

McKnight Foundation Grant

What are the “barriers” to ag retailers
offering conservation services?

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Healthy People. Environments. Economies.

Joe Lally

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Abstract, Background and Methodology

Ag Retailers and Conservation Management

Abstract: Phase 1

Past survey work has shown overwhelming evidence that farmers trust their local ag retailers for crop input production supplies/products, advice, and services. (*2014 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll Jay Arbuckle, ISU*). Conventional wisdom then takes it further by suggesting that ag retailers, as private sector advisors, would be the logical service providers for promoting more conservation on the land. But the findings of this survey indicate that farmers are not asking for such services, ag retailers are not trained in this area and they fear alienating their customers and therefore losing sales. A lack of cost benefit analysis related to conservation is a real challenge for ag retailers.

Background: Phase 1

The goal of this project seeks to conduct a needs assessment and identify perceived barriers to the delivery of conservation management by ag retailers.

During these discussions with ag retailers, the primary areas that were reviewed included

- Current products and services
- Staff knowledge and skills
- Ag retailer/operator exchange of information
- Information technology
- Customer relations

Methodology: Phase 1

The Iowa Institute of Cooperatives was asked if they would help us identify the ag retailers in Iowa who most likely would agree to participate in this poll, and then to further highlight the most progressive retailers in the state. Locations and point of contact, general managers and agronomy department staff, were determined as a place to start. 15 ag retailers were initially targeted across the 3 regions of Iowa (Eastern, Central, Western). A project advisory committee was assembled to create an instrument to assist in determining the key topics of interest for this project and what questions might gain the greatest determination of barriers, if in fact barriers exist. In 14 of the 15 retailers selected, Joe Lally, personally conducted the interview visits with an experienced TSP.

Abstract: Phase 2 and Phase 3

The continuation of the Phase 1 survey work regarding “What are the “barriers” to ag retailers offering conservation services” was extended to Phase 2 and Phase 3 beginning late summer, fall/winter of 2016/2017. The summary of Phase 1 is the first part of this 3-part summary of this project. Many real-time suggestions and input was gathered from farmers (Phase 2) and absentee landowners (Phase 3) regarding their understanding of conservation planning, soil and water management, and sustainability.

A clear, common response was the total lack of cost-benefit relationship that exist in the decision-making process when it comes to implementing conservation management.

Background: Phase 2 and Phase 3

The goal of this project has been to learn from Ag Retailers, first, then from farmers and landowners, what they might offer in terms of input on the question of ag retailers (private sector) assisting with conservation management at the farm level. While it's a big, and fairly new concept, the idea is to supplement USDA's (public sector) continuing reduction in field-based staff to sell and administer USDA conservation programs, with an agronomy sales person from the local ag retailer. The 3 key summary results from Phase 1 work were:

- Information Technology is becoming more important each year
- Ag retailers have little contact with absentee landowners
- Ag retailers are not being asked by farmers for their assistance in conservation management

Methodology: Phase 2 and Phase 3

The 15 ag retailers surveyed in the first phase were again asked to participate in a second round of a poll to gain feedback from their customer farmers. Most ag retailers indicated they just don't get farmers to meetings like they used to. Many have discontinued their annual meetings for example. By far, the most common method of communicating with their customers on a group basis is at sponsored field days during July and August. Typically, the results from fertilizer, seed, herbicide, and tillage plots are demonstrated and discussed by experts in the field. Most of these events are then coupled with on-farm visits to share cost/benefit details of the various products in the plots. There were however, several ag retailers willing to give it a try (group meeting) and learn themselves as well.

Findings

Phase 1

Current products and services

100% of retailers surveyed have established dry nutrient storage facilities with the ability to blend dry fertilizer. 93% have liquid storage facilities. All retailers offer dry, regular, VRT, and liquid application equipment. Application methods, however were variable with 93% offering top-dress, 80% injection and low-impact (minimal soil disturbance) and 33% regular broadcast application. Dual placement application is offered by 33% of retailers. Anhydrous application is offered by 93%. All retailers offer on-the-farm delivery and application through custom application and tender trucks. Liquid and anhydrous products are available through 93% of the retailers. All retailers offer on-the-farm delivery and custom application of dry fertilizer products. Retailers surveyed do not currently offer other in-field custom operations such as planting, tillage, or harvesting.

