

2015–2024 DATA

# The Business Case for Conservation

*Cost-Benefit Analysis of Conservation Practices*



Precision Conservation Management



**Precision Conservation Management (PCM) is a conservation program created by farmers, for farmers.**

We assist in the environmental and financial evaluation of in-field practices, identifying solutions that are a win-win for the environment and farmers' bottom lines. We serve farmers in Illinois, Kentucky, Nebraska and soon, Missouri, targeting watersheds that have the greatest impact on environmental outcomes.

**This year, we officially have 10 years' worth of farm data, which we have used to provide a data-driven analysis of in-field practices.** We continue to assist farmers in a mindset shift that focuses on profitability over yield, making their operations sustainable for generations to come.

PCM works with our dedicated IT partner, Heartland Science & Technology, to ensure our custom-built and internally administered data portal keeps farmer data secure. That data is only shared once it has been anonymized and aggregated, and it's always used to benefit farmers' interests.

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### Increased Yield ≠ Increased Profitability

You'll notice a stronger financial focus in this year's PCM Business Case for Conservation, with less of a push for conservation. Here's why: **2024 brought the toughest financial environment for Midwest commodity crop farmers since 2000, with many facing negative net returns per acre.** In times like this, it's not fair to ask farmers to take on more risk. Rather, we've used our data to highlight cost-saving opportunities like reducing tillage and optimizing nitrogen rates to help farms **protect profitability without compromising conservation.**

# 2024 at a Glance

PCM supports farmers as they adopt in-field conservation practices that improve water quality and soil health while reducing soil erosion and greenhouse gas emissions. This report is possible because PCM farmers anonymously share their farm's data for the betterment of agriculture and the advancement of farm conservation practice analysis.

526 Farmers Enrolled • 7,445 Fields • 561,477 Acres

## 2024 TOTAL IMPACTS\* – ILLINOIS

**NITRATE-N  
LOSS  
REDUCTIONS**

**1,161,886**

lbs NO<sub>3</sub>-N loss reductions

**PHOSPHORUS  
LOSS  
REDUCTIONS**

**188,234**

lbs P loss reductions

**SEDIMENT LOSS  
REDUCTIONS**

**280,533**

tons sediment retained

## 2024 TOTAL ACRES – ILLINOIS

**REDUCED  
TILLAGE**

**265,417**

**IN-SEASON  
N-APPLICATION**

**90,661**

**COVER CROPS**

**94,242**

*\*Nutrient and sediment loss reductions are based on assumptions and values taken from the 2015 Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy Science Assessment except for N rate reductions, which were based on the reduction in total lbs of N fertilizer applied for the four-year period of 2021-2024 relative to the period of 2015-2017 (the earliest three-year period for our PCM dataset).*

## STAFF

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PCM was created in 2015 by the IL Corn Growers Association in response to the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRs). We strategically targeted watersheds and industry supply-sheds to provide the greatest impact on nutrient loss to our waterways, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve biodiversity, and more. In the following years, PCM expanded to provide farmers in Illinois, Nebraska, and Kentucky with free data analysis and exclusive access to incentive payments for their farming practices.

**We would like to thank the hundreds of farmers who have participated in PCM over the last decade for their commitment to sharing data that serves not only their own farm, but also all farms across the Midwest!**



*I've been with PCM since its inception. Since then, I have been cutting back on nitrogen use without a yield loss. PCM offers so much more that I can take advantage of if and when I feel it will work for my farm. The field staff are very knowledgeable about programs offered, and if they don't know, they are quick to find info for me. With PCM on my side, I feel more comfortable moving forward if we are confronted with regulations and/or producing records of our past nutrient use.*

Bruce Musson,  
Vermilion County, Illinois



## PCM Then & Now:

We started with just one PCM specialist serving farmers in Illinois — Clay Bess. Today, Clay is PCM's Operations Manager, overseeing a team of 12 specialists in three states.





