IOWA
2026 IMPACT REPORT



Training the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

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The Nature Conservancy

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ON THE COVER: Trailblazers Academy participants spend a week in the Loess Hills of western Iowa learning from women in prescribed fire leadership © Route 3 Films



Last year, a colleague shared something with a room full of conservation professionals that has stayed with me. Preparing his remarks, he was struggling with the many uncertainties and anxieties weighing on his mind. The advice he received was simple: share it. Chances are, others are feeling it too. He did and it stuck. So I'll do the same.

This is a heavy time. An anxious time. Extreme weather, technological advances and corresponding infrastructure demands, human health crises, on and on. It's a tough list and fraught with challenges that often feel out of our control.

But that is also why celebrating progress matters. Even in uncertain times, there are reasons for optimism. The growing energy behind finally funding Iowa's Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund is a reminder that Iowans can come together around practical, long-term solutions that benefit both people and nature.

For decades, The Nature Conservancy in Iowa has been committed to finding solutions, bringing together science, innovation and partnership to address complex challenges in ways that benefit both people and nature.

As you read the stories in this report, I hope you'll feel both pride in what we've accomplished together and optimism for what comes next. None of this work happens without you. Please continue to support us on this journey, because we know that together, we can find a way.



Graham McGaffin, *Iowa State Director*



2026 has been a year of enlightenment across Iowa. Rising cancer rates, extreme weather events, and a public spotlight on restoring healthy water and soils have consumed our conversation in a dramatic and impactful way. The opportunity to channel our collective energy toward solutions has arrived. Iowa is rich with organizations like The Nature Conservancy that together can apply science-based solutions to address these growing concerns.

For example, our focused work with wetlands and oxbows helps store excess water that might otherwise lead to devastating flooding. These wetlands also provide natural filtration to improve water quality and create habitat for a variety of wildlife. With your support, our land conservation efforts have protected over 20,000 acres in Iowa. Restoring functional floodplains, protecting ecologically diverse landscapes, and deploying management practices such as prescribed fire and grazing have all helped make Iowa's lands more resilient to our changing climate.

The time is now for everyone to do their part, and I'm proud of the work TNC is doing in Iowa. We are grateful for your support of TNC; we simply can't do this work without you.



Sharon Krause, *Iowa Board Chair*



Connection in the Hills

A piece of land can hold a lot of history.

More than 400 acres in the Loess Hills of western Iowa have remained in the same family, helping keep a remarkable landscape intact for nearly as long as Iowa has been a state.

"A lot of landowners have deep ties to their land," says Scott Moats, director of lands and conservation for The Nature Conservancy. "When they're thinking about its future, most want to know it will be cared for and respected. We want people to see TNC as an option, as a good neighbor and a trusted steward that can help carry that legacy forward."

When this property became available, it represented more than an opportunity to protect another 400 acres. Located between TNC's Folsom Point Preserve and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' Green Hill Wildlife Area, it offered a rare chance to connect two important conservation areas.

The acquisition expanded an already significant conservation footprint, creating a nearly 1,200-acre connected landscape just outside the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area.

"For me, larger landscapes allow people to stretch," says Moats. "Not just your legs, but your imagination. You can wander, disconnect from the pressures of the world and experience something bigger than yourself."

That sense of scale matters in nature, too. Wildlife don't recognize property lines. When protected lands connect, plants and animals have more room to thrive and conservation efforts can have a greater impact. But while nature can move freely across boundaries, land protection often happens one property at a time. That's why partnerships are essential.

TNC often serves as a connector, bringing together landowners, funding and long-term stewardship partners to make protection possible. In 2017, TNC jointly acquired Green Hill with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and transferred it to the Iowa DNR in 2020, creating the Green Hill Wildlife Area. The latest project builds on that history, with TNC working alongside the Iowa DNR to add another piece to the wildlife management area.