Soil testing and lab analyses are currently offered by all retailers surveyed. Soil samples are collected by either truck or ATV mounted probes or manual sampling. Soil sampling is primarily conducted for crop

nutrient purposes with all retailers offering grid sampling and 80% offering GPS mapping services. 14% offer soil health and soil property investigation or interpretation.

All ag retailers originate grain production from the farm. One ag retailer shares grain marketing with another ag retailer.

Phase 2: The idea of receiving conservation services through ag retailers is a new concept to this group. Although they weren't inherently opposed to the idea, it is definitely a change to the way they currently work. As water quality concerns increase, farmers are beginning to see a need for assistance and verification of what they are currently doing. The service provider must be well educated and provide value to the farmer. They don't have the time or patience to listen to a sales pitch, even when it's offered up in an educational format. Farmers want to understand the costs and benefits of practices and managements. If a trained ag retailer presented options that benefited the farmer at no or low cost, most would be interested in listening but they are rooted in reality. If they don't have the money, they won't fix the problem.

Phase 3: It would be very difficult for ag retailers to make much progress offering conservation services to absentee landowners. Absentee landowners do not trust people that they don't know and would much rather seek out advice/information from trusted sources (neighbors, trade pubs, conversations held while standing right by the problem) than look for outside expertise. They talk about the legacy of the land, but that's not what drives their decisions or actions. They rely on face-to-face interactions with people they know. However, if the government will pay for the fix, they're willing to let them come in and advise/recommend the solutions. They're not big users of the internet and, in general, it doesn't seem to occur to them to use it as a research tool when they're trying to solve a problem.

Recommendations

Phase 1

- Train and educate the retailer level to market conservation management and start the conversation with farmers about conservation.
- Build confidence with the sales staff that the subject of conservation management is non-proprietary.
- Invest in the ag retailer training, education and incentives that will be required to achieve any momentum going forward.

Phase 2

- Create a stakeholder group of ag retailers in priority watersheds to educate, train and prepare service providers to deliver conservation management services directed to farmers.
- Create an inter-agency working group between IDALS, IDNR, SWCD, NRCS, ISU, and the private sector to gain a common marketing plan for providing conservation management services across regulatory, public agencies and private organizations.

- Train priority watershed coordinators to provide common leadership for providing conservation management services, coordinating various service providers and ultimately extending services across the state.

Phase 3

- While there may be opportunity to facilitate communication between farmers and their absentee landlords, we do not recommend offering conservation management services directly to this group.
- Most of the management decision are made by the tenants. While written documentation of the costs and benefits of considered practice investments would be beneficial to the absentee landowner group, it would make most sense to provide the information through the operators.

Phase 1: Ag Retailers – Full Findings

Abstract

Past survey work has shown overwhelming evidence that farmers trust their local ag retailers for crop input production supplies/products, advice, and services. (*2014 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll Jay Arbuckle, ISU*). Conventional wisdom then takes it further by suggesting that ag retailers, as private sector advisors, would be the logical service providers for promoting more conservation on the land. But the findings of this survey indicate that farmers are not asking for such services, ag retailers are not trained in this area and they fear alienating their customers and therefore losing sales. A lack of cost benefit analysis related to conservation is a real challenge for ag retailers.

Background

The goal of this project seeks to conduct a needs assessment and identify perceived barriers to the delivery of conservation management by ag retailers.

During these discussions with ag retailers, the primary areas that were reviewed included

- Current products and services
- Staff knowledge and skills
- Ag retailer/operator exchange of information
- Information technology
- Customer relations

Methodology

The Iowa Institute of Cooperatives was asked if they would help us identify the ag retailers in Iowa who most likely would agree to participate in this poll, and then to further highlight the most progressive retailers in the state. Locations and point of contact, general managers and agronomy department staff, were determined as a place to start. 15 ag retailers were initially targeted across the 3 regions of Iowa (Eastern, Central, Western). A project advisory committee was assembled to create an instrument to assist in determining the key topics of interest for this project and what questions might gain the

greatest determination of barriers, if in fact barriers exist. In 14 of the 15 retailers selected, Joe Lally, personally conducted the interview visits with an experienced TSP.

