

iSEE Critical Conversation Fall 2023: Climate-Smart Agricultural Practices and Resilience in the Midwest

Summary of Discussion

Overview

On Sept. 18-19, 2023, iSEE hosted academics, industry leaders, farmers, agricultural industry members, nonprofits, and government and NGO representatives at the Illini Center in Chicago for a conversation about climate-smart agricultural practices and resilience in the Midwest. More than 60 representatives from across the agricultural supply chain all shared their unique perspectives on Midwestern agriculture and the potential role of climate-smart agricultural practices in enhancing resilience in the region.

Our participants represented various organizations such as the USDA, The Nature Conservancy, the Illinois Soybean Association, American Farmland Trust, Sustainable Capital Advisors, Environmental Defense Fund, Compeer Financial, Danone, and the Meridian Institute. A list of the full event attendees, as well as the detailed event agenda, are available in the Appendix (starting on Page 11).

This safe space for frank, unattributed discussion was a positive step toward exploring the multiple aspects of Midwestern agriculture in the context of a changing climate and how to best approach the potential opportunities and challenges it presents.

After the opening remarks of Robert Jones, Chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, keynote speaker Maggie Monast, Senior Director of Climate-Smart Agriculture (Finance & Markets) at the Environmental Defense Fund, kicked off the conversation on the evening of Sept. 18. The event continued with three panel and breakout sessions the following day.

The Critical Conversation was paid for by a generous donation from the Alvin H. Baum Family Fund, iSEE's founding benefactor. The Fund is administered by Joel Friedman and Loretta Namovic.



About this Document

The following sections outline the major talking points of each of the three topical discussion sessions. This is by no means a comprehensive listing of the ideas shared, but it is a summary of the points participants spent the most time talking about. Our aim was to offer a look into the multitude of viewpoints and opinions about the issue at hand and the possible solutions that were expressed.



Session 1: Climate-smart agricultural practices and resilience of current commodity crops of the Midwest

How resilient are current commodity crops in the Midwest? Which climate-smart agricultural practices can be adopted in the face of a changing climate and consumer demand?

The first session of the Critical Conversation centered on the resilience of current commodity crops in the Midwest and identifying the opportunities and risks associated with climate-smart agricultural practices for commodity crops in the region. The session began with a panel discussion between Rob Stout (Iowa farmer), Randy DeSutter (Corn Board of the National Corn Growers Association), Lauren Lurkins (Lurkins Strategies, LLC), and Gabe McNunn (Sustainable Environmental Consultants). The panel discussion was followed by facilitated group conversations to dive deeper into the topics discussed.

Major talking points

Current agricultural practices

- Current practices are not very resilient. Corn uses tons of nitrogen. Could we grow less corn? Seems like low-hanging fruit. But there's so much political power in growing corn.
- Corn and soybeans get more crop insurance coverage than regular food crops. Also, the price of corn is held up by subsidies, etc. If the price was lower, there would be fewer people saying, "If you can grow corn, do grow corn."
- Farmers are just embracing the system. We need to change the system to incentivize other types of farming.
- What value do we place on the data? A lot of focus is on "price per bushel" or final yield. Most data leave out things like soil health. How do we get the government to think in those terms?
- Farms are largely small businesses with small profit margins, so they need to focus on productivity/profitability. Need to emphasize talking about soil health because it is something that impacts yields.
- A lot of current technologies allow you to be profitable even with unhealthy soil.
- The majority of land is rented in the Midwest. Some tenants might only care about the land during their lease, not in the future.
- If you're a conservation-minded tenant with an indifferent landlord, you have no incentive to actually do things like cover cropping.
- Insufficient communication — many farmers do not fully grasp climate resilience as it relates to ag practices.
- Defining resilience — economic viability to the farmer; the ability of the system to bounce back to hazards and shocks.
- What does a snapshot of resilience in the current ag system look like? Need to scale up our current climate-smart practices for the future to address the inability of farmers to recover from the current hazards.

Consumer interest in commodity differentiation

- Would consumers be interested in differentiated commodities that are produced with climate-smart practices from those commodities that are not?
- Consumers are muddy about what sustainability even is. To one person, it's GMO stuff; to another, it's non-GMO, cage-free eggs, cruelty-free, etc. Communicating sustainability to consumers is a black box.
- It was expressed that consumers have no idea where their food comes from or how the agricultural market is structured.
- People want cheaper food even if they know that farming practices should be sustainable and climate-smart.
- Some speakers said they don't believe that looking to the consumer to demand "sustainable" crops is the answer.

