you, the reader, engage with the Roadmap and explore the opportunities it identifies, we invite you to consider how your own role, resources, and influence can contribute to the shared vision. Together, we can build momentum toward regenerative systems that benefit farmers, communities, the agricultural industry—and nature.

Introduction

Farmers across North America are uniquely positioned to address many important and immediate environmental and production challenges. Research shows regenerative agriculture systems can yield significant benefits to the environment, including improved soil health, water quality, biodiversity, and climate change mitigation, while strengthening farm productivity and resilience, and delivering healthy food to consumers.

While considerable progress has been made towards improving environmental outcomes in agricultural landscapes, the pace of regenerative practice adoption remains insufficient to position agriculture as a significant contributor to solving our most pressing challenges. Scaling regenerative agriculture faces an array of interconnected systemic and societal barriers, including economic and market barriers, policy challenges, cultural and educational barriers, as well as limitations stemming from data and verification requirements and supply chain infrastructure (Coon et al. 2025). While this Roadmap focuses on overcoming important barriers related to provisioning technical assistance to farmers from trusted advisors, the challenges and interventions proposed recognize and tie into this broader system context.

The Role of Farmer Advisors in Influencing Regenerative Agriculture

A shift to a regenerative agriculture system requires that all stakeholders, not just farmers, work together to achieve this transformation. Producers in the United States rely heavily on agronomic inputs, services, and advice from ag retailers (including cooperatives and privately held companies of all sizes), independent agronomists, lenders, and farmer and industry groups. Collectively, these “farmer advisors” in the private sector are highly influential in farm management decisions (Purdue University, Large Commercial Producer Survey) and their reach is extensive, influencing thousands of farmers and millions of acres across North America (see *The Reach of the CCA Program*, pg. 4).

Farmer advisors are known to be among the most trusted sources of agronomic information for producers (Purdue University, Large Commercial Producer Survey; Houser et al. 2019); however, farmers have historically not relied on them for information about regenerative agriculture practices and opportunities (CTIC 2023). This gap suggests unrealized potential for these trusted advisors to play a stronger role in advancing conservation.

Therefore, to achieve the pace and scale of adoption needed, it is crucial to support and enhance the role private sector farmer advisors play in promoting and enabling successful implementation of regenerative practices among their farmer customers.

Regenerative Agriculture

The term *regenerative agriculture* describes farming and livestock systems that enhance both environmental and production outcomes by rebuilding soil, improving biodiversity, and restoring ecosystem function on working lands. In this report, it refers to systems and practices focused on optimizing nutrient management and improving soil health. Since the goals of the Roadmap focus on effective delivery of technical assistance through trusted farmer advisors, a strict definition of regenerative agriculture is less important than the mechanisms by which these goals can be achieved. Therefore, *regenerative agriculture* in the context of this report is interchangeable with terms like *sustainable* or *conservation agriculture*, *soil health* or *best management practices*, and *precision agriculture*.

The Reach of the CCA Program

The International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program, administered by the American Society of Agronomy, is the largest agronomy-focused certification program in North America with over 12,000 certified individuals. Roughly 85% of CCAs work within ag retail, input manufacturing, or other agribusinesses. They spend the majority of their time directly supporting farmers, developing trusted business relationships and guiding producers to make informed agronomic decisions.

Together, CCAs are highly influential advisors on roughly two-thirds of U.S. cropland acres, with 28% of CCAs advising on more than 40,000 acres each, and the next 23% influencing at least 20,000 acres. Most CCAs work with more than 25 farm clients, and one quarter support 70 or more farmers.

As trusted agronomy experts and business partners, CCAs can be highly influential in farmers' decisions to adopt regenerative practices. Currently, two specialty certifications within the CCA designation are available to further build knowledge and reputation for advising on conservation practices: the Sustainability Specialty (SSp), and the 4R Nutrient Management Specialty (4R NMS).

Source: 2020 ICCA Certificant Survey Report

The Business Opportunity for Advisors

Several intersecting conditions currently position agribusinesses and independent crop advisors to develop innovative operating models that align with the goals of regenerative agriculture, create new revenue opportunities, and equip their farm customers to be resilient and profitable:

- **Increasing interest and demand for regenerative agriculture** is driving public and private investment in these systems, and in some cases spurring supply chain sourcing requirements for regeneratively produced products (Klauser et al 2025).
- **Unprecedented data availability** across the value chain is unlocking new opportunities for farm modeling and decision making, monitoring and verifying regenerative practices and outcomes, and accelerating learning across landscapes (Jones et al. 2024).
- **Narrowing margins on input sales** due to a combination of rising costs, market volatility, consolidation of input manufacturers and retailers, and new competition, are shifting attention to emerging products and diversification of revenue streams for agribusinesses (DTN 2025).
- **A changing technical assistance landscape** is putting increased emphasis on public-private partnerships and highlighting the need for technical assistance delivered through the private sector.
- **The complexity of regenerative agriculture systems** requires that new knowledge, guidance, and resources are made available to farmers, which generates opportunities for agronomists to continue to serve in the trusted advisor role.

Some pioneering agribusinesses are already responding to these emerging opportunities by testing new products and service models that connect their customers to advice, resources, and opportunities in regenerative agriculture (Trust in Food 2020, Gray et al. 2021). These models include, but are not limited to:

- Staffing “conservation agronomists” who specialize in providing technical assistance to growers on soil health and precision ag practices—including certified Technical Service Provider (TSP) services—support in accessing financial incentive programs, data insights and stewardship, and aggregating and reporting environmental outcomes, among other roles.

Trusted farm advisors have significant but underrealized potential to advance adoption of regenerative practices.



Farmers and advisors in Minnesota farm field © Fauna Creative

- Offering insights, sourcing, and custom application of soil health and nutrient management best practices to farm customers.
- Promoting and implementing tools for data stewardship and mobility, which streamline farmers' access to public and private incentive programs and market opportunities. Open access, precompetitive, and proprietary data stewardship platforms and tools all exist.

To date, efforts by individuals, companies, partnerships, and funders have demonstrated the strong potential for farmer advisors to play an active and influential role in advancing regenerative agriculture—and to benefit from it financially and reputationally. Agribusinesses that align with the growing demand for sustainability and offer services to support customers in their transition can potentially gain a significant competitive advantage. Innovative farmer support services can help advisors differentiate themselves in a crowded market and position them as trusted, forward-thinking partners rather than primarily input suppliers. By focusing on profitability and resiliency through regenerative practices, businesses can also develop new revenue streams from consulting, application, monitoring, and reporting services (Trust in Food 2020). This approach drives customer acquisition, retention, and loyalty; builds resiliency into business portfolios; and expands market share as producers seek trusted advisors for increasingly complex operational support. For example, one ag retail partner shared that conservation-focused offerings—such as cover crop application—are the only agronomy services experiencing growth, and that half of farmers enrolling in these services are new customers.

Despite promising opportunities to incorporate these new services and revenue streams, research suggests most individual advisors and agribusinesses still tend to follow the lead of farmers when engaging in regenerative agriculture and are often reluctant to be the drivers of demand (Gray et al. 2021). Significant barriers to more active engagement are described in the results section of this report. To fully unlock the potential of farm advisors to scale regenerative practice adoption, further coordinated

What are Ag Retailers?

Ag retailers are businesses that supply farmers and ranchers with seed, nutrients, crop protection products, feed, equipment, and technology. They often offer consultation such as crop scouting, soil testing, field mapping, nutrient management plan development, as well as custom planting and application.

investment is needed to test new models, support transitions, equip farmer advisors with the skills, capacity, and confidence to become key agents of change in this transformation, and ultimately derisk driving demand for regenerative agriculture.

Purpose and Scope of the Roadmap

This Roadmap aims to develop a shared vision for stakeholders across the agriculture industry to more effectively support and grow the role of trusted farm advisors in scaling regenerative agriculture. Specifically, the report intends to:

- **Establish a framework** for how to accelerate regenerative agriculture practice adoption through private-sector farmer advisors and agribusinesses.
- **Develop specific calls to action** for ag retailers, agronomists, investors (public & private), policy makers, and other stakeholders to engage constructively and collaboratively in this topic.
- **Better coordinate, target, and capitalize** federal, state, foundational, corporate, and philanthropic investment in regenerative agriculture to achieve strong return on investment and accelerate progress towards shared goals.

