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Farm, food and environmental groups weigh in on sustainability

By MIKE ORSO

Illinois Farm Bureau

A group of farming, food and environmental sector representatives believe economic and environmental sustainability don't have to be mutually exclusive.

"There's a real positive movement in terms of ag tech and all of the ways it is making a difference on today's farms to really advance sustainability," says Roxi Beck, director of consumer engagement with the Center for Food Integrity (CFI). "Not only with what consumers want, but also with all other stakeholders, (such as) government and (food) brands."

Beck moderated a panel discussion on food sector sustainability at the American Farm Bureau Federation's (AFBF) 2022

Convention in Atlanta, which included representatives of seed and crop protection companies, food processors, environmental organizations and farmers.

"I don't want to fight about these issues anymore. I want farmers to benefit financially and benefit from healthy soils and higher yields," says Callie Eideberg, director of government relations for the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), a founding member of what's known as The Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance (FACA). "So, let's figure out how to do that instead of just coming up with these arcane regulations from Washington, D.C., that work for a small amount of farmers, or maybe none at all, actually."

In addition to EDF, the FACA consists of Illinois Farm Bureau, AFBF and some 80 organizations representing forest owners, agribusinesses, manufacturers, the food sector, state governments, outdoor sports enthusiasts and other environmental advocates.

"The consumer wants to know that their food is being produced in the most environmentally-conscious or friendly way," says Wayne Gehrke, who farms near Maple Park in Kane County and was one of a hundred or so farmers and others attending the sustainability session at the Atlanta meeting. "We want to be able to produce food ... while still being able to make some money."

FACA's specific federal climate and sustainabili-



Promoting shared climate and sustainability priorities has been the genesis surrounding the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance founded by the American Farm Bureau Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, National Council of Farmer Cooperatives and National Farmers Union. Priorities include areas such as soil health, livestock and dairy, forests and wood products, energy, research, and food loss and waste. (Photo by Mike Orso of Illinois Farm Bureau)

ty-related policy recommendations include:

- Providing voluntary, incentive-based tools for farmers and forest owners to maximize sequestration of carbon and reduction of other greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions;
- Supporting development and oversight of private sector markets for GHG credits;
- Streamlining consumer-facing packaging and implementing a public-private partnership to reduce the GHG impact of food waste and loss within the food sector.

"Many of you would be shocked to know that Tyson has been talking to EDF for the last five years," says Justin Ransom, Ph.D., senior director of sustainable food strategy at Tyson Foods, and sells one of every five pounds of meat in the United States. "We can't do greenwashing. We have to have transparency in a sector that currently doesn't exist."

Other panelists at the AFBF Convention session pointed out some sustainable practices can be complex and can come with a cost.

"Are consumers willing to pay for some of these changes that they want in their food system and that they are asking us to make?" asks Jennifer Crall, global head of partnerships for Bayer Crop Science, one of the largest seed and pesticide companies in the world. "That will be an interesting conversation to monitor, especially with the cost of food increasing that we've seen in the past year."

Panelist and Oregon farmer Jon Iverson agrees on the complexity of sustainability and climate-related farming practices that in some instances can have unintended consequences.

"We get told a lot, 'No-till is the way to go, no-till is the way to go,'" says Iverson, who grows more than 50 different crops south of Portland. "Well, when I

do no-till on my grass seed crop, we have a horrible slug problem, and I've got to slug bait over and over and over. I don't know if that's sustainable versus if I can work the ground and lower that slug problem mechanically."

In fall 2021, the USDA announced its "Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Partnership Initiative" to test wide-ranging ideas that sequester carbon and reduce GHG emissions on farms. FACA noted USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack credited the group for its recommendations used in part to develop details in the initiative.

Find out more about the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance's recommendations at agclimatealliance.com.

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Durbin: Lock and dam upgrades a 'game changer' for Illinois farmers

By TIMOTHY EGGERT
FarmWeek

If farming is a school of patience, then securing federal funding for the agriculture industry is, too.

Just ask U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, who joined other Illinois legislators in finally harvesting their own 15-year infrastructure crop, yielding \$829 million from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to upgrade a pair of locks and dams on the upper Mississippi River.

"It's about time," Durbin said during a news conference from inside the lockhouse at the Peoria Lock and Dam on the Illinois River. "Today, it's the river. Tomorrow it's the highways. The day after, it's the bridges. You're going to hear a lot more about this."