- Standards aren't the same everywhere and have different effects based on their success (for example, greenhouse gas versus soil implications).

Climate-smart changes to implement

- Importance of incentivizing accurate mapping and cloud data availability. This helps validate the use of new practices or technologies.
- Could sharing their data be a possible revenue stream for farmers? Ag Data Wallet. Farmers consent to who sees what.
- Need to also keep an eye on variability. Sure, some technologies might not increase yields, but they might make yields more stable.
- The time scale is a mismatch. To see resilience, we need decades, but to make policies, you need these verifications much faster.
- Move toward diversification.
- Who pays the long-term costs?

Economic viability and benefits of climate-smart products

- Some farmers implement climate-smart practices without yield loss, but that's not the average farmer.
- Lack of a market for cover crops. How do you build a market for cover crops? Once they get harvested, what do you do with them? A lot of cover crops just get plowed in. By definition, a cover crop is terminated before it reaches reproductive maturity.
- But does that get away from the value of the cover crops in the first place? Plowing them in reduces the need for fertilizer. It's a holistic system we need to consider.

Session 2: Diversifying agriculture for enhanced resilience

What are the major opportunities and barriers regarding the diversification of agricultural crops?

The second session of the Critical Conversation centered on enhancing our agricultural systems' resilience through the diversification of crops and products and the adoption of climate-smart strategies. The session began with a panel discussion between Linda Prokopy (Purdue University), Cindy Nickerson (USDA Office of the Chief Economist), Will Glazik (Cow Creek Organics), and Vanessa Kulick Price (Meridian Institute). The panel discussion was followed by facilitated group conversations to dive deeper into the topics discussed.

Major talking points

Drivers of diversification

- The structure of our current system incentivizes the aggregation and streamlining of corn and soybeans.

- Diversification must be thought of as a tool for risk management.
- We need a climate-smart rating system. STAR might be one avenue for that.
- We need something like the common app for applying to college that would allow farmers to fill out this one thing and find out what they qualify for, such that we can advise them and provide appropriate programs.
- Leveraging AI and digital ag for climate-smart use.
- Implementation of regulatory measures for market failure, like price control.
- What is the role of biofuels in diversification?

Consumer demand

- Develop guidelines to define what is "climate-smart" so that consumers can be informed. This shared understanding could bring together producers and consumers.
- Work on the proposals on how consumers are willing to pay for climate-smart commodities.
- There's some increasing interest in pea protein (from Impossible Burger), which has had some farmers diversifying to grow peas. Peas are pretty neutral as a sustainability product. Almonds, on the other hand, have been in vogue recently as a non-dairy option, but they're not actually very sustainable.

Who pays for climate-smart ag?

- It's really hard to get consumers to directly pay for these things.
- The industry producing a new thing like a "new, more sustainable kind of wheat" shouldn't lead to a choice of buying a sustainable version of the product versus buying the unsustainable version of the product. Just switch to making the wheat sustainable and phasing out the less sustainable version. Otherwise, it creates a dichotomy that doesn't need to be there and is confusing to consumers.
- Consumers are ignorant. We need a push to shift the way we think about and value food and how it's produced.
- How do you calculate carbon content, labeling standards, etc.? Communicating all the regenerative steps involved in the final product on the label.
- Think about farm-to-table restaurants. Some subset of consumers are willing to pay for sustainability. But many people probably don't understand what is meant by calling a product "climate-smart."
- In Illinois, despite our largest industry being ag, 90% of our food is from elsewhere. But we're a significant producer of processed foods.

Climate-smart market and infrastructure

- What role should the government play? Bring producers to the market at the beginning to guarantee their voices are represented.

