

An aerial photograph of a farm. In the foreground, there are rows of green crops. A dirt road winds through the fields. In the middle ground, there are several large, cylindrical metal silos. The background shows more fields and a clear blue sky with some clouds.

2023 Impact Report

MIDWEST ROW CROP COLLABORATIVE: LEADING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

*A look forward and highlights
from the past year*

**MIDWEST
ROW CROP**
COLLABORATIVE

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LETTER FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

As we reflect on 2023, we are filled with pride and anticipation. This past year has been one of refocus and renewed energy in an increasingly complex agricultural and corporate sustainability landscape. The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative (MRCC) remains committed to deep collaboration that drives transformation in the Midwest agricultural system.

MRCC has always been more than just a coalition—it's a trusted space where leaders and collective learning thrive. We are excited to welcome American Farmland Trust, which brings a critical, farmer-focused perspective to our work. Throughout the year, our nongovernmental organization (NGO) members have contributed innovative ideas and demonstrated unwavering commitment to our shared goals.

In 2023, we integrated our efforts across policy, projects, and leadership by forming two systems change initiatives: crop diversification and sustainable biofuels. These initiatives are rooted in a shared learning journey to explore how MRCC can uniquely influence and drive actionable projects, supply chain engagement, and positive policy change. In a time where collective action is crucial, we invite you to join us in our efforts to create an agriculture system that supports a healthy environmental ecosystem and is economically viable for all. Thank you for your dedication to this important cause.



Suzy Friedman
MRCC Co-Chair
World Wildlife Fund



Emily O'Halloran
MRCC Co-Chair
Kellanova

Join us

The Midwest Row Crop Collaborative develops innovative solutions for removing barriers to the widespread adoption of regenerative agricultural practices in a collaborative and precompetitive environment. With a small membership by design, members have tested approaches including designing conservation finance solutions to derisk practice adoption, using social science to support and promote regenerative approaches, and developing specific supply chains for crops produced with regenerative practices.

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Recent trends in agriculture

Significant developments in Midwestern row cropping continue to impact Midwest Row Crop Collaborative (MRCC) members, implementing partners, and farmers. A snapshot of these include:

- Unprecedented public and private investments in climate-smart agriculture.
- Ongoing impacts of climate change experienced through unpredictable weather patterns.
- Uncertain policy future and funding in the absence of a Farm Bill.
- Stabilization of supply chains following the COVID-19 disruptions.
- Economic uncertainty with rising interest rates and equipment and input costs.
- Continued consolidation of farms and loss of farmers in the profession.

With 1.5 billion in federal dollars allocated to partner-driven conservation and climate solutions through the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program, \$3.1 billion allocated to the USDA Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities program, and unprecedented private investment from supply chain partners, 2023 began what is described as a once-in-a-lifetime investment into the future of agriculture in the United States. These investments aim to promote practices including cover cropping, crop rotations, and precision nutrient management; provide financial and technical assistance to farmers for adopting conservation practices; and integrate data collection for farm operations and carbon markets.



Many MRCC members are involved in these newly created or expanded partnerships and have made significant private and staffing investments in conservation incentives, programs, and training to expedite systems change.

The Midwest experienced severe weather impacts in 2023, notably prolonged drought conditions that affected over 80% of corn and soybean crops including Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska. Higher temperatures and increased precipitation variability further strained crop production. These adverse weather events impact farmers in addition to the U.S. economy. With billions of bushels of corn, rice, soy, and wheat produced in the Midwest, the region plays a critical role in both domestic markets and international trade. These crops are vital for food products, animal feed, and industrial applications, including sustainable biofuels.

Corporations and farmers are navigating significant economic pressures as they strive to meet sustainability goals. American farmers are grappling with the sharpest decline in U.S. farm income in history, driven by rising input costs, fluctuating commodity prices, and the financial strains of adopting regenerative practices. As farm incomes shrink, the economic viability of transitioning to more sustainable agricultural systems become increasingly challenging, necessitating innovative financing solutions and policy support.

