

STAR 2023 Annual Report



Empowering farmers and ranchers to choose conservation as the standard on all agricultural lands to ensure a legacy of economic sustainability, clean abundant water, and healthy soils for future generations.



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National STAR Launches

Looking back on 2023, I want to celebrate the progress we've made in establishing a new national organization and the partners who have made that progress possible. National STAR formally launched in September 2023, and in four short (and busy!) months pulled together a strong, collaborative, and proven team of passionate staff and partners who have hit the ground running.

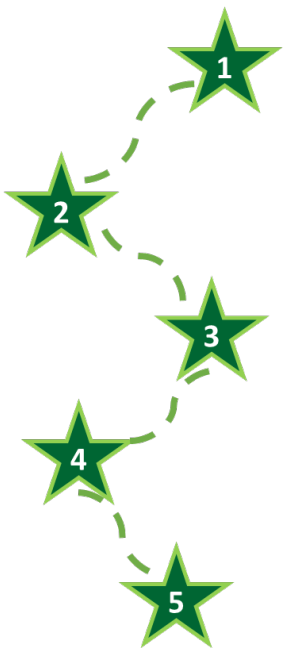


We've been busy refining the STAR framework, tools, and strategies to offer more support and resources for producers and conservation partners to best fit their needs. We know from the work of our current state STAR Affiliates that a successful path must be locally led, producer focused, scientifically sound, and flexible enough to accommodate the risks that come with change, the trials, and errors.

We continue to celebrate producer success but also the process of learning which encourages incremental steps forward. We are grateful for the hard work and stewardship of STAR farmers and ranchers and the enthusiastic support of stakeholders and funders in Affiliate states and all across the US that have been promoting and encouraging STAR's vision and expansion.

Thank you to our state Affiliate colleagues, STAR staff, contractors, supporters, and funders for your hard work and ongoing support.

Colin Wood



Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources (STAR) is a national, non-profit organization that helps farmers and ranchers adopt, evaluate, and benefit from voluntary conservation practices on their agricultural lands. Through its network of state Affiliates and partners, the organization collaboratively tailors its innovative STAR framework to connect producers with tools, resources, and reward programs to grow conservation implementation at scale across all types of agriculture.

Created for producers by producers, the STAR Tool is a simple, free, and confidential resource that generates a 1-to-5 STAR rating to evaluate conservation progress on individual fields and provides tailored recommendations and resources to enable conservation progress. STAR ratings are guided by science and expertise to address local resource concerns. The nationally standardized 1-5 scale gives producers and partners a clear and credible pathway to incentivize and reward conservation practice adoption – no matter where producers are on their conservation journey.



Why STAR?

STAR was born out of a grassroots, farmer-driven movement to help guide agricultural producers in meeting conservation goals established to reduce soil and nutrient losses and address local water quality challenges. In 2017, two Illinois farmers teamed up with the Champaign County Soil and Water Conservation District and other partners to design a simple, voluntary tool to track conservation progress and meaningfully address local resource concerns using sound science, producer experience, and conservation expertise. Designed as a simple, straightforward, and easy-to-use tool, the STAR concept grew to include an implementation framework and was soon adapted and expanded into other Midwestern and Western states to meet their local needs.

STAR co-founder and Board Chair, Steve Stierwalt, Illinois farmer, “Our journey started with the firmly held principle that ‘locally driven conservation is the best path to success.’ Local people making local decisions on how to best address locally identified natural resource concerns instead of a complicated, top-down approach. The development of STAR met this need as a simple, locally led, practice-based, scientifically supported tool and framework that makes sense to us farmers and ranchers. STAR creates an easy pathway to grow conservation practices to effectively and efficiently scale grassroots conservation efforts by incentivizing and rewarding the adoption of practices that have relevance to producers and their supply chain partners.”



STAR co-founder and Board member, Joe Rothermel, Illinois farmer, “Steve Stierwalt and I were kicking around ideas for a roadmap for conservation practices. Say a farmer wanted to try conservation practices: What would we tell them? Make a list of all the practices that would work best in this area – a recipe for success. It recognizes farmers for their practices – but there is also an educational part of it. My goal was to provide information to farmers who wanted to try this.”