By engaging thought leaders from diverse organizations and sectors with deep experience in this topic, the project’s coalition-building and road-mapping process has already fostered shared learning and new opportunities for collaboration—and will continue to strengthen coordination among partners.

The central scope of the Roadmap centers on enhancing the role of private sector farmer advisors and agribusinesses in driving regenerative agriculture. This sector is characterized by unique challenges and opportunities related to the need to primarily consider economic risks and outcomes in decision making. Moreover, private sector farmer advisors have historically represented a relatively untapped and understudied pathway for conservation technical assistance delivery. More specifically, the priority recommendations primarily focus on evolving the role and opportunity for advisors and businesses who supply inputs (i.e., fertilizer, crop protection, seeds) and agronomic guidance to commodity row crop producers.

However, many of the recommendations and principles highlighted throughout the report apply more broadly to other groups of technical assistance providers. Outreach and conservation professionals including staff from federal and state agencies, soil and water conservation districts, university extension, and conservation NGOs continue to play a crucial role in delivering trusted and sound technical assistance. Other influential advisors in the private sector—bankers and lenders, farmland managers, genetic advisors, veterinarians, crop insurance agents, to name a few—are also essential to align on practices, goals, and strategies for scaling regeneration agriculture adoption. These diverse groups of trusted advisors will see their impact strengthened by investment and implementation of many of the recommendations set forth in this report.

While the Roadmap emphasizes technical assistance and the role of farm advisors in enabling practice adoption, these barriers and interventions represent only one component of the broader challenges associated with scaling regenerative agriculture. Meaningful progress will require parallel efforts to address policy constraints, strengthen farmer and consumer market signals, deepen understanding of the benefits and tradeoffs of regenerative practices, leverage data and emerging technologies to generate new insights for all stakeholders, among other areas of focus. These interconnected pillars of work represent essential complements to advisor-centered strategies and must advance in tandem.

The Roadmap Development Process and the Role of Partners

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) convened a diverse coalition of partners representing interests and perspectives across the industry to collaboratively develop a set of recommendations to support the role of farmer advisors in advancing regenerative agriculture in North America.

More than two dozen Roadmap partners were engaged in the development process, representing senior leaders and on-the-ground staff from conservation NGOs; commodity, farmer and industry groups; agricultural input manufacturing, retail, and technology companies; professional associations; and supply chain actors. These partners represent a wide range of geographies, levels of work (local, state, national), agricultural systems (primarily field crops and dairy), and most importantly, perspectives and experiences related to roles of farmer advisors.

Over eight months, a core development team met in a series of virtual meetings, and in person for a two-day workshop to share and align priority recommendations (Figure 1). Specifically, this team worked to:

- Build common understanding of the current and potential roles of farmer advisors in advancing regenerative agriculture and determine what is in or out of scope for the Roadmap effort.
- Identify and prioritize major barriers to farmer advisors fully stepping into a more integral role in driving regenerative agriculture. Barriers were prioritized based on the potential impact if that barrier were addressed, and the feasibility of addressing that barrier in the current system context (Figure 2).
- Develop a priority list of recommendations and specific project needs with high potential to help overcome the identified barriers.
- Refine recommendations and develop communication strategies and next steps for implementing the results of the Roadmap.

Once a draft list of Recommendations was synthesized from this process, a larger advisory group representing additional perspectives from the industry was invited to provide feedback in writing and in two virtual input sessions. All individuals and groups contributing to the Roadmap effort were encouraged to “sign on” to the resulting document, indicating their alignment with the priority recommendations set forth (see list of partners on pg. 2).

Figure 1. The Roadmap Design and Implementation Process



Figure 2. The Roadmap partners prioritized major barriers based on the potential impact each would have if fully addressed, and the feasibility of developing solutions to each within the current system context.



How Can the Roadmap Support My Efforts?



Downstream Food and Agriculture Companies may identify new pathways for delivering programs to farmers that align with their greenhouse gas (GHG), water, biodiversity, or other sustainability or sourcing goals. For example, the Roadmap can point to specific ways to partner with ag retailers on soil health services, data capture, or practice verification that may enable more credible or efficient measurement of environmental outcomes while reducing the burden on growers.



Philanthropic Funders can build a clearer understanding of how private sector advisors and agribusinesses can scale regenerative agriculture, and where targeted investments can unlock this potential. The Roadmap can help funders identify specific mechanisms—such as supporting workforce development, shared data infrastructure, or de-risking service-based business models—where philanthropic capital can synergize large-scale, coordinated efforts.



Ag Retailers and other Agribusinesses can identify key investment areas to prioritize in building service offerings that are likely to be financially viable in a tight-margin environment. The Roadmap is also designed to be used as a shared base of evidence when applying for transitional funding to launch new models.



Policymakers and Agency Decisionmakers can gain insight into innovative mechanisms for increasing regenerative agriculture adoption leveraging the private sector. The Roadmap can inform efforts to streamline and coordinate public-private partnerships—such as aligning costshare programs, technical assistance, or data requirements with retailer-led delivery models—to speed progress toward shared conservation, climate, and water quality goals.



Farmers can gain new insights into the ways leading ag retailers and agronomists are working in partnership with innovative producers, as well as the services their own team of advisors might be able to provide them. They may also wish to help drive increased demand for more advisors to provide the guidance and services needed to bring resilience and new revenue opportunities to their operations.

This list is not exhaustive. Other stakeholders in the food and ag industry will benefit from gaining deeper understanding of the role farmer advisors can play in scaling regenerative agriculture and may identify new opportunities to engage with this sector, and connections to be made to their own goals and areas of influence.

Priority Challenges and Strategies to Support Farmer Advisors in Scaling Regenerative Agriculture

A Growing Body of Research and Practice

As the convening partner for this Roadmap, TNC has worked to raise awareness of and support the critical role of trusted advisors in driving regenerative agriculture for more than a decade, as a central part of a broader agriculture portfolio. TNC has led or supported well over 100 projects engaging ag retailers other private-sector advisors, generating insights into what helps advisors successfully support farmers, as well as identifying persistent barriers and areas where additional learning is needed.

In parallel, TNC and many coalition partners have conducted surveys, research, case studies, and convened workshops (i.e., Making Retail Conservation Real) to build a clearer understanding of farmer and advisor decision-making, business model constraints, and emerging opportunities to better align economic and environmental outcomes.

As this topic has evolved, coalition partners recognized the need to align their learnings and shared priorities. This Roadmap brings together diverse perspectives—grounded in research and on-the-ground experience—to provide new evidence and clarity on where collaborative action can have the greatest impact on shared agricultural and environmental goals.

Overview of Barriers

Through the Roadmap process, the partners identified four high-level barriers that must be addressed for farmer advisors to engage more broadly and effectively in scaling regenerative agriculture. Each of these barriers were deemed to be high impact and feasible to address within the current system context. These four barriers formed the foundation for developing the proposed solutions. The results draw on the collective experience and insights of the Roadmap partners, synthesized through a series of workshop sessions. While statements are often indirectly informed by research, they are not necessarily based on direct analysis of published literature.

Barrier: Unclear Value Proposition or Return on Investment (ROI) for Businesses

Agribusinesses such as ag retailers, cooperatives, seed companies, input manufacturers, equipment dealers, financial service providers, and independent agronomists operate as commercial enterprises. As such, their management decisions are primarily driven by considerations of profitability, return on investment, market share, and risk (Gray et al. 2021). For a business to substantially shift how it operates or to adopt a new revenue stream, the decision needs to be economically rational. Ag retail businesses in particular, which typically generate revenue from the margin on selling agricultural inputs, are unlikely to shift to a model that is more focused on selling services and advice oriented toward regenerative agriculture principles, unless that model can compete in profitability.

To date, the complexity and uncertain economic returns associated with transitioning current business models has dissuaded significant investment by those businesses in providing regen ag oriented services and advice. There has been insufficient data to demonstrate profitability of conservation revenue streams in specific contexts and current operating conditions, which can vary widely across

agribusinesses. The investment required to establish new service offerings can be substantial, and therefore risky, especially when new infrastructure, equipment, staff capacity, and data capabilities are needed. Moreover, regenerative agriculture, which focuses on optimizing inputs and harnessing biological nutrition and ecosystem processes, can be at odds with profit models based in volume of sales. Lastly, expanding, shifting, or diversifying a business structure is often highly complex when new profit centers don't naturally integrate into the current operating model and practices. As one example of these interrelated challenges, an ag retailer with a profitable fertilizer and broadcast application offering may have limited incentive to add advanced strip till services, given the required investments in staff capacity and equipment and relatively modest returns.

