

# CONSERVATION CONVERSATIONS

## Part 2: Multi-Year Leases and Conservation Co-Investment Strategies



***Your guide to a confident discussion with your landowner about multi-year leases, conservation cost-sharing and building healthier farmland.***

*The average landowner-tenant relationship has been in place 16 years. Most of these partnerships involve family, friends and years of earned trust. However, most land-lease agreements are only year-to-year. And many more are handshake agreements without a formal written contract.*

*Use this guide to prepare for a conversation with your landowner, and you'll be able to make a solid case for working together to achieve the sustainable benefits of conservation farming. Together, you'll build on that foundation of existing trust to identify common goals that add value to the land and the environment. Developing and using a longer-term lease will add the security both of you need to adopt a multi-year conservation plan.*

### **Growing soil health takes time. Short-term and sustainable rewards make it worthwhile.**

The long-term benefits of soil health include higher rates of productivity and profitability. But some benefits can be seen almost immediately. Those benefits include the security of longer-term lease agreements and the potential for sharing the costs of conservation practices.

Additional long-term benefits to farmers include the opportunity to grow crops in soils that are increasingly healthy and can lead to lower input level requirements.

Landowners can also enjoy the near-term advantages of improved soil health. These include financial support available through government conservation programs, as well as tax and trust incentives intended to promote conservation

adoption. Over the long term, a focus on soil health will ensure farmland remains viable and valuable for future generations while responding to growing public demand for cleaner and greener on-farm stewardship. This forward-thinking approach can help build trust among farmers, landowners and consumers.

Beyond the farm gate, communities across the U.S. benefit from the soil-health decisions of farmers and landowners. Positive outcomes of stewardship decisions include improved water quality, filtration and storage, as well as richer biodiversity. Good soil health practices can even play a role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions through carbon sequestration.

## True Economic Benefits of Long-Term Conservation Agriculture Are Best Seen on the Land You Farm

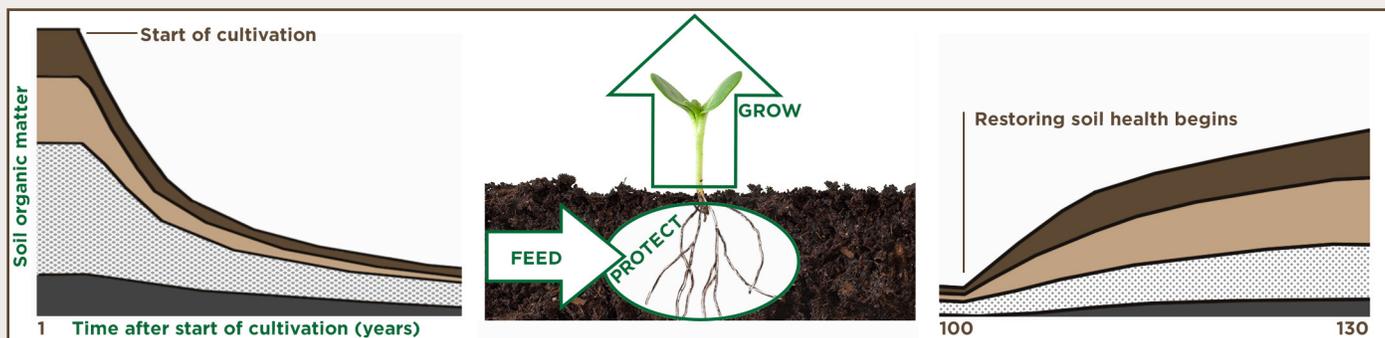
A growing body of research indicates that investing in conservation agriculture can provide positive economic returns. The following sources that can help you and your landowner set goals and benchmarks; measure soil health investments; and maximize your return on investment:

- **NRCS agents**
- **Cooperative Extension soil health specialists**
- **Agronomists with conservation ag expertise**
- **Other conservation-minded farmers**



## A Hands-on Plan for Co-Investing in Soil Health

It doesn't take many seasons to make a significant improvement in soil health. Within three years, reduced tillage and cover cropping can help build the soil microbiome, reduce erosion and improve nutrient break down. Over a five-year period, soils can be built up substantially, leading to lasting positive outcomes including reduced input costs and a smaller environmental footprint. Changes now can keep your land productive for the next generation of farm operators.