"These projects don't happen without partners," says Brian Hickman of the Iowa DNR. "Without The Nature Conservancy, we wouldn't have had the ability to meet the timeline or assemble the resources needed to make this happen."

The partnership doesn't end with the land transfer. TNC and DNR have a long history of working side by side, sharing equipment, expertise and staff for restoration. That collaboration will continue as the property begins its next chapter.

Today, parts of the land are overgrown and in need of restoration. Hickman describes it as a landscape with tremendous potential. The first priority is opening native grasslands that have become crowded by invading trees and brush.

Protecting land is rarely the finish line. It's the beginning of a long-term commitment to caring for a place so everyone can experience what makes the Loess Hills unique.

"It's going to take time," says Hickman. "But the opportunity here is enormous."

Thanks to the generous funding from the Iowa West Foundation, Gilchrist Foundation, Gallogly Family Foundation and individual donors for making this project possible.

Top: Green Hill Wildlife Area © Matt Dollison; Inset: Hikers at Folsom Point Preserve © Nicholas Salick/TNC







Training the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

Through the Anna Beal Internship and Trailblazers Academy, The Nature Conservancy is investing in the people behind conservation.

Standing in a wetland at TNC's Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve, Howie Clark followed the steady beep of a radio transmitter through thick vegetation and muddy water. Somewhere nearby, a Blanding's turtle was hiding. The species is threatened in Iowa and endangered across much of its range.

Soon, Clark and another Anna Beal intern found themselves sliding down a steep bank into a ditch, feeling their way through murky water in search of the elusive reptile.

"Once we knew where the turtle was, I began to run my hands through the muddy water and found it beneath a fallen branch," Clark says.

It's the kind of experience that can't happen in a classroom. And it's why programs like the Anna Beal Internship matter.

When Clark applied for the Anna Beal Internship, he was looking for experience. He found much more.

"I was looking for an opportunity where I could learn skills and gain experiences in natural resources and conservation," he says. "The internship has the perfect mix between hands-on learning and hard work in the field."

No two days look alike. One week, interns may be removing invasive species with chainsaws, backpack sprayers and hand tools. The next, they might be replacing fence posts damaged by weather and wildlife, assisting with prescribed fire operations or surveying wetlands for native species.

For Eastern Iowa Land Steward and Fire Specialist Dale Maxson, that breadth of experience is one of the program's greatest strengths.

"What makes this internship special is that these interns are doing far more than mowing all season," Maxson says. "They're actively involved in all kinds of projects—tracking Blanding's turtles, searching for freshwater mussels, learning plant identification, stewarding our preserves—gaining hands-on experience and technical skills that will serve them long after the internship ends."

Equally important is the environment in which those skills are learned. By the end of the summer, interns leave with more than new technical knowledge. They've gained a clearer understanding of conservation and their role within it.

> "I look forward to sharing the knowledge and skills that I learned interning with TNC in future programs, activities and conversations wherever I go," says Clark.

Shaping the future of prescribed fire

A few hours northwest, at TNC's Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve, another group gathered for a different kind of learning experience.

Nestled in the rolling ridges of Iowa's Loess Hills, Trailblazers Academy brings together fire practitioners for a free, weeklong immersive workshop on prescribed fire each summer.

During the day, participants learn fire ignition techniques, suppression tactics, radio communications and burn planning. In the evenings, they swap stories, build relationships and learn from each other.

The academy was created to address a gap in the profession. Women make up roughly 30% of natural resource professionals nationwide, and fewer than 20% hold leadership roles. While Trailblazers is open to all, the program places a special emphasis on supporting women who are seeking leadership opportunities in fire management and conservation. By covering lodging, meals and trainings, TNC helps ensure that financial barriers do not prevent participation. Since the program launched in 2023, more than 150 women from across the country have attended. Some arrive as experienced firefighters. Others are students, landowners or early-career conservation professionals. What they share is a desire to learn and grow.

