

# CONSERVATION CONVERSATIONS

## Part 3: Engaging Your Landowner in Conservation Activities



**Your guide to partnering with landowners to improve soil health, implement long-term lease security and increase co-investments in conservation.**

In the Midwest, roughly 60% of all farmland is rented. For generations, successful farm operations on rented ground have run on trust and handshakes. Every year across the region, landowners entrust their land to tenants who steward its health and productivity.

This trust remains one of every farm's greatest untapped resources. What if there were a way to unleash this trust and empower a new level of productivity and security for you and your landowner?

There is a way. And it starts with a **conversation**.

This resource guide can help facilitate conversations between landowners and tenants that lead to meaningful change. It can open the door to multi-year lease agreements and unlock co-investments in conservation farming.

### ***The result?***

**A more productive environment for growing your crops, your business and your professional relationships.**

#### **Empowered Farms**

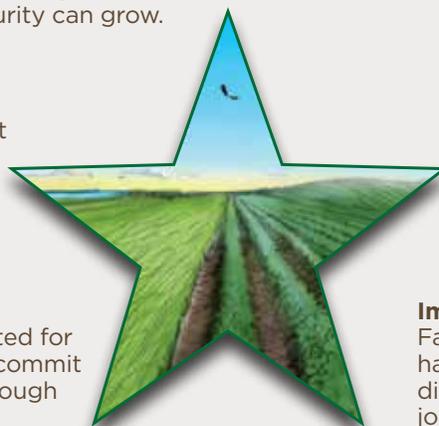
When tenants and landowners partner on conservation, everyone wins, and nature thrives. Operating costs can drop, profits can rise, and security can grow.

#### **Enhanced Incentives**

Landowners can access tax, government cost-share, and other incentives by partnering with tenants on conservation activities.

#### **Increased Security**

Land can remain productive and protected for generations to come when landowners commit to empowering tenants to steward it through co-investment in conservation activities.



#### **Healthier Soil**

Collaboration between tenants and landowners can improve soil health, microbial growth and residual nutrient recycling in the soil.

#### **Improved Resilience**

Farming operations are better equipped to handle extreme weather and market disruptions when tenants and landowners jointly commit to conservation practices.

## Start Your Conversation at the Ground Level



***Most farmers know that improving soil health takes hard work, investment and time. But do most landowners?***

***The first step to collaboration is explaining to your landowner what it takes to improve soil health and the resulting benefits. This section will help you start the conversation.***

Research shows the average landowner age in the Midwest is about 70 years old.<sup>1</sup> About half have operated a farm. The other half either have never farmed or have helped out on a family farm.

Advances in agronomy, soil science and farming technology mean our understanding of soil health today is much greater than when many landowners actively farmed. What's more, many landowners have never had any significant exposure to soil science or agronomy.

Many landowners might be unaware of the role conservation practices play on a healthy farm. They might not realize the time and financial investments required to achieve those benefits. Or they may be misinformed.

### **You can change this.**

In a recent survey, 80% of landowners identified their tenant farmers as a critical source of conservation information. The average tenant-landowner rental relationship is about 16 years old.<sup>2</sup>

### **Your landowner trusts you.**

Tenants can build on this trust, opening the door to collaboration. You can help your landowner learn what it takes to improve soil health.

## Talking Points & Talking Benefits

**To help your landowner understand the opportunities associated with building soil health, start with these points.**

### **Potential benefits to the land:**

- » Reduced erosion and soil loss; improved nutrient retention and fertility
- » Enhanced long-term productivity, farmability and viability
- » Improved environmental footprint, healthier local ecosystem

### **Potential benefits to the tenant:**

- » Healthier, more resilient crop production
- » Reduced input, fuel and labor costs
- » Greater farm business security and opportunity

### **Potential benefits to the landowner:**

- » Assurance that they are protecting their legacy, leaving a healthy reputation of land stewardship for the next generation
- » Increased peace of mind around the security of the property's future productivity and value
- » Improved access to financial incentive programs and tax benefits

1. <https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/NOLS-non-operating-landowners-final.pdf>  
2. <https://www.nature.org/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/NOLS-non-operating-landowners-final.pdf>

# The Basics of Conservation Farming

*Talk to your landowner about these practices as a starting place for collaboration.*



## Conservation Tillage

Reducing tillage can reduce topsoil loss and erosion, keeping valuable nutrients and microbes on the farm. It can take decades to build healthy soil and it only takes one extreme weather event to carry it all away. Although no-till is effective in many areas, strip-till can be superior for wetter, colder regions.



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## Cover Crops

Cover crops can provide erosion control; improve soil structure, moisture and nutrient content; increase beneficial soil microbes; suppress weeds; provide habitat for beneficial predatory insects, pollinators and other wildlife; and become forage for livestock. Cover crops also add nitrogen to the soil and make more nutrients available, reducing fertilizer application needs over time.