Barrier: Insufficient Expertise and Capacity Needed to Deliver Regen Ag Oriented Services

To effectively deliver regenerative agriculture guidance, services, and products to farm customers, farmer advisors must be knowledgeable and confident in a related but unique set of competencies from those required by traditional agronomists in sales or consulting roles. Conservation is an increasing component of many agronomists' role, evidenced by the prevalence of job descriptions with required proficiencies in sustainability or precision management, significant investment in sustainability by professional associations and leading businesses (e.g., CCA Sustainability and 4R NMS Specialty Certification), and survey data (e.g., 2020 CCA Survey). However, most of the current workforce requires access to new training opportunities and resources to support this evolution. Moreover, like much of the agriculture industry, businesses who provide inputs and services are often strained for staff capacity. It is difficult to add to current staff's already high workload, and it is expensive to hire new dedicated positions focused on regenerative agriculture. The seasonal nature of required labor adds to the complexity of hiring additional staff to fill gaps in capacity and expertise.

Barrier: Insufficient Awareness of the Role and Impact of Farmer Advisors

The role of private-sector farmer advisors in promoting and enabling adoption of regenerative agriculture practices is still emerging and not yet fully recognized, understood, or leveraged by many funders, policymakers, and other influential stakeholders. There can also be concerns related to private benefit when philanthropic or public funding flows to for-profit businesses. In addition, advisors and company leadership themselves may not have a full understanding of their potential role in regenerative agriculture or the opportunities it presents to them and their farm customers. Lastly, farmers currently often source agronomic and conservation guidance from separate advisors, leading to misaligned, conflicting, or inefficient advice. The success of regenerative systems will continue to be limited unless the full farm business ecosystem—including agronomists, input providers, lenders, and others—are aligned on shared goals, understanding, and commitment.

Barrier: Uncoordinated and Unpredictable Funding for Business Transitions

For private sector farmer advisors to play a meaningful and sustained role in advancing regenerative agriculture, business models must be profitable and self-sustaining. However, achieving the pace of change needed will require stable, predictable funding to support upfront investments, offset initial risk, and enable the testing and replication of innovative approaches. Currently, much of the funding available for this work is single project-based, too short term, and subject to unpredictable shifts in political climate or funder focus. These limitations can lead to fragmented efforts and create uncertainty, making it difficult for advisors to commit to the bold innovations needed. A more coordinated and resilient funding landscape could unlock the full potential of farmer advisors and agribusiness to catalyze regenerative agriculture adoption.



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The Roadmap Framework: Pillars, Recommendations, and Guiding Principles

The results of the Roadmap synthesis are organized into pillars, recommendations and guiding principles (Figure 3).

Roadmap Pillars

The Roadmap's pillars are critical, overarching bodies of work that, when developed in concert, can advance the role of farmer advisors in regenerative agriculture. These foundational pillars present categories of interventions identified as *high impact* and *feasible* that are needed to directly address each of the barriers prioritized by the core team of partners. While work within all three pillars should ideally be implemented in parallel, they are ordered such that investment in preceding pillars will unlock further potential of subsequent ones.

Pillar 1: Build Awareness of the Opportunity for Farmer Advisors to Support Regen Ag

This pillar focuses on raising visibility and understanding of private-sector farmer advisors as key enablers of regenerative agriculture. The goals are to help funders and other influential stakeholders build understanding of the sector, its potential, and mechanisms to deliver technical assistance and desired outcomes. It also highlights profit opportunities for farmer advisors and businesses themselves, clarifies potential roles and expectations, and amplifies demand signals for new services aligned with regenerative goals.

Pillar 2: Develop and Communicate Strong Value Propositions

This body of work aims to further develop and demonstrate the economic rationale for agribusinesses to engage in regenerative agriculture, including financial modeling and decision support tools to inform decision making around service models. It also supports businesses in leading and actively promoting new offerings that align with regenerative agriculture by developing incentives and transitional funding mechanisms for innovative business models and derisking innovation.

Pillar 3: Increase Expertise and Workforce Capacity

This pillar prioritizes equipping the current and future agronomy workforce with the competencies and confidence needed to effectively deliver regenerative agriculture. It aims to expand access to and coordinate both existing and new training, resources, and tools. It also encourages the development of opportunities for technical assistance providers, both within and outside the private sector, to connect to peer networking and learning opportunities in a precompetitive space that will bolster the value and effectiveness of all roles.



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Guiding Principles

Guiding principles are key components of the integrated body of work that makes up the Roadmap's pillars. They are not recommendations themselves, but rather cross-cutting themes that should be applied where relevant across the recommendations to increase their effectiveness and impact.

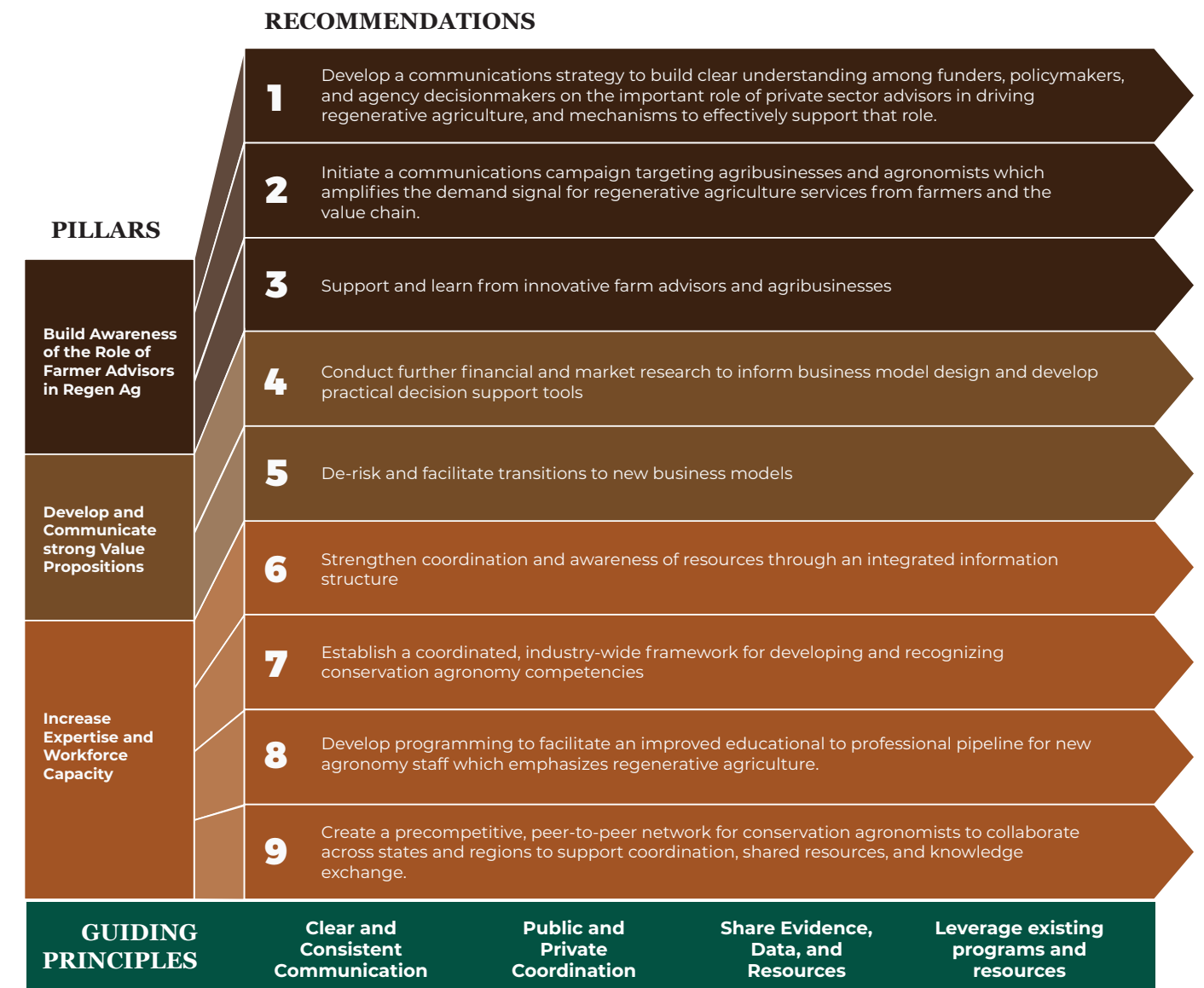
- Communicate Consistently and Accurately**
 Stakeholders across the industry, from funders to ag retailers to farmers, should communicate using consistent, accurate and context-specific messaging that clearly conveys the economic and environmental benefits of regenerative agriculture, limitations, and value propositions for engagement. Consistent, honest, and evidence-based information from different sources (i.e., agency, SWCD, and ag retail agronomy staff) strengthens trust and supports informed decision making.
- Coordinate Public and Private Programming**
 To increase the pace and scale of adoption, it is crucial that all avenues of technical assistance delivery work in concert, including agency, NGO, and private sectors. Programming will be more robust when it emphasizes the unique strengths of each sector, and the reach and impact will be greater when technical and financial assistance to producers is coordinated.
- Share Evidence, Resources, and Successes**
 The full potential of regenerative agriculture continues to emerge, presenting new opportunities for farmers and their advisors. Those who adopt early are positioned to benefit most—through increased market share, greater access to external funding for transitions, and other first-mover advantages. Collaborative efforts to share evidence on best management practices, innovative business models, and resources that derisk transitions, can help ensure that progress benefits all stakeholders.
- Build on, leverage, and coordinate existing programs and resources.**
 Many of the recommendations synthesized in this report are not new ideas. Rather, they highlight areas of work that have been tested, show strong potential for success, and can meaningfully expand the role of private-sector farm advisors in advancing regenerative agriculture—and they should be scaled. In these cases, investment in additional work should avoid recreating programs under new names, and instead build upon existing efforts, prioritizing coordination and reciprocal learning to achieve maximum impact.

