

Diversifying the Corn Belt: Policy Pathways for a Resilient Agricultural Future

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Executive summary

Agricultural diversification has the potential to increase farm resilience, support local food systems and rural community vitality, and reduce the negative ecological impacts of monoculture crop production. In the US Corn Belt region including the states of Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana, 94% of crop production is dedicated to corn and soybeans. Transitioning to a broader array of crops, livestock, and non-crop species in production systems and markets is critical; however, there are deep-rooted challenges limiting this transition. Many of these challenges require broader structural and institutional changes that must be addressed at the policy level. Our team of scientists and practitioners conducted a series of Reimagining Agricultural Diversity (RAD) meetings over the course of three years with a range of agricultural stakeholders, including farmers, to understand perspectives on diversification and identify the challenges and opportunities to diversification in the Corn Belt.

Through a unique model of participatory research, we worked together to identify specific policy opportunities to address key challenges and enable greater diversification in the region. To capture the diversity of perspectives shared by participants, the opportunities vary in both their feasibility and their transformative potential. Our team of academic and agricultural practitioners ranked each opportunity using

a set of criteria that determined the idea's feasibility and transformative potential.

The following opportunities emerged as the most important levers of change:

Opportunity 1: Crop insurance

The farm safety net is an important way in which farmers are protected from both market and environmental risks. Federal crop insurance through Title XI of the Farm Bill, the key tool in our farm safety net, can do more to build on the synergies between risk reduction and on-farm diversification, support a broader range of types of farms and agricultural products, and incentivize ingenuity, conservation, and resilience. Top opportunities:

- A. Increase enforcement of conservation compliance for Highly Erodible Lands (HEL)
- B. Make diversification-enhancing Whole Farm Revenue Program (WFRP) policies easier to sell
- C. Establish state-level discounts to federal crop insurance for using diversified systems
- D. Adapt federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products
- E. Tie federally subsidized crop insurance premiums to ecosystem benefits of diversified rotations
- F. Reduce or remove federal crop insurance subsidies



Opportunity 2: Conservation incentives

Conservation incentive programs authorized under Title II of the Farm Bill, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), are familiar, well-established tools for encouraging environmentally beneficial farming practices, but can be improved in their design to promote production diversity. Top opportunities:

- A. Add resources and awareness within Title II programs to support beginning, small-scale, and disadvantaged farmers
- B. Pilot a “diversified rotation initiative” within EQIP that prioritizes diversified rotations and extend contract periods
- C. Adapt CRP to encourage harvestable and perennial crop systems
- D. Strengthen local capacity and resource control of Title II programs
- E. Tie incentive payments for Title II programs to practice bundles with technical support and business development requirements

Opportunity 3: Post-harvest market infrastructure

The development of new markets for diversified agricultural products is crucial to catalyzing diversified farming systems and markets in the Corn Belt. There is a pressing need for reliable mechanisms for aligning crop production with access to post-harvest market infrastructure including storing, aggregating, processing, and manufacturing. Top opportunities:

- A. Establish or enhance tax credits for local processing and infrastructure
- B. Establish or enhance government programs that support local market infrastructure for diversified products
- C. Support shared infrastructure for local production of diversified crops
- D. Adapt regulatory rules to decrease barriers for local and/or small-scale processors

Opportunity 4: Institutional procurement

The procurement of diversified products by institutional buyers can be a powerful force toward the development of robust and durable markets for diverse locally produced food and generating associated economic benefits. However, institutional buyers need more resources and organizational structures to effectively source and manage a broader range of local food products. Top opportunities:

- A. Increase direct public investment to support institutional purchasing of diverse local food products
- B. Invest in research on the benefits of institutional procurement of diverse local food products
- C. Develop and disseminate frameworks to guide institutional purchasing strategies and actions

Conclusion

Through this work, we elevate the voices of farmers and agricultural stakeholders and aim to inform policymakers and other agricultural decision makers as they consider ways to support farmers and create more regenerative and resilient agriculture and food systems.