

# Collaborating With Farmers to Nourish People and Nature

A more sustainable future for people and the planet



The Midwest is known for its robust agriculture production. © Harlen Persinger

## One of today's greatest conservation opportunities can be found on our farmlands.

By adopting farming methods that take lessons from nature—known as regenerative agriculture—we can better meet the growing demand for food while conserving our lands and waters.

### A Win-Win

The Midwest plays a vital role in nourishing the world's growing population. Our farms provide food for millions of people as well as animal feed, ethanol for fuel, and many other critical products. But decades of intensive farming are taking a toll. Soil health is declining, and the runoff of excess fertilizer and sediment from crops is contributing to water quality issues in our lakes, streams and rivers.

Farmers who adopt regenerative practices—such as cover crops and precision nutrient management—are helping shift

our food system from one that depletes resources to one that delivers positive gains for farmers, communities and nature. Benefits include improved soil fertility, reduced use of fertilizer and cleaner waterways. Plus, healthy soils can store more carbon from the atmosphere, which helps us tackle climate change. Regenerative agriculture can be a win-win for farmers and the planet.

### Scaling Change

The wide-scale adoption of regenerative practices will require industrywide collaboration. Recognizing this, TNC is working closely with farmer-led groups, food and agricultural companies, and other key stakeholders across the supply chain to mobilize the industry to act and push for meaningful policy reforms.

## Regenerative Agriculture Practices

Regenerative agriculture is an approach to growing food that seeks to actively restore nature while benefiting soil health and ensuring resilient farms.



### In-Field Practices

These practices improve organic matter in soil, minimize erosion and increase the soil's ability to absorb heavy rainfall. Practices include **cover crops** and **low- and no-till planting**. Another is the **precision application of fertilizers**.



### Edge-of-Field Practices

Used between or at the edges of fields, these solutions slow down water running off farms, thereby removing excess nutrients and sediments. Examples include **constructing wetlands**, **planting prairie strips** of native grasses or flowers, **incorporating trees (agroforestry)**, and **drainage water management**.



## TNC's 2030 Global Goals

- Conserve 621,000 miles of river and 74 million+ acres of lakes and wetlands.
- Protect more than 10% of the world's oceans.
- Reduce or store 3 billion metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—every year.

Tabitha Blaney carries recently-harvested eggplant and peppers grown on her family's farm in Albany, Ohio. © Alex Snyder/TNC

### Our Midwest Approach

**Mobilizing public policy support.** We are advocating for local and federal policies and programs that support regenerative agriculture, including the Farm Bill. TNC has also partnered with corporate foundations and university experts to research the effectiveness of nutrient reduction policies across key areas of the Midwest Corn Belt with the goal of replicating innovative policies across the region and beyond.

**Partnering with food and agriculture companies.** TNC is collaborating with sustainably minded companies to help increase their investments in food and animal feed that is regeneratively grown. In Michigan, for example, we partnered with Star of the West Milling Company to incentivize wheat growers to implement these practices.

**Collaborating with farmer advisors.** Farmers rely on the advice of trusted companies and individuals that sell agricultural products and services (e.g., seeds, fertilizer, equipment). TNC is partnering with these advisors to ensure they understand how to help farmers integrate conservation into their on-farm business decisions.

**Supporting farmer-led learning.** We assist farmer-led learning networks across the Midwest, which allow farmers to learn about regenerative agriculture practices from trusted peers who understand current trends, on-the-ground conditions and local market factors. For example, in Ohio, we co-developed a regenerative agriculture curriculum, Farmer Advocates for Conservation, which has reached more than 7,000 farmers to date.

**Piloting innovative solutions.** To help scale and commercialize regenerative practices, we are identifying and piloting a variety of technologies and innovations that help farmers solve problems. One innovation is a crop warranty program that reduces a farmer's financial risks from adopting regenerative practices.

### Anticipated Midwest Outcomes

- Profitable, resilient farms
- Improved soil health
- Greater carbon capture as soil fertility improves
- Clean and abundant water resources
- Healthy, intact and restored habitat for wildlife and pollinators

## Your Impact

With your support, TNC aims to increase the use of regenerative practices on 50 percent of row crop acres (~29 million acres) across five Midwest states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. Your contribution will help improve water quality, tackle climate change and help farmers sustainably feed a growing population.

### To learn how you can help, contact:

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# Conservation in Action

The following case studies illustrate how TNC is working with farmers and landowners, agribusinesses, and others to expand the adoption of regenerative agriculture practices.