"A big part of what makes Trailblazers successful is the mix of people in the program," says Elizabeth Owens, land steward for TNC in Iowa.

That approach has transformed Trailblazers from a training opportunity into a lasting professional network.

> "Everyone brings something different to the table, and that creates opportunities for participants to learn from each other as much as they learn from the training itself," says Owens.

In 2026, the program's fourth year, more than 40 participants completed trainings and hands-on conservation work, including prescribed burns in prairie and oak savanna habitats. Along the way, they gained practical experience while building connections that often continue long after the week ends.

The program's reputation is growing, too. Applications now outnumber available spots, and interest continues to spread beyond Iowa. "We've already had people from out of state ask, 'How can I put one of these on myself? I want to do this in my home state,'" Owens says. "It's a good reminder of the impact that comes from bringing leaders together."

Watch Trailblazers in Action

Scan the QR code to learn how Trailblazers Academy is empowering women in prescribed fire.

Or visit **nature.org/trailblazersiowa**

What is the Anna Beal Internship Program?

Named in honor of longtime conservation advocate Anna Beal, the internship introduces students and early-career conservationists to the realities of managing and restoring Iowa's natural landscapes. Over the summer, interns work alongside TNC staff and partners across the state, advancing conservation while exploring potential career paths.

Now in its 38th year, the Anna Beal Internship Program continues to inspire future conservation professionals. In 2026, six interns received scholarship support and lodging while gaining hands-on experience across Iowa.

Alumni have gone on to careers with county conservation boards, state and federal agencies and TNC. Today, former interns help shape conservation decisions, demonstrating the value of investing in future conservation leaders.

Top: Anna Beal interns tracking turtles © Dale Maxson/TNC

Left to right: 2026 Trailblazers participants; Learning in action at Trailblazers Academy © Route 3 films





Fund the Trust

TNC supports activating IWiLL through a voter-approved sales tax increase. Funding the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund would accelerate water quality improvements while supporting human health, productive soils, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation across Iowa.

Scan the QR code to learn more about IWiLL, or visit

iowaswaterandlandlegacy.org

The Power of Investing in Nature

Clean water matters to every Iowan.

Whether it's flowing from the kitchen tap, supporting wildlife or fueling Iowa's outdoor recreation economy, water connects us all. Yet improving water quality remains one of Iowa's greatest conservation challenges. One key concern is excess nitrates in rivers, which can affect human health, increase drinking water treatment costs, contribute to harmful algal blooms and travel downstream to the Mississippi River and Gulf.

One solution is already at work on Iowa's largest river.

Since 2015, The Nature Conservancy has partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers through the Sustainable Rivers Program (SRP) to improve operations at Saylorville Lake and Lake Red Rock. Rather than building costly new infrastructure, the program uses science to guide operations at existing dams and reservoirs, managing storage and releases in ways that support a healthier river while maintaining flood protection and other benefits.

For example, when nitrate runoff is high, reservoir managers can hold water longer, giving naturally occurring bacteria time to convert nitrates into harmless nitrogen gas before water moves downstream. This approach is producing measurable results. Research shows that it can reduce nitrate concentrations in the Des Moines River by up to 20%.

The benefits extend beyond cleaner water. More natural river flows improve habitat for fish, mussels and migratory birds while creating healthier waterways. An independent study by RTI International estimates that the SRP will generate nearly $18 million in net benefits by 2040, showing that investments in nature benefit both people and wildlife.

Cleaner water does not happen by accident. It takes science, partnership and sustained investment. While the SRP is helping reduce nitrate pollution in the Des Moines River, Iowa needs additional resources to expand water quality solutions statewide.

That's why TNC supports Iowa's Water & Land Legacy (IWiLL), an initiative working to put Iowa's voter-approved Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund into action. In 2010, 63% of Iowa voters approved the fund to support clean water, healthy soils, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation, with funding tied to a three-eighth-cent sales tax. But because the tax has not been implemented, the fund remains empty. Activating the tax could generate about $250 million each year for conservation efforts across Iowa, helping improve water quality and giving farmers more cost-share opportunities for practices like cover crops and buffers.