Like consumers, companies are facing rising costs due to inflation, increasing interest rates, and the need to invest heavily in sustainability initiatives to meet regulatory demands and stakeholder expectations. These financial pressures are compounded by the complexities of implementing new sustainability disclosure standards.

Given the significant current and future investments by the corporate sector to meet their science-based targets and improve the productivity and resiliency of the commodities they rely on, the upcoming Farm Bill is the last policy opportunity for Congress to significantly influence the agricultural system ahead of the deadline for companies to meet their 2030 science-based targets. The delay in hearings and ultimate passage of the bill continues to plague all actors within the supply chain.

Midwestern farmers are aging out of the profession. Succession planning remains limited, but a bright spot includes small increases in new and beginning farmers. Efforts to enhance diversity are ongoing, though most farmers remain white and male. Farm consolidation continues, with smaller farms merging into larger operations to achieve economies of scale. Of note, younger farmers are more likely to adopt advanced technologies like precision agriculture and data analytics to inform their business decisions. Because the complexity of our regenerative agriculture system exceeds any of our individual capacities, we've seen an increase in interest in landscape-level approaches to enriching place-based assets.



WHAT GROUNDS US

Shared principles for systems change

Midwest Row Crop Collaborative members are guided by shared principles. Collectively we are:

- Generating positive impacts from agricultural practices, including soil health, water quality, climate benefits, and biodiversity.
- Building resilience through diversity of plant species, businesses, people, and culture.
- Supporting crop production with sufficient yield and nutritional quality to meet existing and future needs, while keeping the impact of resource inputs as low as possible.

With members representing each step in the value chain, our Theory of Change demonstrates a commitment to a systems approach in facing challenges, researching solutions, piloting projects, and scaling successes. Within our Theory of Change we integrate policy, projects, and shared learning. The strength of our NGO members creates an unparalleled opportunity for precompetitive learning and action. The common ground developed between the NGO and corporate members enables systems change.

MIDWEST ROW CROP COLLABORATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE

Mission: Test and demonstrate solutions that promote the widespread adoption of regenerative, science-based approaches which benefit the environment, and share learnings that support scaled adoption across the supply chain.



OUR PROJECTS

Changing systems in agriculture involves a wide range of participants with deep commitment and willingness to test new approaches. Our theory of change is evident within our current projects.

Nebraska and Iowa

Members and partners: Practical Farmers of Iowa, Unilever, PepsiCo, Cargill, Walmart

Conservation focus: Climate change mitigation, water quality, biodiversity

Practices: Cover crops, no-till/strip till, nitrogen reduction, diversified crop rotation, integrated pest management

Illinois

Members and partners: Illinois Corn Growers Association - Precision Conservation Management, PepsiCo, Cargill, Walmart, Bunge, Sustainable Food Lab, and Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research

Conservation focus: Climate change mitigation, water quality, soil health

Practices: Cover crops, no-till/strip till, nitrogen reduction, diversified crop rotation