Recommendations Synthesis

The following interrelated recommendations, which address key elements of each pillar, represent the core actionable results of the Roadmap. Each recommendation ties primarily into one pillar of the Roadmap, but some are cross-cutting and encompass multiple pillars (Figure 5). Recommendations represent workstreams that were synthesized from more granular bodies of work and specific projects identified by the Roadmap partners as priority areas of investment needed to overcome the barriers described above and in combination, advance transformational change in the technical assistance landscape. Within each recommendation, specific project needs, keys to success, and examples of ongoing progress are described.

The synthesis is intended to be useful to a broad range of stakeholders, including farmer advisors and agribusinesses, funders and value chain companies, policymakers, NGOs, and agency decision makers. **While not every recommendation is directly actionable for all audiences, each provides valuable context to help understand how the various elements interconnect to achieve meaningful change together.**

Figure 3. Organization of Roadmap synthesis including pillars, recommendations, and guiding principles.



Recommendation 1: Develop a communications strategy to build clear understanding among funders, policymakers, and agency decisionmakers on the important role of private sector advisors in driving regenerative agriculture and mechanisms to effectively support that role.

Ag retailers and other agribusinesses influence farmer decisions on inputs, technology, agronomic management, and program engagement, making them essential partners in advancing ecosystem outcomes on working lands. However, the potential role of these advisors in regenerative agriculture is often misunderstood or undervalued by funders, policymakers, and agency decisionmakers. Without clear communication and alignment, opportunities to leverage these important actors' reach and influence remain underdeveloped.

A comprehensive communications strategy is needed to articulate the value of engaging ag retail and outline mechanisms for effective support. This strategy should draw from the general recommendations synthesized in this Roadmap, examining relevant components in more depth. The campaign should be guided by communications professionals, and employ multiple formats to reach needed audiences, including:

- Tailored briefs for specific audiences (e.g., CPGs, food and beverage retailers, agency leadership, policymakers), production systems (e.g., row crops, dairy, specialty crops), and geographies.
- Workshops to foster real-time dialogue, understanding, and collaboration.
- Research publications to establish additional credible references and evidence for the value of investment in this sector.
- Guides and templates for implementing innovative projects and partnerships, with case studies and lessons learned.

The goals of the communications strategy could include:

- Building better understanding of the various models for ag retail and agronomy consulting, and how these businesses are structured and operate, and the current challenges for further engagement in regenerative agriculture under each context.
- Creating appeal for investment in business innovation and transitions to new models that support regenerative practice adoption.
- Elevating ag retail and consulting agronomists as a trusted partners in public-private collaborations and multi-stakeholder efforts that deliver sustainability outcomes, including by highlighting successful partnerships.
- Furthering understanding of reputational or operational (i.e. acquisition) risks supply chain actors face by *not* engaging all available technical assistance pathways.

Recommendation 2: Initiate a communications campaign targeting agribusinesses and agronomists which amplifies the demand signal for regenerative agriculture services from farmers and the value chain.

Businesses evolve in response to changing market conditions and demand signals. Previous research has indicated that many ag retailers are hesitant to actively promote regenerative agriculture to farmer customers but are willing to offer guidance and support if farmers ask for it (Gray et al. 2020). At the same time, farmer interest in regenerative production is growing and they typically do not seek information on cover crops or other practices from their ag retailer or CCA, instead turning to other farmers, media, extension services, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or Soil and Water Conservation Districts (CTIC 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that farmers' demand for regenerative agriculture support needs to be stronger and more visible in order to motivate private-sector advisors to actively engage.

A communications campaign would seek to further clarify and demonstrate specific farmer needs which can be filled by farmer advisors, as well as the opportunity and value proposition available to those individuals and businesses who offer and actively promote regenerative agriculture services to their customers.

To ensure communications are grounded in real-world needs, surveys should first be conducted to gather insights from both the stakeholders who influence the advisor (upstream) and those the advisor serves (downstream). Gathering farmer perspectives will inform a clear needs assessment, highlighting the types of support and services they need from advisors. In parallel, surveying funders and downstream companies will help identify specific sustainability outcomes and data requirements that advisors are best poised to help deliver. These insights will shape messaging that is relevant while clearly demonstrating specific demand and opportunities for advisors to adapt their role. Highlighting successful advisor-farmer partnerships and innovative business relationships would be a particularly effective way to showcase demand and actionable next steps for advisors and businesses. This could be achieved through field days aimed at showcasing successes to other farmers and advisors, or through programs like The Fertilizer Institute's [4R Advocates program](#), which recognizes farmers and their retail advisors for partnering on exemplary 4R Nutrient Stewardship strategies.

Recommendation 3: Support and learn from innovative farm advisors and agribusinesses

Leading agribusinesses and advisors have tested and built successful and profitable models for supporting farmers in regenerative transitions, but this represents a small segment of the industry.

As new funding and partnerships grow, it's important to keep early adopters engaged—not shift attention entirely to middle adopters—so their experience and momentum continue to drive progress.

Organizations and funders supporting private-sector farmer advisors can increase project effectiveness by learning from—and continuing to resource—the leading advisors who have already demonstrated successful regenerative agriculture service models. By continuing to back innovators with funding and partnership opportunities, these leaders can feel confident and supported to keep pushing boundaries, while not risking a competitive disadvantage for early adoption. Over time, sustained support for these leaders can also help establish new norms for what viable agribusiness models look like, increasing competitive and market pressure for non-adopting businesses to evolve.

In recent years, trials and pilot projects testing technical assistance models through ag retail and other private-sector advisors have yielded widely varying results in both success and durability. To effectively learn from past initiatives and guide future investments, the following components should be considered and incorporated:

- A comprehensive dataset should be developed, capturing the scope, geographic distribution, and status of agribusiness efforts to integrate regenerative agriculture services, enabling more rigorous and actionable comparison across models and providing a template for documenting the outcomes of future initiatives and investments.
- Innovative businesses and individuals should be encouraged and supported to share their findings and experiences. In a competitive market, there needs to be a justified reason and advantage to innovators for participating in exercises that will benefit the industry.
- Tools should be developed to help customers—both farmers and supply chain partners—more easily find these leading actors, strengthening their early mover advantage as demand grows and the field becomes more crowded, and rewarding the businesses that have already aligned their operations with regenerative agriculture. Recommendation 7 details these tools and other resources in more detail.



CASE STUDY: Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance (ACWA)

Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance (ACWA) is an Iowa-based farmer-facing, non-profit organization comprised primarily of agricultural retailers, co-ops, and associate members across the state. Its goal is to build healthier soils and improve Iowa's water quality by encouraging collaboration between agriculture and conservation stakeholders. ACWA deploys multiple approaches to embed conservation expertise directly into the agricultural supply chain, making sustainable practices more accessible and practical for farmers, and positioning the industry as a proactive contributor to solving environmental challenges.

