

Iowa

2025 Impact Report



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5.5

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427.8

gallons of water not used



830.7

pounds of CO₂ prevented



One of the most rewarding parts of my job as state director is traveling across Iowa, seeing our work first-hand, and connecting with the people and partners who make it possible. These moments remind me why our mission matters and why your support is so vital.

This summer, I witnessed rivers returning to near-normal levels after years of drought—a hopeful sign of nature’s resilience. But with that hope comes complexity, because higher flows bring their own challenges, including increased

flood risk, nitrate pollution and the reality that “normal” is no longer predictable.

As you read this report, I invite you to see what’s possible when we lead with purpose. These stories aren’t just updates—they’re proof of impact. They reflect the strength of our mission and the power of your support.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we’re building a future where nature and people thrive—not just in Iowa, but beyond.

Graham McGaffin, Iowa State Director



Growing up in Iowa, I’ve always felt a deep connection to the land—and a responsibility to care for it. As a small farmer and proud Board Chair for The Nature Conservancy in Iowa, I see first-hand how your support fuels real progress: restoring native habitats, addressing a changing climate and advancing sustainable practices that benefit both people and nature.

The challenges we face—from degraded ecosystems to threatened waterways—are complex, but we’re making a difference. Guided

by science, collaboration and a shared vision for a healthier, more resilient Iowa, we’re building a future where conservation is woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Together, with your support, we’re proving that positive change isn’t just possible—it’s powerful. I hope you see that reflected in the programs and projects highlighted in this report. Thank you for standing with nature, and with us.

Sharon Krause, Iowa Board Chair



Investing in Iowa's Water

A legacy ready to be funded

Water is Iowa's most vital resource. It's the force that drives our agriculture, sustains our communities, and breathes life into our ecosystems. Yet, across the state, nutrient runoff has compromised water quality, threatening drinking water, wildlife and public health.

With over 85% of Iowa's land in agriculture, farmers are uniquely positioned to lead the charge in protecting water. Many already are. TNC is working with Iowa farmers and agricultural organizations to promote conservation practices that reduce runoff and improve water retention. Cover crops, reduced tillage and nutrient management are helping rebuild soil health and keep valuable nutrients out of waterways.

These practices are working, but they need to scale dramatically to meet the challenge.

That's where IWILL (Iowa's Water and Land Legacy) comes in. In 2010, 63% of Iowa voters approved a constitutional amendment to create the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, designed to receive revenue from a future sales tax increase. If funded, IWILL would dramatically accelerate water-focused conservation across Iowa. The fund would generate an estimated \$260 million every year for conservation efforts with 60% of that going directly toward improving water quality.

"This funding would be transformational," says Amber Markham, director of external affairs for TNC in Iowa. "It would allow Iowa to support farmers in implementing voluntary conservation practices that reduce runoff, rebuild soil health, and keep nutrients out of our rivers and lakes." Wetlands would be restored to naturally filter water and absorb rainfall, helping to prevent flooding and protect downstream communities. Drinking water sources on which millions of Iowans rely every day would be better safeguarded. And ecosystems across the state would begin to recover. "It's a vision for a healthier, more resilient Iowa," says Markham.

Despite broad bipartisan support and overwhelming voter approval, the Trust Fund remains empty. As water challenges grow more urgent, IWILL offers a ready-made solution, one that honors the will of Iowans, supports farmers and invests in clean water for generations to come.

To learn more and support the effort to fund IWILL, visit nature.org/iowapolicy.

Water and Land Conservation in Action

All across the state, TNC is working with Iowans to protect the natural resources that sustain us. Explore how these efforts are making a difference.

Freshwater Focus

Discover how partnerships with farmers are restoring Iowa's rivers, lakes and wetlands.

Read more on page 8

Regenerative Agriculture

Working with Iowa farmers, TNC provides support, resources and connections to make regenerative agriculture practical, profitable and scalable. **Read more on page 4.**





Sowing Success

Farmers lead the way in Iowa's regenerative agriculture

Paul Kassel's connection to the land runs deep. Raised in a family where farming and conservation went hand in hand, he learned early on that good stewardship wasn't optional. It was a way of life. His father, both a farmer and a member of Iowa's soil conservation committee, instilled that ethic in him. After years of working as an agronomist with Iowa State Extension, Kassel felt the pull to return to his roots. "It's fun to see the green from your growing crop," says Kassel. "How it changes through the seasons and the results of your input."