- Perhaps one day, water pollution in the ag supply chain or not using cover crops will be treated like child slavery. We look down on child slavery in our supply chain. The idea is that whatever climate-smart is, it should be required.
- Pay for the ecosystem service, pay for the carbon, and let the grower decide how that hits their bottom line.
- Yields are not the only thing. Like the earlier cover crop discussion, recall that there are ways to change net profits other than increasing yields. Doing things that reduce inputs, for example.
- Existing climate-smart grant programs are structured around paying for practices but largely fail to engage producers.
- What does optimal diversification look like? How does it vary depending on things like location and a farmer's resources? We currently lack a systematic approach to this.
- Future-proofing one's business is important. At this point, most brands would acknowledge that climate change is happening and caused by human activities. There is a mismatch between the degree of climate urgency that companies are acting upon and the assumption that they will still be in operation in 25 years. It's a mismatch in the way they are investing themselves in the future and the way the future is heading.
 - What do we need to do to prepare our supply chains for climate change?
 - And how do we make sure that it's effective action, not just greenwashing?
- The corresponding processing, refining, and marketing facilities should be in proximity to empower producers to adopt climate-smart practices.
- Markets can drive behaviors, and some companies will latch on. For climate-smart practices, incentives have to be on the producer side for longevity, resilience, etc. (if you can convince farmers that resilience will help their farm and the ecosystem).
 - We need producers to understand they shouldn't do these things to your land because they're going to lose it. They will gain carbon storage, water retention, etc.
 - From a marketing perspective, companies want to say they want to do the right thing.
 - Farmers need the soil. So, we need to convince the farmers that these are the right practices for the right reasons; they could make their way up the supply chain.

Session 3: Public and private sector strategies for resilience with climate-smart agricultural practices

What private and public initiatives could incentivize stakeholders across the agricultural supply chain to adopt climate-smart practices, and how could these strategies be effectively implemented?

The third session of the Critical Conversation focused on the possible public and private sector strategies to incentivize the adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices. The session began with a panel discussion between Robert Bonnie (USDA), Renée Vassilos (The Nature Conservancy), Kevin Kephart (USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture), Ryan Smith (Danone), and Bryan Stanek (Compeer

Financial). The panel discussion was followed by facilitated group conversations to dive deeper into the topics discussed.

Major talking points

Policies that could support and incentivize climate-smart practices

- Cover crop insurance program — highlights that there has to be understanding between certain groups when developing incentives. Farmers have been trained for years to understand that they need crop insurance, so they're cautious about things like this that might do insurance differently.
- Real estate listings should include information about soil health, etc.
- Financial arguments, risk preference, neighborhood effects, adoption behavior, etc., should be focused.
- Legislatively, we've done everything with allocating funding, but from a policy perspective, we'll need to be creative.
- How should the farmers be brought to the discussion table and use the terms they understand?
- We know federal farm bills are pretty restrictive. The private sector has the opportunity to come in and pay for infrastructure means that are unable to get through government incentives. It might be more specialized and focused.

Gaps in the system

- We can send hundreds of emails, but one farmer-to-farmer connection can sway a farmer's opinion.
- Better administration is needed. Example: If you're a producer, many programs are unclear (pointed to climate-smart). Producers may just throw up their hands and say, "It's not worth my time."
- There's a lot of possibility to use geographic information systems (GIS) to document farmland changes, and a farmer might not even know about it.
- Can making the connection between soil health and land value help bridge the gap? Soil health correlating to value, for some people, is not a proven statement.
- If the USDA can't address it properly, the public loses confidence, and if the public loses confidence, then investors run.
- More capital for generational transition. Philanthropies have missions around this. How do we get those types of funds invested without transactional fees directly to the producers to fund missions of philanthropies — to release that capital?
- "Climate-smart practices" are central to this discussion. Government policy is using that title, but not all farmers know what that means. A potato farmer can't be no-till. We need to define climate-smart practices, so it is well understood. "Climate-smart" is not defined and is still being determined. Do we need a list for climate-smart like organic certification?

Business models

- Having a mentor showing you how to make the transition.
 - Think of a way to compensate farmers to act as mentors; most farmers would like to share their knowledge, especially if they are successful.
- More opportunities to be creative and take a risk if you have land ownership.
- Transition period — working with folks like Practical Farmers of Iowa; common elements to successful transitions.
- Helping people integrate — salespeople getting trained, the evolution of solutions they provide.
- Disaster insurance: what other kinds of insurance are doing to deal with climate change? It is a mess and very challenging. Risk transfer with risk reduction programs.
- Federal flood insurance. Government to insure land that no one would touch. You have to charge premiums that cover the cost of losses.
- Access to data through resilience benefits over time. Everyone is doing their best with the data they have. But missing environmental data on-farm practices. Some feel like we're flying blind. How do we move forward with this?

Conclusion

The Critical Conversation wrapped up with a visioning exercise and an opportunity for participants to summarize their thoughts on sticky notes. Everyone responded to five prompts. The ideas generated by this exercise are summarized below.