In total, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will spend more than \$1.3 billion starting in fiscal year 2022 to upgrade inland waterway systems across Illinois.

A majority of those funds — \$732 million — will be used to build a new 1,200-foot lock chamber just north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, while \$97.1 million will cover a new fish passage at Lock and Dam 22.

Another \$50 million in various repairs will be split by Locks and Dams 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20 and 21, according to Corps plans.

Facilities along the Illinois River will also undergo \$83 million in improvements, including repairs to the Dresden, LaGrange, Lockport, Marseilles, Peoria and Starved Rock locks and dams.

"The monumental infrastructure package that we passed on to the Biden administration is what is making this happen," U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-East

Moline, said during the January news conference. "You have to go back to the Eisenhower administration to see this kind of investment."

The work to land the funding for upgrades to Illinois' water infrastructure, however, started nearly two decades ago.

"We decided as a delegation to fight for, see if we could bring money in for locks and dams in the state of Illinois and in the Midwest," Durbin said. "And we frankly weren't getting anywhere."

The hang-up, Durbin said, was that cost-benefit ratio calculations to invest in locks and dams weren't appetizing enough — more tax dollars would be spent than economic advantages gained.

So, Durbin and Bustos tied infrastructure investments with ecosystem restorations through the Navigation Ecosystem Sustainability Program — and it worked.

"Spending less than a billion dollars on these locks and dams on the rivers, we're going to get a payback of \$72 billion," Durbin said. "How about that for cost benefit?"

Illinois farmers will especially experience those benefits, Durbin and Bustos said. Larger locks mean barges carrying corn and soybeans can move up and down the river faster, getting products to market more quickly and reducing transportation costs, they said.

"We've had record yields in corn and soybeans, so we've got to make sure that we have efficient ways to get these to market," Bustos said, noting how a modern 15-barge tow transports the equivalent of 950 bushels of corn.

When a barge approaches the current 600-foot chamber at Lock and Dam 25, it must decouple, a process that takes two to three hours. With the 1,200-foot chamber, a barge can pass in 30 to 45 minutes.

"The economic impact is a game changer for our farmers, (who are) more competitive now in the world than they've ever had to be," Durbin said. "They're going to get a boost and an opportunity in that regard."

Investments in the Upper Mississippi River locks and dams are also expected to generate thousands of

new jobs and spread other economic benefits across the region.

The project, which is funded to completion, is expected to take five to six years.

Asked by FarmWeek if it will take another 15 years to receive funding for other lock and dam improvements along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, Durbin said it's both a matter of "match-

"We've had record yields in corn and soybeans, so we've got to make sure that we have efficient ways to get these to market."

—U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos

ing up the need, which is obvious, with the resources" and marrying economic and environmental goals.

"These barges and what they move, the alternative is a lot of trucks burning a lot of diesel fuel," Durbin said. "And we have a much more efficient way to do it from an environmental viewpoint. When we put that combination together and sold the (Corps) on the

project ... we started a long process. So, as fast as we can appropriate the money and they can get the work done, we're going to be moving forward with many more projects in the future."

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Midwest Food Bank's new CEO taps farm roots, pandemic lessons

By KAY SHIPMAN
FarmWeek

Eric Hodel grew up growing food on his family's diversified, central Illinois farm. Today, as the new CEO of Midwest Food Bank, Hodel is making sure hungry people can access it. "We've seen an increase of people going to food pantries and soup kitchens, ... a 10 to 20% increase in demand," Hodel told FarmWeek. "We have an opportunity and privilege to feed the world with an abundance and excess of food."

Hodel started 2022 with new duties after serving the private, nonprofit charity as chief operating officer and chief financial officer since 2017. Co-founder and immediate past CEO, David Kieser, remains as president of the board.

Midwest Food Bank started on Kieser's family farm in 2003. That farm heritage continued to serve Midwest Food Bank as it grew to 10 U.S. locations,

including three in Illinois, and a location in Haiti and another in East Africa. The charity maintains its basic model of providing food to now more than 2,000 nonprofit agencies, which distribute to those in need.

Hodel reflected on the benefits of hands-on learning on a corn-soybean-hay farm with an egg-laying business and sheep flock. The family farm near Metamora continues with corn, soybeans, hay, purebred sheep and a seed business.