When Iowa invests in clean water, the benefits extend far beyond our rivers, strengthening wildlife habitat, communities and quality of life for generations to come.

Growing Solar, Growing Communities

One of the biggest challenges to switching to solar energy is knowing where to start.

Questions about costs, incentives, installers and long-term savings can make renewable energy feel complicated. For nearly a decade, a program called Grow Solar has been helping Midwest communities cut through that uncertainty, providing trusted education, local support and access to competitively priced solar installations.

Since its launch in Cedar Rapids in 2017, Grow Solar has helped homeowners, farmers and businesses across Iowa explore the benefits of solar energy by providing them with information, setting up local partnerships, and offering group purchasing opportunities. The program leverages the power of volume purchasing to provide participants with competitive pricing on solar installations and reduce the confusion that can often surround renewable energy decisions.

For Grow Solar participant Matt Weber, that educational approach made all the difference.

> "The program did an incredible job of educating me about how solar power works, incentives and other benefits of solar," Weber says. "I learned a lot from the consultation and never once felt pressured to move forward. I can't wait to get the panels on my home and generate clean energy."

"Solar is something I've considered off and on for many years, and I saw the current program being offered on the local news," says Weber, who enrolled in the program as a homeowner this year.

The program's success is built on collaboration. Led by the Midwest Renewable Energy Association, The Nature Conservancy, and 1000 Friends of Iowa, the Grow Solar program relies on local partners to help connect communities with resources and opportunities.

Expanding access at a pivotal time

This year marks another milestone for the initiative. The 11th Grow Solar program is the largest to date, serving six counties in east-central Iowa.

The 2026 program arrives during a period of change for the clean energy landscape. Despite the loss of federal clean energy tax credits, Iowans continue to view and invest in renewable energy. Interest in the Grow Solar program remains strong, reflecting the ongoing demand for affordable, locally driven energy solutions.

As communities look toward the future, Grow Solar continues to demonstrate the value of bringing together trusted information, strong partnerships and local leadership to benefit both people and nature.

Opposite page top to side: Lake Red Rock Dam © U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; Trout fishing © Mark Godfrey; This page: Solar panels installed at Urban Dreams, a nonprofit in Des Moines © 1 Source Solar



What is Grow Solar?

Grow Solar is a solar group-buying and education program that makes going solar easier. Through the program, property owners can pool their buying power to secure significant discounts that make installing solar more affordable. The program has connected people with reliable information through 149 Solar Power Hour events attended by more than 2,300 Iowans.

BY THE NUMBERS

10
Grow Solar campaigns across Iowa

3,381
Kilowatts of solar power capacity installed by participants so far

$8.4 Million
Generated in local investments so far

7.6 Million
Pounds of CO_2 emissions that these projects will prevent from being released over their lifetime





What is a Foodscape?

Rather than focusing on individual farms, Foodscapes is a strategy that works across the entire supply chain, from the businesses that provide seed, equipment and advice to farmers to the companies, markets and policies that influence decisions on the land.



Cultivating Change From the Ground Up

Josh Behnke has a lot of respect for tradition. As a sixth-generation farmer, he works the same ground in the rolling hills outside Dubuque that his family settled more than 150 years ago. Having a historical connection to the land is deeply meaningful to Behnke.

"I wanted to raise my kids the same way I was raised," he says.

But as he grew older, he faced new challenges in carrying the family farm forward. It was time to make some changes.

After graduating from Iowa State University with a degree in agronomy, Behnke started his career in the seed business. Through conversations with farmers, he became interested in what stewardship really means and how to keep land productive and healthy for years to come.