Findings

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All ag retailers originate grain production from the farm. One ag retailer shares grain marketing with another ag retailer.

Staff knowledge and skills

100% of ag retailers surveyed have dedicated ag sales staff with 93% employing Certified Crop Advisors (CCA). Training is conducted by all ag retailers by both on-site and off-site delivery. All retailers surveyed provide sales and services of seed, crop nutrients, crop pest management, soil sampling and have certified pesticide applicators on staff. Other services include crop scouting, crop nutrient plan development by 93% of retailers and manure management planning by 33%.

Ag retailer/operator exchange of information

100% of ag retailers communicate directly with the farm operator but only 40% work directly with absentee landowners. 78% of the rental ground is cash rented, 16% is 50/50 landowner/tenant, and 6% is flexible lease. 86% of the ag retailers have formal farmer and membership meetings to share business information. 100% of retailers hold product information meetings with staff and industry/extension speakers. 53% hold some form of grain marketing meetings. All retailers are involved with plot research and education for their primary staff and farmer training/education.

Information technology

Websites are maintained by 100% of retailers surveyed however only 60% of those websites are interactive and services provided through the websites are limited. Online purchasing is available for livestock feed through 26% of the retailers, grain marketing for 53%, and electronic deposit for 56% of

the retailers. Information provided by the retailer websites are primarily to promote news and events, and to a lesser extent, staff contact information and plot results and other research. Technology support services for on-farm technology and service support are provided by all retailers surveyed. Technology support through cell phone communication, mapping services, and crop planning are offered by 93% of ag retailers. Cell phone apps are offered by 93% of the retailers and field mapping by 60%. However, all cell phone apps are limited to markets and weather.

Customer relations

Value added services for soil testing are provided by all ag retailers either in house or through contracted services. Only minor discussion exists between the ag retailer and the operating farmer concerning the soil testing maps and yield harvest maps. 40% of ag retailers are using the NRCS tools, RUSLE2 and P Index, while 73% use ag decision software guides to aid in planning. 100% of ag retailers surveyed provide some type of yield goal planning/cost of production. Credit card use is limited to c-store purchases.

Conclusion

All ag retailers participating in this project are stable, long term businesses with substantial capital assets in crop production facilities, equipment and sales staff training. The focus is providing the best information and products that meet the farm operator's needs.

- Information Technology (IT) is becoming more and more important each year. The ag retailers surveyed agreed that more technology needs to be incorporated at the ag retailer level to provide additional feedback and gain the attention of the farmers. Currently, most ag retailers surveyed do not use their company websites as an interactive way to reach farmers. Some websites have no contact information listed, cannot do any ordering via the website, and do not promote electronic business services in the website.
- Ag retailers have little if any contact with absentee landowners. Almost all their interaction solely involves the farm operator. If long term decisions are needed, many times that requires involvement of both the landowners and the tenant, while farming practices generally involve only the operator making that decision.
- A common theme reported by ag retailers was simply farmers are not asking for help with conservation. If farmers are not asking for help, retailers felt it was difficult to bring up conservation because of a fear of sounding accusatory towards the farmer. Since ag retailers rely on income provided by their farmer customers, they fear losing them as customers by bringing up the subject of conservation. Ag retailers currently do not have adequate training regarding conservation management services. Without proper training, ag retailers feel uneasy starting a conversation and trying to sell farmers on implementing practices that they don't fully understand. The majority of the ag retailers surveyed do not discuss needed conservation practices. A lack of cost benefit analysis related to conservation is a real challenge for ag retailers.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation going forward points to the lack of training and education at the retailer level to market conservation management. Starting the conversation with a farmer is the first step. The next step is building confidence with the sales staff that the subject of conservation management is fair. Investing in the ag retailer training, education and incentives will be required to achieve any momentum going forward.