"I'm extremely thankful I had that (farm background) as an opportunity. What I learned on the farm benefited me," he said. "It's a great opportunity to have my kids involved and to teach and train the next generation."

Hands-on learning had applications to hunger needs during the pandemic. Midwest Food Bank "learned with the pandemic that food distribution and disaster relief combined into one," Hodel said. The charity



Eric Hodel, right, then Midwest Food Bank's chief operating officer and chief financial officer, explains the charity's food distribution process to Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton, center. On Jan. 1, Hodel became CEO of Midwest Food Bank. Jada Herr, Midwest Food Bank chief resource officer, looks on. (Photo by Kay Shipman of FarmWeek)

changed everything from how food was packaged and distributed to organizing and working with volunteers.

One adaptation: A packaged family food box to sustain families and ease

distribution. Hodel gave an example of an elderly New York woman who couldn't leave her high-rise apartment, so a family food box left at her door filled an important need. In 2020, Midwest Food Bank

distributed food worth more than \$380 million.

In addition, Midwest Food Bank partnered with USDA on its Farmers to Families Food Box program and added meat, milk and fresh ingredients to boxes of shelf-stable foods.

Through that pandemic partnership, the charity learned more about available USDA programs, Hodel said.

The CEO anticipates future family food boxes would be available, depending on the situation.

Meanwhile, Midwest Food Bank's disaster relief has grown geographically through its state locations and with multiple partners.

"As we grow through the U.S., we grow in ability," Hodel said.

Pandemic health and safety protocols also

changed how Midwest Food Bank worked with its nearly 18,000 volunteers in 2020. Efforts evolved from "mega groups" to smaller, more frequent openings that "give more opportunities to volunteers," Hodel said.

"There definitely was a need," he said.

The charity remained open as an essential business, offering people a safe place to go when schools and other institutions closed.

Hodel expects the charity will continue offering multiple opportunities for smaller volunteer groups and will continue using an electronic volunteer sign-up system adopted during the pandemic.

The charity "welcomes calls for new service projects" from Farm Bureau Young Leaders, 4-H clubs, FFA chapters and other groups. For large gatherings, like an annual convention, Midwest Food Bank can offer an on-site service project. Rice, beans and other ingredients for "tender mercy" meals can be brought to a group's location for an on-site project, according to Hodel.

Midwest Food Bank will continue to alleviate hunger and provide disaster relief with a "terrific team, staff and leaders" at each of its 12 locations and volunteers who "are a tremendous blessing to the organization," sharing talents with dedication and a willingness to serve, Hodel said.

For more information about Midwest Food Bank, visit midwestfoodbank.org.

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Meat processor sees benefits of free HACCP training from IFB

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Illinois Farm Bureau will offer free food safety certification to small meat-processing establishments across the state beginning this month.

The online program and interactive sessions, taught by a meat scientist at Texas A&M through a partnership with IFB, deliver certification for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP)—a prevention-based approach to the safe production, handling and preparation of foods.

Sign-up for the program, which runs Feb. 15 to May 3, can be done online at ilfb.org/foodsafety.

“It started when there were issues with producers getting access to local lockers (at the onset of the pandemic),” Tasha Bunting, IFB associate director of commodities and livestock programs, told *FarmWeek*.

“The plants were so booked with a backlog (of animals) and with employees being out,” she said. “It created a need, so IFB created ways to assist to keep them running.”

Cassie Rea, manager of Farmhouse Meat Co. in Carthage (Hancock County), experienced some of those issues firsthand. She’s thrilled some of her employees will receive critical food safety training for free from IFB.

“I signed three employees up to take the full certification course,” Rea said. “It saves around \$800 per employee.”

“I’ve taken HACCP training twice, and one of those times I had to travel five hours and stay in a hotel for three days (to complete the course in person),” she

noted. “The fact that our employees can do it here in the plant (online) is awesome.”

The HACCP program allows processors to stay up to date on training, certification and policy changes, which allows those businesses to continue operating without interruptions.

“The more employees with the knowledge of why we do things to maximize food safety is really important to small facilities like us,” Rea said.

Farmhouse Meat Co. formed in 2018 when a group of 10 local investors, including Hancock County Farm Bureau Manager Kristin Huls, partnered to build a new meat locker in the Carthage area.

