Testimony of Megan Dwyer

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"Perspectives from the Field, Part 4: Conservation"

May 13, 2025

Good afternoon**.** It's an honor to be here today and an even greater honor to represent Midwest farmers—though some might call it multitasking madness. I come to you wearing several hats: 4th generation farmer, certified crop advisor, ag professional, and mom.

Our Illinois family farm grows corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and beef cattle, and with my husband, we're raising the fifth generation. In fact, our oldest daughter is here with me today - hopefully feeling inspired.

We're discussing conservation today, something I've devoted my professional career to. As the Director of Conservation and Nutrient Stewardship for IL Corn, I strive to ensure that policies and regulatory efforts are grounded in both science and common sense. My goal is to bridge the gap between farm fields and policy, and to make the complexities of conservation feel as relatable as baking chocolate chip cookies.

As the NRCS celebrates 90 years, it's a good time to reflect. For decades, we've rightly focused on protecting our most vulnerable soils. I'm here to ask us to think differently, to consider how programs can better protect our most productive soils. When I think about vulnerable soils versus productive soils, I'm reminded of this quote on the original Agriculture Building on the quad of the University of Illinois - our land grant university: "The wealth of Illinois is in her soil and her strength lies in its intelligent development." Let us protect this wealth with the most intelligent and intentional efforts we can muster.

Since peaking in 1950, the United States has lost nearly a quarter of its farmland—an average of 11,000 acres every day[1]. This isn't marginal land being paved over. Much of what's disappearing is some of the most productive, high-value agricultural ground in the country—land that consistently delivers strong yields and underpins the economic viability of American agriculture. American Farmland Trust warns that if current trends continue, we could lose an additional 18.4 million acres by 2040[2]. For farmers, that represents a serious threat to our ability to meet growing demand while maintaining efficiency and profitability.

In production agriculture, we rely on a foundation of high-quality soils, reliable water, and favorable climates to sustain yields and manage input costs. As urban sprawl, infrastructure expansion, and fragmentation push into our best growing regions, we're losing more than just acres—we're losing operational efficiency.

Conserving our most productive agricultural acres is essential if we want to stay competitive in global markets and continue feeding and fueling a growing population. These lands deliver more output with fewer inputs and are better positioned to adapt to economic pressures, policy shifts, and weather extremes. Without deliberate efforts to protect and manage these critical resources, farm families will face increased land prices, reduced margins, and greater pressure to overwork marginal land.

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[1] https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsagscitech.2c00250

[2] https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/AFT_FUT2040_AbundantFuture_ExecutiveSummary.pdf

In production agriculture, we've long felt the pressure of competing land uses—residential sprawl, industrial development, and energy projects. As these interests expand into prime agricultural land, the competition for space is becoming more intense and more costly for farmers trying to grow food, manage inputs efficiently, and plan for the next generation.

When you heard I'm from "Illinois," odds are you thought of Chicago. But the reality is that about 70 percent of Illinois is farmland. That's 24 million acres of cropland —about the size of nearly one-third of all U.S. cities combined. Our farm fields are a powerhouse of productivity, yet when it comes to federal conservation funding, we receive only a small fraction. From 2018 to 2022, Illinois received just 1.31 percent of EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) funding—in comparison, Georgia received nearly three times that investment for one-fifth of the cropland.