## Advanced Nutrient Management

Nitrogen stabilizers and split application of nitrogen with precision technology can help conserve nutrients and reduce runoff. Yield monitoring, soil sampling, tissue sampling and nutrient modeling can maximize the efficiency of inputs while enhancing long-term productivity and profitability of fields.



## Edge of Field Practices

Terracing sloped land, adding buffer zones or prairie strips, constructing wetlands and installing bioreactors can all prevent erosion and nutrient loss from fields. These constructed conservation methods keep valuable topsoil and nutrients in the field and prevent them from impacting local waterways.

## Build Alignment Around the Basics

These conservation practices can have a powerful and positive effect on the land, local ecosystems and everyone who supports a farm.

But these effects can only be realized through sustained, consistent and comprehensive adoption – all made possible by collaboration and commitment between tenants and landowners.

Talk with your landowner today about these basic methods of conservation farming. If you don't feel comfortable discussing these practices and their benefits, reach out to a trusted adviser such as a crop consultant, an NRCS agent, a Cooperative Extension agent, or a retail agronomist. These experts and others like them can help provide more information and local context. They can also help facilitate the discussion.

Once you and your landowner are aligned around the benefits of building soil health, you can develop a plan that works for both of you.

## Conversations Focused on the Future



***The benefits of implementing conservation practices to build soil health can best be achieved through long-term, consistent investment.***

***Help your landowner understand the challenges you face as a farmer in improving the health of their soil. By working collaboratively on conservation farming practices, you can identify solutions that will benefit you both.***

The many benefits of conservation practices—a **stronger farm operation, healthier soils, improved resilience, increased investment security**—are within reach of you and your landowner. You can make measurable changes to soil healthy through consistent, year-after-year implementation.

For many tenants like you, consistency can be a tall order. That's because year-to-year lease agreements often make long-term access to the land uncertain—and without that, why invest in something that requires long-term consistency?

Compounding this issue is the reality that some conservation practices might require upfront and maintenance costs which many tenants are unable to meet alone. This creates a barrier which tenant farmers are unable to overcome—especially in light of volatile and low commodity prices.

But landowners can help. They can play a critical role by reducing or removing these challenges and empowering you as a tenant to scale the conservation activities on their land.

**It starts with a conversation about multi-year leases and cost-sharing agreements.**

### Talking Points & Talking Benefits

**To help your landowner understand the advantages of multi-year leases and co-investment, share these points.**

#### **Multi-year lease agreements:**

- » Unlock guaranteed access to the land, enabling tenants to adopt and steward practices consistently over time
- » Provide security and peace of mind for landowners and tenants alike during uncertain market conditions and unexpected weather swings
- » Ensure long-term stewardship of land and prevent potentially disruptive planting seasons

#### **Cost-sharing lease addendums:**

- » Distribute cost increases for conservation practices across tenants and landowners, reducing barriers to practice implementation
- » Provide potential tax benefits for landowners
- » Demonstrate a commitment to protecting the environment and building soil health, which can put you on stronger footing with lenders you may be asking to approve future land-financing requests

## Guide Your Conversation Beyond Barriers



*Talking about extending your land lease or sharing investments in conservation with your landowner might seem uncomfortable. These solutions can help you confidently guide the conversation to win-win conclusions.*

### CHALLENGE:

Your landowner may lack a basic agronomic understanding and appreciation for soil health and its benefits.

### SOLUTION:

- » Use this series of resource guides as a tool to help educate your landowner about the many benefits of building soil health, reducing nutrient loss and protecting waterways.
- » Engage your trusted adviser to help facilitate the conversation and explain agronomic concepts and the benefits of conservation agriculture practices.
- » Use a small test plot on the farm (or find a neighbor who is implementing the practice) to help the landowner understand firsthand. Show them the data and walk them through the practice and expected benefits.

### CHALLENGE:

Landowners and tenants are reluctant to rock the boat during uncertain times. If your professional relationship has been in place for years, why risk it by introducing change?

### SOLUTION:

- » Before you approach your landowner for a conversation, work with trusted advisers (crop consultants, extension agent, NRCS staff, etc.) to understand the benefits and risks of the soil health practices you'd like to explore. These experts can put your mind at ease, reduce your uncertainty and help you plan for the conversation.
- » Come prepared for the meeting with your landowner. Have data points, pictures and supplemental materials printed or available in digital format to help them understand the opportunities and to ease their mind.