In 1994, Kassel took a leap of faith. Since the family farm was too small to support both him and his brother, he bought his own land in northern Iowa near Spencer. He began with 500 acres and rented equipment, slowly growing his operation into a thriving 1,300-acre farm. As the farm expanded, Kassel stayed true to the conservation values his father had instilled in him, embracing the idea of regenerative agriculture, which focuses on improving soil health, increasing biodiversity and utilizing natural processes to create resilient agricultural systems. His background in agronomy gave him a special view on farming, and he began to feel a growing concern about conventional farming practices and how they affect Iowa's land and water. He started experimenting with cover crops to reduce runoff and improve soil health.

"I know it's a long process and it won't ever be perfect," Kassel says. "But these practices help communities and farmers like me."

Building Momentum for Regenerative Farming

Kassel is part of a growing movement: farmers moving toward regenerative agriculture not only to protect the land but also to improve their bottom line. The Nature Conservancy recognizes farmers as some of the greatest conservation allies. Working with Iowa farmers, TNC provides support, resources and connections to make regenerative agriculture practical, profitable and scalable.

"We are one of the puzzle pieces connecting farmers to resources, and we understand that it's not a one-size-fits-all approach," says Paige Frautschy, agriculture program director for TNC in Iowa. "It's about working across the entire supply chain with farmers, agribusinesses, corporate partners and advocating at the policy level to expand opportunities for regenerative agriculture practices."

TNC's role spans from field-level support to broader landscape-scale change. Through multi-level partnerships, TNC is helping shift incentives and expand access to regenerative practices. At the same time, we support farmers directly through technical assistance, cost-share programs and peer-led networks that make regenerative agriculture more accessible and practical.

In northwest Iowa, where Kassel farms, nutrient runoff and erosion threaten Iowa's Great Lakes region—home to some of the state's most scenic lakes, rich biodiversity and outdoor recreation.

“I know it’s a long process and it won’t ever be perfect. But these practices help communities and farmers like me.”

—Paul Kassel, Iowa Farmer

TNC is partnering with local farmers to launch a regional effort that reflects the broader statewide strategy: empowering farmers to lead conservation through peer networks and practical support.

In early 2025, a group of seven farmers, including Kassel, from Clay, Dickinson and Emmet counties, formed a farmer-led network focused on conservation. The result was the Northwest Iowa Agriculture Stewardship Alliance (NIASA), a coalition of farmers committed to promoting regenerative practices.

NIASA’s first field day in June drew nearly 100 attendees, including farmers, landowners, agribusiness professionals and conservation experts. “It was exciting to see such a great turnout,” says Frautschy. “We had a farmer panel, a field visit highlighting cover crops and strip-till systems, as well as information on cost-share programs and technical support.”

With funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Mosaic Company and the Wright Foundation for Sustainability and Innovation, NIASA developed a cost-share initiative tailored to the region’s needs. The program helps offset the financial risk of adopting conservation practices, making it easier for farmers to experiment and transition.

“If you spend \$30 an acre on cover crop, it’s hard to know the exact value you’ll get out of it,” Kassel explains. “But it’s worth trying; most farmers don’t want to see their land erode away, and having financial assistance offsets that risk.”

NIASA is more than a local initiative—it’s a blueprint for statewide transformation. By empowering farmers to lead, TNC is helping facilitate peer-to-peer learning that can accelerate the adoption of regenerative practices across Iowa.

Funding Agricultural Resilience Through Smart Policy

Kassel believes every Iowan has a role to play. “We had 12 inches of rain in Spencer this July,” he says. “For my farm to stay productive, we need drainage, but we also need to restore wetlands and use cover crops. When the public backs these initiatives through policy and tax funding, it can lead to meaningful benefits for people and nature.”

In-field and edge-of-field practices, such as prairie strips and restored wetlands, keep nutrients and sediments from washing into waterways. These regenerative practices align with goals in the federal Farm Bill and could be further supported by Iowa’s Water and Land Legacy (IWILL), which could fund water quality and habitat improvements through the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund.

TNC’s work in Iowa highlights a powerful truth: farmers can take the lead in adopting conservation practices, and with the right support from partners like TNC, these efforts are helping build a more resilient agricultural landscape.

Kassel’s message to his fellow farmers? “You’re not in this alone.” He explains, “When farmers form partnerships, they can help each other out. We can make this work for everybody.”





Buffalo Homecoming

TNC supports Indigenous stewardship of the land

At Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve in northwest Iowa, the thunder of hooves echoes across the prairie. Once nearly erased from the landscape, buffalo are part of a growing movement to restore not just a species, but a sacred relationship.