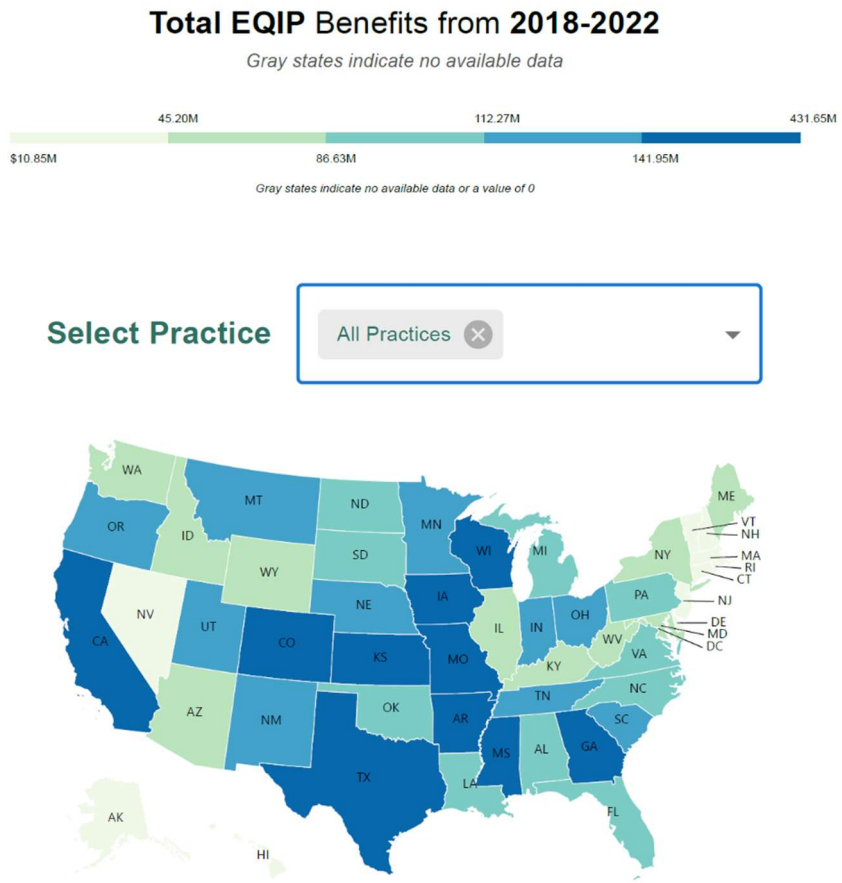

Image 1: https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/eqip

In 2024, only $6.4 million of the $21.5 million in EQIP funds Illinois received supported cropland conservation. Of that, less than $600,000 reached beginning farmers. Thanks to strong collaboration with Senator Durbin's office, the Illinois Corn Growers Association and the Illinois Department of Agriculture were able to secure an additional $15 million of traditional EQIP

funds to address conservation priorities. This more than doubled the state's cropland EQIP budget, enabling targeted efforts to reduce nutrient loss and preserve topsoil.

While those funds were contracted, it provides an example of the competition farmers face when trying to sign up for federal conservation programs and the role partnerships play in securing funding. While meaningful progress requires financial investment, it's important to recognize that securing sufficient funding to fully support a state like Illinois—with its 24 million acres of farmland— takes a creative and strategic approach that recognizes we can't fix the problem overnight. One way to sustain this momentum is to incorporate IRA conservation funds into the Farm Bill baseline.

Continuing to view conservation programs through a 90-year-old lens is like picturing today's farmers as the storybook version of Old McDonald—rather than the innovative, tech-savvy professionals they truly are. It's time to modernize our approach to conservation and create programs that empower farmers to protect their most valuable and finite resource with flexible and scalable solutions. If we fail to deliver effective programs, technical assistance, and meaningful funding to our farmers we can expect more outcomes like the 2023 and 2024 dust storms in central Illinois that closed major interstates and caused loss of life.

Our approach can make the difference between success and failure. Too often, we zero in on one granular issue or promote a one-size-fits-all solution, without stepping back to consider the broader path to success.

