GROWING OUTREACH CAPACITY TO ADVANCE CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE: A COLLABORATIVE ROADMAP

2024

NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farmers, ranchers, and agricultural landowners are key to ensuring the continued vibrancy and resilience of U.S. agriculture. Faced with a changing climate, increasing production and sustainability demands, and continued technology development, producers and landowners need support from a variety of stakeholders. Engaging in climate smart conservation practices requires not only technical and economic resources, but strong communities, public agencies, and industry partners. Key among these are conservation professionals, researchers, and community organizations supporting sustainable production systems. *Where* and *how* these researchers, professionals and advisory engage with producers and landowners is an important, and sometimes overlooked, aspect of advancing conservation.

This report presents a roadmap for improving how conservation advisors, including those from public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private industry, achieve conservation success through outreach. Based on a collaborative workshop conducted as part of National Wildlife Federation's Growing Outreach conference in August 2024, this report outlines key actions needed to build and strengthen the capacity of the broad outreach community. Collaboratively, this group identified four broad areas of action:

- **Research and evaluation needs**
- **Innovative outreach approaches**
- **Capacity building**
- **Improved policy implementation**

This roadmap lays out key challenges, opportunities, and actions needed in 8 broad topics: 1) improved conservation messaging; 2) outreach professional development; 3) farmer peer-to-peer networks; 4) outreach evaluation and metrics; 5) engaging the private sector; 6) strengthening public institutions; 7) climate change and mental health; and 8) building urban-rural connections.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, agriculture is at a moment of immense challenge, and immense opportunity. The scale of the challenges facing U.S. agriculture is perhaps unprecedented in the country's history. Global human populations, rising living standards, and global markets continue to drive increasing demand for agricultural products. An accelerating biodiversity crisis and changing climate have strained many agricultural regions, including across the United States. Market and policy changes have globalized many agricultural systems, resulting in significant shifts in who owns and operates U.S. farms and ranches. Rapid advances in technology–including advanced equipment, crop and livestock genetics, production inputs, and data management–have resulted in significant increases in the productive capacity of agriculture, and offer the potential to help address and overcome many challenges. U.S. farmers, ranchers, and landowners must continually adapt if they are to thrive in the 21st century and beyond.

Yet agricultural producers are not alone in this. Agriculture has underpinned most of human societies for millenia. While the proportion of the U.S. population directly involved in agriculture has continued to decline in recent decades, the ongoing success of agriculture is a collective responsibility. Farms and ranches not only provide vital food and fiber resources, but also serve a critical role in ecosystem protection and preservation, and have the potential to play a strong role in climate change mitigation and resilience.

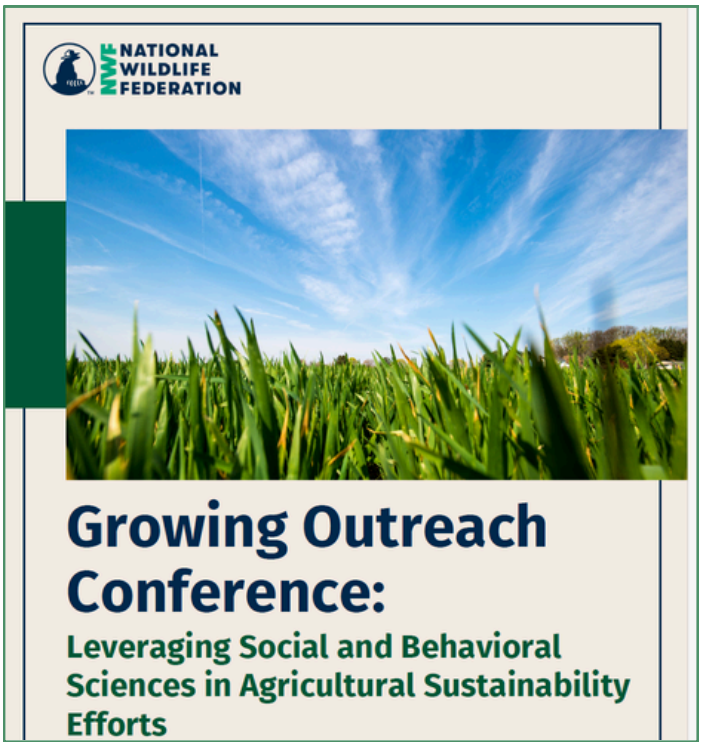
Enhancing the resilience and adaptability of U.S. agriculture, especially in the face of such daunting challenges, will require some degree of coordination and collaboration among those involved in agriculture. Beyond those directly involved in food, fiber, and energy production, there are numerous advisors, agencies, retailers, community groups, and civic organizations involved in steering agriculture forward. There are many traditional silos within this ecosystem of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Breaking down these silos and bridging differences across geographies and sectors is critical to identify and deploy effective innovations in sustainability, enhance resilience, and protect vital natural resources. By working more closely together, those seeking to improve agriculture can more effectively engage and support producers and landowners in their own conservation efforts.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

GROWING OUTREACH CONFERENCE

The Growing Outreach conference, held in Madison, Wisconsin on August 22 & 23, 2024, was a first step in a larger process to build a collaborative community of scientists, conservation organizations and community groups, farmer, landowners, and others to improve outreach on regenerative agriculture through applied social and behavioral science. Through a facilitated, collaborative workshop, over 120 conference attendees identified key areas of action to support improved conservation outreach. Together, we surfaced and discussed over 15 different topics, ranging from the role of farmer peer networks, the evolving capacities of public agencies and extension systems, and how to establish partnerships between public, private, and non-profit organizations. Collectively, these topics constitute a form of roadmap for how to support more effective, equitable, and sustainable conservation agriculture.