The centerpiece of ACWA's approach is its Conservation Agronomist Network, developed in partnership with Iowa Soybean Association and other partners. This cohort of agronomists embedded within ag retail businesses leverage trusted farmer relationships to bridge agronomy and conservation. By providing one-on-one support across practice planning, implementation, cost-share access, compliance, and outcome tracking, the network enables agronomically sound and economically viable pathways to adoption that fit into the production context of farm operations and don't rely on public conservation programming. The role of Conservation Agronomists is explored further in Recommendation #7 of the Roadmap. An iterative and coordinated approach to adapting the Network and ACWA programming more broadly ensures the model remains responsive to real-world farm conditions and environmental needs.

ACWA benefits all members by providing a precompetitive space that enables ag retailers and coops to openly share learnings, tools, and resources, and to leverage partnerships for better collective outcomes. This collaborative environment makes it possible to move beyond fragmented pilot efforts toward larger-scale, coordinated action, allowing proven approaches to spread more efficiently across the industry and driving faster, more durable progress.

Recommendation 4: Conduct further financial and market research to inform business model design and develop practical decision support tools

For private-sector farmer advisors to play their full role in scaling regenerative agriculture, businesses need to profitably integrate regenerative-oriented revenue streams without relying on long-term external subsidies. As previously described, market forces are pushing the industry towards delivering a wider array of optimization services to farmers; however, risk, complexity and uncertain economic returns are still a major barrier to transforming business models. Some leading businesses have already demonstrated potential to integrate regenerative agriculture into their portfolio, but these successes are context specific and often face ongoing challenges. Roadmap partners—including The Nature Conservancy, the Soil and Water Conservation Society, the Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance, and others—are involved in ongoing business model research to support decision-making (e.g., Ag Retailers in Transition, Conservation Business Planning Tool, Making Retail Conservation Real), but further work is needed to fully understand and demonstrate scenarios that are profitable and sustainable in a variety of relevant contexts.

Insights and tools must be practical, tailored to real-world conditions, and designed to integrate into existing business operations. Agribusiness leadership must see a compelling business case to pursue new ventures. Equally important is providing agronomy and sales staff with practical insights and tools that immediately enhance their ability to serve customers and generate revenue. These staff are best positioned to convey value messages to decision makers. Research and guidance—communicated clearly and with language that is familiar—should be integrated into existing agronomic planning and services (e.g., precision agriculture).

The members of the Roadmap coalition identified the following specific research needs:

- **Clearer scenario analyses** of regenerative agriculture revenue streams across specific cropping systems, geographies, and current business contexts.
- **Improved market forecasting** for regenerative agriculture demand to guide purchasing and capacity needs.
- **Assessment of agribusiness model performance**, specifically whether companies that fully transition to service- or outcomes-based models can achieve stronger long-term profitability compared to those that simply layer regenerative agriculture services into existing product-sales models.
- **Research on crop diversification**, a key component of regenerative agriculture systems. As new commodity crop markets emerge (e.g., small grains or crops besides soybeans and corn), research should assess how advisors can most effectively reduce transition risk for farmers and accelerate adoption. Identifying the advisory skills, tools, and services that best support diversification could help agronomists differentiate their services while creating new revenue opportunities for both farmers and advisors.
- **Analysis and communication of farmers' ROI** on regenerative practices. Because farms operate as businesses and prioritize return on investment in decision making, research on the economic performance of regenerative practices and business-model research continues to be essential. Clear ROI insights will strengthen the demand signal farmers send to their advisors (see Recommendation 2).

In addition to concerted efforts to advance the above research topics, it is also recommended to integrate financial analysis into any project aimed at business model evolution and supporting private sector technical assistance, including a mechanism for sharing results. These learnings will be key to the expanding knowledge base that will inform more effective future work. Lastly, it is important to underscore that this research is needed and valuable regardless of its findings. It's possible that thorough inquiry ultimately builds strong evidence that under current market, policy, and environmental conditions, there is not a clear value proposition for most businesses to engage in regenerative agriculture. Rather than indicate failure of efforts to date, this should reprioritize investment into (1) further generating demand for regenerative agriculture adoption through agronomic research, farmer outreach, favorable policy, and corporate engagement; and (2) public sector technical assistance pathways and financial support for practice adoption (i.e., cost share).



CASE STUDY: Retailers in Transition – Evaluating a Fee-based Sustainability Service Model

In 2021, The Nature Conservancy and Purdue University collaborated to conduct business model research to better understand how agricultural retailers might transition toward service- or outcomes-oriented business models. Through paired focus groups with Midwestern retailers and farm customers, the study looked at whether fee-based conservation services could be integrated with existing input-based retail models. It aimed not to prescribe a single solution, but document how retailers and farmers currently perceive conservation value, revenue potential, and risk, while highlighting where misalignment currently hinders progress.

A key finding is that uncertainty around value and risk is a major barrier to adopting service models. Farmers require evidence of return on investment before paying for conservation services, while retailers report this evidence is limited and poorly incentivized. Without clearer market, policy, or supply-chain signals, retailers are reluctant to invest in specialized staff or technology needed to provide relevant services. Moreover, retailers may avoid proactively promoting conservation practices due to reputational risk, reduced input sales, or added complexity. Farmers, in turn, view advisors as only engaging after they express interest in practices to them, limiting retailers' influence in decision making. As a result, conservation services tend to remain low-margin relationship tools rather than scalable, outcome-oriented revenue streams. However, both farmers and retailers stated they expect conservation to gain importance in the future, putting pressure on retail's role in whole-farm advising and services to grow.

Broadly, this work demonstrates how business model research can inform the design of interventions—from incentives, to policy, to risk mitigation tools—that can make retailer-led conservation economically viable and enable these trusted advisors to lead, rather follow, conservation demand.

Access the full white paper: [Ag Retail in Transition](#)

Recommendation 5: De-risk and facilitate transitions to new business models

Even with strong, demonstrable evidence of profitable business models that align production and environmental goals (see Recommendation 4), investing in new ventures or revenue streams is likely to remain a challenge and carry significant risk for existing and new companies and organizations. This is true of any business innovation but is particularly so in regenerative agriculture where the operational and financial benefits to farmers, and therefore their advisor partners, are complex and may take time to fully realize. This recommendation centers on translating insights into action by supporting agribusinesses in testing and transitioning to innovative models while shouldering reduced financial and operational risk. While markets may drive businesses to new operating models eventually, the current pace of innovation is too slow to meet pressing environmental threats. To accelerate transitions, mechanisms should be established that share risk between business and societal interests, provide supportive environments for experimentation, and offer financial tools that make these transitions viable and appealing in the short term. By lowering barriers and creating pathways for innovation, funding partners can enable agribusinesses to confidently test and adopt new models.



Iowa farm © Harlen Persinger

The Roadmap partners identified the following priority business models to pilot, adapt from previous learnings, or replicate based on past success:

- **Service-based fee structures, as opposed to margin-on-product sales models.** Revenue is generated from providing advice, custom application, data insights, or other services to farmers.
- **“Fiduciary” models that reward advisors for improved farm performance.** Revenue and incentives are tied to outcomes such as farm profitability, stability and resilience, or environmental outcomes, rather than product volume.
- **Platform businesses or products** that connect farmers to available services, providers, inputs, equipment, etc.

Recommended mechanisms to de-risk and facilitate transitions to new models:

- Stand up an “innovation incubator” to reduce business start-up risk and accelerate the creation and growth of businesses that enable farmers to adopt conservation practices at scale. The program could include seed funding, market development, and cost-recovery agreements to support entrepreneurs offering services such as no till and strip till, cover crop seeding, precision nutrient management, and diversified crop processing and storage.
- Leverage public and private funding to provide cost-share on regenerative agriculture equipment for ag retailers, coops, and custom applicators, which can reduce investment risk for advisors and the farmers they serve.
- Develop and provide interest rate reduction programs on equipment and infrastructure needed to offer regenerative crop system-oriented services and diversified crop process and marketing and make available to both farmers and advisors.
- Partner with and support ag retailers in offering innovation assurance warranties (e.g., Growers Edge Crop Plan Warranties, see case study) on products and services they provide to farmers, functioning to reduce real and perceived risk for both farmers and their advisors (Houser et al. 2025).



