FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Gathered insights from partnerships for sustainable agriculture

MIDWEST ROW CROP COLLABORATIVE

FEBRUARY 2021

THE COLLABORATIVE

The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative (MRCC) is a unique partnership between leading environmental nonprofit organizations and supply chain companies spanning the full food and agriculture value chain, all aligned around one goal—to drive positive environmental change in the agricultural system in the upper Mississippi River Basin. MRCC achieves this by developing solutions for removing barriers to the widespread adoption of more sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices.

Learning together

In spite of recent systemic disruption, MRCC members remain committed to their partnership. Through collaborative projects and bold corporate commitments, MRCC members are making strides in their efforts toward systems change, including providing financial and technical support for new practice adoption, leveraging behavioral science to support farmer and advisor networks, advancing innovative lending approaches that support soil health, and developing a new campaign to engage consumers on sustainable agriculture.

Members continue to learn from more than a dozen collaborative projects and share with each other on topics like the business case for soil health, financing resilient agriculture, and reaching beyond early adopters with sustainable farming practices. MRCC projects are driving on-the-ground change, increasing adoption of conservation practices in scalable pilots working toward systemic change. Through this existing foundation of joint work and more in the pipeline, MRCC members are learning how to effectively collaborate for more impact beyond what could be achieved by any one organization alone.

Aside from strengthening the effectiveness of their programs by learning from each other, MRCC members are also committed to sharing what they learn more widely to help others on their journey toward a more sustainable agricultural system. One of the most powerful opportunities in bringing MRCC members together is to share these lessons on how to overcome barriers to make projects more scalable and effective. We hope the insights that follow are useful in illustrating our experiences as we work together through collaborative systems change, and that it can help to improve opportunities for scaling success throughout the agricultural system.

BAYER Cargill EDF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND Finding the ways that work Kellogg's PEPSICO

The Nature Conservancy Unilever Walmart WWF

INSIGHTS FROM OUR MEMBER SURVEY

In 2020, MRCC companies and nonprofit organizations shared a detailed look at the practices and strategies used in their supply chain projects to realize the environmental outcomes to which they are committed.

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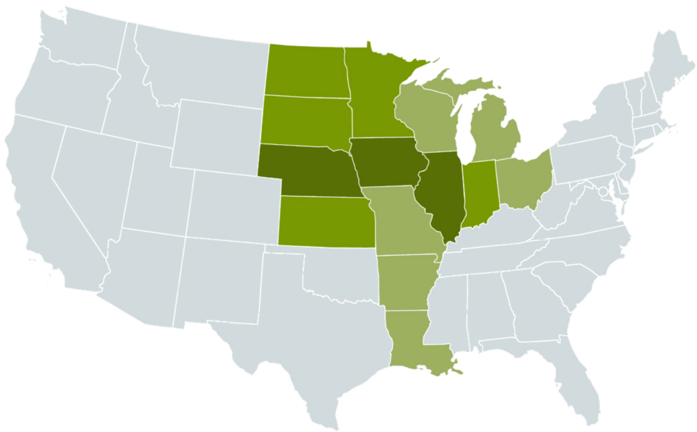
Although members are implementing farmer-focused MRCC projects in a few core states in the Upper Midwest, their survey responses reflected insights from projects across the states highlighted in this map.



Targeted Impacts

Of these sustainable agriculture projects, the most highly prioritized impacts were **supporting farmer well-being** and **improving water quality**, followed by **greenhouse gas (GHG) reductions** and **building climate resilience**.