### CHALLENGE:

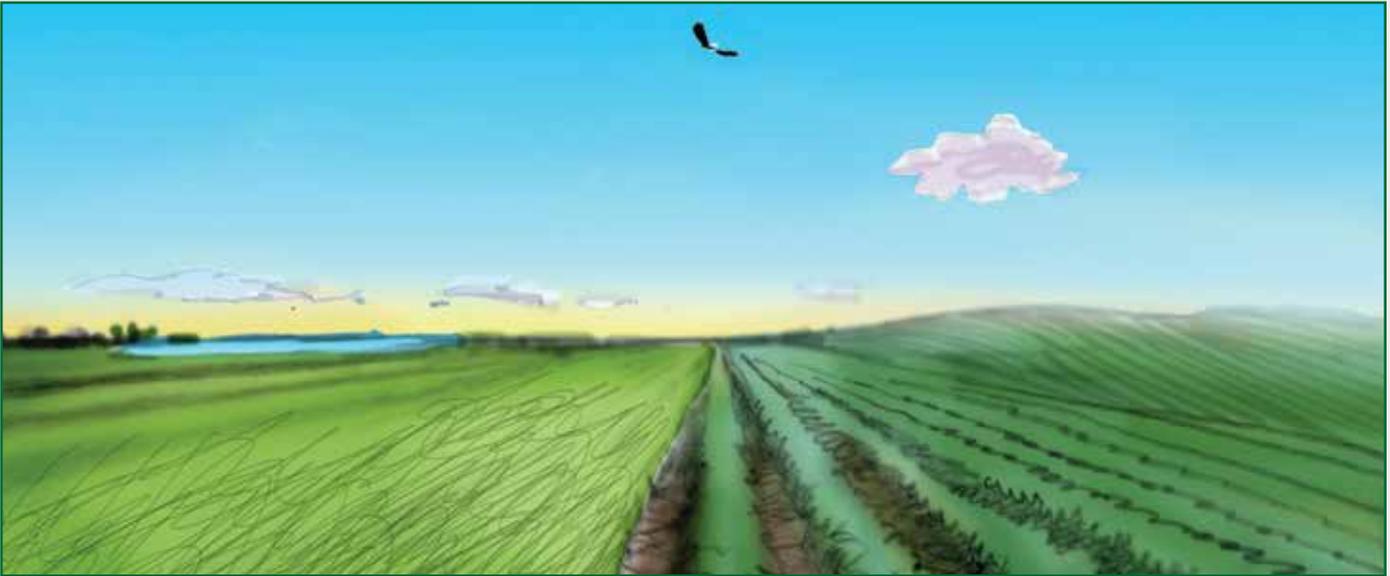
Your landowner is concerned it will take a long time to see returns and measurable value from a conservation partnership.

### SOLUTION:

- » Work with a trusted adviser to understand the costs and farming seasons you will need to invest. Then demonstrate visually to the landowner that some results will be immediate, others will take only a few years and still others will be achieved after many seasons.
- » Help your landowner understand the many benefits of conservation practices. Point out those outcomes can only be achieved by consistent implementation over extended periods of time.
- » Position this as your landowner's opportunity to build value in their farmland through a long-term investment that protects, improves and secures its productivity for decades and generations to come.



# Conservation Conversations Can Lead to Benefits for Everyone



***Everyone wins and nature thrives, when tenants and landowners collaborate on conservation over the long-term.***

***The immense and full benefits of soil health practices can only be achieved when tenants and landowners work together. Use this section to explain the 'so what' of collaboration on conservation.***

## **THE TENANT FARMER**

- » Produces crops in a more resilient environment
- » Experiences potential input, fuel and labor cost savings
- » Achieves greater business security and opportunity

## **THE LANDOWNER**

- » Attains greater peace of mind because of investments in farmland's future productivity and value
- » Accesses potential financial incentive programs and tax benefits
- » Leaves a legacy and a reputation of land stewardship for the next generation

## **THE LAND**

- » Protected from erosion and soil loss
- » Nurtured through improved nutrient retention and fertility
- » Strengthened long-term productivity and viability
- » Improved environmental footprint and healthier local ecosystem

## **THE TENANT-LANDOWNER RELATIONSHIP**

- » Improved communication channels
- » Strengthened partnership foundation
- » Enhanced trust

## **YOU HAVE THE POWER TO TRANSFORM THE LAND YOU FARM.**

An estimated 41% of all U.S. farmland is rented. That percentage ranks much higher in the Midwest where 62%—and in some counties 80%—of all farmland is farmed by tenant farmers. That's why farmers such as you have the power to transform millions of acres of American farmland when you develop a long-term business relationship with your landowners that prioritizes conservation agriculture.

Working together, you and your landowner can reap benefits while building the prosperity and productivity of the nation's farmland for generations to come.

Use this resource guide to help prepare for your discussion and bring it along to help guide the conversation.

Why wait? Contact your landowner and start building soil health today.

Access the full Conservation Conversation resource guide series here:

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