CASE STUDY: PepsiCo–PFI Climate-Smart Practice Linked Crop Plan

The transition to regenerative agriculture can be a significant financial risk for farmers, as well as a reputational risk for their advisors. It often requires upfront investment in new equipment and practices, and it can take several years to see a return on that investment. Advisors may be hesitant to recommend or apply a product or practice perceived as risky or unproven. Growers Edge is a financial technology company that is working to de-risk this transition. Growers Edge's Crop Plan Warranty reduces the financial risk of transitioning to new practices and products by guaranteeing post-transition profitability for farmers implementing new practices, products or crops. This innovative product is the only one of its kind operating at scale. In partnership with groups such as PepsiCo, Mondelez, Nutrien, Practical Farmers of Iowa and The Nature Conservancy, the Crop Plan Warranty currently guarantees on around 1 million acres.

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), in partnership with PepsiCo and Growers Edge, administers a Climate-Smart Practice Linked Crop Plan that functions as a warranty for farmers adopting nitrogen reduction and cover crop practices. Farmers who reduce nitrogen rates receive a guaranteed \$35 per acre if yields fall below expectations, and an additional 5 cents per bushel is paid to encourage cover crop implementation. Growers Edge, white labeled, administers the warranty guarantee and pays growers out if losses occur. The program is free to farmers and funded through PepsiCo and USDA's Advancing Markets for Producers grant. PFI measures resulting environmental outcomes, enabling PepsiCo to apply verified emissions reductions toward its sustainability targets.

Crop plan warranties have been administered through agricultural co-ops as well, with advisors reporting increased confidence in selling sustainability packages with the backing of the yield guarantee (Houser et al. 2025). The warranties continue to be tested and expanded across the United States.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen coordination and awareness of resources through an integrated information structure

Interest and investment in regenerative agriculture have surged over the last decade, resulting in an ever-expanding array of resources including financial assistance programs, ecosystem service markets, soil health data and information, training and education offerings for farmers and agriculture professionals, and other valuable resources that support informed decision-making and implementation. These resources can be invaluable to trusted advisors in the public and private sectors who need accurate, up to date information and access to programs in order to confidently serve their farmer customers in regenerative practice adoption. However, these resources often are relevant only to a specific set of practices, outcomes, or one cropping system or geography. Additionally, they often lack the sustained support and capacity needed for long-term upkeep, causing them to lose relevance over time. These challenges stem from the nature of short-term funding and fragmented investment across many projects. While existing information and resources have individually added value to technical assistance efforts, the crowded array of tools and programs, differentiated by subtle variations in intent and scope, can also unintentionally generate confusion for farmers and advisors navigating an already complex landscape of support.

The industry should develop an integrated structure to coordinate existing and new resources and

focus on raising awareness and connecting farmers and advisors to quality information, thereby making information simpler to access and use, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts and spending. Ideally, this infrastructure would closely align and integrate with public funding and technical assistance programs, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, making those opportunities easier to unlock. Ultimately, the goal is to make it easier for trusted advisors to build knowledge and skill in regenerative practices and systems, access trainings, navigate and connect to available funding, and advertise related services; and for farmers to find qualified regenerative service providers, funding for their transitions, and practical, reputable practice information, regardless of cropping system and location.

Key Components of an Integrated Information Structure

- A pre-competitive inventory of trusted advisors who offer regenerative-oriented services such as consulting, TSP planning, custom application, program enrollment support, etc. (e.g., Conservation Technology Information Center's [Conservation Connector](#)).
- Practical technical resources on practice implementation, benefits, and economics that are valuable to both farmers and their advisors. These resources should include case studies adapted to different cropping and livestock systems and geographies (e.g., [Dairy Conservation Navigator](#)) and should demonstrate value as a solution for on-farm challenges.
- Further expansion of easy-to-use decision support tools for implementing regenerative practices to reduce uncertainty of outcomes and increase probability of successful implementation.
- Templates for communicating and marketing regenerative agriculture services for advisors and businesses.



CASE STUDY: Dairy Conservation Navigator: An Integrated Information Platform for Regenerative Dairy Systems

The [Dairy Conservation Navigator \(DCN\)](#) is a free, public website designed to simplify the fragmented landscape of conservation, climate, and regenerative agriculture resources and increase access to and awareness of conservation opportunities specific to dairy operations. It provides dairy farmers and their trusted advisors with a centralized platform that brings together science-based practice information, training, funding opportunities, and decision-support tools aligned with on-farm needs.

The platform hosts more than 15 courses and 81+ curated practices, with guidance adapted to diverse regions and production systems. In 2025, DCN recorded more than 4,000 unique visitors and nearly 10,000 site sessions, reflecting strong engagement from farmers and conservation professionals. Advisors use DCN to stay current in a rapidly evolving space, understand practice implementation nuances, access checkoff tools, models, and guides, and identify relevant funding opportunities.

DCN is a continuously evolving platform supported by sustained industry investment. Ongoing enhancements include an AI-powered funding library, expanded decision-support tools, and new resources that connect research to farm-level decision-making, strengthening coordination across public and private technical assistance networks.

Recommendation 7: Establish a coordinated, industry-wide framework for developing and recognizing conservation agronomy competencies

The American Society of Agronomy (ASA) established the Certified Crop Advisor program in 1992 as an internationally recognized standard for knowledge, skill, and ethics in delivering agronomic advice to farmers. Certification provides farmers, employers, and regulators with an assurance that a crop advisor has the judgement and experience to apply science-based practices effectively and responsibly, in a manner that protects soil and water resources. Over the last 30 years, farm decision making has become increasingly complex with an abundance of performance data, more complicated nutrient management requirements and environmental pressures, and growing opportunities to generate additional value from regeneratively grown products. Simultaneously, the CCA credential appears to be less consistently supported and required by employers than in the past, suggesting reduced awareness or clarity around the value certified agronomists provide to both farmers and employing organizations.

This evolution of farm management points to the emerging need for regenerative-focused agronomic advice that not only informs farmers with cutting edge technical expertise on precision and soil health practices, but also supports the grower in marketing decisions, navigating regulation as well as available public and private incentive programs, optimizing data use, among other needs. In response to this trend, a growing number of agribusinesses, coops, and organizations are hiring dedicated “conservation agronomists”, or similarly titled positions, whose roles include but are not limited to supporting farmer customers in the above responsibilities. Currently, most of these positions are partially grant-funded, with their ability to be sustained dependent on driving tangible value to the company that employs them. Various models and job descriptions for conservation agronomists have been tested, with varying levels of long-term success and integration into the business. There are also a growing number of independent agronomists who deliver regenerative agriculture guidance and services to farmers.

Currently, there is not an industry standard for providing, recognizing, or certifying the suite of competencies that are required to function effectively as a conservation agronomist. The CCA program defines the agronomy profession by setting and certifying a recognized standard of agronomic expertise and includes optional specialty certifications in Sustainability (Ssp) and 4R Nutrient Management (4R NMS). However, the curricula for these certifications primarily focuses on technical aspects of conservation management, and does not include the business, marketing, and program enrollment aspects of regenerative agriculture which are critical to successful and sustained farm transitions. While many conservation agronomists are CCAs, it is often not a requirement of employment in these positions or for ag retail agronomists more broadly. At the same time, there are existing and emerging training programs focused on various aspects of conservation agronomy and soil health (e.g. [Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership's Soil Health Leadership Program](#)). However, these training programs tend to be state or regional, proprietary to a specific agricultural supply chain, or focused on a narrow subset of competencies.

Given the rising demand for conservation agronomy, the limitations of current training opportunities and certification, the Roadmap partners recommend the establishment of a coordinated, industry-wide framework for developing and recognizing conservation agronomy skillsets and experience. These competencies should be standardized across public, private, and NGO sectors to develop foundational trust, consistent definitions, messaging and standards, and better enable public-private partnerships. A conservation agronomy workforce backed by a trusted certification would evoke the credibility, value, and purpose embodied by the CCA program, updated to meet the greatest needs farmers face today. A conservation agronomy certification should meaningfully add value to an agronomist's employability, his or her ability to drive value to their farm clients and employer, and ideally unlock access or priority to complementary programs, funding, and resources (i.e., provide streamlined access to NRCS funds, practice approvals, or Technical Service Provider [TSP] certification). As with other recommendations, this proposal does not seek to replace existing efforts towards these goals. Rather, it recommends a concerted investment in mapping and coordinating existing training resources, reducing redundancy where possible, and filling in needed gaps in curricula. Given the existing infrastructure, reach, and trust

of the CCA program, the proposed standardization and certification may be most effective if integrated into that existing framework.