Following the conference, NWF staff worked to compile all of the notes, posters, and ideas generated at the convening into a comprehensive proceedings publication. There were many topics that surfaced through the two days, many of which are interconnected and overlapping. We collectively identified **8 major emerging themes** from the conference, which serve as an initial framework for moving forward together.



A ROADMAP FOR CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE OUTREACH

The intention of this report is to serve as a form of collective roadmap: a guide for how the individuals, organizations, and professionals working toward conservation outcomes can improve how we engage with each other and the communities in which we work. We have organized this roadmap by primary topic, typically a key issue or area of conservation outreach work. Within each topic, we present the major opportunities, challenges, and recommended actions for meaningfully addressing those challenges.

Pillars of Action

Research & Evaluation

Capacity Building

Innovative Outreach

Policy Implementation

There are also some important cross-cutting themes in these topics, especially in the recommended actions. These connect strongly with the major themes from Day 1 of the conference: research needs, outreach capacity building, innovative outreach approaches, and improved policy implementation. **Throughout the following sections, look for the color-coded titles and icons indicating which pillar of action each item falls under.**

Note that there are relatively few specific suggestions on policy implementation. While many of the discussions included recommended or needed changes to how policies and programs are structured or delivered, most of the direct action items recommended during the conference were in other areas. This reflects the focus of the discussions through the workshop, which were focused primarily on actions that this group can undertake collectively. Many participants either directly conduct outreach with farmers and landowners, or support direct outreach efforts and have less policy-related work. Policy considerations, especially how policy is implemented and perceived by producers, were widely recognized as important but less actionable by this collective group.

MAJOR OUTREACH ACTION AREAS

1

Improved Conservation Messaging

Producers and landowners receive numerous messages from a variety of sources on conservation and management issues. These messages are often contradictory, confusing, or overwhelming. The lack of actionable, consistent, and effective messaging is an under-appreciated barrier that is an opportunity for collaboration going forward. Applied social-behavioral and communications science can provide valuable insights on how to target conservation messaging in more effective ways.

2

Outreach Professional Development

Effective outreach requires relationship and trust building between resource professionals, advisors, and producers. These relationships are challenging to maintain for many public and civic organizations given the high turnover and lack of training for outreach staff. There is a need for more technical and communications training and mentoring for conservation professionals. Investment in training and professional development is critical for building the necessary human capital to support transitions to regenerative agriculture.

3

Farmer Peer-to-Peer Networks

Farmers often express a desire to learn and collaborate with peer farmers on conservation and innovation efforts. Research points to the importance of professional and social networks in supporting sustained conservation adoption by producers. Yet there remains a lack of clear metrics for evaluating the success of farmer networks, training and mentoring for both farmer leaders and network facilitators, and capacity support for networks.

4

Outreach Evaluation & Metrics

Current monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts in conservation outreach are under-developed and under-supported. There is a need to develop an improved collective understanding of what outreach and engagement approaches are effective at supporting sustained conservation adoption. A broader set of metrics and evaluation approaches, including a focus on the short- and medium-term outcomes of outreach efforts and a more nuanced approach to measuring conservation behavior change , are needed.

MAJOR OUTREACH ACTION AREAS

5

Engaging the Private Sector

There is a need to break down silos between private sector and public/NGO advisors. Agricultural advisors in crop and livestock consultation as well as retail need support to deliver effective conservation technical assistance and guidance to producers. This group focused on identifying and building on strategies that work to develop effective public-private partnerships in conservation and innovation.

6

Strengthening Public Institutions

Producer trust in public institutions, including agriculture and resource agencies, university extension, and academic research has eroded in recent years due to lack of sufficient resources, staff turnover, and high administrative burdens to participate in programs. Work is needed to build back trust, including through professional development and support programs for public sector conservation staff to encourage staff retention and equip that staff with the communication and information tools needed to do their jobs well.

7

Climate Change & Mental Health

Climate change and other systemic challenges facing agriculture create significant mental health challenges for producers, landowners, and the advisors serving them. There are insufficient support resources, including training and best practices for outreach professionals to deal with the emotional needs of producers. Holistic rural revitalization, including investment in public health capacity, is needed to facilitate sustainable transitions.

8

Urban-Rural Connections

Organizations and agencies focused on urban and rural communities and agriculture are often siloed, with a lack of coordination and information sharing. Producers and farm landowners often feel disconnected and misunderstood by urban communities and consumers in general. More exposure and collaboration between urban and rural communities could increase general awareness and support for conservation efforts, building more sustained markets, funding, and supportive social norms.

1 IMPROVING CONSERVATION MESSAGING

OPPORTUNITIES

Relatively little attention has been paid to identifying and evaluating communication and messaging strategies to advance agricultural conservation efforts, so there are potential gains to be made through more effort in this area. Leveraging convenings such as the Growing Outreach Conference and other efforts to increase coordination and professionalization in conservation outreach can improve message coordination, innovation, and evaluation.