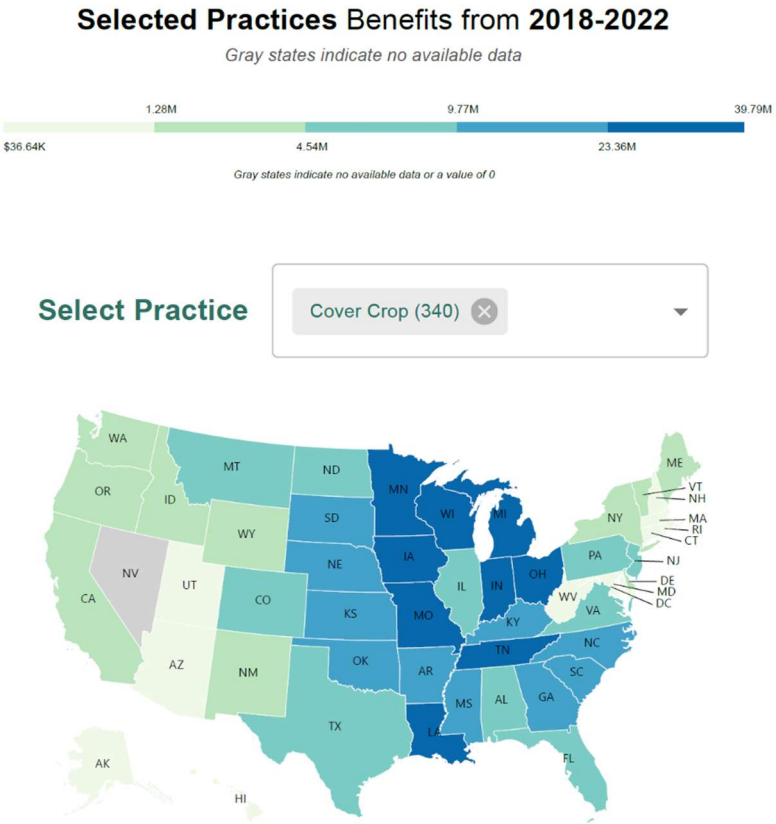

Image 2: https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/eqip

We know that cover crops deliver multiple co-benefits: they improve water infiltration, build soil resiliency, provide valuable livestock forage, and help reduce nutrient loss through runoff. Yet despite this, only 1.1 percent of EQIP funding in Illinois has gone to the USDA-NRCS Cover Crop 340 practice. This isn't just a funding gap—it's a design flaw.

Rigid practice standards and burdensome contracting processes don't support practical implementation on the ground. Illinois has a singular cover crop practice standard, even though the state stretches 390 miles north to south and spans USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 5a to 7b. That's a vast range of climatic and agronomic conditions—and Illinois farmers are expected to fit into this one-size-fits-all model. Similar challenges can be found in other regions, like the Bootheel of Missouri, or even across different crops. Managing corn and soybeans, for example, requires distinct approaches, but these differences often go unrecognized in current standards.

Practice standards should offer a clear framework, but they must also be flexible enough to accommodate regional realities and proven management practices. If we want conservation to work for production agriculture, especially in a state as diverse as Illinois, we need to modernize both the funding priorities and the structural design of the program.

Now for the connection between conservation and cookies: if I asked each of you to describe the perfect chocolate chip cookie, I'd likely get 23 different answers. Some would say thin and crispy, others soft and chewy, maybe a few with nuts. Now imagine I told each of you to go bake your ideal cookie—but didn't give you a recipe. That's the challenge farmers face when trying to implement conservation practices. And even if I did give you the same recipe, you'd all still get different results—because no two ovens bake the same, just like no two farm fields respond the same way.

Successful conservation doesn't happen by accident, it requires strong partnerships, reliable funding, local expertise, and flexibility. Trusted, accessible field offices for NRCS and FSA, along with well-staffed agencies like EPA and USFWS, ensure we have boots on the ground and every tool in the conservation toolbox ready to go. Public-private partnerships amplify impact, while a strong safety net and practical technical assistance help drive real adoption. To sustain this momentum, IRA conservation investments must be included in the Farm Bill baseline.

We could spend hours discussing barriers—ranging from financial constraints to technical assistance, machinery, time, and the fact that over 70 percent of Illinois farmland is owned by someone other than the farm family tenant— but I'd prefer to focus on solutions.

RCPP is one such solution, providing the support that made IL Corn's flagship initiative, Precision Conservation Management, possible. PCM is an economics-focused program that has proven we can far exceed the success of traditional conservation efforts by leveraging strategic private partnerships, providing boots on the ground, and allowing flexibility in implementation. The program's long-standing partnership with PepsiCo is just one example where leveraging public and private contributions generates $1.50 going to farmers for every $1.00 of federal funds invested.

IL Corn has successfully leveraged RCPPs to drive meaningful conservation work across the state. RCPP allows us to build powerful partnerships—between farmers, conservation groups, private businesses, and local agencies—that tackle our most pressing environmental challenges. These partnerships bring national resources directly to Illinois fields. From improving soil health to protecting water quality in priority watersheds, RCPP helps us deliver locally led, results-driven conservation. With continued support and collaboration, Illinois is demonstrating that strategic partnerships can drive meaningful impact. After it's beginning in Illinois, PCM has now expanded into Nebraska, Kentucky, and Missouri, showing the broader potential of this approach.