A conservation agronomy certification should meaningfully add value to an agronomist's employability, his or her ability to drive value to their farm clients and employer, and ideally unlock access or priority to complementary programs, funding, and resources.

Defining Core Competencies of a Conservation Agronomist:

These initial high-level competencies for a conservation agronomist or related technical assistance roles should be refined through input from agronomists, agribusinesses, farmers, and conservation partners. Where relevant, agronomy competencies should build on foundational objectives of the existing CCA certification. These categories also suggest priority training topics for a future certification curriculum.

Foundational agronomy: Practical agronomic knowledge to ensure crop input and management recommendations are agronomically and environmentally sound

Advanced 4R Nutrient Stewardship: Includes Right Source, Rate, Time, and Place principles to balance crop productivity with soil and water protection, as well as advanced testing, guidance, technologies, and application techniques to optimize nutrient efficiency and reduce loss to the environment.

Soil health practices: Working knowledge of soil health management practices including but not limited cover crops, reduced tillage, and edge of field practices; and ability to translate principles into field and farm-level systems.

Crop diversification and integrated systems: Knowledge of diversified cropping strategies including alternative crops, extended rotations, and livestock integration (e.g., grazing cover crops).

Benefits and ROI of practices: Ability to rigorously evaluate agronomic, economic, and risk tradeoffs and communicate expected outcomes to support farmer decisions.

Incentive programs and markets: Understanding of locally relevant public and private programs, including enrollment processes and navigating common producer challenges.

Tools and resources for conservation agronomy: Familiarity with available decision support tools and planning resources to streamline and enhance advising.

Integrating regenerative agriculture services into agribusiness portfolio: Knowledge of successful models for integrating conservation into business objectives and demonstrating return on investment to employing organization.



CASE STUDY: Iowa Soybean Association Conservation Agronomy Curriculum

Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance (ACWA) and Iowa Soybean Association (ISA) created the Iowa Conservation Agronomist Network to integrate conservation expertise into private sector agronomy, leverage existing farmer-retailer relationships to scale conservation outcomes across Iowa. Individual conservation agronomists are employed by ag retailers and partner organizations, and they support farmers in planning the implementation of practices that improve soil health, water quality, and farm profitability. The network provides a precompetitive space for shared learning and access to resources.

As part of this effort, ISA is developing a Conservation Agronomist Course Plan—a modular training program intended to build consistent, high quality capacity across its advisor network. Based on the latest research, the training targets key professional, technical, and relational skills needed for conservation agronomist to function effectively, including translating conservation and agronomic science into practical decision making support for farmers to achieve soil health goals.

Key features of the course include:

- Eight core modules covering planning, communications, sales, project management, and partnership development
- Clear learning objectives aligned with real-world conservation agronomy roles
- Practical tools and frameworks (e.g., PMBOK, BATNA, stakeholder mapping, sales templates)
- Evidence-based sources from universities, industry research, and peer-reviewed literature
- Scalable design, supporting live delivery, recordings, and onboarding of new network members

With broader investment, a curriculum could be transitioned into a robust learning management system to improve accessibility and expanded to be relevant across states, regions, and production systems. By coalescing around a broadly applicable, foundational set of conservation agronomy competencies, the curricula could be efficiently adapted to specific production and conservation challenges most relevant to a given geography or cropping system. Through greater alignment and standardization of a core curriculum, the training could readily be linked to an accredited certification that is recognized across the sector—benefiting both individual advisors and employers while giving farmers greater confidence in the expertise supporting their conservation decisions.

Recommendation 8: Invest in Programs that Strengthen the Educational and Professional Pipeline for Agricultural Professionals, with a Focus on Regenerative Agriculture

Agriculture faces mounting workforce challenges driven by labor shortages, aging demographics, and limited interest among young people entering the field. Recent surveys show that only 5% of high school students are considering careers in agriculture or natural resources (Rosenzweig and Chen 2023), even as demand for agricultural jobs is projected to grow in the coming decade (US BLS 2025). At the same time, scaling regenerative agriculture requires a workforce with a broader and more specialized skill set, combining crop production expertise with soil health and ecological principles, data-enabled tools, and knowledge of emerging markets and incentives.

Strengthening the education-to-profession pipeline is critical to ensuring that enough well-prepared agronomists and other agricultural professionals are available to support farmers in adopting regenerative practices. This effort also presents an important opportunity to broaden participation in agricultural careers by attracting more diverse talent and better serving historically underserved farming communities.

Recommended Areas of Investment and Action

- **Integrate regenerative agriculture into core education and training pathways.** Support partnerships with landgrant universities, community colleges, and professional societies to embed conservation agronomy and regenerative agriculture into core curricula. Projects could include curriculum development and support for practical, real-world learning in working landscapes. Some universities already have regenerative agriculture centers or coursework, providing a strong foundation for scaling this work. For example, the Soil and Water Conservation Society's (SWCS) [Emerging Leaders Program](#) supports early-career professionals through leadership development and peer networking opportunities to further their conservation career.
- **Increase awareness and positive perceptions of agricultural careers.** Invest in outreach and communications campaigns that raise awareness of agronomy and agricultural science careers among high school students, college students, and early-career professionals. Emphasizing clear pathways from education to certification to employment could help more young people view agriculture as a viable, impactful, and rewarding profession. For example, American Society of Agronomy's newly launched [Dirty Hands, Clean Conscience](#) campaign.
- **Expand internships and early-career job placements.** Support paid internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs that connect emerging professionals with farms, conservation organizations, and agribusinesses. Programs should minimize financial barriers to participation and ensure opportunities are advertised and accessible to a broad range of prospective employees.
- **Support entrepreneurship and business start-ups.** Encourage and invest in programs that help young professionals start custom operating, regenerative service enterprises, or consulting businesses. This recommendation could include small business grants, incubator programs, or risk-sharing arrangements for entrepreneurs focused on regenerative practices. For example, Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa Soybean Association's

Other Considerations

- Efforts should intentionally support a **diverse agronomy workforce** by addressing barriers to entry faced by women; Black, Indigenous and people of color sectors; and other underrepresented students and professionals.
- Emphasizing **public-private partnerships** can help clearly define the skill sets most in demand and align educational investments with both public interest and industry needs.
- Efforts to expand and support a **highly skilled workforce** are not limited to the next generation but should also include upskilling the existing agronomy workforce (see Recommendation 7)



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Recommendation 9: Create a precompetitive, peer-to-peer network for conservation agronomists to collaborate across states and regions to support coordination, shared resources, and knowledge exchange.

The growing conservation agronomy workforce and the technical assistance community must be equipped with the support, knowledge, and resources to confidently deliver value to farmers and employer organizations. In addition to the training and resource needs outlined in the preceding recommendations section, these individuals could benefit greatly from participating in a facilitated, collaborative network that fosters shared learning, easy access to relevant resources, and mutual support in troubleshooting challenges specific to regenerative agriculture. Among technical assistance providers, private sector agronomists face unique pressures of working in a competitive environment, which can limit their participation in broader professional networks and reduce opportunities to collaboratively solve problems and develop strategies to support farmers.

Several existing regional efforts exist to support conservation agronomists, including the Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance Conservation Agronomist program and the Northern Plains Trusted Advisor Partnership. As noted in previous recommendations, the purpose of this proposed work is not to replace efforts or create a new stand-alone forum but rather develop a regional and national support structure to coordinate across existing and emerging programs. By leveraging and coordinating existing programs, along with investing in new networks in underserved regions and cropping systems, this initiative would facilitate standardization of resources where appropriate and greatly expand the and deepen the breadth of peer support available to conservation agronomists.

Key Components of a Conservation Agronomist Peer Network

- Facilitate standardization of existing support resources and networks where beneficial, while ensuring autonomy and specificity of individual programs.
- Establishing mechanisms for ongoing peer learning, case-sharing, and problem-solving across regions and roles.
- Encourage participation from public, private, and NGO advisors to ensure broad applicability and impact.