Submitted by:

Joe Lally, Executive Director, Technical Service Providers Network, (ISU-retired)

December 2015

Notes:

1a: new N.P.K.S facilities 2d1: 60-120' sprayers 4: most farmers plant on contour 5c: 50% of the farmers do not soil test 7c1: test plot/chemical mtg 8b: new website under construction 8d2: 25% of the famers do about 25% of their purchases prepay 8d5: do get occasional questions

1a: 2 plants – Mosaic – 40 Rock Simplot-MAP, Potash, MnZn encapsulated, P2O5 1.c: strip-til, exact nutrient in each prill – outside of planter 2c: 50% use VRT 2d: 2 liquid blend plants 2f: questions VRT Anhydrous 3b: 90% of products are custom applied 5: 50% of farmers grid sample 6d2: Cropland and Monsanto 6e: merchandiser 6f1: fee based 8c2: quarterly newsletter 8d: precision ag hardware business, climate pro, 360 yield field scripts 9i: 4 staff people trained in helping farmers with precision ag

1a: 50% fall, 50% spring 2d1: banding is better than broadcast 2d2: starter on planter 2f2: WCC 85% fall – ECC 85% spring 4b: strip tillage and ridge tillage are a management challenge for farmers 5: 95% of soils are sampled 7c1: 3 times a year at 3 different locations 8d5: senior staff only 9i: next big dimension of ag retailer business looking at all the options i.e. drones cover 5c: smaller farms in NH, larger farms in C C

3c: 6 locations – self load 6d6: soil sampling contracted 6d6f: contracted with Carrie 6d6f3: SSI-ag advance ends with invoice 8b2b: plans are built ahead of time on laptop 9a: Carrie 9i: watch computer track live sprayer operation in field

cover5c: sell seed for waterways & producer – CRP, seeding cover seed with dry fertilizer spreaders 6f3: grid sampling 85% of local prescriptions – VRT Nitrogen 8d: sales plus installation of precision technology 9i: scout pro, ipad, tissue sampling, LSNT, stalk N test

3c: sprayer – 2/3 pre-plant 1 /3 post plant 4: majority of farmers plant on contour 5c: approved lab- IAS prints and delivers results 8d5: promotes staying ahead of water quality concerns 9i: LSNT, yield 360 commander, soil scanner, in season nitrate measurements

2d1: Y drops – highboy – top dress urea 2d3: blue jet 5c: N sampling 1-2", soil scanner – N compare to climate corp LSNT 6c: Monsanto climate corp agi drain training 8d2: calibrate IT precision 9g: referral to two river financial

6d3: most farmers apply maintenance rates and are not soil testing 8d2: most farmers are older and prefer face to face 9i: scouting some and stalk test some

2a: 90% of acres no fall commercial N but lots of manure 6g: summer interns 5 to 6 weeks may thru june 98% of the acres are 2.5 grids 9e: data management 20% of the acres – Premier Ag, Des Moines

5c: 3000 acres aerial seeding cover crops, 1500 acres with buggy's 70-80 % of farmers soil test 8d5: grassed waterways and headlands

7c: Some farm management company's order products 8b2d: farmers can view their statements on the web 8c4: 85% of farmers have email addresses and use them 8d5: some CP in eastern territory – 635,000 acres in eastern territory,

cover5c: seed cover crops – contract drill, 2c VRT for 20 years – pays to grid sample soils just to get lime spreading right, which pays for the soil testing 2f: 80,000 acres of NH3 d6: 100 % soil tested 8b2b: Most ag inputs are purchased face to face 8b2a: ffd is ordered by phone, cell, email and text 9d: build, maintain and the long-term levels out 9i: follow up is farmer driven