Since 2020, The Nature Conservancy has partnered with Tribal nations and Indigenous-led organizations, including the InterTribal Buffalo Council and Tanka Fund, to return buffalo to their ancestral lands. These aren't just conservation transfers—they're acts of healing. Buffalo are seen as relatives by many Native peoples, central to cultural, spiritual and ecological life. Their return is a restoration of balance.

From 2022 through 2024, 162 buffalo from Broken Kettle were transferred to Tribal communities in Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Minnesota. Across all TNC preserves, more than 2,300 buffalo have made this journey home since the partnership began.

"We're proud to stand alongside Tribal partners and our TNC colleagues in this effort," says Scott Moats, director of lands and fire manager for TNC in Iowa. "Returning buffalo is about more than ecology—it's about respect, relationship and restoring what was lost."

The impact of buffalo on the land is profound. Their grazing patterns shape the prairie, their wallows collect rainwater, and their presence supports countless other species. Plants sprout in their hoofprints. Seeds travel in their fur. Their movements create habitat for water-loving organisms and grassland birds. But their deeper role—as a keystone species for Indigenous communities—is what reshapes the narrative.

Historically, TNC sold surplus buffalo to help manage herd sizes. Then we asked: What if we gave them back instead?

That question sparked a shift. TNC now works to support Tribal stewardship, recognizing that buffalo are not just conservation tools—they are more. Each transfer is a step toward reconciliation, honoring the deep stewardship of Native peoples and restoring the prairies to their full, living story.

With more than 6,000 buffalo from 11 herds across TNC's network of preserves, TNC is committed to expanding this effort. From Broken Kettle and beyond, the buffalo are coming home—and bringing with them a future rooted in respect, resilience and renewal. Learn more at [nature.org/buffalo](https://www.nature.org/buffalo).



Baptism by Fire

Gaining hands-on fire training at Trailblazers Academy

On June 2, a group of 13 women gathered at Stone State Park in western Iowa, dressed in flame-resistant Nomex yellow work shirts and green pants, geared up and ready to conduct a prescribed burn. It was the second day of the Trailblazers Academy, a multi-day workshop hosted by The Nature Conservancy in the Loess Hills. The academy trains participants in fire management techniques, including medical aid, ignition methods, radio use and burn planning.

The group was assigned a 13-acre unit that hadn't been burned in a decade. With minimal wind, the terrain would dictate the fire's behavior. Their goal: reduce woody encroachment from species like sumac and dogwood.

While some wildfires can be damaging, prescribed burns are intentional and beneficial, restoring ecosystems, reducing invasive species and lowering wildfire risk. Indigenous peoples have long used fire to manage landscapes, but European settlement led to widespread fire suppression.

The burn lasted an hour, followed by "mop up" to extinguish lingering embers. Though the scorched earth appeared stark, it signaled renewal—soon, native grasses and wildflowers would sprout. Over three days, Trailblazers participants burned 335 acres across prairie, savanna and wetland habitats.

The academy began as an idea from the Director of Lands Scott Moats, who, inspired by a women's forestry program, envisioned a women-centered fire training. Amy Crouch, TNC's Little

Sioux project director, took that spark and transformed it into something bigger and bolder than imagined. With Moats' support and in collaboration with Iowa State Extension, she designed and launched Trailblazers in 2023 with 26 participants. This year, over 100 people applied for just 40 spots, ranging from beginners to seasoned fire practitioners from across the country. Trailblazers Academy not only teaches fire skills—it fosters confidence, leadership and community among women fire practitioners, helping reshape the future of conservation. Though it is open to all genders, Trailblazers centers on empowering women in fire—a field where only 9% of firefighters are female, according to a 2020 National Fire Protection Association study.

"I liked seeing how women lead and communicate," says Alex Garcia, a wildland firefighter. The program offered her first experience with female leadership. Others echoed the sentiment. Destiny Magee, a returning participant, appreciated the slower pace that allowed for learning and questions. For Ruth Campos, a seasoned fire practitioner, Trailblazers reignited her passion. Asked to serve as burn boss, a role that typically takes 10–15 years to achieve, she led a successful burn at TNC's Knapp Prairie Preserve. "It felt like directing a symphony," she says. The experience shifted her perspective: "I didn't see myself in that role before. Now I want it."

This article by Bethany Kaylor originally appeared in *Little Village Magazine*. To read the full story, visit [nature.org/2025trailblazers](https://www.nature.org/2025trailblazers).



Breathing Room for Freshwater

TNC and partners restore wetlands to reduce flood risk and improve water health

In 2008, days of heavy rain caused the Cedar River to flood, inundating downtown Cedar Rapids and displacing more than 18,000 residents.

