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ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE SELECTS STAR TOOL TO ADVANCE STATEWIDE SOIL HEALTH INITIATIVES

Springfield, IL — The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) has officially designated the STAR Tool as the required soil health assessment for all state-funded conservation practices, in accordance with the Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts Act (70 ILCS 405). This decision marks a significant milestone in the commitment to sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship in Illinois.

The STAR Tool now plays a central role in supporting key conservation programs across the state, including the Partners-for-Conservation Cost-Share program (PFC), the Illinois Healthy Soils Initiative (PA 103-00494), and the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRs).

“The Illinois Department of Agriculture is proud to elevate the STAR Tool as the standard for assessing soil health across all state-funded conservation programs,” **said IDOA Director Jerry Costello II**. “This decision reflects our deep commitment to advancing sustainable agriculture, supporting farmers with science-based tools, and protecting our state’s vital natural resources for generations to come. By aligning our efforts through STAR, we’re not only improving soil health and water quality—but also empowering producers with the data, resources, and support they need to thrive.”

Developed with Illinois-specific science and farmer input, the STAR Tool evaluates field-level management practices—such as tillage, cover cropping, nutrient application, and crop rotation—through its STAR Field Form. Each field receives a STAR Rating from 1 to 5, with 5 STARs reflecting exemplary conservation practices that improve soil health and water quality. In Crop Year 2024 (CY24), 498 producers received STAR Ratings on 1,197 fields covering 65,698 acres, averaging a 3.45 STAR Rating. Of these, 87% of producers and 67% of fields participated in the PFC program.

“The STAR Tool is an excellent example of responsive government programs at work,” **said Jen Walling, Executive Director of the Illinois Environmental Council**. “A program like the STAR Tool invests taxpayer dollars in an effective, science-based approach that delivers real environmental benefits for farmers and the rest of us. We all need clean water and healthy soil,

and this tool is an important part of Illinois' work to reduce nutrient pollution, curtail erosion, and build resilient farm communities.”

To ensure credibility, STAR conducts randomized field verifications while maintaining strict data privacy protocols. Farmers retain full ownership of their data, and only anonymized, aggregated results are shared publicly.

“The Illinois Corn Growers Association appreciates the enhanced partnership between STAR and the Illinois Department of Agriculture,” **said Mark Bunselmeyer, Vice President of Illinois Corn Growers Association.** “Having tools that allow farmers to self-evaluate and compare conservation practices across different fields is an important step in supporting practical on-farm decision making.”

Beyond assessment, the STAR Tool empowers producers with a Resource Directory and a Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP) feature, which connects farmers to financial, educational, and technical support tailored to their goals. STAR Navigators are available statewide to provide local, hands-on assistance.

The STAR Tool is free and accessible to all corn, soy and small grain producers in Illinois. Expansion efforts are underway to include urban agriculture and grazing lands. With field forms already available in eight other states—and grazing forms launching soon in three more—STAR is poised to serve producers in 11 states nationwide.

The STAR Tool is currently available for Crop Year 2025 and can be used at www.STARtool.ag.