3e: sulfur bars on anhydrous applicators 7c: absentee landowner – billing only 8d: climate app, R-7 tools 8d5: Premeir, Sustain, ISA

cover5c: routinely discuss soil erosion, grass waterways, headlands and terraces with farmers 1a: new dry storage at 2 locations, liquid storage at 2 locations, c new blending coming on line at one location 2b: buggy's mostly used for pastures 2e: dual placement is anti-VRT 2f1: low impact NH3 applicators are not proving to stay seated correctly during application – also high maintenance rig 5a: 50% soil test is contracted-50% in house – virtually all farmers soil test 6c2: most training/education of staff is completed during answer plot field days and work days 9i: promote multiple applications of N, ammonia sulfate, liquid started with planters

3e: 40% NH3 fall – 60% spring 5c lab analysis ?? 6d6: 2.5 and 4 ac grids 8b2: much ag inputs are ordered via email, test, phone 8b2d: checks are often transferred electronically 8d: Ipads, laptops, premier crop 9i: precision ag, tissue testing

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Donna Jolley, TSP

Phase 2: Farmer Focus Groups – Full Findings

Separate focus groups were conducted in Pickering, Denison, and Davenport, Iowa. All of the participants were “local” within 50 miles of each focus group site. The participants were recruited to attend through the local ag retailers.

Group size ranged from 4 – 15 in every case. The Agren staff remained in the room to take notes. Joe Lally, TSPN and Amy Dreith, Agren conducted the Pickering and Davenport sessions. Drew McLellan, McLellan Marketing Group conducted the Denison session.

Joe Lally began the meetings by introducing the project, explaining the funding through the McKnight Foundation, as well as the reason for the meetings.

Each group was then asked to complete a written set of questions in order to capture language verbatims. Amy Dreith began by handing out 3 questions and asked each group to answer the questions in their own words in order to capture the language each individual normally uses.

Key phrases/words identified by farmers when asked to define the term **conservation planning** were stewardship, soil quality, soil health, water quality, conservation tillage, crop rotation, nutrient management and controlling erosion. When asked what **sustainability** means, farmer’s answers were summarized as maintaining or improving soil quality, health, and tilth to improve crop yields and profits for future generations without adversely affecting the environment. Finally, the farmers were asked what would be covered under the term **soil & water management**. Common themes were controlling erosion, water quality, cover crops, drainage, and erosion control practices.

Among the farmer groups, there was a shared set of words used to define the three terms. The farmers typically defined conservation by listing how they protect their land (no-till, etc.). They spoke about the idea of legacy, but it was not their primary focus or definition. This trend held true through all of the verbatim questions. But it was clear that there was a shared understanding of the terms and that there’s not much risk of misunderstanding the terms. A full list of responses to the three questions can be found in **Appendix A**.

In the Davenport group, Dreith asked “What is the single biggest challenge you face in your efforts to do more soil and water conservation on your farm?”

- a. I’m unsure what conservation practices are the best “bang for my buck.”
- b. I feel conservation “best practices” limit my ability to maximize production, or won’t pay off.
- c. I’m not satisfied with the assistance available from my local conservation agency.
- d. I don’t see enough of a need on my farm that it has been a priority.

The consensus of the group was a combination of a and b, referring to a need to understand the cost/benefit relationships of practices on their land. Some commented that using government funds forces compliance with guidelines that sometimes have unnecessarily high standards and don’t allow for custom solutions.

One of the key goals of the farmer focus groups was to identify who growers trust and seek out when they're looking for information regarding conservation planning. The group was asked where they would get information regarding conservation practices. Specifically, if they were looking for information on controlling soil erosion, changing tillage practices, or installing a grassed waterway, what was their number one source for reliable information?

The source listed were...

- NRCS
- Contractors
- Neighbors
- FSA office
- County Commissioner
- Internet
- Ag consultants/seed salesmen
- Farm Bureau paper
- Magazines
- University data
- Soybean Association
- Leopard Center
- Corn Growers Association

They tended to rely on sources close at hand for their day-to-day information like agronomists, NRCS, contractors, and neighbors. They were more likely to seek out expertise from other authority groups like associations and the NRCS to get general education or specific information. They also indicated that because they are the ones working the land, they are their own most significant source of information.

When asked how they'd know if they had a conservation need, the answer was universally tangible – when we see a real problem. They also relied on conversations with their peers/neighbors whose farming practices they respect.