Illinois and Michigan

Members and partners: The Nature Conservancy, advised by Kellanova

Conservation focus: Climate change mitigation, water quality, soil health

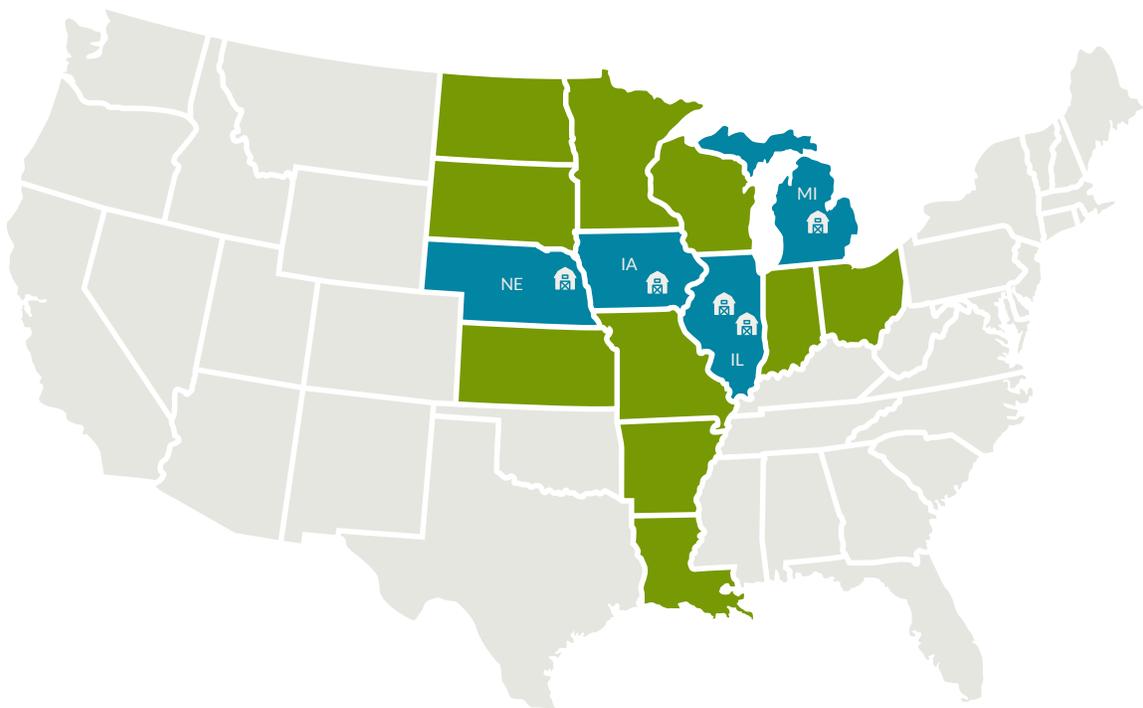
Practices: No-till/strip till, cover crops, nutrient management, pay for performance in collaboration with merchandizer utilizing STAR tool

Illinois

Members and partners: Soil and Water Outcomes Fund, PepsiCo, Nutrien, Walmart, Ingredion

Conservation focus: Soil health, GHG reduction, improved biodiversity

Practices: Cover crops, no-till/strip till, nitrogen reduction



TESTING SOLUTIONS: DE-RISKING PRACTICE ADOPTION

An ongoing focus within each of our multi-year pilots is de-risking practice adoption. Tracking over time within each geographic region allows the members, implementors, and farmers to understand variations in approach based on soils, growing seasons, and regional economics.

De-risking practice adoption can assume many forms. In our current portfolio, the following approaches are being evaluated:

- Expanding use of cover crops.
- Diversifying crops with additional rotations.
- Tailoring crop advisory services.
- Creating capacity of merchandizers to offer conservation programs.
- Simplifying conservation programs.

Cover crops provide sweeping benefits. They improve soil health, increase biodiversity, demonstrably reduce soil erosion, and expand wildlife habitat. Cover crops are also extremely effective at reducing net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by removing atmospheric CO₂ and sequestering it in the soil as our most valuable agricultural resource—organic matter in the soil.

Our members are learning that an absence of markets for small grains, coupled with limited infrastructure and risk management programs, prevent farmers from diversifying their crop rotations. This is a specific barrier seen in a Practical Farmers of Iowa program that pays farmers to add small grain and legume cover crops into their corn and soybean rotations. Directly supporting farmers transition to include additional rotation requires market demands internalizing the externalities of the current system.

What we are learning will inform recommendations for changes in policy, projects, and organizational practices.



CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS: AGRICULTURE NETWORK ENGAGEMENT

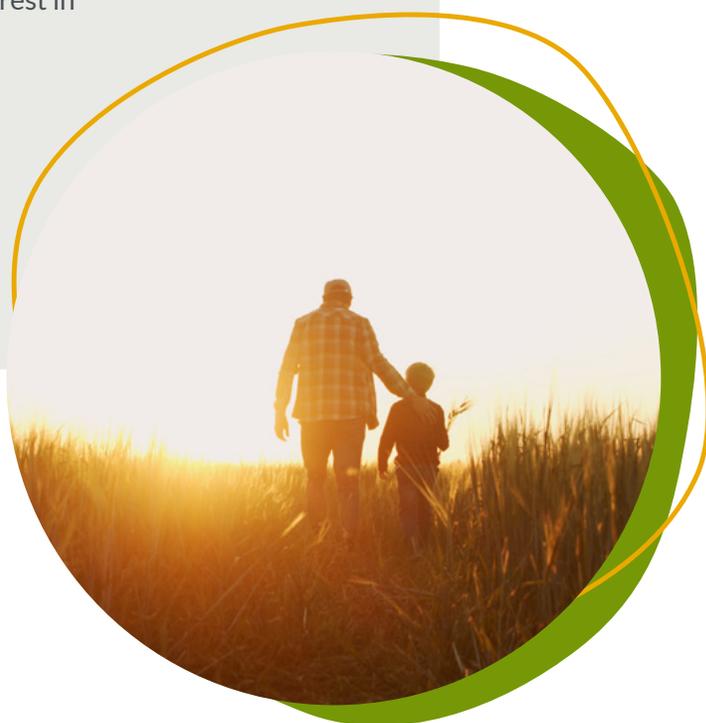
Midwest Row Crop Collaborative members are clear-eyed that practice change is only possible with on-the-ground partners and farmers. Connecting farmers with programs remains a systemic challenge. Trusted relationships with advisors are the gold standard of engagement in the agriculture industry. With billions invested by public and private partners to scale conservation, increasing the reach to new farmers requires new ways of engagement. Practical Farmers of Iowa is working to increase brand awareness with farmers and is using advertising campaigns to help with additional program recruitment. Merchandisers can be important partners for recruitment as demonstrated in The Nature Conservancy's [engagement with wheat merchandizers in Michigan](#).

Another opportunity to scale is through values-based engagement that provides a farmer the opportunity to interact with information before having a meeting with a trusted advisor or responding to an inquiry about program enrollment. MRCC members supported research funded by Walmart Foundation to understand and connect with middle adopters—those farmers who see themselves as not quite ready to make a change. Working with Trust In Food™, we developed an outreach and engagement approach using a data-informed understanding of a moveable middle, corn and soy farmer living in Illinois, Iowa, or Nebraska. The engagement reflected the values of legacy, leadership, and protection as drivers in behavior change. Through a mix of 30 different outreach methods including blog posts, podcasts, text messages, and direct mail, we learned what value propositions motivate, which channels for message delivery are effective, and how different farmers react to different engagement opportunities.

Pairing a values-based messaging approach with preferred outreach methods, our engagement performed at a rate of three-to-five times benchmark. This heightened engagement demonstrated increased interest in the information. Additionally, a longitudinal study showed that sentiment related to conservation agriculture improved measurably in the project area during the one-year span. Our goal was to increase awareness, understanding, and readiness, not enroll farmers. We experienced 161 farmers ready to enroll and were fortunate to connect them to either Practical Farmers of Iowa or Precision Conservation Management.

In lieu of a report, MRCC members developed a web-based, step-by-step guide for conservation leaders.

[ReachFarmersFaster.org](#) offers the MRCC case study and tools for others to design data-driven outreach and engagement strategies that motivate farmers to connect to conservation agriculture programs and resources.



The upcoming Farm Bill is a defining moment for positive agriculture policy. For companies, farmers, consumers, and communities to experience the benefits of a more resilient food and agriculture system, there is a dire need to increase focus and resources for climate and the environment beyond the conservation title alone. Scaled adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices offers a significant opportunity for farmers to become more resilient, build soil health, increase biodiversity, and protect water systems while helping them become more economically sustainable through reduced input costs and diversified income streams.