“There was a local meat locker that closed. There was about a two-year gap (with no processing services). This area was missing a meat locker,” Rea said. “So, 10 family investors got together and decided to start one from the ground up.”

Farmhouse Meat Co. has been in operation since November 2018. The locker processes beef, pork, lamb, goats, seasonal deer and even some wild game including a moose and buffalo.

Slots were completely filled in recent years, although some openings have emerged.

“We were booked out about two years for custom processing,” Rea said. “But some were overbooked and now we’re seeing some being canceled. I have a standing wait list so even when there’s cancellations, we get the spots filled.”

Overall, livestock farms, along with meat and dairy processing, contribute \$14.1 billion annually in economic activity in Illinois and ac-

count for more than 52,000 jobs, according to the Illinois Small Meat Processor Expansion and Economic Impact Study, conducted by Decision Innovation Solutions.

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Illinois Farm Bureau will offer free food safety certification to small meat-processing establishments across the state.

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GROWMARK Foundation announces 2022 Agricultural Scholarship program

BLOOMINGTON – The GROWMARK Foundation is once again offering a \$1,500 scholarship program for students in the United States pursuing two- or four-year degrees or trade school certification in an agriculture-related field.

“As our business has grown and evolved, we saw

a need to provide a scholarship to students throughout the United States, in addition to the scholarship programs already established in our core geography,” said Amy Bradford, GROWMARK corporate communications manager and GROWMARK Foundation manager. “GROWMARK

and the FS member cooperatives are strong supporters of youth leadership education and this is one more way we can contribute to the future of agriculture.”

Applicants must complete an online application, which includes academic information, community service and leadership ac-

tivities, and essay questions regarding agriculture and cooperatives. Applications will be judged by a panel of agribusiness professionals.

High school seniors or students at any level of higher education may complete the application, which can be found at <https://www.growmark.com/about-us/corporate-commitments>.

Applications are due by midnight Central Time on April 14, 2022 and recipients will be notified by July 1, 2022.

About the

GROWMARK Foundation
The GROWMARK Foundation was formally incorporated in 2005 and supports 501(c)(3) not-for-profit charitable organizations. The Foundation is focused on programs and activities that support the vitality of the industry of agriculture; agriculture education and consumer understanding of agriculture’s contributions to society and the economy; agricultural leadership development; and education about the benefits of the cooperative way of doing business. The GROWMARK System has been involved in a variety of philanthropic efforts, including youth and young leader education and development and scholarships, for decades.

About GROWMARK

GROWMARK is an agricultural cooperative serving almost 400,000 customers across North America, providing agronomy, energy, facility engineering and construction, and logistics products and services, as well as grain marketing and risk management services. It is headquartered in Bloomington, Ill.

USDA invests \$75 million in partner-led projects; 2 in Illinois

CHAMPAIGN — The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will invest nearly \$75 million for 15 partner-led projects to address natural resource concerns on private lands. This year, projects funded by the Regional Conservation Partnership Program’s (RCPP) Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) focus on climate-smart agriculture and forestry and other conservation priorities as well as improving access for historically underserved producers.

“The AFA component of RCPP is designed for partners who are thinking outside of the box to address some of our most pressing natural resource challenges,” said Ivan Dozier, State Conservationist in Illinois. “RCPP is a testament to the power of partnership. By combining local expertise, partner resources, federal assistance and a shared commitment to conservation we can advance critical priorities and innovative solutions that are key to addressing climate issues.”

As part of this year’s project selections, NRCS prioritized projects that support smart strategies on working lands to help sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Several projects also had concrete plans for engaging producers from historically underserved communities.

Through RCPP, NRCS works with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to advance conservation priorities on the ground. AFA projects are partner-designed and partner-led RCPP projects that propose innovative uses of program funding to achieve conservation benefits. Through AFA projects, lead partners are responsible for contracting directly with eligible farmers and other landowners to implement conservation activities on the ground.

Two of the 15 projects involve Illinois partners and farmers:

- Illinois Climate-Smart Agricultural Partnership – Illinois Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Land and Water Resources will establish a Climate-Smart Agricultural Champions program for Illinois producers to incentivize climate-smart conservation practices and systems with greenhouse gas and water quality benefits. Project partners will create an Agricultural Climate-Smart Institute to establish educational/training programs for climate-smart systems and practices.