## LOOKING AHEAD

# PCM is Growing!

We are expanding to serve farmers in north-central Missouri and central Kentucky in 2025! By supporting farmers in this region as they reduce tillage, implement cover crops, and maximize irrigation efficiency, we will move the needle even more on the goals set forth in the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.



## Special Thanks

to the many people who made this program possible:

- Dr. Laura Gentry (IL Corn)
- Dr. Gary Schnitkey (University of Illinois)
- Clay Bess (PCM)
- Glen Salo (Heartland Science & Technology) — *In Memoriam*
- Randy Stauffer (PCM) — *In Memoriam*
- Gary Knoblett (FBFM)
- IL Corn Staff and Board Members

## Enrolling is as Easy as 1-2-3 (and it's free!)



### 1. SIGN UP

Fill out a simple enrollment form and get connected with a PCM specialist.

### 2. PROVIDE DATA

Your specialist will assist with data collection and enter everything into PCM's secure Farmer Portal to be instantly anonymized and never shared without your permission.

### 3. GET RECOMMENDATIONS

Your annual Resource Assessment & Analysis Plan (RAAP) report will include a breakdown of your farm's agronomic, economic, and environmental outcomes.

## Farmer Benefits

- ✓ Free to participate
- ✓ \$750 sign-up bonus
- ✓ Technical assistance
- ✓ Expert recommendations and updates on farmer opportunities
- ✓ Exclusive cost-share programs
- ✓ Personal data analysis
- ✓ Financial and environmental benchmarking
- ✓ NO requirement to change your farming practices





## PCM Makes Conservation Easy and Effective

PCM specialists provide enrolled farmers with one-on-one technical support and annual data analysis and recommendations. They also connect farmers with cost-share programs best suited to their individual farm and goals, making it a priority to stay up to date on programs and technology useful to PCM farmers.

# 100%

of PCM farmers are likely or very likely to continue working with PCM

# 90%

of PCM farmers surveyed would recommend the program to their neighbors

“

*PCM has helped me to take on additional conservation practices with their datasets and large network of agriculture professionals to provide clarity and direction. PCM is like the person holding the flashlight while you are working on a piece of equipment. They make it a lot easier to see what you are doing.*

Zach Wells,  
Champaign County,  
Illinois



These tables represent 10 years of financial and environmental outcomes by tillage class for Illinois corn and soybean fields on highly productive soils. While every year brings changes in weather, market prices, and input costs, the trend remains clear. **Reduced tillage is a consistent financial win.**

In terms of tillage strategies, our dataset confirms that one or two light tillage passes are consistently the most profitable on high-SPR Illinois soils. However, in this financial environment where low-cost farmers are being rewarded, no-till is a rising star. If you can participate in an incentive program that pays at least \$5/acre, no-till is a best bet! **The lesson here: less is more when it comes to tillage.**

Corn HIGH-SPR   2015-24 AVG VALUES	NO-TILL	STRIP-TILL	1-PASS LIGHT	2-PASS LIGHT	2-PASS MODERATE	2+ TILLAGE PASSES
# of fields	1,534	2,102	2,310	835	986	131
Yield per acre	221	224	224	229	229	226
GROSS REVENUE	\$948	\$958	\$956	\$978	\$980	\$971
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS*	\$447	\$467	\$442	\$455	\$463	\$461
Field work	\$0	\$22	\$12	\$26	\$30	\$43
Other power costs**	\$113	\$106	\$109	\$108	\$106	\$110
TOTAL POWER COSTS	\$113	\$128	\$121	\$134	\$136	\$153
OVERHEAD COSTS	\$41	\$41	\$41	\$41	\$41	\$41
TOTAL NON-LAND COSTS	\$601	\$636	\$604	\$630	\$640	\$654
OPERATOR & LAND RETURN	\$347	\$322	\$352	\$348	\$340	\$315
Estimated soil Loss (tons/a)	0.68	0.63	1.93	1.83	1.62	2.21
Soil Carbon Index (-1 to 1, higher=better)	0.72	0.81	0.55	0.59	0.57	0.49
GHG emissions (metric tons CO2e/a)	0.69		0.85			1.00