CHALLENGES

Farmers and other community members often receive incomplete, confusing, or contradictory messages about conservation. This is in part a result of the siloed and diverse range of advisors, organizations, and individuals from which farmers receive information. These diverse organizations have different roles, audiences, and goals, which can lead to fragmented messaging approaches. The lack of coherent and consistent messaging may be contributing to ineffective outreach efforts, especially to reach producers and landowners who have thus far not adopted key conservation practices.

Current outreach and communication efforts have been insufficient to achieve conservation outcomes (e.g., water quality, climate change adaptation and mitigation). Among the current communication challenges are:

Lack of effective targeting: Farmers and landowners, just like any group of people, are not a monolith in their decision making. Farmers have different goals, experiences, risk tolerances, values, and production systems. There is no “one size fits all” messaging or outreach approach that will effectively reach all producers. There is a need for more research on what messaging approaches are effective (and effective at *achieving what outcomes*) with which audiences. There is also a need for guidance for practitioners on how to message effectively.

1 IMPROVING CONSERVATION MESSAGING

Lack of coordination: Farmers rely on a wide range of advisors (private sector/ag retail, extension, conservation agencies, NGOs, peers), and many require social confirmation (hearing validating information from multiple distinct sources) before making significant management changes. The coordination challenges to identify and implement consistent messaging about conservation systems are significant. Coordination is complicated by different and potentially conflicting goals among different organizations.

Shifting terminology and media channels: There are several different and overlapping terms in this space: conservation, stewardship, sustainability, regenerative, climate-smart. These have different meanings and implications depending on the audience. Lack of consistency in the use of different terminology can create confusion among farmers and contribute to unintended polarization. There have also been significant shifts in where farmers, landowners, and other community members receive information, most notably the shift to social media and online sources. Conservation professionals may not have experience or adequate tools or resources to effectively use these platforms and shift messaging strategies.

Trust and identity: **Who** is providing the message is equally important to effective communication as ***what*** the message is. Many conservation professionals, especially those engaging in direct outreach, may not share the same identities or background as the farmers and landowners with which they are communicating. An increasing proportion of outreach professionals are female (contrasting with male-dominated producer populations) and may not have direct farming experience. These are not insurmountable differences but create some barriers to developing trusting relationships (exacerbated by other organizational and professional development challenges covered in other working groups).

1 IMPROVING CONSERVATION MESSAGING

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Messaging and Communications Research

More applied research on effective communication and engagement strategies would help inform science-based strategies. Research is needed to identify who trusted messengers are, what messages are most resonant, with what audiences. Research is also needed in a variety of contexts (geographic, farming systems, non-traditional audiences). This could be supported by **comprehensive reviews of existing research literature** (both in agricultural conservation contexts and similar settings) as well as a **research agenda that identifies the key outstanding research questions.**

Messaging Guides and Training

Practitioners need more support on how to deploy effective messaging in their outreach. This support should be science-based, applying insights from social, behavioral, and communication sciences. Outreach professionals could use professional development **training in audience identification and marketing, communications, and utilizing applied research**. Training should be supported by comprehensive guides, examples, and templates on messaging and communication strategies. This is an area of coordination with the “Professional Development and Training” working group.

Social Media Guidance

Social media is likely to continue to be an important channel for communicating with a range of audiences. Practitioners need more comprehensive **guidance on how to effectively use social media, examples of successful uses, and how to integrate metrics for reporting and evaluation.**

1 IMPROVING CONSERVATION MESSAGING

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Communication Metrics and Evaluation

Assessing the effectiveness of communications is an important but challenging area for many organizations and professionals. There are training and resource constraints, as well as organizational cultures that privilege certain types of information over others (e.g., quantitative over qualitative). Evaluating ongoing communication efforts is critical to be able to adapt to changing perceptions, networks, and communication channels. There is an opportunity to create more **guidance for organizations to collect and evaluate communications data**, especially through social media channels. Efforts should also be made to **provide examples and evidence of the importance of targeted communications and marketing approaches** in the agricultural conservation context, potentially through literature reviews, case studies, and narrative storytelling. This would be helpful for communicating with organizational leaders, funders, and other key decision makers.

Collaboration Guidance

Coordinating messaging is both important and challenging, especially in bridging differences in organizational goals and values. Organizations and practitioners need **guidance on how to develop and maintain collaborative relationships, especially in public-private partnership contexts.** Especially important is how to identify shared values and objectives, and how to develop shared messaging strategies where these exist.

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2 OUTREACH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

OPPORTUNITIES

Building and maintaining trusting relationships between public agencies and farmers is key to supporting conservation adoption. Empowering agencies and staff require more investment in professional development, organizational leadership, and more available resources. There are alternative models to outreach, including place-based participatory processes, that could both empower professionals and increase farmer trust and engagement in conservation efforts. There are also existing efforts to increase professionalization among conservation staff, which could be built on to enhance the experience and build a stronger pipeline of future professionals.

CHALLENGES

Public agencies, including USDA agencies, local conservation districts, and extension, generally suffer from high staff turnover. This high turnover is caused by numerous factors, including:

Low compensation and poor benefits: Despite many resource positions requiring college degrees, starting salaries for entry level positions are often low. Local organizations (including soil and water districts) in certain places cannot offer full employee benefits.

Inconsistent funding: Many positions, especially entry-level and early career, are frequently grant funded and short-term.

Workload: Public agencies are often understaffed, increasing the workload and burdens on existing employees. High workload decreases job satisfaction, inhibits outreach and innovation, stifles professional development, and leads to burnout.

