

CONSERVATION CROPPING SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

The Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative (CCSI) works to improve soils on Indiana cropland, increasing its abilities to produce food, fiber and fuel. The initiative focuses on farmer-proven solutions, such as using a systems approach to improve soil and water quality.

HISTORY OF THE CCSI

CCSI grew out of the Conservation Tillage Initiative, which helped farmers implement practices that improved water quality across all working farmland. From 2002-2005, the initiative focused on promoting no-till on corn acres. No-till helped farmers reduce erosion, but the practice was slow to increase organic matter and prevent ephemeral gully erosion.

As cover crops became more popular, those working with the Conservation Tillage Initiative recognized that a systems approach was the logical next step for improving soil on individual farms and farm fields. No-till alone was not enough to address all of the soil and water quality challenges the state faced. In 2006, the initiative's focus shifted to agriculture systems. The Conservation Tillage Initiative became the Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative in January 2010.



STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT FARMERS AND CONSERVATION

CCSI promotes the adoption of science-based, farmer-proven practices through grassroots leadership. CCSI envisions an Indiana with healthy and productive soils, clean water, profitable and resilient agriculture, healthy, diverse ecosystems and where our communities embrace a conservation ethic.

DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The program continues to focus on the principles of a systems approach to enhance soil function, farm ecology, and water quality. The systems approach also can help farmers build resilience to extreme weather. The principles include the following:



Partners and staff of CCSI discovered that the organization's specialty was translating and interpreting scientific research for farmers and other stakeholders. As part of this outreach and education focus, CCSI's staff and partners seek and listen to ideas from many farmers in various stages of implementing conservation agriculture systems. Through CCSI, they learn about opportunities and barriers that farmers encounter in working with conservation agriculture systems.

CCSI's stakeholders include the farmers and landowners of the 12 million acres of Indiana cropland, as well as non-governmental organizations and urban audiences who are affected by erosion and run-off from farmland.

Farmers and other stakeholders are also connected with a network of researchers at Purdue University, University of Notre Dame, Ball State University and Indiana University. These researchers are involved in fields such as agronomy, water quality, social sciences and biology.

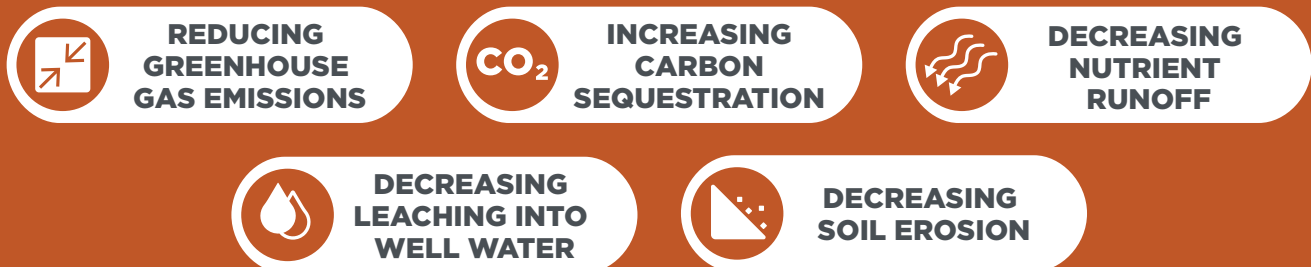
More than 400 of CCSI's partners were surveyed while CCSI was creating its 2017 strategic plan. From the partners' thoughts on CCSI's strengths and assets, the following goals were developed:

- 1** Engage and involve farmers in building the adoption and promotion of soil health management systems.
- 2** Collaborate with and support partners in grassroots and local level organizations to build trust and provide information to help soil health practice adopters.
- 3** Effectively communicate the CCSI mission, strategy, available resources, and needed tools.
- 4** Review, decide, and act on CCSI's role in research related to soil health.
- 5** Diversify funding sources and implement a funding strategy that will allow CCSI to support its mission and achieve the goals outlined in this plan.

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RESULTS

Farmers who work with CCSI have seen several benefits to using conservation agriculture systems, such as:



Indiana's tillage transect, which quantifies the plants and practices used on the state's crop acreage, shows that ***Hoosier farmers are leading the way in adopting cover crops.*** The 2018 transect showed that one million acres of the twelve million acres of Indiana cropland are sown with cover crops, but only 20-25% of the farmers receive financial assistance to plant them. Most use their own funds.

PARTNERSHIPS

CCSI has caught attention nationally with its successes. As a program of the Indiana Conservation Partnership (ICP), the CCSI works with a unique blend of commodity groups, conservation organizations and government agencies.

Members of the Indiana Conservation Partnership include the following:

- Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- Indiana's 92 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs)
- Indiana Department of Environmental Management
- Indiana Department of Natural Resources
- Indiana State Department of Agriculture (ISDA), Division of Soil Conservation
- Purdue Extension
- State Soil Conservation Board
- U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

CCSI also works extensively with:

- Agribusiness Council of Indiana
- American Farmland Trust
- Indiana Agriculture Nutrient Alliance
- Indiana Corn Marketing Council
- Indiana Farm Bureau
- Indiana Soybean Alliance
- Local watershed groups including Western Lake Erie Basin Science and Solutions
- North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE)
- The Nature Conservancy
- Women for the Land

Indiana Agriculture Nutrient Alliance (IANA) works extensively with CCSI to promote nutrient management and soil health practices to keep Indiana's farms viable with an ultimate goal of reducing nutrient loss to water.

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