Cindy Lair, Deputy Director for Conservation Services Division and Climate Resilience Specialist at Colorado Department of Agriculture, and STAR Board member, “The STAR commitment to soil health and voluntary, incentive-based stewardship practices has been a key priority for the State of Colorado. STAR is an ideal solution for meeting our soil health goals because it is shaped from the ground up by farmers, ranchers, conservation districts, and other partners who helped the Colorado Department of Agriculture to tailor it to work for different crops, range, and ways of farming and ranching across the state.”



STAR Executive Director Caroline Wade, “Working in partnership with STAR Affiliates and their producers, state agencies, conservation districts, universities, non-profits and other conservation focused entities, STAR has the potential to cost-effectively target a majority of production acres in the US. The standardized STAR framework provides producers a simple and straightforward entry into conservation practice adoption, which can then bridge the gap between producers’ perceptions of sustainability and the many outcomes-based market programs and supply chain initiatives.”



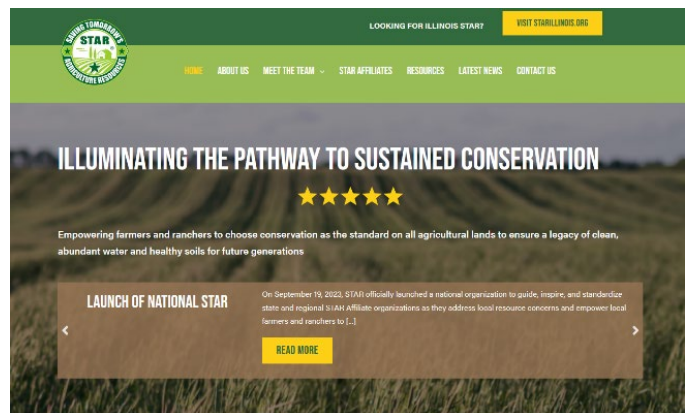
Key Accomplishments in 2023

As part of our organizational launch in 2023, we began building out our capabilities for tool and resource development, and established relationships with STAR Affiliates around the country.

Web Tool Design & Development – to enhance the design and expand development of STAR’s progressive web tool to meet the needs of a national scale program to help landowners implement conservation on their land in a way that keeps it productive and profitable. We created a dream team of web tool developers – including four companies and organizations that are leaders in the field. Our team includes Houston Engineering, Inc. and Heartland Science and Technology who are building the tool, Wave Interactive who is leading web tool design and user interface, and PLANT Group who is coordinating this project.

Website Launch – to fully communicate our background, activities, and story, we designed, developed, and launched the STAR website at <https://www.STARconservation.org>. Take a look to learn more about how STAR was founded, our team, STAR Affiliates, how to start an Affiliate, the resources we offer, and how to get in touch.

Communications Development – Signal Group joined STAR in the Fall of 2023 and worked closely with STAR staff and board members to develop and synthesize our messaging, communications strategies, and branding for the national STAR organization and provide resources for STAR Affiliates.

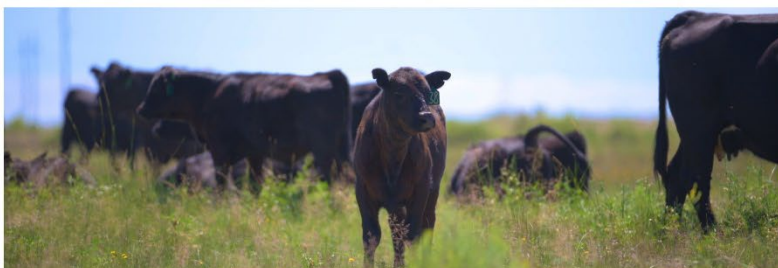


WHAT WE DO

STAR is a national, non-profit organization established to develop and expand the STAR framework for conservation practice evaluation, implementation, and valuation.

The STAR framework inspires, guides, and standardizes conservation practice adoption and implementation across a variety of agricultural production systems at scale through state-level STAR Affiliates.