2 OUTREACH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CHALLENGES

***Lack of professional development*:** Many organizations, especially local and community-based ones, are not able to offer sufficient professional development opportunities within the organization, decreasing job satisfaction and contributing to turnover as employees seek opportunities for advancement in other organizations.

Hierarchy and bureaucracy: Highly bureaucratic organizations and programs stifle individual innovation, disempower staff, and inhibit innovation and use of new approaches that could be more effective. Along with staff turnover, another significant challenge in conservation is expanding place-based approaches that more adequately address the concerns and needs of specific communities. High staff turnover, bureaucratic organizational cultures, outreach and science approaches that prize traditional institutions (e.g., universities, federal agencies), and reliance on quantitative metrics of success all inhibit place-based participatory processes that could enhance conservation adoption.

2 OUTREACH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Professional Development and Mentoring

There are existing professional development and leadership training programs that could be expanded. **Focus should be on identifying successful training approaches, sharing curriculum, and expanding inter- and intra-agency mentoring.** Professionalization across conservation fields (e.g., watershed coordinators, soil and water conservation staff, outreach professionals) could increase knowledge and access to training opportunities, with clear career trajectories and professional development goals. This could include expanding existing professional societies (e.g., Soil and Water Conservation Society, the Confluence for Watershed Leaders) and expanding online communities of practice. Specific training needs include:

- Communications
- Community engagement and facilitation
- Technical conservation skills
- Project management
- Grant writing

Organizational Development Resources

Practitioners need more support on how to deploy effective messaging in their outreach. This support should be science-based, applying insights from social, behavioral, and communication sciences. Outreach professionals could use **professional development training in audience identification and marketing, communications, and utilizing applied research.** Training should be supported by comprehensive guides, examples, and templates on messaging and communication strategies.

2 OUTREACH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Place-Based Participatory Processes

Moving away from traditional outreach and technical assistance models, which privilege top-down, 'expert-based' knowledge sharing, is necessary to achieve conservation and equity goals in agriculture. Incorporating place- and community-specific approaches throughout the outreach process, from problem identification to creating and implementing solutions, has the potential to expand participation and facilitate conservation transitions. Incorporating these approaches will require more professional training, including **guidance on appropriate language use, community engagement processes, and conflict management.** Also needed are shifts in organizational culture to value non-traditional approaches to conservation and become more comfortable with uncertainties, while maintaining a focus on achieving conservation and social outcomes. There is also a need to **value qualitative approaches to evaluation, including storytelling, alongside traditional quantitative metrics.**

Recruiting the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals

There is a need for increased recruitment into agricultural conservation fields, including **youth education and engagement**, **professional organizations at universities**, and **internship programs** to expose early-career professionals to opportunities. This also connects with expansion of participation in professional societies for students and early-career professionals.

3 FARMER PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKS

OPPORTUNITIES

Farmers want to engage in networks and learn from peers on conservation and other management topics. Many organizations support farmer networks, and many face similar challenges when it comes to funding, leadership, and maintaining efforts. There are numerous networks out there, and this provides opportunities for collaboration, resource sharing, and learning.

CHALLENGES

Network collaboration: There is concern about potentially "reinventing the wheel" when it comes to networks. When there is funding available, organizations can start a new network on a topic, but this may be creating redundancy. These networks could benefit from greater collaboration and partnership between organizations. There is a need for more data about where networks are located and what aspects of farm management they are focused on.

Sustaining networks: Maintaining and sustaining networks is a shared challenge, with three primary areas of concern: money, time, and support resources. While funding may be available to form and start networks, it can be difficult to sustain funding. Time is also a significant resource required for networks, including the time and effort of supporting organizations, facilitators, farmer leaders, and farmer participants. Sustaining this level of effort can be difficult, and many farmers and facilitators face burnout. There is also a lack of training and supporting resources for facilitators.

3 FARMER PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKS

CHALLENGES

Metrics of success: Identifying and quantifying the impact of networks can be difficult but is a necessary aspect for funders and supporting organizations. Funders often value the input (i.e., creation of a new network) and behavior change outcomes. Peer networks have numerous potential impacts, including conservation and social outcomes. There is a lack of rigorous evaluation of the holistic impact of networks due to lack of research clarity on network impacts, siloing between researchers, practitioners/network leaders, and funders, and undervaluing of many types of network outcomes. Network evaluation efforts most typically focus on behavior change impacts, especially farmer intentions to adopt specific conservation practices. This leaves out a wide range of other outcome or indicator metrics, including social outcomes (e.g., increased trust, relationships built, quality of those relationships, social norms), environmental/climate outcomes, and social indicators of behavior change.

Culture: To improve funding and network impacts, there may be a need to change the culture of both funders and supporting organizations. Funders should recognize behavior change and agricultural transitions as a long and complex process. They should recognize the value of social outcomes as part of the process (and desired outcome?) of conservation and incorporate these types of metrics into funding and evaluation efforts. Organizations also need to shift to a collaborative mindset and recognize the importance of sustaining networks for the long-term and the challenges associated with burnout and leadership.

3 FARMER PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Network Database

There is a need for more accessible, transparent information about where networks are located, how they operate, and what their desired outcomes are. This could include an **online database of network funders, network locations, leadership structure, demonstrated activities and outcomes. It could also take the form of a map or GIS resource**.

