

CONSERVATION CONVERSATIONS

Part 1: How to Start the Discussion



Your guide for unleashing your farm's full potential through a conversation between tenant and landlord.

For generations, farms have run on trust and handshakes. Every year, landlords trust their tenants to be good stewards of their soil, and tenants trust landlords to keep the farm in production.

This trust remains your farm's greatest untapped resource. All it takes to unleash its potential is a conversation. The Conservation Conversation guidebook series provides resources that make the conversations easier to start and more productive as you go, helping open the door to enhanced collaboration.

Everyone profits and nature thrives.

Discussing Conservation Agriculture Can Open Many Doors

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

A key reason for this lack of collaboration¹ is, in many cases, a lack of communication between tenant and landlord around the benefits, to each party and to the farm, of implementing conservation activities. Many landlords simply aren't aware of the benefits to conservation farming, and they aren't actively supporting their tenants in deploying conservation practices.

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

¹<https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2018/Q4/study-who-owns-and-farms-land-can-create-barriers-to-conservation.html>

Where to Start? With Simple Questions

Ask your landlord about their basic view of conservation agriculture. See if they are aware of the basic practices that support good soil health such as reduced or minimal tillage, cover crops, in-season and precision nitrogen applications, buffer zones and other structural strategies for reducing nutrient loss.

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

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



In Broad Terms, Conservation Agriculture Applies to Anything and Everything That:

**Promotes
Maintenance
of a Permanent Soil
Cover**

**Minimizes Soil
Disturbance**

**Increases
Diversification of
Plants, Insects and
Soil Microorganisms**

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



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

Conservation Agronomy 101: Lessons for Your Landlord

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

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



Talking Points: The Benefits of Building Soil Health

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

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

Reduced tillage decreases disturbance of the soil, thereby improving the soil's ability to retain nutrients and sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. **Cover cropping** between cash crop seasons is a heritage practice that maximizes the time each year that living roots are building soil nutrients and keeping the surface protected.

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

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



While colder, wet springs may make no-till farming difficult, new technologies and practices like strip-tillage can help improve emergence while offering benefits of no-till farming.



Wheat, ryegrass, red clover, millet and other cover crops can protect against soil erosion while helping add biodiversity to the living complex of species and microorganisms above and below the ground.



Using nitrogen stabilizers and splitting fall nitrogen applications with increased in-season precision applications help conserve nutrients and reduce runoff.



Terracing sloped land, adding buffer zones or prairie strips and building bioreactors are all recommended ways to conserve soils, reduce nutrient runoff and protect waters.

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

Conservation agriculture can benefit

- tenants through reduced input cost and increased yields;
- landlords through ensuring the acres remain profitable and productive for generations to come; and the
- environment by improving water quality through reduced nutrient loss and erosion.

But these benefits are only achievable through sustained, long-term adoption of conservation—something only possible when tenant and landlord work together to achieve a common goal. This starts with everyone understanding conservation agriculture's role on a healthy and profitable farm.

Almost 40 percent of all U.S. farmland is rented. America's farmer-tenants have the transformative



power to positively affect millions of acres of land through adopting beneficial conservation agriculture practices.

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

It all starts with a conversation. The next move is in your hands. Talk to your landlord today and get a good thing going.

Talking Points: Conservation Agriculture...

Enhances the Soil's Productivity, Longevity and Value

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

Benefits the Tenant

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

Benefits the Rental Relationship

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

Benefits the Landlord

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

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