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STAR Tool Launches in Iowa for 2025 to Amplify Conservation Efforts and Connect Agricultural Producers to More Conservation Incentives

An updated and enhanced STAR Tool has been launched in Iowa for the 2025 crop year by Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) and Saving Tomorrow's Agriculture Resources (STAR), a national scale non-profit, to amplify state efforts to address Iowa's natural resource concerns and further empower and reward farmers making progress on their conservation journey – wherever they are. The STAR 1 to 5 rating system is used to evaluate conservation practices on individual fields using a locally-driven, science-based approach 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.

Using the free, online STARtool.ag, Iowa producers can find out how their field ranks on a nationally recognized scale that evaluates their conservation progress. The STAR evaluation form typically takes just 10 - 15 minutes and is tailored to the producer's crop type – available for row crops and wheat. Farmers receive a 1- 5 STAR score along with a field-level customized Conservation Innovation Plan (CIP); a field sign with their STAR rating; direct connections to unbiased technical support through local STAR Navigators; and opportunities to participate in cost-share and incentive programs.

"STAR is an easy, voluntary, and versatile tool to support conservation. It was created by farmers for farmers to help them make the most of limited resources and to make informed decisions," said Michael James, Watershed Coordinator at Polk Soil & Water Conservation District. "The STAR Tool is a useful resource for producers to evaluate their current practices and determine the best practices to improve their STAR score, conservation impact, and their bottom line."

STAR has been available to Iowa farmers, but this year's field forms have been adapted more specifically for Iowa and the enhanced online STAR Tool features make it even more valuable – producers receive tailored and field-specific Conservation Innovation Plans (CIPs) with customized technical and financial resources and reporting formats for sharing progress with landowners and lenders. For a limited time, producers who complete a CIP will also be entered to win one of five \$50 gift cards. Each field with a completed CIP will be entered (one prize per producer, deadline is October 15th). Participation in STAR allows producers to see progress over time and the CIP will help producers ensure they are on track in meeting their conservation goals while balancing the economic viability of their operation. STAR is committed to protecting a producer's privacy – data is never shared beyond STAR without the producer's permission.

"Supporting Iowa farmers and ranchers is essential to continue to grow our agricultural sector and build our economy. STAR is a revolutionary new tool that promotes

sustainable agricultural practices and is a convenient and cost-effective resource to ensure our agricultural community is able to maintain productivity while protecting the land for future generations of Iowa farmers,” said Dien Judge, Executive Director, Conservation Districts of Iowa.

The IA STAR field forms and Conservation Innovation Plan design were developed collaboratively by key stakeholders in the state and the national STAR non-profit. Iowa STAR has been led by CDI as the IA STAR Affiliate and collaborative Steering Committee and Science Committees, made up of representatives from Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, local Iowa SWCDs, The Nature Conservancy, Iowa State University and University Extension, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Heartland Coop, Iowa Nutrient Research Center, and guided by input from Iowa farmers. The committees adapted the STAR framework to fit agricultural production systems and the different realities of farming specific to Iowa. This partnership will leverage existing conservation programs to provide additional technical and financial support for Iowa farmers as they transition their operations to include more conservation practices such as cover crops, reduced tillage, improved nutrient management, edge of field practices, and more diverse rotations.

“TNC realizes, as a science-based organization, that farmers and ranchers are critical to both conservation adoption and implementation on the lands in which all life depends. We are excited to join others in support and promotion of STAR,” said Paige Frautschy, Iowa Agriculture Program Director, The Nature Conservancy

Local, trained STAR Navigators will provide one-on-one support and technical assistance to STAR participants as they enroll in STAR and explore planning and program opportunities. Several IA SWCDs have been promoting STAR including Polk and Dubuque Counties. Recruitment is underway for county and statewide STAR Navigators to assist producers with STAR enrollment and to provide direct technical support. Access to the STAR Tool administrative dashboard allows Navigators to streamline technical assistance to their clients, track participant progress, and access the state and locally specific resources database to learn about available technical and financial programs.

You can find the tool at startool.ag. Please email Regan Davis, regan@cdiowa.org if you have any questions about the STAR Tool or need assistance in enrolling.

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About Saving Tomorrow’s Agriculture Resources (STAR)

STAR is a national, not for profit organization working collaboratively with producers and partners across the country to support comprehensive conservation efforts through the design, adaptation and implementation of the STAR Framework. The STAR Tool provides simple and straightforward steps to increase voluntary conservation practice implementation on agricultural lands designed with producer needs in mind. STAR for Croplands is available to farmers in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, Washington, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. STAR for Grazing Lands will be launched in September for ranchers in Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Missouri. Read more at: www.STARconservation.org.