Shared Research and Evaluation Agenda

While networks have been identified as positively impacting conservation outcomes in academic and gray literature, there remains **a need for more research on networks, their activities, and impacts**. This research can and should be conducted by academic researchers and outreach/ conservation practitioners, including organizations currently supporting farmer networks. There is a need for a more thorough description of the current state of knowledge on farmer networks, gaps in understanding, necessary metrics of success, and opportunities for cross-sector collaboration. **This could take the form of academic papers, a special issue of a journal, or collaborative reports.**

Network Evaluation Resources

Practitioners, funders, and other supporting organizations could benefit from specific **guidance about how to conduct evaluations of networks**, best practices for incorporating robust metrics into evaluation efforts, and addressing the benefits of multi-method evaluations (social network analysis, quantitative surveys, ripple effects mapping, qualitative analysis, and storytelling). This could take the form of a **comprehensive guide or manual.**

3 FARMER PEER-TO-PEER NETWORKS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Network Facilitator and Leader Training

Network leaders and facilitators need more training and mentorship, as well as support resources that guide network activities. These types of materials should be collaboratively developed and could be hosted on existing or new collaborative websites.

Training topics could include:

- o effective leadership
- o fundraising and sustaining support
- o outreach and meeting facilitation
- o network recruitment.

Support resources could include:

- o best practices guides
- o facilitator handbooks
- o templates and examples of meeting agendas, formats, etc.
- o promotional and outreach material examples or guidance

4 OUTREACH EVALUATION & METRICS

OPPORTUNITIES

Better ways to measure and evaluate the processes involved in agricultural outreach are needed by practitioners, program leaders, and funders– how relationships are built and what intermediate steps exist between first contact and sustained adoption of conservation practices. In revamping our understanding of metrics for success in agricultural outreach programs, there is an opportunity to learn from other fields and cultures how to define and capture measures of success. In addition, this is an opportunity to better recognize farmers' roles in determining metrics of success. Programs designed to engage farmers in conservation practices can only be successful if the messages reach the farmers and are deemed by those farmers to be relevant and trustworthy.

CHALLENGES

Traditional metrics of conservation outreach success may not adequately reflect the complexity and time lags of behavior change. The emphasis on quantifiable metrics, especially from traditional conservation funders and programs, may miss some key outcomes that lead to long-term, sustained adoption of conservation by farmers and landowners. A major question is how to better focus attention on and best communicate the intermediate steps being achieved in the process of agricultural outreach – when there may be shifts in networks and relationships but not yet concrete changes in conservation acres or water quality.

Timeline mismatch: Agricultural outreach efforts can be described as a long game being played on very short increments (grant cycles). In other words, the existing grant funding model tends to limit program timelines to a maximum of a few years while relationship building, particularly in rural agricultural communities, can easily take a minimum of that time.

4 OUTREACH EVALUATION & METRICS

CHALLENGES

Time is needed for good outreach: The timeline mismatch cannot be corrected by speeding up outreach efforts, as outreach professionals rightly describe relationship building as sometimes being a matter of decades' worth of work. The challenge comes in how to frame and account for this work on annual reports ("I didn't meet metrics but I'm making inroads on trust that won't really show results for another five years").

Participant and practitioner burden: Evaluation efforts, especially those using quantitative methods, can create substantial paperwork burdens both for participants in outreach efforts (e.g., farmers and landowners) and those conducting outreach. Both of these groups often are already being asked by funders, organizations, and agencies to engage in substantial paperwork and processes and may not have additional 'bandwidth' to take on additional data collection for evaluation purposes. This can also lead to low engagement with evaluation efforts (i.e., low survey response rates). There are also equity considerations, as those participants and practitioners in under-resourced communities may be the least able to take on additional data collection requirements.

Overemphasis on outcomes versus process: For grant proposals and success measurement more broadly, there is a focus on the end products – new equipment, buffer strips and cover crops, etc. In comparison, the years it took to build the relationship with the farmer to build their trust and confidence enough to even consider engaging those end products is lost to the process.

4 OUTREACH EVALUATION & METRICS

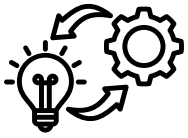
RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Guidance on Evaluation Purpose and Process

Evaluation and metrics collection have value for many purposes: demonstrating impact for funders and policymakers, informing ongoing programming through monitoring and real-time feedback, providing a platform for cross-program comparison, and creating longitudinal datasets for research. Each of these purposes and intended user/audience requires different types of data and collection processes, yet there is likely to also be overlap in assessment needs. **Practitioners and organizations could benefit from guidance on how to structure evaluation programs and processes to meet overlapping needs, including what types of data are needed for each purpose.** This could take the form of publications, resource guides (including best practices for practitioners), symposia at professional conferences, and trainings incorporated into existing professional development programming.

Outreach Process Evaluation

There is an opportunity to reframe measures of success, including within grant-funded projects, by including documentation of the incremental steps farmers go through before adopting a practice. These could include additional information seeking, accessing resources (technical assistance, financial programs), or engaging in other outreach efforts. **Evaluation should also reflect the complexity of behavior changes, moving beyond binary measures of adoption to reflect practice trialing, intensity of practice use, and integration of conservation systems (including practice stacking).**



Shifting Organizational Culture on Evaluation

As part of the culture shift around metrics of success, there is an opportunity to **write and publish an editorial** that (1) synthesizes the research on metrics of success both in agriculture and across other fields and (2) highlights an innovative approach that prioritizes intermediate indicators of success and best practices as a measure of success.