No lives were lost in the disaster, but the flood illustrated the vulnerability of the second largest city in Iowa. The river crested at a record 31.12 feet, floodwaters swirled through more than 10 square miles of the city and firefighters used boats to rescue 423 people. An estimated 1,360 people ultimately lost their jobs.

Since that devastating deluge, the City of Cedar Rapids decided to proactively mitigate flood risk. They turned to The Nature Conservancy to help them diversify their protection strategies and make broad, landscape-scale changes to lessen the risk of future floods.

"Flooding is a statewide challenge, and no single group can solve it alone," says Karen Wilke, associate director of freshwater for TNC in Iowa. "That's where we come in. We can help bridge the gaps, bringing partners together and creating innovative solutions that improve water quality and strengthen our rivers, wetlands and lakes. When these systems thrive, so do the communities and wildlife that depend on them."

Floods are normal, and to a certain extent, healthy. "But we've channelized water and expect it to stay in those channels and behave itself," says Mary Beth Stevenson, watersheds and source water program manager for the city of Cedar Rapids.

To find solutions, the city and TNC looked upstream. There, they realized, they could slow the flow of floodwaters by scooping out and restoring some of the area's



sediment-filled oxbows, the U-shaped wetlands that form when a meandering stream or river cuts a straighter path and leaves a section of waterway that is separated from the main flow. Restoring these wetlands can bring many benefits.

“Oxbows create space for rivers to breathe,” Stevenson says. “We love oxbows because they create pockets for water storage in the landscape.”

Oxbows can hold up to 1 million gallons of floodwater per acre, slowing raging waters before they spill into nearby streams and rivers. They also sequester an estimated 1.34 tons of carbon per acre, minimizing the impacts of a changing climate.

A single oxbow won’t stop flooding entirely, but when oxbows across the watershed are restored, they can collectively help the landscape become more resilient, Stevenson says.

And that’s not all.

Much of the watershed around Cedar Rapids, and throughout Iowa, suffers from high nitrate levels, which have been linked to health issues. Oxbows naturally filter out those excess nutrients, ultimately providing safer water for drinking for the nearly 130,000 people who live in the Cedar Rapids area.

“What we’re doing is partnering with farmers to protect community drinking water supplies,” Stevenson says. The city is using funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to help farmers cover the costs of implementing these conservation practices. They’ve also hired a conservation agronomist to work with area farmers on fertilizer management.

For more than 10 years, TNC has partnered with the City of Cedar Rapids on some of those upstream wetland restorations. Now, that vision is expanding. TNC has identified an additional 1,142 potential high-value oxbow sites. Over the next decade, the goal is to bring back 500 acres of these critical ecosystems throughout the Cedar River watershed. “Partnerships like the one between Cedar Rapids and TNC are a really great example of how we’re all working together to solve these big landscape-scale problems,” Stevenson says.

It’s work that TNC supports, because it not only slows floodwaters and helps remove excess nutrients and provides critical habitat for fish, including the federally endangered Topeka shiner, and migratory birds in a biologically diverse part of the state. Restored oxbows are great places for people to fish, hunt and view wildlife, too.

Farmer Brian Bourgeois, a current TNC board member in Iowa, says that factored into his decision to restore an oxbow on his property in Cedar and Johnson counties.

“We were looking for a conservation practice that, for a relatively small cost, would provide an outsized impact on nature by reintroducing a habitat that was diminished across the Iowa landscape,” Bourgeois says.

He found that restoring an oxbow would meet those goals of mitigating flood risk, maintaining biodiversity, and filtering out nutrients. It also would provide another place for wildlife to drink and cool off.

“We restored our oxbow less than a year ago, and it is already teeming with wildlife and a diverse mix of wetland plants,” Bourgeois says. He’s spotted softshell turtles, muskrats, river otters, waterfowl, frogs, deer and more at the site.

Bourgeois says he believes it’s important to conserve and protect the land and water upon which all life depends, and the project is work he’s proud of.

“Farmers have strong ties to the soils and water they depend on, and taking care of the environment is very gratifying,” he says.

Of course, oxbows aren’t the only answer. They’re one piece of a bigger effort, and change takes multiple approaches and strong partnerships.

The good news? Those partnerships are growing, and together we’re proving that when we share the same goals, we can create cleaner rivers, safer communities and a future where nature and people thrive side by side.



