

## Success with Conservation Practices is Optimized with a Targeted, Stepwise, Tailored Approach

One of the biggest findings from our 2021 report, **Conservation's Impact on the Farm Bottom Line**, was the reminder that profitable conservation systems do not look the same on every farm since growers implement different strategies to address their specific needs. Here we highlight some of our takeaways related to taking a targeted approach to conservation. Be sure to visit [soilhealthpartnership.org/farmfinance](https://soilhealthpartnership.org/farmfinance) to explore the full report.

### Farmer goals for conservation adoption

Farmer	Goal for conservation adoption
Ken Rosenow – Wisconsin	Save time, fuel, equipment and maintenance costs; increase soil health benefits; be able to get back into the field faster after a heavy rainfall
Ryberg Farms – Minnesota	Save on operating costs and improve soil health
Minnesota Farmer*	Decrease time spent on the tractor; increase water holding capacity; address water quality concerns
Gaesser Farms – Iowa	Improve erosion control; achieve savings on time, fuel, number of field passes; improve environmental outcomes
Dwight Dial – Iowa	Reduce fuel costs and time spent on the tractor; improve soil health while keeping costs low
Indiana Farmer*	Reduce overall tillage; improve soil structure; be more efficient with trips across the field; reduce machinery ownership and overhead costs

\*Participating farmers were offered the option to remain anonymous. Farmers who requested to be anonymous (2/7) are only described through the state in which they farm, their farming practices, and the financial and management data they provided through the project.

### Farmers had clear goals they wanted to achieve with conservation practices

When deciding how to approach and evaluate a new practice, farmers in our study benefited from clearly defined objectives. Farmers commonly shared two goals:

1. To improve soil structure to help with erosion control and water holding capacity
2. To reduce hours on the tractor to save time, machinery and overhead costs

Each farmer reached these goals in their own unique way and all have seen positive outcomes as a result of clearly knowing where they wanted to head.



**Each farmer reached these goals in their own unique way and all have seen positive outcomes as a result of clearly knowing where they wanted to head.**



It is important to understand that there are different financial dynamics at play when comparing conservation approaches. Those dynamics impacted how our farmers implemented a practice, based on their financial goals and comfort levels.

### Farmers approached cover crops and conservation tillage differently

It is important to understand that there are different financial dynamics at play when comparing conservation approaches. Those dynamics impacted how our farmers implemented a practice, based on their financial goals and comfort levels:

- **Conservation tillage:** Most farmers made a wholesale change with associated equipment updates, with the knowledge that they could achieve short-term cost savings.
- **Cover crops:** Most farmers took a stepwise approach to testing seed varieties, seeding methods, and weed pressure outcomes, with the knowledge that the transition could be risky and that cost savings and soil health benefits from cover crops can take longer.

We found that, when farmers align their expectations with their long-term goals, growers are comfortable taking their time to “get it right” before rolling out the practice on a larger scale.

### Conservation practices were prioritized based on individual farm needs

Since most farmers face time and logistical constraints in adopting conservation practices across all acres, farmers in this study targeted specific fields or prioritized addressing substantial challenges to maximize the effectiveness of their practices. Examples included:

- Using cover crops to retain soil during heavy rain events
- Changing conservation practices based on crop rotation
- Choosing to cover crop owned or long-term contracted ground over land with high rent

Although farmers differed on tactics for tailoring their cover crop systems, they all identified strategies that worked for their farm’s challenges and long-term goals.

To learn more about our report, *Conservation’s Impact on the Farm Bottom Line*, visit [soilhealthpartnership.org/farmfinance](https://soilhealthpartnership.org/farmfinance).