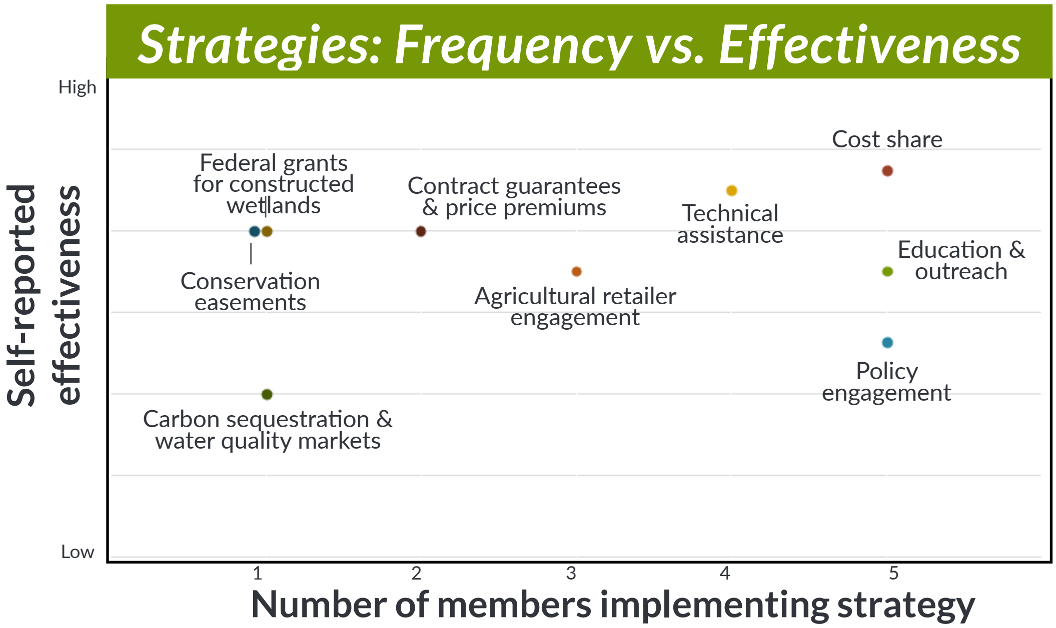
What are the most common sustainable practices being adopted?

A wide range of sustainable practices were encouraged in the projects being implemented by MRCC members, with the most popular being:

- cover crops,
- no-till/strip till/reduced tillage,
- nutrient management plans,
- irrigation management/efficiency,
- integrated pest management/reduced pesticide use, and
- removing marginal land from production.

Supply chain projects are using a mix of strategies to promote practice adoption

In their survey responses, MRCC members reflected on the effectiveness of the strategies they employ to accelerate the adoption of these practices, with **cost share** being among the most common strategy and considered the most effective. Other commonly used strategies included **technical assistance**, **education and outreach**, and **policy engagement.**



Policy is viewed as a driver for change, but its full potential has yet to be realized

While MRCC members have incorporated public policy into their work, its use has significant unrealized potential to drive transformation. With the growing awareness of sustainable agriculture as part of the policy landscape, the timing is particularly good for collaborative policy efforts in which companies in the value chain can engage, either directly or through trade organizations. Examples of these efforts are growing, like the AGree Coalition, the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA), and a renewed commitment to policy among MRCC members through its Policy Work Group. MRCC members and partners understand that for more lasting change, successful integration of sustainable practices in our agricultural system will depend on every part of the value chain stepping forward in their commitment to improvement, which includes sensible policy.

Networks that support farmers are key

Another visible theme from the survey was a reluctance on the part of a broad set of farmers—with the exception of a relatively small set of early adopters—to embrace sustainable farming practices as "the norm." As focus on the social side of practice adoption continues to grow, MRCC members see promise in efforts to normalize these practices with the support of key influencers.

These influencers, identified through member project implementation, were notable for their untapped potential, and members expect that their deeper engagement would substantially benefit project activities. Some stakeholders whose embrace of sustainable farming practices could be particularly powerful include:

- state-level, extension-operated certified crop advisor (CCA) boards,
- farmer cooperatives,
- agricultural retailers, and
- other companies and financial institutions who haven't yet integrated sustainability into their business models.

Progress is driven by partnerships

Finally, MRCC members repeatedly stressed the importance of partnerships in project design and implementation. They believe that complex challenges demand collaborative solutions and aim to pull back the curtain on what has worked and where there are opportunities for improvement, with the hope that the insights shared might offer benefit to others. Characteristics of those partnerships considered especially high value are explored in the following pages, as well as discussion of how those partnerships have provided demonstrable value to project activities.

INVESTING IN PARTNERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Investing time and money in project partners can have more benefit than simply project implementation. The right organization acts as a thought partner, pushing the project forward with unique expertise that can add internal capacity. With the right partner, projects not only have greater impact, but can build credibility, leading to new opportunities to scale and expand work.