**CASE STUDY:
Trusted Advisor Partnership**

The Northern Plains Trusted Advisor Partnership (TAP) demonstrates how centering agronomic advisors can accelerate conservation adoption and translate corporate investment into durable, landscape-scale outcomes. TAP engages the professionals that farmers rely on most—agronomists, conservation specialists, and technical assistance providers—and equips them with flexible tools and resources, a robust educational curriculum, and a growing peer network to strengthen long-term effectiveness. Through structured training and shared learning sessions, CCAs gain deeper knowledge of conservation programs and financial assistance pathways. This positions advisors as the primary connectors between producers and multiple conservation programs, reducing the confusion and fragmentation that typically accompany single-practice programs. As a result, conservation recommendations are grounded in real farm conditions, backed by the latest technical knowledge, and aligned with whole-farm goals rather than isolated requirements.

TAP has already demonstrated strong demand and measurable success. Advisors report that the program's education, mentorship, and professional network expand their capacity to support farmers in adopting diversified practices, layering incentives, and implementing whole-farm plans that improve resilience and profitability. The partnership also pilots innovative approaches such as flexible MMRV frameworks, shared accounting strategies, and adaptive management support that meet producers where they are. Looking ahead, TAP serves as a replicable template for coordinated agronomy learning networks across the Northern Plains and beyond. Future expansions could deepen resource sharing, broaden the curriculum, and scale advisor-led planning capable of translating public and private investment into resilient working lands at meaningful acreage.



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Figure 5: Summary of Recommendations, Key Projects, and Relevant Stakeholders

Recommendation		Primary Pillar	Cross-Cutting Pillars	Key Projects & Investment Areas	What This Enables	Most Relevant To
1	Develop communications to clarify the role of private-sector farm advisors	Pillar 1: Build Awareness	Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted briefs and workshops for funders and policymakers Case studies on effective models 	Clear understanding of why and how to engage ag retailers as delivery partners for regen ag	Philanthropic Funders; Supply Chain Companies, Policymakers and Agency Decisionmakers
2	Amplify demand signal for regen ag services	Pillar 1: Build Awareness	Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmer and value-chain demand surveys Advisor-facing communications showcasing successful service models 	Stronger demand signals that encourage advisors to proactively offer regen services	Agribusinesses; Downstream Food and Ag Companies; Philanthropic Funders; Farmers
3	Support and learn from innovative farm advisors and agribusinesses	Pillar 1: Build Awareness	Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Documentation and comparison of existing innovative business models Incentives for early adopters to keep innovating and share lessons learned 	Faster diffusion of innovations across the industry	Agribusinesses; Philanthropic Funders; Supply Chain Companies
4	Conduct financial and market research to inform new business models and support tools	Pillar 2: Develop and Communicate Value Propositions	Pillar 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scenario-based financial analyses by geography and system 	Reduce risk and enable profitable regen service offerings	Philanthropic Funders; Researchers; Agribusinesses;
			Pillar 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practical tools for business planning 		
5	De-risk and facilitate transitions to new business models	Pillar 2: Develop and Communicate Strong Value Propositions	Pillar 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transitional funding and cost-share mechanisms Innovation incubators and risk-sharing tools 	Accelerated adoption of new business models	Philanthropic Funders; Agribusinesses; Policymakers and Agency Decisionmakers
6	Strengthen coordination and awareness of resources for regenerative agriculture	Pillar 3: Increase Expertise and Workforce Capacity	Pillar 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An integrated information platform connecting existing and new tools, funding, and training Align public and private TA and cost-share programs 	Simpler navigation of available resources for advisors and farmers	Philanthropic Funders; Agribusinesses; Agency Decisionmakers; Farmers
7	Establish an industry-wide framework for conservation agronomy competencies	Pillar 3: Increase Expertise and Workforce Capacity	Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standardized competency framework for conservation agronomists Coordinated certification pathway building on CCA infrastructure 	A credible, consistent conservation agronomy workforce valued by farmers and employers	Agribusinesses; Philanthropic Funders; Agency Decisionmakers
8	Invest in programs that strengthen the education-to-profession pipeline	Pillar 3: Increase Expertise and Workforce Capacity	Pillar 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration of regen ag into education pathways, professional development, and internships Entrepreneurship support 	A robust and diverse workforce equipped to support the farming of the future	Philanthropic Funders; University Partners; Policymakers and Agency Decisionmakers; Agribusinesses
9	Create a pre-competitive peer network for conservation agronomists	Pillar 3: Increase Expertise and Workforce Capacity	Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination of existing and emerging regional and national peer-learning networks Standardization of resources, while maintaining local relevance 	Stronger coordination of efforts, advisor confidence, and effectiveness in delivering TA and services	Philanthropic Funders; Agribusinesses

The Role of Coordinated and Stable Funding

Through the Roadmap development process, the partners identified four major barriers to greater engagement by private sector advisors in regenerative agriculture (see pg. 11). Three of these barriers directly mapped onto the three pillars that encompass the priority recommendations for investment described in the previous section. The fourth identified barrier, *Uncoordinated and Unpredictable Funding for Business Transitions*, stands apart in that it highlights a current limitation, and therefore an opportunity related to the structure and coordination of funding across the entire farmer advisor technical assistance landscape. This need is described separately from the recommendations synthesis because it is a call to action which has potential to influence the implementation and success of every one of the specific areas of investment called out in the recommendations, and the overall ability for this body of work to progress. At the same time, implementing specific recommendations related to Pillar 1: Building Awareness and Pillar 2: Developing Strong Value Propositions will continue to provide new evidence and direction to guide improved funding across high impact projects.

Historically, there has been some justified and well-intentioned concern over both public and private funding flowing towards private-sector advisor work, mainly out of caution for navigating the challenges of providing real or perceived private benefit to specific businesses. However, this valid concern must be balanced with the need to deliver regenerative agriculture outcomes efficiently at scale. Trusted agronomists and ag retailers, with their existing foundation of trust, expertise, and integration within commodity agriculture, are crucial to achieve meaningful progress towards that goal. Sustained and effective engagement by private sector farmer advisors and agribusinesses will require an evolution towards business models which are profitable without external support. However, upfront support to discover, test, transition to, and replicate new models is crucial in the short term.

Bold innovation is needed to realize operating models that can achieve both environmental and business goals. Short-term, single project-based funding often does not go far enough to create low-risk conditions that can foster this innovation. Moreover, evolving political climates and funder priorities related to sustainability can lead to uncertainty and caution by innovators to invest in the transformative ideas that are needed to develop self-sustaining market-based solutions.

Longer-term collaborations, coordinated learning, and replication of successful models should be prioritized. One way to enable this is through pooled resources and collaboration by funders in launching a centralized fund with a common goal to enhance private-sector TA delivery. This could build in redundancy, longer-term certainty, and higher risk tolerance, while fostering more ambitious projects by prioritizing partnerships with high potential for synergistic impact. Innovative financing through the impact investor landscape offers another route to achieve greater, more coordinated funding for this work – through blended finance models or other landscape level investment strategies. Since agriculture retailers and other farmer-facing businesses know their financial, labor, and risk limitation and opportunities better than anyone, they should be involved in prioritizing and funding decisions whenever possible.

On the grantee or implementation side of the equation, those seeking funding to advance technical assistance delivery through farmer advisors, or advisors and businesses who have a need for transitional funding, should use the recommendations in this document as a starting point to craft meaningful and innovative projects, and collaborate with partners to apply for coordinated funding of larger efforts.



Aerial view of Minnesota farm © Fauna Creative

The Path Forward

Now more than ever, it is crucial that stakeholders across the agricultural industry—including agribusinesses, funders, policymakers, agencies, conservation advocates, and farmers - work collaboratively to accelerate the pace and scale of regenerative agriculture adoption. By investing in the strategies outlined in this Roadmap, stakeholders can more effectively engage the private sector and fully leverage the essential role that farm advisors play in promoting and enabling regenerative agriculture across diverse farming systems. Looking forward, the Roadmap partners will continue to meet regularly to develop implementation plans and coordinate action across the regions and sectors they represent. The priorities set forth in this report are intended to help Partners and others aligned with this work seek funding and build new collaborations. Together, these coordinated actions can pull the levers necessary to achieve meaningful environmental outcomes, strengthen a resilient and healthy food and agriculture value chain, and unlock new economic opportunities for businesses and farmers.

This Roadmap is intended to be a living framework that will evolve as the industry learns from implementation and continued feedback. The Roadmap coalition welcomes additional partners to join this important work. If you're interested in getting involved or learning more, please contact:

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