



More than 60 percent of Midwest farmland is rented, making collaboration between landowners and farmers vital to a sustainable operation. © Shutterstock/Artie Medveder

For generations, rented farmlands have run on trust and handshakes. Every year, landowners trust farmers to be good stewards of their soil, and farmers trust landowners to keep the farm in production. This trust remains your farm's greatest untapped resource. All it takes to unleash its potential is a conversation.

Our *Conservation Conversation* guidebook series provides resources to make the conversations easier to start and more productive as you go, opening the door to enhanced collaboration.

Everyone profits. Everyone thrives, including nature.

Discussing Conservation Agriculture Can Open Doors

Most landowners and farmers have long-standing, deep relationships—with trust earned and seasoned through the challenges of unpredictable weather, market swings and the shared commitment to run a productive and profitable farm. Yet formal collaboration between farmers and landowners around the use of potentially beneficial conservation farming practices on rented farmland acres remains low. Many conservation practices require multi-year implementation periods and incur additional costs before their full benefits can be achieved—meaning without landowner and farmer collaboration, progress is not possible.

In many cases, a key factor in this lack of collaboration is a lack of communication about the mutual benefits of adopting conservation agriculture practices. Many landowners simply aren't aware of the benefits to conservation farming, and they aren't actively supporting their farmers in deploying conservation practices.

This resource guide aims to empower conversations that lead to agreement, alignment, and, ultimately, longer-term land lease security while co-investing in the sustainable benefits of conservation agriculture.



SNAPSHOT: The Benefits of Building Soil Health

- Higher rates of productivity and profitability
- Reduced input costs
- Reputational value for farmers committed to conservation
- Stores and recycles carbon, water, and nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorous)
- Improved water quality, filtration, and storage
- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions help mitigate impacts of climate change



In broad terms, conservation agriculture applies to anything and everything that:

- promotes maintenance of a permanent soil cover,
- minimizes soil disturbance, and
- increases diversification of plants, insects and soil microorganisms.

Consistently practiced, conservation agriculture can contribute to increased nutrient use efficiency, improved soil hydrology, and higher crop yields.



Oat, rye and radish cover crops planted among corn.
©Ryan Sanders

Start with the Basics

Landowners and farmers should start out by asking each other about their basic view of conservation agriculture. See if they are aware of the basic practices that support good soil health such as reduced or minimal tillage, cover crops, in-season and precision nitrogen applications, buffer zones and other structural practices for reducing nutrient loss.

Ask if they understand the benefits of conservation practices to the soil and the environment and see if they understand what those benefits mean for them as a landowner, as a farmer.

They may be unsure or unaware about many conservation practices. New research comes to light almost weekly in today's information age, so they may be a few years behind.

What Next? Share the Knowledge of Conservation Agriculture and the Benefits of Soil Health

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service defines soil health as "the continued capacity of the soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans."

The practices of conserving soils, reducing compaction, adding biodiversity, increasing organic matter, and encouraging growth of thriving microbial communities all contribute to better soil health. With healthier soils, your crops are better fed, better protected and better equipped to reach their full potential in growth, yield and quality.

Which Conservation Practices Should be a Part of Your Farming Operation?



No-till practice
(USDA-NRCS photo)

Reduced tillage decreases disturbance of the soil, thereby improving the soil's ability to retain nutrients and sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.



Cover crops
© David Ike

Cover cropping between cash crop seasons is a heritage practice that maximizes the time each year that living roots are building soil nutrients and keeping the surface protected.



Corn and soybean
(USDA-NRCS photo)

Diverse crop rotations help build nutrients, limit erosion, and foster soil carbon sequestration.





Together, farmers and landowners have the ability to positively affect millions of acres of farmland by adopting conservation agriculture practices. © iStock.com/StockSeller_ukr

Farmers can ask your trusted agronomic advisor which conservation practices make the most sense for where and how you farm. Together, you can set goals and develop a relatively short 5-year plan to build higher-fertility, higher-performing, higher-value farmland that delivers more sustainable returns for you and for future generations. Consider inviting the landowner to this consultation or sharing the plan with them afterwards.

- While colder, wet springs may make no-till farming difficult, new technologies and practices like strip-tillage can help **improve emergence** while offering benefits of no-till farming
- Wheat, ryegrass, red clover, millet and other cover crops can **protect against soil erosion** while helping **add biodiversity** to the living complex of species and microorganisms above and below the ground.
- Using nitrogen stabilizers and splitting fall nitrogen applications with increased in-season precision applications help **conserve nutrients and reduce runoff**.
- Terracing sloped land, adding buffer zones or prairie strips and building bioreactors are all recommended ways to **conserve soils, reduce nutrient runoff and protect waters**.

Align on Benefits and Start to Build a Conservation Co-Investment Strategy

Conservation agriculture can benefit

- **farmers** through reduced input costs, improved trafficability, and increased yields;
- **landowners** by ensuring the land remains profitable and productive for generations to come; and the
- **environment** by improving water quality through reduced nutrient loss and erosion.

These benefits are only achievable through sustained, long-term adoption of conservation practices—something only possible when landowner and farmers work together.

Almost 40 percent of all U.S. farmland is rented. America's landowners and farmers have the transformative power to positively affect millions of acres of land through adopting conservation agriculture practices.

This move can be streamlined through collaborative co-investment strategies between farmers and landowners—things like multi-year lease agreements, conservation practice lease addendums, cost sharing structures, and more.

It all starts with a conversation. The next move is in your hands.



Conservation agriculture...



Enhances the Soil's Productivity, Longevity and Value

- More organic matter and less compaction improve structure and water management, limiting erosion and runoff, which helps to keep the soil and nutrients on the land.
- Increased biodiversity and microbial activity improve fertility and plant nutrient availability, reducing the amount of inputs required and improving the local biome.
- Healthy soils build resiliency for crops against insects, disease and extreme weather.
- Conservation agriculture makes land more farmable, more profitable and helps to ensure its productivity for decades to come.



Benefits the Farmer

- Healthier soils can result in lower nutrient and crop protection input costs as well as fewer trips through the field—saving fuel and labor costs.
- Conservation agriculture can lead to improvements in overall crop yield and quality—providing higher margins for farmers.
- Healthy soils can help provide resilience for extreme or unexpected weather events, providing stability for farmers during uncertain times.



Benefits the Rental Relationship

- Collaborating on conservation agriculture issues creates increased communication and collaboration between farmer and landowners—building a healthier and more profitable business partnership.
- A co-commitment to conservation agriculture helps secure a tried-and-true relationship dedicated to reaching common goals during trying times for agriculture—giving both parties peace of mind and security.



Benefits the Landowner

- Conservation agriculture can increase the overall productivity of the land, improving property investment health and asset value.
- Conservation agriculture can protect and regenerate the soil, ensuring it remains productive over time and does not decline in value.
- Conservation agriculture contributes to a cleaner environment and more sustainable agricultural production—providing reputational gains for landowners and opening doors to unique opportunities.