Insight #1: Collaboration between corporate partners and nonprofit organizations fills in the gaps (e.g., subject matter expertise and relationships) that might otherwise prevent a project from finding success

Play to strengths

Through MRCC's work group focused on financing sustainable agriculture, Unilever and PepsiCo saw an opportunity to accelerate the adoption of sustainable farming practices by engaging agricultural lenders in the development of new incentives, building on the success of more conventional cost-share transition support. However, their ability to spearhead the design of these financing models was constrained by their limited capacity and expertise in this area of the agricultural system.

Without the commitment of Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and their experienced staff, both PepsiCo and Unilever acknowledge they would've been unable to dedicate the time and effort necessary to build relationships with agricultural lenders and explore opportunities to design financial solutions for farmers who adopt conservation practices.

In this case, the dynamics of the nonprofit organization members supporting collaboration between the lenders and the major brands better suits the capacity, skills, and priorities of all the work group's members. While the development process continues, the work group members believe it's a concept worth committing to and are developing project pilots in 2021.

In their words

"Because food and agricultural lenders often finance both farmers directly as well as companies in the supply chain, they are motivated to identify financial solutions that support farmer adoption of conservation practices and company efforts to achieve their sustainability goals. This collaboration has enabled us all to learn and identify the greatest opportunities to support farmers in overcoming the financial barriers to conservation adoption."

"Innovation in this sector has its challenges, but we believe it's been a productive use of time—we've learned a tremendous amount and we're well positioned to test new solutions in 2021/22."

Members' unique contributions

PepsiCo and Unilever	Environmental Defense Fund and The Nature Conservancy
• Concrete insights and examples from their existing cover crop program to use as a starting point for concept development and program design • Credibility from private industry, increasing the attractiveness of the effort in the eyes of banks and other financial partners	• Development of initial concept and theory of change for finance to accelerate farmer practice adoption • Identification of appropriate financial solutions providers, collaboration with them on specific data and analysis needs to support product development

Insight #2: The best implementing partners share values, speak the same language, and have credibility with farmers.

Find the right fit

Expectations for program design and reporting often differ between corporate and nonprofit organization partners, and the necessary bridging of that gap can be challenging and time-consuming. According to MRCC members, successful partnerships are characterized by trust, transparency, and alignment between an implementing partner's theory of change and the corporate partner's goals and vision.

For MRCC members, partnerships with organizations like Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) are of especially high value, as PFI possesses internal capacity to effectively liaise between corporations and farmers. Of particular importance to the partnership is a shared understanding of each party's needs and values—this allows partners to quickly begin project work rather than devote significant resources to navigating the mechanics of their partnership.

In their words

"We value partners who, when something isn't going well, communicate that to us in straightforward terms. Although those can be challenging situations, that transparency builds trust and ultimately strengthens the relationship between companies and implementers."

"Implementing organizations that have the farmer relationships, know agronomy and conservation, understand science and models for metrics reporting. and can question everything while administering programs are high-value partners. Add to that a willingness to push for innovation and they become a one stop shop for effective collaboration."

Insight #3: Viewing joint work as relationship- and capacity-building rather than transactional creates better outcomes and builds a foundation for future shared work.

Unlock opportunity

Bayer's work with the Soil Health Partnership has been described as "a natural fit" for both entities, with some of the partnership's success attributable to the care taken in developing a project that would prioritize each organization's research objectives. Originating from Bayer's need for growers open to piloting a carbon modeling program, the effort was ultimately made possible by the relationships the Soil Health Partnership held with willing growers. While the traditional funding agreement meant that both parties' immediate needs were met, by integrating research goals outside of the immediate project-based goals, they further extended the benefits of their collaboration.