- 1) Imagine we “get this right”, whatever that means to you; how would that look to you? How is it more resilient? How is it more climate-smart?**
 - Widespread adoption of climate-smart practices that are economically viable.
 - Farmers have options and choices.
 - Less debt, more assets.
 - Ability to quantify the impact of climate-smart practices.
 - Improved resilience becomes a motivating factor in adoption.
 - Climate-smart ag is normalized among middle adopters.
 - Being fair to the ag sector.
 - It will take combined efforts from the public and private sectors and universities.
 - Power dynamics are more equally distributed across the value chain.
 - Climate-smart ag is stimulating economic development in rural communities.
 - Clear definitions prevail with targets and metrics that are consistent.
 - Farmers are compensated for multiple environmental benefits.



- I envision a world where my first farm becomes a greater opportunity for my kids and grandkids to work towards self-reliance to be resilient.
- We need more data.
- Ag policy aligned with positive environmental outcomes.
- Farm loans, insurance, and supply chain relationships include the values of climate-resilient ag.
- Consumers are aware of, value, and are invested in the system.
- Land access for BIPOC and new farmers.
- Research questions driven by stakeholders and policy needs; research outputs are actionable
- Farmers have cropping and soil management systems that build resilience into their operations.
- Connections between farmers and consumers.
- Widespread value in knowing where our food comes from.
- Continuous productivity growth that is environmentally beneficial and economically viable.
- Farmers are self-reliant, adopting climate-smart technologies.
 - They care about climate change.
 - They understand how climate-smart technology works.
 - They understand how climate change impacts their production.
 - They are eager to adopt climate-smart technology.

2) What are you going to do next coming out of this conversations?

- Rethink my priorities.
- Engage in critical conversations with farmers who aren't currently practicing climate-smart agriculture.
- Not partner with industry/NGOs.
- Climate-smart commodities program.
- Plan a landowner workshop on how to support conversation with farmers.
- Collecting measurements in the field and reporting data.
- Do research on organizations and associations that represent farmers to find out how to get farmers a better seat at science/policy tables.
- Tell the farmer's point of view.
- How to make research more useful?
- Better understand stakeholder drivers — what can be influenced?
- Understand how my organization interacts with non-operating landowners.
- Rebuild/strengthen extension — but how?

3) What are some possible partnerships that we could begin today that would further this work to become more climate-smart/resilient?

- Regulatory and educational agencies.
- University endowment investment committees.
- SWCDs.

- Mentorship networks.
- The farmers.
- Partnering with farmer advisors.
- Investment companies and communities.
- Other industries that have driven industry-wide change.

4) If we are going to spread the word, who are the people you're going to talk to?

- Lead a research project to talk to late adopters to find out why they don't adopt.
- K-8 teachers to make young people aware of climate-smart ag and their role in it.
- Landowners, farmers, and farm advisors.
- Urban producers.
- Multi-generational family farms.
- Talk to farmers.
 - During farmers association conference/workshop.
 - At retail shops, farmers usually go to.
 - Farmers are operators of climate-smart technology. Understanding their experiences and getting feedback is imperative for future policy, incentives, and procedure development.
- Church leaders (churches as landowners in many locations).
- Tenant-landowner: bridge gaps and increase shared awareness of values.

5) If you were to write an op-ed for your local newspaper that captures today's discussion, what is the most interesting thing you'd include?

- What's the problem here? Is climate change even real?
- It's going to take effort from everyone to get engaged. Treat apathy.
- If we get this right: climate-smart agriculture, resilient Midwest.
- Selling opportunity.
- Are we solving the right problems?
- How can policy solve the land tenure barrier?
- Need for information and clarity of what "climate-smart" encompasses.

**iSEE Critical Conversation 2023:
Climate-Smart Agricultural Practices and Resilience in the Midwest
Sept. 18-19, 2023
Orange & Blue Room, Illini Center, Chicago**

Agenda

Monday, Sept. 18 (Day 1)

4-5 p.m. – Check-in and Refreshments

5-5:30 p.m. – Opening Remarks

- Madhu Khanna, Alvin H. Baum Family Fund Chair and Director, iSEE
- Robert Jones, Chancellor, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

5:30-6:30 p.m. – Keynote Address

- Maggie Monast, Senior Director, Climate-Smart Agriculture (Finance & Markets), Environmental Defense Fund

6:30 p.m. – Reception

Tuesday, Sept. 19 (Day 2)

8:45-9 a.m. – Check-in and Refreshments

9-9:30 a.m. – Welcome and Introductions

- Madhu Khanna, Alvin H. Baum Family Fund Chair and Director, iSEE
- Luis Rodriguez, Associate Director for Education & Outreach, iSEE
- Sarah Fisk, Facilitator, Community At Work