4 OUTREACH EVALUATION & METRICS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Qualitative Measures of Success

Having farmers and outreach professionals document the conversations being held, relationships being built, and the mindsets that are being changed are all valuable ways to capture the social outcomes of outreach success. **There is a need to provide frameworks and guidance for conservation professionals and organizations to qualitatively assess their outcomes and impacts.** Some examples of qualitative assessment could include documenting individual interactions between outreach professionals and farmers or landowners, qualitative interviews to assess impacts of conservation events, or narrative reflection on outreach interactions. In addition to guidance, **research on how to incorporate systematic qualitative assessments into rigorous evaluation is needed. Research can inform the most critical qualitative indicators connected with conservation outcomes**.

Farmer Perceptions of Outreach Efforts

It is critical to recognize the importance of process and relationships in determining the conservation outcomes of outreach efforts. Producers and landowners are not one-way recipients of conservation information or programming, but co-equal participants in an ongoing engagement process. Because of this, **it is critical for evaluation to capture producer and landowner perceptions of outreach processes**, in addition to the information received, attitudes changed, and practices adopted. Understanding how farmers are engaging with outreach efforts and conservation information over time can be key indicators of the effectiveness of outreach.

5 ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

OPPORTUNITIES

Farmers increasingly look to the private sector (especially product retail and advising services) for guidance and support. Conservation is an increasingly popular topic, and there are a lot of financial resources available. The agriculture services sector brings a lot of experience that complements what public conservation agencies can bring. They have contacts with a wide array of producers, especially the 'middle adopters' that can be challenging for traditional conservation agencies to reach. Ag retail also has capacity that may be currently lacking in some public agencies (NRCS and conservation districts specifically).

CHALLENGES

There is a lack of collaboration between public agencies (and NGOs?) and the private retail sector when it comes to conservation. These agencies, organizations, and companies are siloed. This lack of collaboration has several implications:

Conservation messages: There is a lack of coherent and consistent messaging that farmers hear from advisors. This lack of consistent messaging is also apparent within the public/civic conservation community, but especially between public and private entities. Conflicting messages can lead to farmer confusion and status quo bias.

5 ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

CHALLENGES

Misaligned incentives: There are clear advantages for public agencies to leverage private sector connections with producers, but what is in it for the private sector firms? There are potential advantages in accessing financial resources (e.g., grants), or with receiving technical service payments, but there is often not an obvious business case for engaging in conservation partnership. It is also important to acknowledge that the values and goals of public, non-profit, and private organizations may not always align. There is also potential reputational risk (for all types of organizations) when engaging in cross-sector partnerships; perception of these risks may be significant barriers to collaboration.

Technical conservation skills and capacity: Private sector advisors are well equipped to provide technical assistance on a wide range of farm management topics, but may be less capable or confident with conservation topics. Public agencies may lack staff capacity in terms of both people power and training in conservation technical skills and outreach. This is exacerbated by high turnover and staff retention challenges.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY PHOTO GALLERY

5 ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Relationship Building and Partnership

Effective partnering will begin with relationship building. There is a need for conservation agencies and organizations to begin with establishing meaningful communication with private firms, developing trust between organizations, and identifying opportunities for collaboration. This might include "**conservation roadshows**," where agencies/organizations demonstrate the benefits of conservation agriculture for producers and establish a positive business model for private firms to pursue. **Another key output might include guidance on ethical considerations about when and how to engage in cross-sector partnerships.**

Project Collaboration

There are numerous financial and grant resources available to facilitate partnerships, including the RCPP and federal investments made through climate smart agriculture programs. Leveraging existing programs and seeking new funding opportunities can help support private sector engagement by paying advisors for their expertise and connections with farmers. Conservation agencies and organizations should invest in staff time and capacity to pursue and manage collaborations. **Potential support resources that could benefit nascent collaborations include case studies, grant application guidance, and checklists for establishing and managing effective collaborations.**

5 ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Watershed Management

The watershed management sector has extensive experience with cross-sector engagement and collaboration. There may be lessons learned in non-agricultural contexts that could serve as templates for effective conservation agriculture partnerships. Watershed planning and management may also be an effective geographic scale for developing public-private partnerships.

Capacity Building

Developing private sector competencies and confidence in conservation technical assistance is key to sustaining industry engagement. There are existing efforts (e.g., Iowa Soybean Association's Conservation Agronomy program and TNC's private sector engagement programs) that could serve as templates for successful capacity building programs. **There is the potential to develop shared guidance and training programming that organizations could benefit from.** Public sector staff could also benefit from more training in conservation technical assistance and outreach skills (i.e., how to talk to 'middle adopter' farmers.)

6 STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

OPPORTUNITIES

There are public institutions with long histories and track records of success supporting agriculture, including the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its agencies (especially the Natural Resources Conservation Service [NRCS]), the land grant university and extension system, and local soil and water conservation districts. There are also significant financial and staff resources available, especially through USDA, to support research, innovation, and adoption of conservation agriculture. Many farmers trust and use information or access programs through these institutions. Despite significant challenges, there is a need to revitalize these organizations through investments in capacity, innovation in programming, and shifts in organizational culture and approach.