What corporate partners need	*What implementing partners need*
• Concise and straightforward communication • Detailed reporting of project metrics • Partners with local relationships and landscape knowledge	• Clear expectations of project needs and requirements • Trust in ability to execute project • Project alignment with organization mission, vision, and values

Further resources on partnership

1. Guide to Successful Corporate-NGO Partnerships – *GEMI & EDF*
2. Leveraging the Power of Collaborations – *The SustainAbility Institute by ERM*
3. Successful Partnerships: A Guide – *OECD*
4. Unlocking the Power of Partnership – *KPMG*

FARMER ENGAGEMENT

Farmer recruitment is most successful when farmers are personally engaged by a trusted source, such as another farmer or a local organization. It's also crucial to time the project in the right part of the season and implement in areas not yet saturated by other projects or initiatives.

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Insight #4: Emphasize and test localized, personalized, and responsive recruitment, and prioritize implementing partners whose credibility and relationships enable success.

Respond to the need

In Nebraska, Cargill initiated a cover crop cost share project with the hope of enrolling 25 farmers in the program for its first year. Much to their surprise, local enthusiasm for the program was high enough that they were able to double their enrollees and, maybe more surprising, most of these participants fell outside of the typical early-adopter crowd. To explain much of what made this possible—especially when many recruitment approaches were forced to change due to COVID-19—we can look to agronomists who rose to the challenge.

To lay the groundwork for the enrollment, local Cargill teams engaged in trainings led by PFI where they worked to deeply understand soil health and the cost share program, internalize the value of participation to the farmer, and connect with resources for additional support. When the time came to seek out program participants, the local agronomists reported that the farmers were more interested than ever in getting on the phone to discuss soil health, perhaps because typical opportunities for meaningful discussion of the topic had been reduced and planned field days had been canceled due to the pandemic.

Insight #5: Expand work in areas with less activity / fewer resources to meet enrollment goals, and align offerings in overlapping areas.

Tap into new audiences

For Cargill, another recruitment success came when the company looked for opportunity in less crowded areas. Iowa is—for good reason—an epicenter for soil health efforts from companies and nonprofit organizations alike. However, when the project development team adjusted to focus on Nebraska instead, they were taken aback by the appetite for cover crop cost share participation that they found. Growers who, until that point, had only been able to watch their peers take advantage of a range of support were finally given the opportunity to enroll. While a decision to target a different region hinges on the project's environmental and other goals and whether the geography is able to realize them, expanding recruitment outside of more saturated areas can alleviate some enrollment challenges.

In their words

"When we don't coordinate the transition support companies offer, it creates recruitment challenges and fails to create the kinds of expanded impact we're all seeking. If two different programs are competing for enrollment within the same pool of growers, some of that funding may be more effective elsewhere—so having that information in advance is crucial."

Insight #6: Farmers listen to farmers.

Grow farmer advocates

One element of practice adoption that Unilever values—and which is evident in its work with PFI—is investing in the social infrastructure that supports long-term culture change. While farmers are likely to find good information from trusted sources (e.g., extension services, agricultural retailers), research also shows that growers are likely to seek and trust information from other farmers.

To respond to this reality, PFI has relationship-building embedded into the structure of program enrollment: when a new farmer joins the ranks of those receiving PFI's technical assistance, they're welcomed by a phone call from another participant. As part of this outreach, the participant with more experience offers themselves as a resource, assuring the new enrollee that—among the PFI network—no farmer is an island. The vision for these new participants is that, down the road, they may be the one offering support to those just beginning their journey.

One doesn't have to look too far to see the promise in this strategy on display: at some PFI-sponsored gatherings where a formal presentation had been planned, organizers pivoted to embrace the lively, organic conversations between current practitioners and interested farmers when it became evident that they were more effective and persuasive than the planned remarks.

In their words

"In the places where big tipping points in adoption of soil health practices have been reached, most of those success stories have farmer-led networks at the center along with charismatic group leaders who help facilitate the networks."

"Peer networks are a critical component of creating community, building a culture, and helping to de-risk practice adoption. Building up the capacity of on-the-ground implementing partners is a high impact strategy **if** it can be coupled with a demand signal and incentive structure that can de-risk practice change."

Insight #7: Market-based incentives will disrupt traditional methods of farmer engagement.

A challenge to existing models

Current cost-share programs are designed to provide a "bridge" that supports farmers as they incur additional costs in the adoption of conservation practices. After a few years—when the practices' financial benefits are realized—farmers are generally no longer eligible for the programs.