Designed and led by producers, the STAR tool utilizes science and experience to target local solutions for local natural resource concerns, and to support

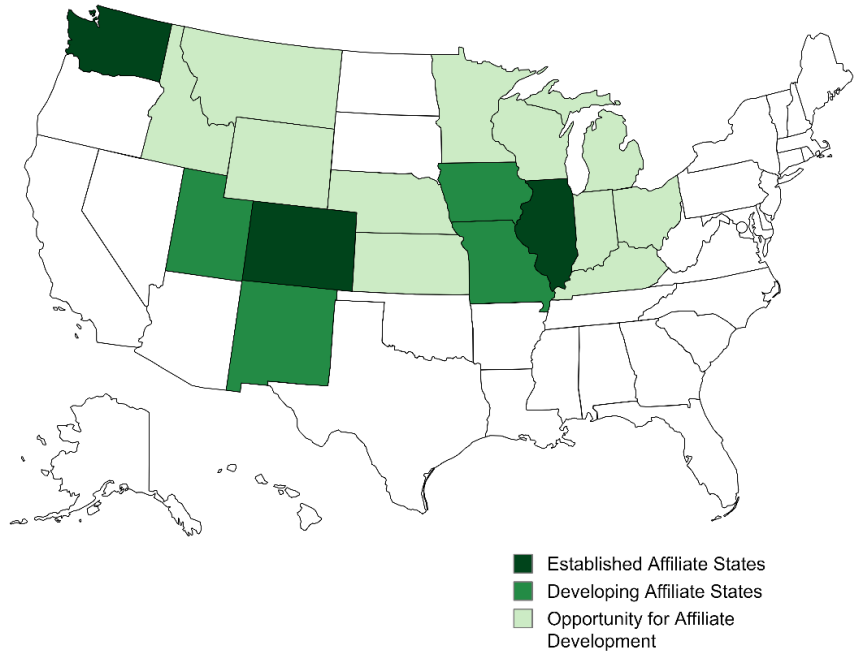




STAR Affiliates

STAR Affiliates are partners who are aligned with STAR’s strategies for increasing conservation adoption and are using the STAR tool and framework to amplify conservation efforts with farmers and ranchers in their states and regions. STAR Affiliates recognize, inspire, guide, and reward agricultural producers for conservation practice adoption and implementation at scale.

Through adaptation of the STAR Framework, STAR Affiliates provide a simple, straightforward, and flexible roadmap that guides producers toward maximizing ecosystem services and agricultural system resilience while connecting them to needed technical support and financial incentives.



Where We Are Going in 2024

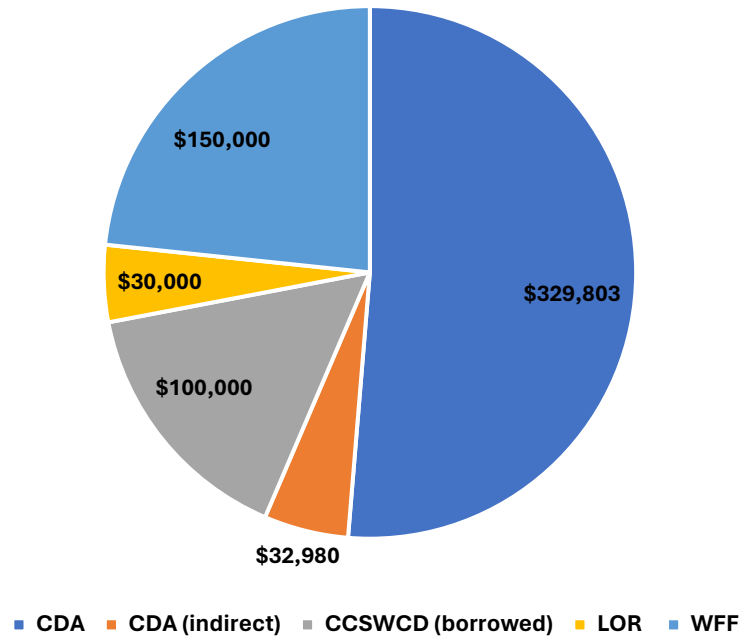
We are preparing for enrollment launch in established Affiliate states in 2024. We’ll also be releasing our new, enhanced version of the online STAR Tool that will integrate and automate the field forms and scoring systems for current and developing STAR Affiliates. The new tool will also provide STAR participants with a tailored Conservation Innovation Plan including recommendations and connections to technical and financial resources to support changing production systems to include more conservation practices.

