



Welcome!

Welcome to the Fall 2017 PCM newsletter! A lot happened this summer with PCM. Our enrollment coordinators signed up over 50 new cooperators this summer. In April, we hired 2 new PCM Specialists, Jacob Walker and Chris Stewart —check out their bios on the last page. Chris, our Kentucky Specialist, helped us launch PCM in 10 counties in western Kentucky. Clay's been super busy training Jacob and Chris and serving as program director while Laura was gone on maternity leave. All of the Specialists have been busy meeting with farmers, promoting the program, and going to NRCS trainings. Adding Jacob and Chris brings a wealth of agronomic expertise and conservation enthusiasm to this bustling program.

NRCS Update

Using RCPP-EQIP funds, PCM farmers established 475 acres of cover crops this fall. Specialists have been meeting with PCM cooperators to learn who is interested in CSP and EQIP programs for 2018. So far, there has been a lot of interest in cover crops, no-till and strip-till, and split N application. There is also interest in precision ag practices, saturated buffers, and bioreactors.

Other PCM Events and Updates

More than 50 farmers joined us to discuss conservation issues while enjoying a good supper at the 3 PCM Quarterly Dinners hosted in March and August. The dinners included presentations from speakers covering timely topics including local drinking water quality, the future of precision ag, and financial implications of conservation practice adoption.

PCM staff have attended and presented at more than a dozen conservation meetings, farmer events, and demonstration days this summer. PCM was also featured in an article in [FarmWeek](#) July 20th, 2017. We're also proud to be a founding partner of the [Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership](#), a collaborative effort assembling the most proactive and engaged conservation efforts in the state.

Finally, we continue to improve our ability to understand the financial risks and benefits offered by conservation practices. We do this with strategic partnerships with faculty and staff at the University of Illinois and IL FBFM.



PCM staff having a little team-building fun at CU Adventures Escape Room during a PCM Specialist Training this Spring (left to right, Krystal Montesdeoca, Chris Stewart, Laura Gentry, Jacob Walker, and Clay Bess)

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Farmer Highlight—Dirk Rice

PCM is proud to have Dirk Rice as one of our cooperators. Dirk farms in Philo, Illinois with his wife, Lynn; they have three grown children. The Rice family has roots in the Champaign County area that predate the Civil War. Dirk and Lynn live on the farm that Dirk's great-great-grandfather purchased in 1883, making Dirk the 5th generation to care for the same land. "So we've really taken root," Dirk jokes.



When asked how he became interested in conservation practices, Dirk responds that his family has always been willing to try new things and they've always had a conservation ethic. He points to his father who was one of the first farmers in the

area to farm on the contour and also one of the first to buy a chisel plow when other farmers in the area were moldboard plowing. The Rice family's commitment to conservation extends to the 6th generation with their son, Matt, who farms with his dad and also sells cover crop seed.

Dirk has been no-tilling soybeans since the early 1990s. For corn, Dirk is transitioning from a single-pass tillage program to a strip-till system. Dirk has been growing cover crops since 2012 and almost all of his soybean are now planted into a cereal rye cover crop. The cereal rye, he says, has improved his soil quality, reduced soil erosion, and improved weed control. Dirk continues to try different cover crop combinations ahead of his corn crop.

When asked if he thinks there's a single thing that farmers should do to improve soil and water quality he says, "If you're looking for a single answer, you're probably going to be disappointed – I think there are a lot of small things we need to do that add up over time to make our extra efforts worthwhile."

*Thanks to Ashley Rice for contributing to this article.

Partner Highlight—Heartland Science & Technology Group



"Our goal is to provide farmers with the tools and resources they require to assess their sustainability practices, identify conservation solutions that are economically practical, and reduce overall risks in farm management. We are very proud of our partnership with the Illinois Corn Growers Association and our support of Precision Conservation Management - they are prime examples of how we can support national issues of importance on a personalized level." - Glen R. Salo, President & CEO, Heartland Science & Technology Group

The Precision Conservation Management (PCM) program was one of Heartland's first collaborations. Early in the conception of the PCM program, Heartland worked with Dr. Laura Gentry and the Illinois Corn Growers Association to design and develop the information technologies infrastructure and web applications required to realize PCM's mission - helping farmers implement financially viable conservation practices. Heartland, an official PCM Partner, designed, developed, and maintains the PCM portal, which includes the farmer portal – a farmer friendly web interface that securely manages farmer data and enables farmers to quickly and easily enter their farm management practices, self-assess their sustainability and economics, and identify superior conservation solutions that are economically viable. This portal also provides the primary mechanism for PCM Specialists to create tailored recommendations and perform field-level analyses.



