

Illinois Engages With National Program To Advance Soil Health

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CHICAGO - The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) signed a memorandum of understanding establishing a state-wide program to standardize soil health practices and set clear levels of achievement for farmers engaging in best practices. The program enables IDOA to implement legislation passed this year to increase use of cover crops, strip till, no till, and erosion and sediment control practices. This is another step forward in encouraging agriculture partners to capitalize on conservation practices.

“Agriculture is the heart of who we are as a state, and it’s our biggest industry,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Three-quarters of our state is farmland, and as we look to the future of farming and conservation, we’re ensuring that Illinois farmers have the necessary tools to succeed. That’s why I’m proud to establish the STAR program to further support our agricultural economy, families, and community.”

Saving Tomorrow’s Agricultural Resources (STAR) is a model program started in Illinois by the Champaign County Soil & Water Conservation District. It provides a free tool for farmers and landowners and encourages the use of best practices and decisions that will reduce nutrient and soil loss on their fields. Farmers are evaluated on their crop rotation, tillage, nutrient applications, and use of conservation practices to generate their overall field score. The program will align with the goals established in P.A. 103-0494 passed by Senator Ram Villivalam (D-Chicago) and Rep. Michael Kelly (D-Chicago) after years of negotiations between the environmental and the farming communities. The initiative moves Illinois forward to meet the goals of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.

Resources for the initiative will come from Conservation 40, a new IDOA partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) and the Sangamon County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). By leveraging \$3.5 million in state dollars to capture \$9.8 million in federal funds, IDOA envisions expanding the playing field to support voluntary efforts by farmers to reduce nutrient loss, build soil health, manage water resources, increase yields, profits, and climate resilience.

“This is a great step forward for Illinois agriculture,” said Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Jerry Costello II. “I applaud not only our staff for utilizing existing programs to meet the goals established by the legislation, but also Sen. Villivalam and Rep. Kelly for their due-diligence and good-faith efforts to make this a reality. Combining the resources of our successful Conservation 40 program with the metrics within the STAR program to achieve the goals set forth in state legislation is a creative way to achieve meaningful progress.”

STAR provides scientific validation for P.A. 103-0494 because all STAR applicants are providing the Department with accurate metrics of performance. Scores are converted to a STAR rating of 1 to 5 STARs, with 5 STARs indicating commitment to a suite of practices proven to improve soil health and water quality.

“Working in partnership with state STAR Affiliates and their producers, state agencies, conservation districts, universities, non-profits and other conservation focused entities, STAR has the potential to cost-effectively impact a majority of production acres in the

US,” said STAR Executive Director Caroline Wade. “The standardized STAR framework provides producers, investors, and supply chain partners a clear roadmap for increasing conservation outcomes and evaluating progress. By providing producers a straightforward entry into conservation practice adoption and an easy on ramp to in new value-driven programs and opportunities, STAR can then bridge the gap between producers’ perceptions of sustainability and the many outcomes-based market programs and supply chain initiatives.”

“The Illinois Environmental Council is proud to stand with the Illinois Department of Agriculture and Governor's Office in celebrating the passage and implementation of SB 1701, said Eliot Clay, IEC’s Land Use Programs Director. “It's great to see the administration taking a tested, science-backed approach to wisely aligning resources invested in improving the soil health and water quality we need to make progress on our 2025 NLRS goals. We look forward to the work ahead and hope this is a major step in Illinois becoming a national leader in regenerative, responsible agriculture production.”

“We are very supportive of the quick effort by Governor Pritzker, Director Costello, and the Department of Agriculture to implement the new law. P.A. 103-0494 allows federal funds to be leveraged, to continue pursuing our shared goals for conservation, while providing more direction on soil health duties to SWCDs,” said Rich Guebert, President of Illinois Farm Bureau. “It is exciting to know that the hard work that all the parties who worked on this new law is coming to fruition. Our goal has always been to bring forward successful conservation practices to reduce nutrient losses in a voluntary manner.”

“Agriculture is far and away Illinois’ largest industry, with over 75% of our state’s land area under cultivation,” said State Rep. Michael Kelly, D – Chicago. “That’s why a program to ensure we keep our soil rich and fertile is so important. The STAR initiative will help keep Illinois agriculture a source of prosperity and enrichment for generations to come.”