CHALLENGES

Despite long histories of engagement in agriculture and conservation, the role of public institutions has been changing in recent years. The influence and role of these public institutions has diminished for multiple reasons, which affects not only how farmers engage with these organizations and their programs, but also potentially conservation outcomes on the ground. **The primary challenge across these agencies is a lack of trust between farmers and the organizations.** This lack of trust stems from multiple issues:

Lack of staff capacity: While financial resources for conservation, especially at the federal level, are significant, much of this funding is to support farmer adoption of conservation through cost-share and direct technical assistance. Funding for staff has not kept pace, resulting in fewer staffed positions, lack of professional development opportunities and training, and greater staff turnover due to non competitive compensation.

USDA NRCS
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

6 STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

CHALLENGES

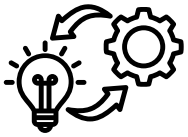
Poor farmer experiences: Lack of staffing in turn can contribute to bad experiences when farmers seek out technical assistance or access to programs. Likewise, investments in extension have decreased, leading to a lack of on-the-ground capacity. Poor experiences can also manifest through lack of consistent relationships stemming from lack of local staff, high turnover, and lack of time/effort to develop relationships on the part of overburdened staff. This is also exacerbated by public programs with high administrative burdens and paperwork requirements, which are challenging for both farmers and administrators.

Slow pace of service: High administrative burdens for programs are also associated with long waiting periods between application and funding decisions and slow government processes. In extension, there is a culture of slow, deliberative research. While this used to be a major source of public and farmer trust in extension/university science, the increased pace of development from private industry has changed expectations. While it is important for extension and university recommendations to be rigorous and science-based, there may be a need to shift traditional methods to meet changing realities.

"Public-private competition": Relatedly, farmers increasingly look to private industry, agricultural retailers, and agronomists and other service providers for guidance on decisions. Public and private organizations have different incentives though, with public organizations more focused on environmentally sustainable systems. There is a potential treadmill effect, wherein public perception of increased responsiveness of private industry leads to disinvestment in public institutions, exacerbating lack of responsiveness and trust in public agencies.

6 STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS



Shifting Approaches

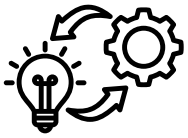
In policy, there is a strong status quo bias, with heavy reliance on short-term financial (i.e., cost share) assistance, without longer term investment in technical and social support needed to sustain adoption. **There is a need to innovate and identify different strategies with potential for long-term impact.** Likewise, with the changing perception and role of public institutions (especially Extension), there is a need to pivot in the target audience for these organizations. **Extension will continue to focus on collaborative research with farmers and other communities (rather than top-down, 'expert driven' research approaches) and more outreach to private sector advisors.**

Public Professional Empowerment

Decreasing staff turnover, supporting conservation professional development, increasing job satisfaction, and supporting conservation outreach are all necessary to improve farmer experiences with public institutions and increase trust. "Make public jobs good jobs" is a succinct way to put this. Accomplishing this requires **increased agency staff capacity, more investment in professional development, equipping organizations and their employees with new tools** to effectively do their job and **encouraging community engagement and relationship building** with farmers and other community members.

6 STRENGTHENING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS



Policy Changes

While it has been noted extensively that lowering administrative burdens to program participants is key for encouraging participation, it has not been noted as much that these are also burdens on employees. **Public institutions should encourage more staff innovation in program administration and engagement efforts.** Reliance on short-term cost-share programs also does not always facilitate strong relationship building between farmers and public institutions. **In extension, policy changes should support faster research, more focus on emerging communities and issues, and increases in collaborative research.**

Impact and Needs Assessment

Decreasing staff turnover, supporting conservation professional development, increasing job satisfaction, and supporting conservation outreach are all necessary to improve farmer experiences with public institutions and increase trust. “Make public jobs good jobs” is a succinct way to put this. Accomplishing this requires **increased agency staff capacity, more investment in professional development, equipping organizations and their employees with new tools** to effectively do their job and **encouraging community engagement and relationship building** with farmers and other community members.

7 CLIMATE CHANGE & MENTAL HEALTH

OPPORTUNITIES

Building resilient, regenerative agriculture systems requires not only technical and environmental stewardship, but also attending to the economic, personal, and social dimensions of farming and ranching. There are people, both producers and advisors, interested in having more open discussion of climate change and the associated mental and emotional toll. Organizational capacities may need more development, but farmer peer networks are a potential avenue. Many farmers may want to have more open discussions with other farmers. Other rural communities may also play an important role in facilitating discussions, including women producers, women in farming families who may not be the primary producer-decision maker, or ag retailers or suppliers.

CHALLENGES

Climate change, especially inter- and intra-annual variability and weather extremes, create significant vulnerabilities for farms, farmers, and rural communities. These vulnerabilities and risks can create significant physical, mental, and emotional strain on producers, their families, and advisors they work with. The main challenges and harms include:

Farm succession concerns: Changes in growing conditions and climate create significant risk for future farming generations, both in terms of farm viability (environmental and economic) and creating a farming industry that youth are excited about becoming part of.

Personal and physical concerns: Weather extremes create real risk for individual farmers (e.g., extreme heat) and farming/rural communities (e.g., storms, fires). These are exacerbated by rural poverty and an aging farming population.

7 CLIMATE CHANGE & MENTAL HEALTH

CHALLENGES

Mental health stigma: Farmers and advisors can find it challenging to discuss mental health. Climate change itself can also be a politically divisive topic, layering on another challenging topic to broach between farmers and advisors.

Culpability and guilt: Individual farmers may feel a sense of personal guilt or responsibility for lack of farm resilience in the face of climate change, potential for passing along less-viable farm operations to future generations, or a feeling of helplessness at being able to adequately address climate change.