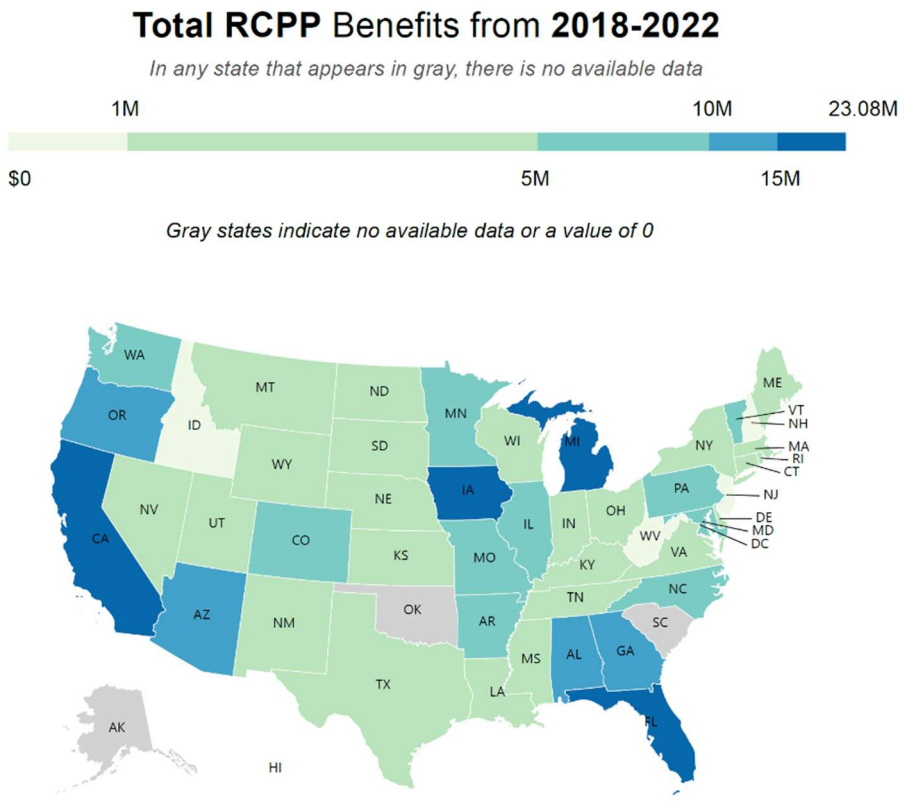

Image 3: https://policydesignlab.ncsa.illinois.edu/rcpp

Regarding funding, we have a limited but significant opportunity to drive meaningful change. Advocating for IRA funds to be incorporated into the conservation funding baseline in the upcoming Farm Bill is essential. This would enhance technical assistance, strengthen partnerships, and most importantly, deliver direct support to farmers—empowering them to make lasting, on-the-ground improvements. *Image 4 (next page)* illustrates the positive impact of the previous infusion of IRA funds in Illinois—a story that reflects similar successes across many other states.

