



Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources

For Immediate Release

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S.T.A.R. PROGRAM REACHES 27,000 ACRES IN 2018, READY FOR STRONG 2019 SEASON

CHAMPAIGN – An innovative statewide conservation program is helping more Illinois farmers ensure they are protecting their farmland and our environment, all via a free, handy evaluation tool that has them thinking more strategically about the rich soil that produces their crops.

The S.T.A.R. program (Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources) was created by the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District in 2017 to meet goals in the state's Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy plan. That plan, developed by the state's Department of Agriculture and Environmental Protection Agency, aims to ensure Illinois' agricultural sector continues to feed the world while better managing water quality and other environmental challenges it creates.

S.T.A.R.'s highlights for 2018:

- 180 participants on 438 fields, for a total of 27,418 acres on Illinois land
- 382 of the 438 fields participating received 3 stars or higher on a 5-star scale, or more than 87 percent
- Champaign County is now joined by 42 other Illinois counties licensed to offer S.T.A.R., with more counties coming on board soon. Farmers in seven other counties also participated in the program.

S.T.A.R. participants complete a field form that is scored by a local reviewer, which then assigns points for everything from the cover crops used on acreage, to the kinds of fertilizer used for nutrient management at different points before and during the growing season, to various possible conservation practices used on that field to prevent runoff into nearby water sources.

S.T.A.R. uses a science committee of university researchers and other experts to ensure the field forms accurately compare practices used and how those effect the natural resources of the state. Fields are then ranked on the 5-star scale, and participants receive a sign for their fields to identify their S.T.A.R. designation.

The program touts several key benefits for more participation: decreasing nutrient loss in the soil and encouraging other farmers to help meet the state's nutrient loss reduction goals; increasing net farm income and possible new markets to sell crops grown using conservation practices; and supporting the ongoing work of soil and water conservation districts to preserve and promote the state's natural resources.

"Our experience with S.T.A.R. farmers is they never realized how easy it can be to prevent runoff and protect our water supplies, and how important it is to take the extra time to plan for and execute a sustainable

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farming strategy on their acreage,” said Bruce Henrikson, S.T.A.R. Program Coordinator through CCSWCD. “With more than 40 counties now participating in S.T.A.R., and state legislators making soil and water conservation a priority at the Capitol, we believe 2019 will show even more growth – and that will pay big dividends for our agricultural economy and our environment for many years to come.”

S.T.A.R. is now encouraging interested farmers to enroll their acreage in the 2019 program as harvest time arrives, although applications will be accepted until next March 1st. For the 2019 Crop Year, the science committee is placing more emphasis on cover crops and crop rotation.

The agriculture industry is embracing the use of the S.T.A.R. Program tool. ADM Cares has donated to the promotion of S.T.A.R. and provided other indirect support. Farm Credit Illinois has donated to help provide field signs in their service area, including the lower two-thirds of Illinois. Kellogg Company has pledged through 2021 to support conservation and the S.T.A.R. Program in east-central Illinois, as part of its global commitment to reach 1 million farmers and workers by 2030.

Soil and water conservation also is on the minds of state legislators. One piece of legislation, Senate Resolution 52, was adopted by the Illinois Senate to support and encourage the work of stakeholders on the state’s Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. House Bill 2737, signed into law by the Governor this summer, expands the work of SWCDs to promote soil health. The Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts honored state Sen. Scott Bennett, D-Champaign, for his leadership on both issues.

Participating is free, and as simple as completing a field form at the S.T.A.R. website: <https://starfreetool.com/home>. Paper field forms are also available for download from the site.

“We hope to show more farmers in 2019 that sustainable practices are not a luxury for farms with economic means, but a natural, necessary investment in the health of our soil, our water and our state,” Henrikson said.

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