With emerging market-based approaches like carbon payments, farmers new to certain conservation practices are likely to have more compensation options for practice implementation. In some instances, this approach may make practice adoption more attractive to farmers and encourage long-term practice change. However, it may also become more difficult and expensive to incentivize farmer participation in shorter-term projects. In any case, new models are introducing uncertainty about what types of incentives might be most effective in the years to come, at which rates, and under what conditions.

Comparing a selection of Iowa incentives

Provider	Offered incentives and terms
PepsiCo/Cargill	$40/acre cost-share, max. of 40 acres (new cover crops only) & $10/acre cost-share, max. of 160 acres or 10% of total farmed acres (whichever is greater)
Unilever/ADM	
Indigo Carbon	Up to $30/acre, market-based, 10-year contracts
Soil & Water Outcomes Fund	$30-$45/acre, market-based

Further resources on emerging models

1. Ecosystem Market Information – *Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership*
2. Ecosystem Service Market Credits from Agricultural Working Lands– *Ecosystem Services Market Consortium LLC*
3. Farming for Ecosystem Services: An Ecological Approach to Production Agriculture – *BioScience*
4. Paying Farmers for Environmental Services – *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*

METRICS AND REPORTING

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Publicly shared reporting is essential in building credibility and awareness about the impacts of sustainable agriculture projects, and its rigor and validity can be strengthed through partnerships with academic and scientific institutions. While climate change and greenhouse gas reductions are a primary focus for agriculture, there are opportunities to expand reporting to include nutrient runoff and water quality, soil health, and biodiversity. There is also a growing need for improved and expanded modeling tools in order to accurately scale reporting capabilities.

Insight #8: Opening up reporting to the public strengthens credibility and visibility.

Showing their work

Walmart's approach to addressing environmental issues has, like most companies, evolved over the years—and those changes are particularly visible in the establishment of Project Gigaton. Where the early years could be characterized by more distributed projects, efforts have grown within the company to urge suppliers to accelerate their efforts and those of suppliers further up the supply chain. To achieve this, Walmart has emphasized measurement as a key tool to change suppliers' practices. A Soil Health Calculator, known as FAST-GHG, was created in partnership with Cornell University and MRCC members Environmental Defense Fund and The Nature Conservancy and allows suppliers to estimate carbon benefits of soil health practices in row crop production. The FAST-GHG accounting tool is publicly available on Cornell's website for anyone to use as a simple, scientific method of calculating GHG emissions related to crop production. Likewise, many MRCC members are utilizing an array of metrics from Field to Market to measure and evaluate continuous improvement in GHG reductions, water quality, soil conservation, soil carbon, and biodiversity and transparently reporting their progress through Field to Market's Continuous Improvement Accelerator.

Insight #9: Adapting approaches to measuring project impact is difficult but necessary.

In recent years, the methods MRCC's members have used to define success have evolved based on new information and emerging priorities, and these adjustments will inevitably continue. As organizations refine their approach, some are prompted to reflect on practical issues, like the cost and scalability of quantifying soil organic carbon across varied landscapes, as well as more theoretical issues like the tradeoffs of metric selection—what is gained and what is lost by elevating one over another. At least one member has been wrestling with how to measure the impact of sustainable practices on people, beyond a simple metric of "acres impacted." Additionally, many organizations are currently working to better understand what the concept of "regenerative" means, beyond "sustainable," in terms of how they measure success.

Further, while there are demands for accurate and effective measurement from inside the member companies and nonprofit organizations, as well as from external sources, there are also considerations related to resource allocation—with a finite budget for producing impact in the row crop system, paying for measurement is not necessarily an innovative and exciting proposition for expanded investment, but it is sorely needed. In the context of growing environmental crises, companies are also considering the effectiveness of metrics focused on practice adoption versus a shift to more outcomes-based measures of success.

A new approach

At an earlier point in Project Gigaton's existence, a metric Walmart used to evaluate its success centered on the improvement of nitrogen fertilizer management. However, with maturity and insight from academics and the public, the company's approach expanded to embrace a more holistic look at measuring and defining sustainable agriculture practices—one that focuses on regenerative and soil health outcomes, and accounts for greenhouse gases more broadly. Still, the emphasis on nutrient reduction strategies isn't going anywhere, as it remains an important aspect of water quality, GHG mitigation, and environmental health. As corporate commitments to accelerate sustainable agriculture practices grow, establishing meaningful and practical approaches to metrics will become increasingly important.

