Agriculture’s footprint in the U.S. spans all 50 states and accounts for more than half of the U.S. land base—1.2 billion acres, including more than 200 million acres of row crops like corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton and rice. Tillage practices and winter cover crops on these farmlands have a significant impact on productivity and environmental outcomes, including soil erosion, water quality, carbon sequestration and soil health.

A new tool developed by Applied GeoSolutions (AGS) has the potential to unlock conservation solutions for a variety of food and agricultural supply chain stakeholders. The Operational Tillage Information System (OpTIS) is an automated system designed to monitor the yearly usage trends of soil health practices over large agricultural areas. Using publicly available, remote sensing data from multiple satellites, OpTIS monitors the adoption rate of no-till, conservation tillage, and winter cover crops annually in a large-scale, systematic and cost-effective way.

AGS, the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) have spearheaded the development, testing and application of OpTIS. While OpTIS calculations are performed and validated at the farm-field scale using publicly available remotely sensed data, the privacy of all individuals is fully protected by reporting only spatially-aggregated results at larger geographic scales (Crop Reporting Districts and HUC8 watersheds).

Online queries of OpTIS data—available freely at ctic.org/OpTIS—can be customized by timeframe, units, crops and geographic area.

Researchers are also inputting OpTIS data into the DeNitrification-Decomposition (DNDC) computer simulation model to estimate various environmental factors associated with the data trends. Those factors include nitrous oxide emissions, nitrate loss, soil organic carbon, and water-holding capacity. This additional dataset is set for release in August 2019.

“Utilizing remote sensing technology that is ground-truthed allows us to see the entire picture of conservation practice adoption, and the results show that we are making progress.”

— Ben Gleason, Sustainable Program Manager, Iowa Corn Growers Association
OpTIS data released in July 2019 document the level of adoption of soil health practices for Illinois, Indiana and Iowa from 2005 to 2018. This dataset represents about 1 billion acre-years of agricultural conservation practices. The data show:

- Adoption of winter cover crops—non-cash crops growing over the winter—is increasing. Across the three states, cover crops planted after corn and soy increased by nearly 2 million acres between 2006 and 2018. Specifically, cover crop use went from 0.9 percent (528,559 acres) to 4.1 percent (2.4 million acres) of usage in the three states.

  The increased usage of cover crops was limited during the first half of this monitoring period (through 2012), but the level of adoption accelerated in recent years across all three states.

- Conservation tillage practices—those that leave at least 30 percent of residue on the surface before planting—have remained relatively steady for corn and soybeans, averaging 45 percent (25.7 million acres) across the three states in 2018 and 47 percent (26.6 million acres) in 2006.

Soon the same data will be available for the entire Corn Belt—an area extending from eastern Ohio to eastern Kansas and Nebraska, and from the Missouri Bootheel to the Red River Valley of North Dakota.

Benefits for Conservation and Business Stakeholders

OpTIS and DNDC data will fill critical gaps in understanding recent trends in conservation practices and soil health, as well as set a baseline of adoption against which future progress can be tracked. These data will enable a more targeted focus of resources and tools to help farmers secure their future while benefiting communities and nature. A range of public and private stakeholders can use the data for a multitude of purposes, including:

- Tracking progress in meeting conservation goals
- Targeting technical service or incentive programs
- Comparing the success of conservation programs across large areas
- Advancing ecosystem services markets

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