9:30-11 a.m. – Session I: Climate-smart agricultural practices and resilience of current commodity crops of the Midwest

- **Focus:** Perspectives on the resilience of current commodity crops and agricultural practices facing a changing climate and consumer demand; opportunities and risks associated with the adoption of “climate-smart” management practices
- **Panelist Remarks:** 9:30-10 a.m.
 - Randy DeSutter, Board Member, Corn Board of the National Corn Growers Association
 - Lauren Lurkins, Consultant, Lurkins Strategies, LLC
 - Gabe McNunn, Vice President of Modeling and Data Science, Sustainable Environmental Consultants
 - Rob Stout, Farmer, Practical Farmers of Iowa
- **Group Conversation:** 10-11 a.m.



11-11:15 a.m. – Break

11:15 a.m.-12:45 p.m. – Session II: Diversifying agriculture for enhanced resilience

- **Focus:** Perspectives on the role of alternative crops and climate-smart strategies in improving resilience in the Midwest, and the benefits, barriers, and opportunities associated with their wide adoption
- **Panelist Remarks:** 11:15-11:45 a.m.
 - Will Glazik, Manager, Cow Creek Organics
 - Vanessa Kulick Price, Senior Mediator and Program Manager, Meridian Institute
 - Cindy Nickerson, Deputy Chief Economist, USDA Office of the Chief Economist
 - Linda Prokopy, Professor and Department Head of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, Purdue University
- **Group Conversation:** 11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.

12:45-2:15 p.m. – Lunch

2:15-3:45 pm – Session III: Public and private sector strategies for resilience with climate-smart agricultural practices

- **Focus:** Perspectives on the initiatives by the private and public sectors to achieve a wider adoption of climate-smart commodities and agricultural practices
- **Panelist Remarks:** 2:15-2:45 p.m.
 - Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation, USDA
 - Kevin Kephart, Deputy Director, Institute of Bioenergy, Climate, and Environment, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture
 - Ryan Smith, Senior Manager of Regenerative Agriculture Impact and Partnerships, Danone
 - Bryan Stanek, Managing Director (New Markets), Compeer Financial
 - Renée Vassilos, Director of Agriculture Innovation, The Nature Conservancy
- **Group Conversation:** 2:45-3:45 p.m.

3:45-4 p.m. – Break

4-4:50 p.m. – Wrap Up and Visioning

- **Goal:** Imagine we “get this right”, whatever that means to you; how would that look to you? Is it more resilient? Is it more climate-smart?

4:50-5 p.m. – Closing

Our Keynote Speaker: Maggie Monast

Monday, Sept. 18, 5:30-6:30 p.m.



Presentation Title: “Climate-Smart Agriculture: Overcoming Barriers and Financing the Transition”

Abstract: The agriculture sector is on the front lines of climate change. Crop and livestock production depends on access to healthy soil, adequate water supplies and predictable weather conditions, all of which are more difficult to access and manage as the climate changes. Farmers already experience higher temperatures, increasingly variable rainfall and more frequent droughts, storms, fires and floods that threaten production across the United States. While these risks are felt by all

farmers, they are particularly challenging for small farms, farmers of color, and low-income farming communities.

Climate-smart agriculture offers the promise of reduced climate pollution from agriculture, increased resilience to impacts of climate change, and long-term farm profitability and stable livelihoods. However, realizing that promise will require transformative private and public investment. This presentation will delve into current trends in climate-smart agriculture, the essential information and partnerships to make progress, and the ways in which investment in climate-smart agriculture can be catalyzed at scale.

Speaker Bio: Maggie Monast works with agriculture financial institutions, food and agriculture companies, land grant universities, farmers and more to create an agricultural system that generates climate stability and secure farmer livelihoods. She works to quantify the farm financial impacts of climate-smart practice adoption, collaborates with major financial institutions and food companies to develop financial products and other solutions, and identifies policy solutions to facilitate investment and risk management that supports climate-smart agriculture. Monast has testified to Congress on the agriculture finance sector’s role in reducing climate-related financial risk and serves as co-chair of Field to Market’s Innovative Finance Committee.

Monast began working with EDF in 2011. She holds a master’s degree in Environmental Management with a focus on economics from Duke University and a Bachelors in Economics and Political Science from Tufts University.



Our Event Participants

Members of the event's organizing committee are marked with an asterisk ()*

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