BUILDING INTERNAL CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE WORK

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When sustainability becomes part of a company's identity, engagement and buy-in flow much more easily through different parts of the business. The most progressive companies express this not only in their culture, but also in their resourcing decisions and compensation and incentive structures. Whether hiring a project manager to add capacity for moving internal partners on sustainability projects or educating staff to further internal buy-in on the business benefits of sustainable practices, having the right champions to spearhead and move a project forward is essential to program success.

Insight #10: Companies need genuine buy-in from the top and aligned resources to meaningfully engage.

Aligning ambition with action

Corporate sustainability goals are often ambitious in their scope—and rightly so, as setting expectations too low can reflect negatively on the brand and set an artificial limit on the possibilities for impact. The transformation of goals into meaningful outcomes, however, requires a challenging balance between the conceptual and the practical: keeping the high-level vision at the forefront while digging into the details of effective design and implementation of a portfolio of projects. At their best, sustainability programs are bolstered by leadership from the executive team and are adequately resourced, giving them a fighting chance to help support the company's bold goals.

Incentives and making sustainability pay

Among MRCC members, one common strategy to increase the adoption of sustainable practices is to offer farmers financial incentives to ease their transition. While this type of support tends not to be enough to compel widespread change on its own, it has proven to be a powerful motivator—and models like these demonstrate promising results as many farmers choose to adopt cover crops on acres beyond those covered by the cost share. However, MRCC members have encountered other parts of the agricultural system where sustainability goals and financial incentives conflict.

Procurement teams are typically incentivized to source ingredients at the lowest cost for their customers, and subsequently find it challenging to pay more for any embedded costs of sustainable practices. Likewise, agricultural retailers asked to reduce nutrient inputs may be working against their own interest based on the traditional incentives in place. In these cases, there are opportunities for sustainability goals to be integrated into compensation models, and MRCC members who have witnessed these approaches firsthand cite it as catalytic to powerful breakthroughs.

Internalizing the value of sustainability

In the food and agricultural system, there are stark divisions between those companies leaning into sustainable development and those holding onto conventional models of operation—investment being one important measure of this division, and the degree to which sustainability is embedded in its operations being another. For one MRCC member, a concept for a sustainable feed project with big potential has languished for years due to its inability to find a compatible partner in the livestock industry. Among the reasons offered for this particular project's failure to launch, the member primarily cited an absence of companies in the sector that understand and have fully internalized the value of sustainability and projects like these. Despite the supply chain disruption that virtually all companies in the food and agriculture system experienced due to COVID-19, the unfortunate reality is that most haven't yet integrated resilience-building as a core value in decision making.

Big corporate goals for bold action

June 2020

- **Unilever** announced a new series of sustainability commitments, including reaching net zero emissions from all its products by 2039, investing $1.1 billion in a new dedicated Climate & Nature fund, and introducing a Regenerative Agriculture Code for all suppliers.
- **The Kellogg Company** announced progress towards its Better Days commitment, including supporting more than 433,000 farmers, workers, and women through conservation agriculture programs.

July 2020

- **Bayer** launched its Bayer Carbon Initiative, a pilot program that will pay farmers for capturing carbon in cropland soils.

September 2020

- **Cargill** set a goal to advance regenerative agriculture practices across 10 million acres of North American farmland by 2030.
- **Walmart** announced its goal to become a regenerative company, including targeting zero emissions by 2040 and aiming to protect, manage, or restore at least 50 million acres of land by 2030.

January 2021

- **PepsiCo** announced plans to more than double its science-based climate goal, reducing absolute greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across its entire value chain by more than 40% by 2030 and targeting net-zero emissions by 2040.

Insight #11: Companies' ability to effectively engage in sustainable agriculture depends on enough internal capacity cultivated through education or hiring.

With the growing urgency and interest around solutions for a more sustainable agricultural system, MRCC members feel the pressure to develop additional capacity to improve and expand existing project work.