Living Land, Lasting Impact

Protecting Iowa landscapes so nature can flourish and communities can connect

Marilyn “Marty” Mihall has lived nearly nine decades on her family’s farm in Fayette County, and every inch of it holds a story. As a young girl, she recalls gathering the cows to bring back to the barn and walking through the cornfields, prairies, and marshy, peat-filled wetlands. She loved the exotic-looking flowers that bloomed there. Her father and mother instilled in her a deep respect for the land, teaching her the value of its fragile ecosystem. “The best part of my life has been spent in this place,” says Mihall. Now, she’s working to ensure that its legacy continues.

The marshy wetland on Mihall’s property is a fen—one of the rarest and most delicate habitats in Iowa. Working with The Nature Conservancy, Mihall put 77 acres in a conservation easement, a voluntary legal agreement designed to protect natural areas and help prevent development or land conversion. Often, TNC plays a critical role in bridging the gap by transferring the land to organizations that can continue to properly care for and steward the land. Today, the land is managed by the Fayette County Conservation Board, and the fen that Mihall and her parents cared for so much is now part of the Gray Hart Fen Memorial Preserve.

Mihall’s story is just one example of how TNC works across Iowa. Over the years, Iowa’s landscape has changed dramatically, leading to a steep decline in biodiversity and increasingly disconnected landscapes.

TNC works in places where conservation can have the greatest impact, collaborating with landowners and local organizations to ensure lasting protection. Sometimes that means acquiring land to manage as a nature preserve. Other times, it involves holding conservation easements or transferring land to trusted partners for long-term stewardship, as in Mihall’s case. Each approach ensures that Iowa’s habitats remain protected for generations to come.

TNC has been working in Iowa since 1963. Early on, we conserved small properties to protect individual species. Guided by science, TNC has broadened its scope. Now focusing on landscape-scale conservation, protecting and restoring diverse habitats and the species that live there. In all, TNC has helped protect over 20,000 acres across Iowa.

“I learned from my dad and taught my daughters. We knew it was a special kind of land, and my dad never wanted to touch it. So, we left it alone and enjoyed what was there.”

—Marty Mihall, Iowa Landowner

A Living Laboratory for Conservation and Discovery

Nestled in the heart of eastern Iowa, TNC's Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve has been a conservation cornerstone for more than four decades. Within this unique landscape, TNC has protected over 5,000 acres of floodplain forests, wetlands, prairies and oak savannas—creating a mosaic of habitats that support both biodiversity and scientific research.

The preserve functions as a living laboratory, offering researchers a rare opportunity to study an unaltered floodplain ecosystem. Its untouched soils and natural hydrology reveal the intricate relationships between rivers, plants, wildlife and the land itself.

Keith Schilling of the Iowa Geological Survey has been monitoring water quality at the preserve for two decades. By tracking groundwater levels through a network of wells, Schilling helps uncover how native vegetation and soils respond to flooding. His research shows that floodplains like this one naturally filter water, reducing excess nutrients before they reach downstream ecosystems.

Meanwhile, retired University of Iowa biology professor Jeff Klahn spends his days sweeping the preserve's riverside vegetation with a sampling net along the Cedar River. The insects he collects are added to the university's Museum of Natural History, contributing to a growing record of species diversity. Klahn's work underscores the importance of protected areas like Land of the Swamp White Oak Preserve, especially in a state dominated by industrial

agriculture. These refuges, he notes, are essential for sustaining insect populations and allowing species to move and thrive across connected habitats.

Protecting Land for Generations to Come

That's why The Nature Conservancy is working to protect broad swaths of land across Iowa—creating long, connected corridors that support wildlife movement, ecological resilience and scientific discovery.

“The land protection work that TNC is scaling, with the goal of creating long, contiguous tracts, helps with plant and animal migration and climate resiliency,” says Graham McGaffin, TNC's Iowa state director. “TNC is proud to work with landowners like Marty to protect land and provide a place where scientists can learn.”

Back at Gray Hart Fen Memorial Preserve, Mihall is proud to be part of these efforts. When asked why she wanted her land to become a preserve, she shares that it was about honoring her parents' wishes—and passing on a legacy.

“I learned from my dad and taught my daughters,” Mihall says. “We knew it was a special kind of land, and my dad never wanted to touch it. So, we left it alone and enjoyed what was there.”

She hopes future generations will bring their children to the preserve, so they too can experience the quiet wonder of the land—just as she did growing up.



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Create Your Conservation Legacy.

What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting nature for future generations? Whether you are taking the first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help.

Contact us today.

📞 515-244-5044

✉ geofrey.fischer@tnc.org

👉 nature.org/legacy