Informed by collective experience and deep partnerships with farmers, MRCC members believe the Farm Bill offers a critical opportunity for Congress and the Administration to partner with the private sector for investments in landscape-level, climate-smart, and science-based policies and practices. Policy makers continue to hear from MRCC members regarding key policy recommendations at this critical time in agriculture.

Key policy recommendations

- Develop tools in partnership with private sector leaders that improve the cost-effectiveness and accuracy of monitoring, measurement, reporting, and verification to help farmers engage in ecosystem and climate markets and verify practices and impacts for value chain partners.
- Create streamlined, consistent, and understandable processes for farmers and other supply chain partners to account for existing practices and to track progress and accountability toward Greenhouse Gas Protocol and the Science Based Targets Initiative.
- Support the improvement of readily available verification tools that include robust measurement, monitoring, reporting, and verification to maximize credibility, compatibility, usability, financial benefit, and interoperability by farmers.

- Ensure standards for programs that enable farmer participation in emerging climate and ecosystems markets are strong and verifiable.
- Accelerate the impact of conservation programs through increased investment, flexibility, adaptability, and ongoing improvements in program delivery to maximize the benefits of public-private collaboration, increase investment in conservation technical assistance, and prioritize funding for practices and management systems with the greatest outcome for climate and co-benefits for biodiversity, water, and soil health.
- Enable innovation by creating a dedicated team for moving innovative ideas and technologies from pilot-scale to mainstream programming.

Through the development of Farm Bill priorities and subsequent in-network discussions, MRCC members co-developed two policy memos from the unique perspective of a value chain public-private partnership. One focused on [the power of public private partnerships](#) and the other focused on [the business case for agricultural partnerships and capacity building](#).



Environmental Initiative staff support MRCC members in seeking creative solutions to agriculture's most urgent challenges, provide leadership in convenings designed to explore and act on emerging opportunities, and engage in learning to share with MRCC members who remain at the leading edge of their industries.

Below is a sampling of roles and opportunities our staff was honored to be a part of:

- Showcasing nature-based solutions and strengthened relationships on a global scale with partners in the United Kingdom and France.
- Supporting development of a transformative crop diversification workshop with Sustainable Food Lab for leading NGOs and consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies.
- Facilitating panels at Sustainable Ag Summit, Field to Market, and America's Conservation Ag Movement events.
- Leading a teaching workshop on designing data-driven engagement strategies for farmers at the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting.
- Advising on Diversified Farming Systems work group convened by [AGree](#).
- [Advising on Seeding Solutions](#) for the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research.
- Serving as an elected member for the Outreach & Education Committee of Field to Market.



Conserving water in regional aquifers

In 2023, the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative's work broadened to the entire Mississippi River Basin, expanding to other commodities of focus. The MRCC steering committee gathered in the Mississippi River Delta region of Arkansas for a day-long learning session regarding rice production from on-the-ground experts. The field day, organized and led by staff from Ducks Unlimited, allowed members the opportunity to gather insights from people with direct experience in production.

A key learning from the on-the-ground experts is that programs encouraging innovation require up-front, direct-to-farmer investment and a minimum run time of three-to-five years.

Groundwater reserves are being rapidly depleted due to agricultural demands; new technologies and new ways of growing are critical for the resiliency of commodity supply, farmer livelihoods, and rural communities. Innovations in irrigation practices offer the greatest opportunity to positively impact greenhouse gas emissions and protect groundwater assets in the region.

Cost share during transition is essential to allow farmers time to discover value beyond the initial financial investment. Further, multiple benefits realized over multiple growing seasons typically result in more sustained practice adoption. Throughout their supply chains, MRCC members provide financial support for practice adoption.

One size does not fit all when considering practice adoption. The importance of place-based solutions is significant in the food and agriculture industry. Even within counties, farmers have different needs based on countless variables. Even within one commodity—in this case, rice—differing practices may be utilized to ensure crop resiliency and protect vital resources.