Organizational capacity: While some organizations (i.e., Extension) do have some capacity and experience discussing mental health, this is not widespread, especially in organizations focused primarily on environmental sustainability and natural resources. There is a need for individual training in addressing mental health and emotional components of farming, supporting resources, and communities of practice. Rural mental health resources in general are also a significant challenge in many areas.

7 CLIMATE CHANGE & MENTAL HEALTH

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Training and Communities of Practice

Individual practitioners and organizations need training in mental health, how to facilitate discussions around mental health, and specific guidance on addressing climate change-related issues. This could include **identifying existing programs that successfully do this, including non-US programs (e.g., Australian agriculture), One Health or other public health Extension programs, or others.** This may require some additional research and/or resource sharing. At the individual professional development level, there is a need for **specific training programs** to build core competencies as well as **professional mentoring**.

Reframing Climate Change Conversations

There is a need to reframe ways in which climate change is discussed, both to minimize harms (especially associated with feelings of hopelessness) and to identify actionable paths forward for individuals and communities. Reframing farmers and rural communities as "part of the climate solution" and focusing on holistic farm resilience are two potential frames that address these concerns. **Elevating these approaches could involve writing papers for different audiences or specific outreach and communications guidance for practitioners and other advisors.**

Peer-to-Peer Communication and Support

Farmers want to hear from and talk with other farmers. There is a role for practitioners at helping to facilitate these peer groups, including **hosting discussions and creating safe spaces.** (This connects to the other point about the need for professional training on how to do this). There is also a role for practitioners and organizations at **providing platforms for storytelling**, especially around specific events that create mental health strain.

8 URBAN-RURAL CONNECTIONS

OPPORTUNITIES

There is an interest and need in bridging existing socio-political and communication divides between rural farming populations and the general public (which tends to be urban or suburban). This involves increasing knowledge among the public about agriculture in general, and regenerative/sustainable approaches specifically. Changing narratives through increased engagement with youth, urban populations, and others could increase investments in rural communities, encourage conservation efforts through increased consumer demand, and ease emotional burdens on farmers, who often feel misunderstood by the public.

CHALLENGES

There are significant socio-cultural, economic, and geographic divides between rural farming populations and more urban audiences (including suburban and perhaps ex-urban as well). These divides create challenges for advancing conservation and regenerative agriculture in multiple ways:

Lack of perceived socio-political support by farmers: Many producers feel misunderstood and unfairly blamed for multiple ills: pollution and environmental degradation; lack of animal welfare and food safety; perception of 'big ag', a business-oriented, political lobbying orientation; and lack of economic opportunity in farming.

***Farmers perceived as monolith*:** Many non-farming populations may not understand the diversity in production systems, farm sizes, and approaches to conservation that exist. There is a perception of agriculture as either industrial farming or small, direct-to-consumer (CSA, farmers market).

8 URBAN-RURAL CONNECTIONS

CHALLENGES

Lack of youth engagement: Especially in urban/suburban settings (but also potentially in rural areas?), there is a lack of youth education on agriculture in general and ag conservation specifically. This lack of engagement exacerbates existing divides as future generations hear incomplete messages about farms through other channels.

Farm succession: Lack of youth engagement and education both exacerbates divides, but also contributes to continued farm succession challenges. There are relatively few urban or suburban youth moving into agricultural careers.

Policy and investment: Agricultural policy at federal and state levels, including on conservation issues, are increasingly the purview of agriculture-focused agencies. There are silos between other resources agencies (such as state departments of natural resources) and traditional ag agencies. Misperceptions of agriculture lead to disinvestments in innovation and regenerative agriculture, especially for smaller farms, new farmers, and other historically marginalized producers (women, people of color). There is also often a lack of local facilities (especially in USDA) that can address rural development and local food system development.

Lack of support for local food systems: Farmers may want to increase market opportunities locally, including through institutional buyer outlets (e.g., schools, hospitals, local government), but may lack experience or opportunity to develop needed connections. Paired with lack of investment in local markets (especially in rural communities) through existing policy, lack of capacity and resource constraints can constrain the ability to develop robust local food systems. Lack of secure, developed local markets also inhibit farmer desire to engage in local food sales, including lack of interest in wholesale and aggregated markets.

8 URBAN-RURAL CONNECTIONS

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Youth Education and Engagement Programs

There is a need for more comprehensive and robust school-based and extra-curricular programming for youth education on agriculture in general, and conservation specifically. This should begin with **identifying and sharing successful models that exist**, as well as **identifying key desired topics and outcomes of education programs.**

Targeted Outreach to Local Municipal Leaders

Building support for local food systems and regenerative production will require increased and different outreach to local leaders. This includes school and other community administrators (i.e., hospitals, local governments), state and regional rural development groups, and other business leaders. Outreach to these audiences is likely to require a mix of education and encouragement to action. There is a need for more **examples of successful municipal outreach, resources (toolkits, communications guidance) for individuals and organizations doing outreach**, and **empowerment of local farm communities to engage with local leaders.**

Incorporate Holistic Farm Goals in Outreach

Supporting regenerative agriculture requires not only supporting on-farm action, but also developing markets for diverse, regeneratively-grown products, supportive communities, and investments in social and human capital. This will require **greater coordination and collaboration** between organizations traditionally engaged in conservation issues with organizations focused on rural development, food safety, youth education, and agri-tourism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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