Their answers were a list of symptoms like:

- Wet spots
- Yield loss
- Visual signs of erosion
- Tile blowout/hole in the ground
- Soil sample results
- Ditch needs filling in
- Look at soil health
- Changing fence line

Farmers were then asked what would it take for the potential erosion or yield loss to be a big enough concern that you would want to actually do something about it or at least learn more? Answers often boiled down to if the problem is significant enough that it would impact yield and profitability. The threat of regulation also was mentioned as a factor. But, the issue of figuring the cost versus benefit of practices and management choices was clear among many farmers.

When asked what conservation needs might the farmers have down the road, the participants were broad in their responses.

- Controlling soil erosion
- Cover crops
- Putting in a pond
- Water management
- Cost/Benefit analysis of practices

- Verification of progress toward sustainability goals
- Creating a conservation plan
- Tillage practices

Finally, the groups were posed the question, why do conservation practices matter to their work and their land and what long-term gains do they see.

The gains listed were...

- Soil health/quality
- Organic matter increase
- Water infiltration
- Personal satisfaction
- Controlling soil erosion
- Higher yields

Next, we posed a scenario to each group and asked them to simply react to it. The scenario used a trained local agronomist to identify soil erosion and water quality issues on their land. If issues were identified, the agronomist would offer a free consultation with the farmer, regional conservation specialist from the ag retailer, and themselves. A detailed conservation plan would then be offered as a next step that could include services such as erosion analysis and design of structural conservation practices for a fee.

Farmers were asked to note what they liked, didn't like and how likely were they to seek out the solution offered in the scenario.

Most farmers liked the idea of their agronomist visiting the land on a regular basis and offering a second opinion on practices and managements. However, there was some concern of the potential cost and motives of the ag retailers. Some farmers had good relationships with their local NRCS offices and didn't see a need to change that relationship. Others were not happy with the services provided from the local NRCS and were open to the idea of their ag retailers providing conservation services.

Reoccurring answers to the scenario questions are listed below. A sample scenario and full comments are attached in Appendix B & C.

Scenario:

- What do you like about this scenario?
 - Third-party to help with landlord or banker
 - New suggestions, how much soil am I losing?
 - NRCS isn't out and about, proactively marketing services
 - We have a relationship with the ag retailer
 - Ag retailer is familiar with my farm
 - Comparison and benchmark with other local farms
 - Another point of view
 - Faster response time
- What do you dislike about this scenario?
 - Cost (NRCS is free)
 - Will farmers accept the recommended change?

- Farmer has to make effort to change
 - Are the agronomists trained in these topics?
 - Fear of compliance
 - Need a whole-farm based plan
- c. What would you change?
- Ag retailer demos could help overcome barriers
 - Include landlords and bankers since this is good evidence to show why you are choosing certain managements or practices
 - Concerned with inconveniencing landlord
- d. Concerns
- Risk for retailer in losing customers due to sales calls
 - Is there enough time for agronomists to accomplish this?
 - Will agronomist's recommendations be the best option for the farmer?
 - Can the ag retailer work together effectively with the NRCS?

Phase 2 Conclusion:

The idea of receiving conservation services through ag retailers is a new concept to this group. Although they weren't inherently opposed to the idea, it is definitely a change to the way they currently work. As water quality concerns increase, farmers are beginning to see a need for assistance and verification of what they are currently doing. The service provider must be well educated and provide value to the farmer. They don't have the time or patience to listen to a sales pitch, even when it's offered up in an educational format. Farmers want to understand the costs and benefits of practices and managements. If a trained ag retailer presented options that benefited the farmer at no or low cost, most would be interested in listening but they are rooted in reality. If they don't have the money, they won't fix the problem.

Phase 2 Recommendations:

- Create a stakeholder group of ag retailers in priority watersheds to educate, train and prepare service providers to deliver conservation management services directed to farmers.
- Create an inter-agency working group between IDALS, IDNR, SWCD, NRCS, ISU, and the private sector to gain a common marketing plan for providing conservation management services across regulatory, public agencies and private organizations.
- Train priority watershed coordinators to provide common leadership for providing conservation management services, coordinating various service providers and ultimately extending services across the state.