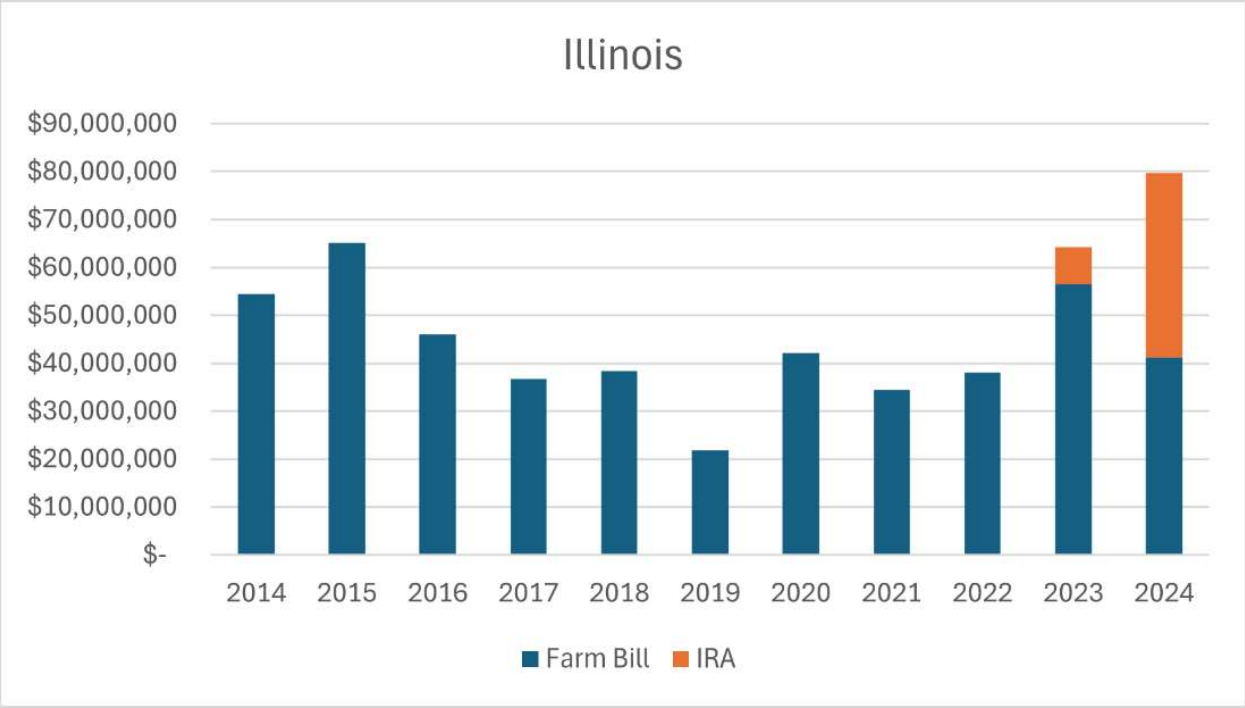

image 4

Once funding and program feasibility are addressed, a critical need remains: trusted, local technical assistance. Today's farmers operate state-of-the-art equipment from their tractor cabs, but personal relationships still matter. They don't want to talk to an AI generated voice and they don't want self-service from a computer. Farmers want a knowledgeable, trusted expert who understands local resource concerns and can dedicate time to their individual needs. To make this a reality, we need well-staffed local offices—places where providers aren't buried in paperwork but instead run efficient programs that allow time for meaningful interaction with the farmers they serve. This is another area where strong partnerships make a difference. One example is the recent MOU between NRCS and Certified Crop Advisors (CCAs), which I've had the opportunity to experience firsthand. This agreement streamlines the process for CCAs to become Technical Service Providers, helping to relieve the burden on overextended local offices.

To truly accelerate conservation adoption, we must align financial incentives with on-the-ground practices. This is where crop insurance can play a pivotal role. We must consider how Federal Crop Insurance can support in-field conservation by recognizing the risk-reducing benefits of conservation, covering the transition to new practices, and offering flexibility for innovative approaches like growing cover crops for seed ahead of cash crops.

The historic rainfall of 2019 caused unprecedented planting delays across the U.S., leading to record-high prevent plant claims and highlighting the vulnerability of our agricultural system to extreme weather. In response, a 2022 analysis examined the impact of two common conservation practices, cover crops and no-till, across six major row crop states. The findings were clear: these

practices reduced the odds ratio by 24 percent[3]. This kind of research underscores what many farmers already know—conservation not only protects the environment but also reduces production risk.

A 2023 study by the University of Illinois *farmdoc* team further strengthened the case. After analyzing six years of data comparing fields with and without a history of cover crop use, they found that cover crops did not increase yield risk in corn. In fact, yields were higher in the lowest-performing 5 percent of fields, suggesting that cover crops can help buffer against the worst outcomes and reduce downside yield risk[4].

These findings make it clear: conservation practices lower risk. It's time for federal crop insurance to reflect that reality. Recognizing these practices would not only support farmer profitability and resilience but also reduce indemnity costs and save taxpayer dollars.

Baby boomers currently own the majority of farmland across the United States, and within the next decade, their average age will reach 80. This puts us on the edge of a generational cliff. Without robust programs to help the next generation gain access to farmland and be economically equipped to adopt conservation practices, we risk losing our position as the global leader in production agriculture. Success won't come from just increasing program capacity or rebranding programs for working lands – we must design entirely new approaches that recognize the uniqueness of each acre and meet farmers where they are. We must reevaluate practice standards and decide not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. This reevaluation will allow us to achieve greater scalability and adoption of effective conservation practices and better support farmers' operations, their families, and our rural communities.

I appreciate your time today and look forward to answering any questions.

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[3] https://foodandagpolicy.org/homepage/focus-areas/agriculture-data/conservation-and-crop-insurance-research-pilot/

[4] https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2023/10/yield-and-yield-risks-of-cover-crops-in-east-central-illinois.html