- Soil and Water Outcomes 2022-2023 (Illinois, Indiana, Missouri) – Illinois Soybean Association will replicate and scale up an existing pay-for-performance model piloted in Iowa to improve water quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in target watersheds. Farmers will implement conservation practices and systems on 140,000 acres of cropland. RCPP funding will be used to pay for the verified water quality outcomes while partner contributions from Nutrien Ag Solutions and PepsiCo will pay for verified carbon reductions.

For details on all awarded projects and to view an interactive map, visit the RCPP website.

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Experts say changing attitudes key to reducing soil runoff

By TAYLOR VIDMAR

For Capitol News Illinois
SPRINGFIELD – Illinois has, for decades, laid out a nutrient reduction strategy aimed at reducing the amount of nitrogen, phosphorous and other nutrients that run off into its waterways.

The nutrient loss reduction effort is outlined in the regular Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy Implementation Biennial Report, which showed this year that Illinois is far from living up to its goals, especially when it comes to runoff from agricultural fields.

As a short-term goal, the state aimed to reduce nitrates and nitrogen by 15 percent and phosphorus by 25 percent by 2025, but the latest update showed that nutrient loss increased by 13 percent and phosphorus losses increased by 35 percent, compared with a baseline period from 1980 to 1996.

Experts say a mixture of state policy shortfalls and the challenging nature of adopting new farming practices are contributing factors to Illinois' inability to meet nutrient reduction goals.

Some of the key agricultural practices to combat nutrient loss and help reach a longer-term goal of a 45 percent reduction in nitrogen and phosphorus pollution are conservation tillage, testing the soil before applying phosphorus fertilizer, using the maximum return on nitrogen rate for nitrogen fertilizer, putting grass buffers on waterways, and using cover crops.

Through cover planting in the fall, farmers can plant certain crops, like cereal rye, clover, and radishes, to pro-

tect from erosion, improve soil quality and reduce fertilizer runoff. These plants hold soil and scavenge surplus fertilizer during the early rainy months before cash crops emerge.

Illinois farmers planted 1.4 million acres of cover crops in 2019, according to the report. This marked a 135 percent increase from 2011.

But the report also showed that number should be 21 million acres in order to meet the EPA's nutrient loss reduction goals.

Cover crops cost about \$30 to \$50 an acre to plant. Some require special equipment to plant and require planning and testing to be successful.

A state program, called "Fall Cover Crops for Spring Savings," offers a \$5-per-acre discount on crop insurance, but demand for the program is far outpacing the availability even as its funding was doubled this year.

But besides the costs, it will take a major cultural shift for more farmers to adopt cover planting, said Cliff Schuette, district sales manager in southern Illinois

for Stine Seed Company.

Some farmers fear that the soil alone won't provide enough nutrients to sustain cash crops like corn and soybeans, Schuette said. It can also be daunting to embrace new strategies when it seems like the old ones are working.

In reality, he said, increased fertilizer use can facilitate soil loss. Most farmers lose anywhere from two to five tons of soil per acre each year, which is about the thickness of a dime.

According to Schuette, this change might not be noticeable at first but can have lasting impacts on soil quality over time.

Schuette works one-on-one with his customers to help them select the best cover crops.

"Basically, what I'm trying to do is mimic the prairie before we got here," he said.

But fertilizer use is still necessary for many farmers, said Jeff Kirwan, who farms about 2,500 acres south of the Quad City area.

Planting cover crops can also help fertilizers work more efficiently.

"I look at it as kind of



Illinois is far from living up to its goals to reduce nutrient loss, especially when it comes to runoff from agricultural fields.

a symbiotic relationship," Kirwan said. "The cover crops provide us cover on the ground all the time. We're sequestering nutrients. We're holding nutrients so that when we do apply things, they don't immediately leave the farm."

Other farmers like Kirwan are looking to maximize the effects of fertilizer application while still preventing nutrient loss and fertilizer runoff.

Josh Sullivan, a farmer from Morrisonville, said

2021 was the first year he used a banding approach to fertilizer application instead of the more common broadcast method.

Banding fertilizer is a more time-consuming method of spreading fertilizer all around the crops, so it's actually in the soil as opposed to just on top of it. Broadcasting, the other more widespread method of distributing fertilizer, can lead to soil erosion and runoff, he said.