Phase 3: Absentee Landowner Focus Groups - Full Findings

Two focus groups were conducted with absentee landowners in Iowa Falls, Iowa. All of the participants were “local” within 50 miles of each focus group site. The participants were recruited to attend through Agren’s NIFA project absentee landowner list.

In total, 23 absentee landowners participated. The Agren staff remained in the room to take notes. Drew McLellan, McLellan Marketing Group conducted the sessions.

Amy Dreith from Agren began the meetings by introducing the project, explaining the funding, as well as the reason for this meeting.

Each group was then asked to complete a written set of questions in order to capture language verbatims. Three questions were handed out and each participant was asked to answer the questions in their own words in order to capture the language each individual normally uses.

Key phrases/words identified by absentee landowners when asked to define the term conservation planning were protecting soil and controlling erosion, improving water quality and preserving the land for future generations. When asked what sustainability means, absentee landowner’s answers were summarized as retaining productivity for the long-term while keeping our environment safe. Finally, the absentee landowners were asked what would be covered under the term soil & water management. Common themes were controlling erosion, water quality, drainage, and erosion control practices.

Among the absentee landowner groups, there was a shared set of words used to define the three terms. The absentee landowner attendees were much more likely to talk in a more abstract, greater good sort of way than their farmer counterparts. They spoke more often about preserving the land for future generations and in broader generalities. There was a clear shared understanding of the presented terms. A full list of responses to the three questions can be found in Appendix D.

One of the key goals of the focus groups was to identify who landowners trust when they’re looking for information regarding conservation planning. The group was asked where they would get information regarding conservation practices. Specifically, if they were looking for information on controlling soil erosion, changing tillage practices, or installing a grassed waterway, what was their number one source for reliable information?

The source listed were...

- Extension
- NRCS
- Renter/family member farming the land
- Contractors

Secondary sources were...

- Neighbors
- FSA
- County Commissioner
- YouTube
- Trade pubs (Wallaces Farmer, Successful Farming, Farm Journal, Furrow)
- Corn Growers Association

For the absentee landowners, without a doubt their primary source of information is whoever is actively farming the land. The tenant is typically the one who raises the alarm that there's a problem. They indicated that they get general information from Extension, NRCS, tenants, contractors, and trade publications. However, they rely on their tenant to trigger a specific concern about an active problem. Based on the participants we spoke with, the internet is a very minor player. Only one or two referenced the internet (or YouTube) at all. This may be due to their age/general adoption and use of the internet or that they are more at arm's length from worrying about these issues.

When asked how they'd know if they had a conservation need, the answer was universally tangible – when we see a real problem.

Their answers were a list of symptoms like:

- Wet spots
- Tenant notifies me
- Visual signs of erosion
- Tile blowout/hole in the ground
- Soil sampling

Absentee landowners were then asked what would it take for the potential erosion or yield loss to be a big enough concern that they would want to actually do something about it or at least learn more. For the absentee landowners, they often rely on the tenants advising them of issues. But, the problem needed to be significant enough that it would impact yield and profitability. As one participant said, “owners want what is best for their land but they don't want to spend money to do it.” Interestingly, even though many of the participants referenced the idea of legacy (leaving the land in better condition than it was when you got it) at least one participant mentioned that consideration was given to “how much longer will I own the land/am I getting ready to sell?”

When asked what conservation needs might be down the road, the participants were broad in their response.

- Controlling soil erosion
- Cover crops
- Putting in a pond
- Water management
- Changing tillage practices
- Wetland

Finally, the groups were posed the question why do conservation practices matter to their work and their land and what long-term gains do they see.

The gains listed were...

- Being a good steward
- Land preservation
- Legacy/next generation
- Water quality

Next, we posed three scenarios to each group and asked them to simply react to them. Scenario A looked at utilizing an independent third party for conservation services. Scenario B discussed receiving conservation services through a landowner's local ag retailer. Scenario C outlined using the NRCS for

conservation services. Absentee landowners were asked to note what they liked, didn't like and how likely were they to seek out the solution offered in the scenario.