Updates from the PCM Specialists

Clay Bess—East-Central Region— Clay grew up in Paris, IL helping on the family cow-calf farm. He earned a Conservation Biology degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison before being hired as the East-Central PCM Specialist.

Fifteen months into the program, Clay works directly with 55 farmers in his 5 county area (Champaign, Douglas, Edgar, Ford, and Vermilion) and members of the Sangamon Valley region until PCM hires a third Illinois specialist and expands westward. The most common conservation goal he has dealt with is cover crops. Producers have either seen a neighbor succeed or heard about the benefits and now, with PCM's help, they're ready for a crack at it. Clay works with one of PCM's Enrollment Coordinators, Gary Knoblett, who put in a good word for him with every cooperator. Gary paved the way for a working relationship and comfortable conversation with producers about cover crops, environmental issues, and drones. These discussions have opened the door for Clay's simple goal: to be able to drive past fields where he helped implement conservation. This visual success is something that the farmer and Clay can share pride in; it's also Clay's favorite part of the job (driving 26,000 work miles in a year is a close second). Seeing proactive farmers is something also noticeable at the quarterly dinners PCM has hosted. Quarterly dinners in Homer and Hindsboro brought over 30 farmers to listen to expert speakers on conservation. Both PCM farmers and non-PCM farmers attended the meetings, showing that there is a spreading interest in the program.



Jacob Walker—North Central Region— Jacob started farming in the Hopedale area of Tazewell County in the summer of 2009. In 2011, he started experimenting with split-applying and side-dressing nitrogen. He added wheat to the rotation in 2012, and transitioned to no-till during 2012-2013. In 2015, he started growing seed beans and food-grade corn. In April 2017, Jacob joined the PCM team as the North Central Region Specialist serving Tazewell, Woodford, McLean, and Livingston Counties.

When Jacob started with PCM in April 2017, there were approximately 20 farmers in the North-Central region. This summer, he met with them to learn more about their operations and discuss their conservation goals. Meanwhile, Randy Stauffer, a PCM Enrollment Coordinator, worked to double the PCM cooperators enrolled in the North-Central region.

Based on his meetings with farmers, the conservation practices generating the most interest right now are cover crops and waterways. Farmers have also expressed interest in other practices: buffer strips, pollinator habitat, bioreactors, and nutrient management, to name a few. One farmer has a goal of utilizing the water sampling program offered by Illinois Corn Growers Association to determine nitrate levels discharged from his tile lines. Jacob's job as a conservation specialist is to help farmers in achieving their conservation goals, whatever they may be.

Chris Stewart—PCM Kentucky— After growing up in south Louisiana, working on a cattle, rice and soybean operation, then earning a history degree from North Western State University, Chris was accepted to the US Army flight program and spent a 20 year career flying helicopters for the Army. Upon retirement Chris wanted to go back into the agricultural sector and was hired as the first PCM specialist in Kentucky. He has developed a passion for cover crops and no-till and sees this position as an opportunity to promote these practices and help KY farmers reduce input cost and prove conservation's worth to their bottom line.

Chris is now six months into the program, he has enrolled seven farmers in 4 counties (Graves, Hickman, Carlisle and Christian) and plans to expand the program to the other 6 PCM counties in the first year of the program. In KY, farmers are very no-till oriented due to their highly erodible land so the most common new practice Chris works with is the introduction of cover crops and variable rate fertilizer inputs. Most farmers in the region have the technology in place for precision agriculture techniques like variable seed population and variable rate fertilizer to match soil and tissue sample data from their field records. This is a great success story and the ROI on this technology is proving itself and getting better every year. The strip-till program is advancing in the region also with a couple of his farmers now over 3000 acres of strip-till with a cereal rye cover crop. This technique has a lot of promise, especially the precision placement of fertilizer and using new technologies to develop fertilizer prescriptions for each acre.