\*Direct Costs = fertilizers, pesticides, seed, cover crop seed, drying, storage, and crop insurance

\*\*Power Costs = tillage, fall fertilizer application, spraying, planting, cover crop planting, spring/in-season fertilizer application, harvesting, and grain hauling



# PCM FARMER SURVEY RESULT

(Based on PCM data)

# 67%

of PCM farmers who don't already use reduced tillage practices are likely to reduce or eliminate tillage



## Soybean

HIGH-SPR | 2015-24 AVG VALUES

	NO-TILL	STRIP-TILL	1-PASS LIGHT	2-PASS LIGHT	2-PASS MODERATE	2+ TILLAGE PASSES
# of fields	3,691	263	1,146	352	1,103	514
Yield per acre	68	73	71	71	73	71
GROSS REVENUE	<b>\$728</b>	<b>\$780</b>	<b>\$754</b>	<b>\$758</b>	<b>\$775</b>	<b>\$757</b>
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS*	<b>\$182</b>	<b>\$230</b>	<b>\$178</b>	<b>\$175</b>	<b>\$186</b>	<b>\$166</b>
Field work	\$0	\$20	\$13	\$27	\$29	\$50
Other power costs**	\$85	\$83	\$84	\$76	\$78	\$75
TOTAL POWER COSTS	<b>\$85</b>	<b>\$103</b>	<b>\$97</b>	<b>\$103</b>	<b>\$107</b>	<b>\$125</b>
OVERHEAD COSTS	<b>\$34</b>	<b>\$35</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>\$34</b>
TOTAL NON-LAND COSTS	<b>\$301</b>	<b>\$367</b>	<b>\$309</b>	<b>\$312</b>	<b>\$327</b>	<b>\$325</b>
OPERATOR & LAND RETURN	<b>\$427</b>	<b>\$413</b>	<b>\$444</b>	<b>\$446</b>	<b>\$448</b>	<b>\$432</b>
Estimated soil loss (tons/a)	1.24	0.76	1.86	2.47	2.74	4.46
Soil Carbon Index (-1 to 1, higher=better)	0.48	0.62	0.42	0.35	0.22	0.00
GHG emissions (metric tons CO2e/a)	-0.10			0.05		0.17

**No-Till** = no tillage; **Strip Till** = less than full-width tillage of varying intensity; **1-Pass Light** = 1 pass w/low-disturbance tillage; **2-Pass Light** = 2 passes w/low-disturbance tillage; **2-Pass Moderate** = 2 passes (1 low-disturbance tillage + 1 high-disturbance tillage); **2+ Tillage Passes** = more than 2 tillage passes, any intensity level

SPR = Soil Productivity Rating

You can find this data for low-SPR fields at [precisionconservation.org](https://precisionconservation.org).

Cover crops remain unmatched in improving soil drainage and its water-holding capacity, reducing soil erosion and weed pressure, and improving local drinking water. It's a great practice, but there are risks. Still, our data shows that PCM farmers who begin using cover crops are highly likely to grow them again.

While our data still can't demonstrate a clear profit advantage to using cover crops, fields planted with **winter terminal cover crops ahead of corn** show potential for positive net returns. We have very few fields in our dataset utilizing winter terminal cover crops ahead of soybeans, but suspect they are managed by

experienced cover crop users on highly productive soil. There are several variables at play, but agronomists generally recommend beginners start with **cereal rye ahead of soybeans** due to the low seed cost and straightforward termination.

Note: These figures **do not** account for any cover crop incentive payments available to farmers. It doesn't take a large incentive payment from one of PCM's partners to make cover crops a winning proposition!