Sustainable biofuels learning series

According to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, any fuel produced from biological materials—whether burned for heat or processed into alcohol—qualifies as a “biofuel.” The two principal biofuels are ethanol and biodiesel. Biofuels output within the United States has relied almost exclusively on corn-based ethanol. After ethanol, soy-based biodiesel is the next most significant biofuel in the United States.

Midwest Row Crop Collaborative members historically focused their efforts on driving regenerative agriculture in food markets. However, the biofuel industry is a significant off-taker of the corn-soy system. Recognizing that 40% of total corn production is used for biofuels, MRCC members began a learning journey to understand the current conventional starch (corn/sorghum) and oilseed (soy, canola) feedstock system, and what it might take to deliver better environmental outcomes in biofuel production.

Significant opportunity exists in the biofuels industry to meaningfully support farmers transition to regenerative farming systems. Clear signals for farmers to produce regeneratively grown biofuels feedstocks within ecological limits could provide greater support and market signals than food markets could alone.



New partnerships were formed during our first-ever project “sprint.” The sprint was designed to rapidly cultivate, explore, and decide upon systems change strategies and portfolios of projects within the landscape of the Mississippi River Basin. Notably, consumer packaged goods companies and NGO members forged new research-based partnerships to build the foundation for a long-term business case for sourcing diversified crops. Successes include forming a multilateral carbon accounting project managed by the Sustainable Food Lab and Ecosystem Service Market Consortium and two corporate members working together on a full-value-chain project for corn.

Environmental Initiative staff regularly engages with financial organizations, implementors, and NGOs to facilitate new partnerships, share lessons learned between partners, pilot new projects on the landscape designed to create new markets, test new financial mechanisms, and engage industry actors in new ways.

Key partners include:

- American Farmland Trust
- Environmental Defense Fund
- HSBC
- Practical Farmers of Iowa
- Precision Conservation Management
- The Nature Conservancy
- Sustainable Food Lab
- Soil and Water Outcomes Fund
- Walmart Foundation
- World Wildlife Fund



What to watch for in 2024-25

We are building on momentum from the past 12 months. Over the next year we are leaning in to our shared commitment to learning and refining processes to maximize impact.

- Applying in-depth learning on crop diversification and biofuels to in-field and supply chain programs.
- Advocating for policy to drive systems change.
- Expanding project opportunities through custom matchmaking across the membership.
- Recruiting new members.
- Designing new projects through member “sprints.”

Unique opportunities for members

Trusted network - Small, tight-knit, and regularly convened group generates and tests new ideas.

Benefits stacking - Landscape-level field programs enabling acreage and crop rotations to serve more than one brand at a time.

Cost sharing - Financial resources to farmers are available through pooled funding.

Collaboration with NGOs - Access a range of agricultural resources and expertise by working multilaterally with top environmental nonprofits.

Influence policy outcomes - Activate members' extensive on-the-ground experience to address policy barriers and inform policy opportunities.

Engage farmers - Develop and deploy social science projects to inform behavior change and grower engagement practices.



IN CLOSING

The leading organizations that comprise the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative's membership are committed to working within our U.S. food and agricultural system to deliver environmental outcomes at a meaningful scale throughout the Mississippi River Basin.

From field-level relationships to global impact, each member offers unique value and perspective within the supply chain. I see member organizations demonstrating the power of collective action by engaging in conversation and problem-solving for the most pressing challenges facing farmers and companies. Focused on expanding regenerative agricultural solutions that enhance soil health and water quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, members are diving into learning about opportunities for new markets for traditional crops and emerging crops. Our team remains committed to cultivating the community that members find value in.

I look forward to the innovation and new partnerships emerging in the months ahead and offer gratitude to the investments our members have contributed to each other and to conservation agriculture. If you are interested in learning more about this intentionally small collaborative, I welcome the conversation.

Warmly,

Jenny



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MIDWEST ROW CROP COLLABORATIVE



Learn more

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- Suzy Friedman, Co-Chair, World Wildlife Fund
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