Healthy soils help break down nutrients in a way that makes it easier for crops to use them. They also protect against plant disease and pest damage while stimulating plant growth. What powers this process? The natural beneficial relationships of microbes and other species that thrive in healthy soils.

The framework below demonstrates how you and your landowner can develop a long-term conservation plan. All farms are unique, so it's best to work with local experts to create a conservation system that best supports the land, your farm business and your landowner.



# Discussions About Multi-Year Leases and Co-Investment Can Lead To Greater Conservation Agriculture Success

Discussing conservation agriculture opportunities with your landowner can yield a basic yet powerful document: a longer-term (multi-year) written lease.

As you've seen, conservation isn't an overnight decision. Instead, it takes years of planning, adopting and measuring to fine-tune the system that fits your farm business and your landowner's land.

Once you are both on the same page about the value of these soil health investments, asking for a multi-year lease agreement can be an excellent next step. When developing that agreement, be sure to identify specific ways you might work together to extend your conservation agriculture investments to meet both your objectives as a farm business and those of your landowner.



## Talking Points: Why Longer-Term Leases and Joint Conservation Investments Can Help Your Landowner—And Your Farm Business

### Multi-year lease agreements

One of the best reasons to initiate a conservation conversation is the opportunity to gain longer-term lease security.

- » Establish key goals and time horizons needed to measure success
- » Discuss the need for multi-year time commitments
- » Propose 3-to-5-year formalized land-lease agreements

### Cost-sharing lease addendums

The practice of cost sharing or rent reduction lease addendums with a co-investment strategy in conservation agriculture is gaining popularity.

- » Discuss cover crops as a good starting point for building soil health
- » Propose a 50-50 cost-sharing as a common cover crop co-commitment program
- » Talk about co-commitments to build buffer zones, berms or other edge of field or drainage management practices



**BARRIER:** Are you reluctant to “rock the boat” with your landowner?

**SOLUTION:** Work with facilitators such as:

- *Lenders*
- *Cooperative Extension specialists*
- *Farm managers*
- *Attorneys*

# Co-Investing in Conservation Agriculture Can Yield Long-Lasting Economic, Social and Environmental Rewards



- Over 90 percent of landowners trust their farmer to make good conservation decisions.
- And 84 percent indicate that maintaining soil health is a very important quality for a farm operator.

Research also shows that avoiding erosion, maintaining soil productivity and preventing contamination of waterways are attributes landowners rank highly in farmer operators. That means you most likely already share common ground with your landowner about the value of conservation agriculture.

## CONSERVATION COLLABORATIONS

### Co-Investing in Conservation Agriculture:

#### Creates Farmer Benefits

- » Fosters communication and alignment of farm management goals
- » Encourages security of longer-term lease agreements
- » Improves profitability through lower-maintenance soils and reduced inputs
- » Maintains higher rates of sustainable productivity
- » Strengthens your reputation and alignment with the public's expectations for sustainable agriculture

#### Creates Farmland Benefits

- » Builds better soil health
- » Improves water quality, filtration and nutrient storage
- » Provides richer biodiversity and natural disease resistance
- » Reduces greenhouse gas emissions

#### Creates Landowner Benefits

- » Economic incentives offered through USDA and state government programs
- » Stewardship language can be incorporated into trust and corporation establishment agreements
- » Maintains higher rates of sustainable productivity and profitability
- » Adds value to the land for future generations
- » Strengthens your reputation and alignment with the public's expectations for sustainable agriculture

The benefits are clear. The facts are strong. Adapting conservation agriculture practices that build soil health and protect waterways is a win-win worth talking about. Call your landowner today. Get a conservation conversation going. It might just lead to greater lease security that comes from working together with your landowner to invest in conservation agriculture in a way that benefits both of you.

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