"When you keep living roots in the ground longer, you're protecting the soil between crops instead of leaving it exposed," says Behnke. "For us, it's about taking care of the land so it's just as productive tomorrow as it is today."

As he worked across the region, Behnke noticed that many farmers were interested in trying new practices, but they often lacked the equipment, time or confidence to get started.

In 2020, he purchased a no-till drill and began helping neighboring farmers plant cover crops, which keep fields covered between growing seasons, reducing erosion, retaining nutrients and improving the land's ability to absorb rainfall. What started as a small side business serving a few hundred acres quickly grew as more farmers became interested.

"I wanted to be a one-stop shop," Behnke says. "Someone could call me, tell me which field they wanted planted and I'd take care of the rest."

Helping farmers make that transition became a passion for Behnke and connected him to a broader effort to care for soils across Iowa and the Upper Mississippi River region.

A global priority at a local scale

The Upper Mississippi River region is unique. With millions of acres in productive farmland intertwined with vast water resources that span four states, it's one of the most important agricultural landscapes in North America.

But what happens on these working lands doesn't stay there. Heavy rains carry soil and nutrients into waterways, stripping the soil of its ability to remain productive. Regenerative practices can help keep nutrients where they belong. That's why The Nature Conservancy chose the Upper Mississippi River as one of its global Foodscapes regions.

"The focus of our Foodscapes program is to scale practices that we know will have benefits for water quality and working lands," says Paige Frautschy, TNC agriculture program director.

"And a great place to start is with people farmers already trust."

Through this program, TNC works with agricultural retailers who operate at the crossroads of agriculture, supporting hundreds of farmers and thousands of acres every year.

More than a piece of equipment

Farmers need more than good intentions to adopt new practices. They need equipment, expertise and trusted support. In many communities, those resources come from local ag retailers, co-ops and crop advisers.

Through the Foodscapes Ag Retailer Equipment Cost-Share Program, TNC helps ag retailers invest in specialized equipment that makes regenerative agriculture more accessible to farmers. The response in the Upper Mississippi River region has exceeded expectations. What began as a $100,000 grant-funded pilot program has expanded to $200,000 after demand surged. Ag retailers submitted nearly 40 applications, including 30 from Iowa, requesting roughly $700,000 to support more than $3.2 million in equipment purchases.

"There is a lot of infrastructure necessary to achieve conservation at scale," says Frautschy. "It requires labor, equipment, access to seed and people who can help farmers implement these practices. Seeing the strong response to this program confirmed that ag retailers are eager to help farmers."

Investments ranged from drones and planting equipment to seed-cleaning systems, all of which can help expand regenerative practices on more farms and across more acres while improving soil health and water quality.

For Behnke, the program provided the final push to expand his services and pursue an idea he had considered for years.

With support from the cost-share program, he purchased a 1952 Super Clipper seed cleaner. "It looks like a relic from another era," he jokes. "But it fills an important gap."

For years, much of the cover crop seed used by local farmers came from hundreds of miles away.

His new seed cleaner allows him to work with farmers to grow, clean and distribute cover crop seed locally, creating a homegrown supply chain that keeps dollars in rural communities while expanding regenerative practices across the landscape.

Looking ahead, Behnke plans to partner with local producers to grow rye and other small grains as cover crops, creating new opportunities for farmers while supplying cover crop seed for the region. What started as a single equipment purchase is growing into a local network that promotes healthier soil, cleaner water and a stronger farming community.

"My grandpa is one of my heroes," says Behnke. "When he found out I bought the seed cleaner, he was proud to see us doing something new while also going back to our roots. That support gave me the confidence to keep going and made the investment feel bigger than any piece of equipment."

Behnke family farm © Josh Behnke

Top: Josh Behnke stands with his uncle, Rusty Bahl (left), his father, Ken Behnke and grandfather, John Bahl (right), in front of a seed cleaner. © Josh Behnke; Inset: Upper Mississippi River Region map © Karla Mendoza



What Shapes a Legacy?