Developing leadership from within

One effective means of capacity-building is strengthening leadership from within the existing organization. To boost recruitment in their Nebraska program, Cargill employed this approach by working with local Cargill teams to build their knowledge about soil health and programs for which farmers might be eligible, as well as helping them to understand and convey the value of participation in a cover crop cost share program. In this case, the strategy was primarily intended to support farmer enrollment efforts, but it also served as a development opportunity for the local Cargill team to strengthen their relationships and credibility with the farmers—ultimately laying the foundation for more soil health-focused work in the future.

Finding the right person

It should come as no surprise that, while collaborative efforts create powerful opportunities, they also offer their own share of challenges. In the process of MRCC members developing joint projects, some must first navigate the complexity of working across various internal stakeholders and different parts of their business before they are even able to dive into the complex work with other MRCC members. For many, it can be a tall order to ask that—on top of their other commitments—members devote precious time to finding the right person to engage with a refined message that resonates. In some instances, this may only require a change in messenger: one member recalls a time they struggled to get a key point to "click" with colleagues whose engagement was essential, which they overcame by enlisting the help of a peer whose background and experience helped the message land more powerfully.

Although MRCC member organizations have demonstrated willingness to invest in sustainable agriculture—for instance, hiring a new corporate project manager to drive collaborative projects—teams are still pushed to establish how the work enabled by hiring new staff will contribute to the company's bottom line, as simply meeting sustainability goals doesn't guarantee profitability. Ultimately though, companies persuaded by the case for committing to sustainable and regenerative agriculture generally understand the threat that inaction poses to profitability in the long-term.

In their words

"Before we're able to engage fully in project development with external partners, we typically have to unite fragmented conversations across different parts of the business, boil down the key issues, barriers, and limitations, and understand what we have to solve for internally. Once we're able to make headway on those issues, we're better prepared to collaborate effectively with others."

RAISING THE AMBITION

Through platforms like the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative, companies and nonprofit organizations are able to explore new approaches to agricultural challenges and find solutions that increase productivity while ensuring soil health, protecting water, addressing the factors contributing to climate change, and supporting farm families.

Collaboration can be an important catalyst for new solutions. However, it does come at some cost, including financial, time, and added complexity. We hear from our members about a growing "collaboration fatigue," and not all organizations may be at a point where collaboration makes sense for them. While it may be a positive indication that the challenges facing our agricultural system are getting their due attention through a proliferation of collaborative efforts and initiatives, it doesn't take away from the reality that those individuals and organizations on the front lines of change have a finite amount of time in the day.

For their part, MRCC members have expressed that the value derived from collaboration is worth the investment. They view MRCC as "a place to really think" with peers and generate new ideas. For the industry-leading companies and nonprofit organizations engaged in this work, there are limited opportunities to test, explore, and innovate with others, and do so with vulnerability and an open orientation toward learning and improving. In the coming months, MRCC's members are eager to expand their work and explore other potential pathways for change, including issues like non-operator landowner engagement, agriculture retailer incentive structures, and equity in the row crop system. With the focus of our members and the many others engaged in this work, we know that it's possible to transform what is, at this moment, an emerging seed for change into system-wide embrace of the practices and outcomes that will ensure a future for our agricultural system that is resilient, healthy, and vibrant. We invite those who share these ambitions and a commitment to achieving them to join us in this journey.

We are grateful to the following MRCC members and partners for their contributions to this report:

Becky Langer-Curry, Bayer
Ryan Sirolli, Cargill
Tai Ullmann, Cargill
Maggie Monast, Environmental Defense Fund
Kate Schaffner, The Kellogg Company
Margaret Henry, PepsiCo
Greg Fishbein, The Nature Conservancy
Stewart Lindsay, The Nature Conservancy
Carrie Vollmer-Sanders, The Nature Conservancy
Sarah Carlson, Practical Farmers of Iowa
Elizabeth Reeves, Sustainable Food Lab
Stefani Millie Grant, Unilever
Mark Eastham, Walmart
Nicole Tanner, World Wildlife Fund

Co-authored by Haley Burns & Camille Morse Nicholson
The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative is facilitated by

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