Scenario C was clearly the most appealing. While they acknowledged that the process was a long, drawn out, paperwork intense solution, they liked it because someone else was paying for (or contributing a large portion) the solution.

Scenario A was not well received. The idea of a stranger being helpful seemed far-fetched to them. "We know our land" was the over-arching attitude. The absentee landowner audience is slow to trust, and didn't warm up to the idea that they'd be relying on someone they didn't know. They preferred the offer come through the government or a trusted source. The fact that the scenario also suggested the initial introduction came via an online ad or the internet was also a turn off for them. They were not very familiar with the internet and assumed the solutions offered would be generic in nature and not specific to their land. They also objected to the lack of cost-share with this scenario.

They did like that Scenario A was voluntary and a pay as you go solution. Their reaction overall to Scenario A could best be boiled down to a lack of trust.

In Scenario B, some liked the localization of the ag retailer resource but there were still trust issues. "What are they going to try to sell me and are they getting a kick back" was a common response. Again, this scenario was deemed less desirable because the government was not involved and the lack of transparency in the pricing/compensation.

What they liked about Scenario B was the agronomist's visits to their land on an annual or regular basis. But they also were unhappy at the idea of paying a fee when they already believe they fund the NRCS.

The overall reaction to Scenario B was slightly better than Scenario A, but not by much. There was no enthusiasm for it, but the level of distrust was slightly less.

None of the scenarios received a rave review, but Scenario C came the closest. They liked the idea of getting free counsel and they loved the cost-sharing aspect of the plan. The biggest concerns with this scenario were the time lag and the amount of paperwork. There was also still a lack of trust in the expertise of the government employee.

The bottom line of their reactions to all of the scenarios was:

- We know our own land and what needs to be done
- It often boils down to having the money to implement the fix we know we need
- We don't trust other people telling us what to do – they all have an agenda/sales focus
- If we aren't making money, we won't fix the problem

Scenarios and full comments are attached in Appendix E-J.

Phase 3 Conclusion:

It would be very difficult for ag retailers to make much progress offering conservation services to absentee landowners. Absentee landowners do not trust people that they don't know and would much rather seek out advice/information from trusted sources (neighbors, trade pubs, conversations held while standing right by the problem) than look for outside expertise. They talk about the legacy of the land, but that's not what drives their decisions or actions. They rely on face-to-face interactions with people they know. However, if the government will pay for the fix, they're willing to let them come in and advise/recommend the solutions. They're not big users of the internet and, in general, it doesn't seem to occur to them to use it as a research tool when they're trying to solve a problem.

Phase 3 Recommendations:

- While there may be opportunity to facilitate communication between farmers and their absentee landlords, we do not recommend offering conservation management services directly to this group.
- Most of the management decision are made by the tenants. While written documentation of the costs and benefits of considered practice investments would be beneficial to the absentee landowner group, it would make most sense to provide the information through the operators.

Appendices

- A – Farmer written responses to terms p. 20-22
- B – Sample scenario presented to farmers p. 23
- C – Farmer written responses to scenario p. 24-26
- D – Absentee landowner written responses to terms p. 27-28
- E – Farmer written responses to Scenario A p. 29-30
- F – Farmer written responses to Scenario B p. 31-32
- G – Farmer written responses to Scenario C p. 33-34
- H – Sample Scenario A presented to absentee landowners p. 35
- I – Sample Scenario B presented to absentee landowners p. 36
- J – Sample Scenario C presented to absentee landowners p. 37

Scenario C

Overview:

- While scouting your fields, you notice a reoccurring area of erosion.
- You contact your county NRCS office to obtain a waterway design.
- No fee is charged to access services.
- After a cost-share application is completed, you will be notified in approximately two months if you are approved. If approved, you can expect to receive assistance within one year.

For this scenario, please consider...

1. What do you like most?

2. What do you like least?

3. What would you change?

4. What potential concerns exist?