In addition to preventing

soil loss, there can be multiple other benefits for farmers planting more cover crops. Less fertilizer use means less pollution in the environment, and it also means money saved for farmers using costly fertilizers.

Some farmers still might not see enough incentive to rethink their planting strategies.

Inclement weather—like this year's rains, which

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Air quality specialist: It's important to understand livestock's role in climate

By DANIEL GRANT
FarmWeek

Farm animals don't play near the role in emitting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions as some suggest. In fact, the livestock industry has become much more efficient and looks to be part of future climate solutions, according to Frank Mitloehner, professor of animal science and air quality Extension specialist at the University of California-Davis.

He discussed the livestock industry's role in the climate this month during Purdue University's annual Top Farmer Conference.

"The animals are receiving a lot of criticism these days. But, the public is really confused about livestock's impact on the climate," Mitloehner said. "It's not to say livestock doesn't have any impact. It does. It's important to understand it."

Globally, the majority of GHG emissions are driven by the energy and transportation sectors. Livestock contribute about 5.8% of emissions worldwide.

But, in the U.S., efficiencies in livestock production help farmers reduce GHG to just 4% of all emissions nationwide.

"About 80% of all livestock-related GHG stems from developing countries, with about 20% from developed countries," Mitloehner said. "This is not finger-pointing. It's just important to understand where there's room to grow and improve."

In the U.S., efficiencies and developments in genetics help farmers produce more beef with about 90 million cattle today than was produced with a peak of nearly 140 million cattle in 1970.



The dairy herd has also shrunk, from 25 million to 9 million head, yet milk production is up 60% nationwide compared to 1950. In fact, there are actually more horses in the U.S. (9.5 million head) than dairy cows. Pork production has tripled during the same time with fewer animals.

"This is exactly what sustainability is all about, doing more with less," Mitloehner said.

And the efforts toward reducing climate impacts continue to make great strides in the livestock sector.

The use of anaerobic digesters to convert methane to biogas has already led to a 25% reduction in California dairy emissions, Mitloehner reported. Feed additives could also help reduce methane emissions, all helping the dairy industry to potentially become climate neutral within a decade or so, the air quality specialist said.

Mitloehner believes reducing food waste would have a much bigger impact on reducing GHG emissions long term. About 40% of all food is wasted in the U.S.

He notes methane gas released from animals has a half-life of about 12 years, compared to 1,000 years for carbon dioxide and 110 years for nitrous oxide.

"Methane is a flow gas.

It's destroyed at the same rate as emissions (by natural processes)," Mitloehner said. "Carbon dioxide is a stock gas. It accumulates over time. It's important to understand this (as climate solutions are considered)."

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Nutrient

Continued from Page 7

caused many farmers to push back their harvests—can make it difficult for farmers to successfully grow cover crops, Kirwan said.

Another obstacle farmers face is the amount of planning cover planting requires. Schuette recommends planning over a year in advance based on what cash crops will be planted in the future.

Increasing government-funded incentives tied to crop insurance, Schuette said, could help encourage more farmers to increase their cover crop acreage despite these challenges.

That's something that lawmakers are trying to accomplish this year through Senate Bill 3471, the latest measure aimed at increas-

ing resources for nutrient reduction efforts and extending the state programs that make up the bulk of the nutrient reduction effort.

That includes increasing funding from \$14 million to more than \$25 million for conservation efforts by 2027.

"Though this isn't an issue that hits the front page, it is an important one and one that we should make sure we make a priority," Sen. Ram Villivalam, a Chicago Democrat who sponsors the measure, said of the program.

Still, for many, the biggest challenge to overcome is their own mindsets.

"This has to change, and change is hard," Schuette said. "But change is going to have to happen, otherwise, I feel that mandates will be coming down the road."

Catie Gregg, Agricultural Program Specialist for Prairie Rivers Network, agreed that participation in voluntary incentive programs, like the cover crop program, may not be enough to meet the goals in the NLRs.

"If we continue to not see improvements, or things are getting worse, as seen in the 2021 NLRs report, we will need to look at a broader range of strategies that may include both voluntary programs and requiring certain best management practices," Gregg said.

(Editor's Note: Taylor Vidmar is a student in the Public Affairs Reporting program at University of Illinois Springfield. She is a reporting intern at the Capitol for Lee Enterprises. Capitol News Illinois reporter Beth Hundsdoerfer contributed to this report.)

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