When you think about your legacy, what comes to mind?

Perhaps it's the people you love. The values you've shared. The places that shaped you. The small moments that changed how you see the world.

For many of us, some of life's most meaningful memories happened outdoors. A creek that you explored as a child. The first hike up a mountain that showcased the vastness of nature. The smell of the woods after rain. These experiences become part of who we are, connecting us to something larger than ourselves.

A legacy is the opportunity to pass that connection forward.

Members of The Nature Conservancy's Legacy Club have chosen to include conservation in their estate plans because they believe that future generations deserve the same chance to discover, wonder and belong in nature. Their commitment helps ensure that Iowa's prairies, woodlands, rivers and wildlife have a healthier, more resilient future.

When Iowa Trustee Bob Riley reflected on his own "why" for joining TNC's Legacy Club, he found himself returning to the experiences that first sparked his curiosity, imagination and love for the natural world.

The result was the following poem, which captures not only his personal journey but also a question for all of us: **What kind of world do we want to leave behind?**

Top: Exploring Berry Woods Preserve in the springtime © Casey Struecker/TNC; Opposite top to bottom: Bob Riley © Rachel Mummey; Wilson's snipe at Land of the Swamp White Oak © Jacob Pitzenberger; Broken Kettle Grasslands © Jacob Pitzenberger

"Wonder with Purpose"

Why? Unselfing, getting outside of me, was an early quest.

When I was 10, like you, I lived outside, with dirt under my nails, itchy poison ivy; I smelled a dead squirrel, heard a crow caw, saw clouds be elephants, and I breathed pure forest air.

A creek in the ditch next to our house had frogs, bugs, leaves, dams, pools. My universe.

Buckeyes with spiked husks, ice thick enough on Greenwood Pond to skate on (back when winter still meant ice.)

I got a microscope around then, fed it kelp from my aquarium. Fly wings, dirt, a feather.

Curiosity was the complicator, for a feral kid with ADD, and it saved me.

Nature and Bob - collecting snakes and june bugs, boiling roadkill squirrel to make a shrunken head.

Then came science fiction - finally a universe large enough to hold my imagination...

Then, the threats - slow at first - fewer bugs on windshields, murky water, air not so crisp - gaining speed, gaining momentum... fewer turtles, tigers, trees...

I started close to home, parks, Des Moines Water Works, Iowa Environmental Council.

Finally The Nature Conservancy, a large enough universe to challenge my imagination again.

We all put grass between our thumbs to make a kazoo.

In nature, we know the thigh bone is connected to the knee bone, a truth of living things.

Sitting in a deer stand, I felt the pulse of the woods

No wind, forest still

Wind blows, leaves move, paws scurry

Until still again

Candling ice on the lake in Manitoba, watching cumulonimbus anvil clouds from the hood of my truck in South Dakota, a dozen quail flush from under my feet after a minute long pause.

Will we be the last kids on earth to hear the crow caw?

The question at the heart of Bob's poem belongs to all of us.

Will future generations inherit a world where they can hear crows caw, watch quail flush from the prairie, skip stones across a clear-running creek and discover the same sense of wonder we did?





Join the Legacy Club

If conservation is part of the legacy you hope to leave, we invite you to learn more about TNC's Legacy Club.

Visit **nature.org/legacy** or contact Geof Fischer, director of development, at **geofrey.fischer@tnc.org** to start the conversation.



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2026 Impact Report



Your real estate can be a gift for nature.

An asset you've had for generations can be a gift for generations to come. By donating all or part of your property to TNC, you may be able to reduce your capital gains tax, receive an income tax deduction, and receive income for life—and you may even be able to continue to use or live on your property.

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To learn more about how you can use your real estate to protect nature, contact:

Geofrey Fischer, Director of Development

515-244-5044

geofrey.fischer@tnc.org

nature.org/legacy

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Farmstead © Cameron Davidson