The STAR team will be spending significant time visiting – both in-person and virtually – with state STAR Affiliate leaders, staff, partners, producers, landowners, and supporters in the West and Midwest. We’ll be listening carefully to identify their locally specific needs and challenges and the opportunities they see to amplify conservation learning, promotion, implementation, and collaboration in their. As we refine our new offerings for 2024 enrollment, STAR is committed to supporting those producers testing and implementing more conservation practices on more acres.

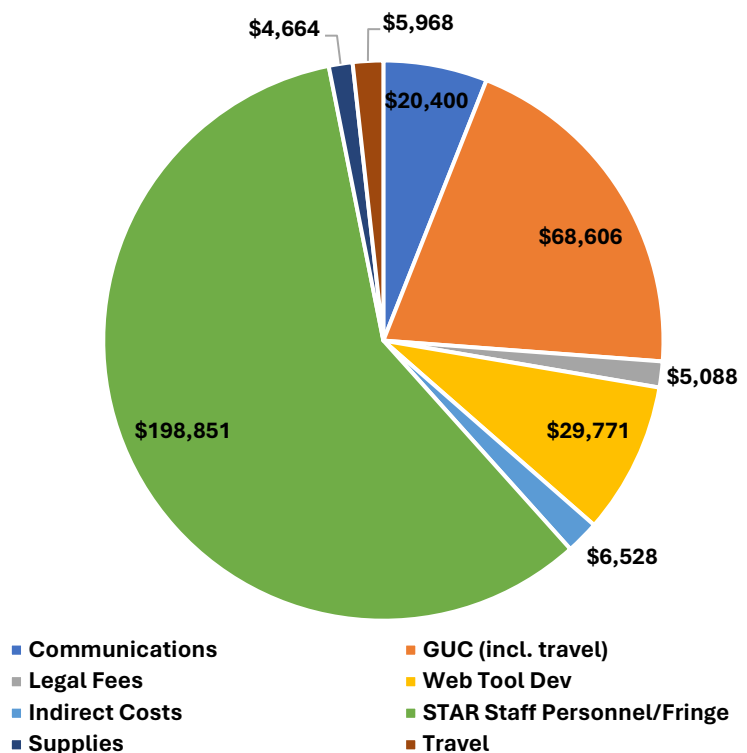


Financial Summary

Revenues: National STAR opened July 1, 2023 and enjoyed strong financial health, totaling revenues over \$624,000 in the opening 6 months of operations (ending 12/31/2023). Most of the revenues came from the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) via reimbursements for STAR activities. CDA's Climate Smart Commodities grant, earned by the Champaign County Soil and Water District (CCSWCD) and passed through to STAR, provided funds to launch and develop a national STAR framework in the western states. STAR also received foundation and philanthropic grant funds from the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) and the LOR Foundation. In order to fund start-up costs, STAR borrowed \$100,000 from CCSWCD across July and August 2023 and will pay those funds back by the end of the grant period.



Expenses: In 2023, most of the STAR expenses paid were to cover the completion of grant deliverables by STAR staff. Ground Up Consulting (GUC) was the second highest expense in 2023, as they contributed to the STAR expansion science and strategy development in the West. Communications strategy work and website design also began in 2023, alongside the start-up of STAR web tool development.





Our Board, Staff, Contractors, and Support Team

We would not have our level of success without our fantastic Board, Staff, Contractors, and Support Team. Each of these individuals and organizations make STAR succeed. Learn more about our team at <https://www.STARconservation.org/meet-the-team>.

Board

1. Steve Stierwalt, STAR Co-Founder and Board Chair
2. Joe Rothermel, STAR Co-Founder and Board Member
3. Cindy Lair, STAR Board Member
4. Jeff O'Connor, STAR Board Member
5. Michael Woods, PhD, STAR Board Member

Staff



CAROLINE WADE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



AMANDA RASTER
SCIENCE & RESEARCH DIRECTOR



SHIVA SCOTTI
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR



JAKE DEUTMEYER
PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Support Team + Contractors



Max Neumeyer
Outreach and Development Support Ground Up Consulting



Helen Silver
Science Support Ground Up Consulting



Emily Holleran
Science Committee Coordinator Ground Up Consulting



Austin Arrington
Technology Project Manager PLANT Group



Thayer Tomlinson
Comms Director