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

### Addressing Farm Drainage Across Indiana Upgrading underground drain tiles to reduce excess fertilizer runoff

In Indiana, Randy Bales and his son Brad from Fairholme Farms are partnering with TNC to minimize the runoff of excess fertilizer, such as nitrogen, from crops into streams, rivers and lakes. Nutrient runoff contributes to the pollution flowing into and down the Mississippi River, eventually causing a dead zone in the Gulf, which is an area of low to no oxygen that can kill fish and marine life.

TNC is helping Bales and other Indiana farmers install and then demonstrate various edge-of-field practices that have been shown to slow and filter water running off croplands. One recent project at Fairholme Farms focused on improving underground tile drainage through the use of specialized technology.

#### Technology for Drain Tiles

Traditionally, underground drain tiles were built on farms primarily to get rid of excess rain and snowmelt to avoid flooding crops. Nearly all the tile outlets across the Midwest are completely uncontrolled, allowing water and any nutrients to flow unchecked into our waterways. Today, farmers are looking at how to better manage this drainage system to improve water quality as well as to conserve and store excess water for use during hot, dry weather.

Technological developments now allow for the automation of drainage structures. At Fairholme Farms, 12 drainage water management structures have been installed, which function like in-line dams that can be controlled from a

computer or smartphone. The structures can be adjusted to hold water in the field, reducing the amount of nitrogen lost downstream by 46 percent.

#### Part of a Larger Initiative

Fairholme Farms is one of five demonstration farms participating in the Indiana Regenerative Agriculture Demonstration Network, a partnership developed by TNC that includes state and federal agencies, agriculture drainage companies and other key groups. Very few Indiana farms currently use edge-of-field practices—and the network aims to change that by inviting farmers and landowners to the demonstration farms to see the benefits for themselves.

As of spring 2025, the consortium has supported the installation of 18 edge-of-field practices on three demonstration farms. By the end of the year, 9 more edge-of-field solutions will be installed across a total of five farms.

“Our goal is to engage farmers and landowners with real-life examples of these solutions being used by neighbor farmers in their own state,” says TNC’s Mike Dunn, director of Indiana freshwater conservation programs. “Just as important, we have partnered with government agencies and other key stakeholders that interact with farmers so they can help expand the adoption of these nature-friendly practices.”

Improvements in tile drainage systems on croplands can reduce excess fertilizer from entering streams and other waterways. © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative





TNC's Foodscapes initiative is addressing common challenges that are preventing the widespread adoption of regenerative agriculture practices. © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative; © Timothy T. Lindenbaum/TNC

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

# Transforming the Food System Along the Upper Mississippi

**TNC is working to address challenges that prevent the use of regenerative agriculture practices across large-scale landscapes.**

Wisconsin farmer Bob Danes plants cover crops and uses no-till farming because he wants to leave his land in better shape for the next generation. Cover crops and other nature-friendly regenerative practices can improve soil fertility. "With heavy rain, we were seeing a lot of soil washing away along with the nutrients the plants need," Danes says. "With these changes, we now see the soil staying in place."

While the number of farmers adopting regenerative methods is growing, the transition is not happening fast enough. Standing in the way: a variety of practical, economic, and technical challenges.

### Spreading Knowledge and Solutions

TNC's Foodscapes initiative is meeting these obstacles head-on with localized solutions that create the right conditions for regenerative practices to spread across sweeping landscapes.

Here in the Midwest, the Upper Mississippi Foodscape runs along both sides of the Mississippi River, touching down in parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. "The Foodscapes approach takes what we've learned from our on-the-ground work with individual farmers and communities—and adds steroids," says Lisa Kushner, TNC's regenerative food systems manager with the North America Agriculture Program.

### Diversifying Crops

In the Upper Mississippi, over 90% of crop acreage is devoted to two crops: corn and soybeans. Decades of growing these two crops is taking a toll. The soil is losing the ability to filter water, store carbon and reduce flooding and drought risks by soaking up excess rain.

A regenerative strategy that could help restore soil health in the region is crop rotation, specifically planting grains like oats and cereal rye between corn and soybean plantings. This practice can also boost farmers' bottom lines—increasing net crop returns by 10% over a four-year rotation period, per a 2020 study.

### Creating a Business Case

Through the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative, TNC is working with food and agricultural companies as well as other partners to build a business case for crop diversification. "We are looking at how to build markets for additional crops, like oats sourced from the Midwest, so that farmers are incentivized to grow these crops," Kushner says.

TNC has been working with local oat farmers to support the development of a new mill that will provide new market opportunities for farmers to sell food-grade oats at a premium price. We've also been working on developing new crop insurance products that provide risk mitigation for farmers who are worried about economic losses as they begin to diversify their crops.

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