<b>Corn</b> HIGH-SPR   2015-24 AVG VALUES			
	OVERWINTERING	WINTER TERMINAL	NO COVER CROP
# of fields	753	334	6,892
Yield per acre	218	222	226
Soil Productivity Rating (SPR)	138	140	140
<b>GROSS REVENUE</b>	<b>\$945</b>	<b>\$952</b>	<b>\$966</b>
COVER CROP SEED	\$16	\$15	\$0
<b>TOTAL DIRECT COSTS*</b>	<b>\$459</b>	<b>\$451</b>	<b>\$454</b>
COVER CROP PLANTING	\$12	\$15	\$0
Other power costs**	\$134	\$120	\$124
<b>TOTAL POWER COSTS</b>	<b>\$146</b>	<b>\$135</b>	<b>\$124</b>
<b>OVERHEAD COSTS</b>	<b>\$41</b>	<b>\$41</b>	<b>\$41</b>
<b>TOTAL NON-LAND COSTS</b>	<b>\$646</b>	<b>\$627</b>	<b>\$619</b>
<b>OPERATOR &amp; LAND RETURN</b>	<b>\$274-\$324</b>	<b>\$300-\$350</b>	<b>\$347</b>
Estimated soil loss (tons/a)	0.82	1.08	1.41
GHG emissions (metric tons CO2e/a)	0.49		0.80

\*Direct Costs = fertilizers, pesticides, seed, cover crop seed, drying, storage, and crop insurance

\*\*Power Costs = tillage, fall fertilizer application, spraying, planting, cover crop planting, spring/in-season fertilizer application, harvesting, and grain hauling





PCM FARMER SURVEY RESULT  
(Based on PCM data)

# 70%

of PCM farmers who don't already use cover crops on their whole farm are likely to try or expand cover crop use

## Soybean

HIGH-SPR | 2015-24 AVG VALUES

OVERWINTERING

WINTER TERMINAL

NO COVER CROP

# of fields	1,769	63	5,344
Yield per acre	68	71	71
Soil Productivity Rating (SPR)	139	140	140
<b>GROSS REVENUE</b>	<b>\$727</b>	<b>\$768</b>	<b>\$752</b>
COVER CROP SEED	\$14	\$17	\$0
<b>TOTAL DIRECT COSTS*</b>	<b>\$184</b>	<b>\$191</b>	<b>\$181</b>
COVER CROP PLANTING	\$11	\$16	\$0
Other power costs**	\$99	\$80	\$92
<b>TOTAL POWER COSTS</b>	<b>\$110</b>	<b>\$96</b>	<b>\$92</b>
<b>OVERHEAD COSTS</b>	<b>\$34</b>	<b>\$35</b>	<b>\$34</b>
<b>TOTAL NON-LAND COSTS</b>	<b>\$329</b>	<b>\$321</b>	<b>\$307</b>
<b>OPERATOR &amp; LAND RETURN</b>	<b>\$374-\$424</b>	<b>\$422-\$472</b>	<b>\$445</b>
Estimated soil loss (tons/a)	1.30	1.53	2.06
GHG emissions (metric tons CO <sub>2</sub> e/a)	-0.26		0.00

SPR = Soil Productivity Rating

You can find this data for low-SPR fields at [precisionconservation.org](https://precisionconservation.org).

Nitrogen application rates really crept up for high-SPR corn fields in 2024, following several years of lower N rates that coincided with historically high fertilizer prices. In this economic environment, farmers need to exercise caution to ensure every extra pound of nitrogen they apply pays for itself.

**Mostly preplant and sidedress applications generally saw the highest returns.** Since in-season fertilizer applications help ensure all that expensive nitrogen stays put, spring N application is a safe bet.

In 2024, the average N application rate across all high-SPR corn fields was 208 lbs N/a — the highest application rate since 2018. However, our data shows the **most profitable N application range was 151-175 lbs N/a**. The University of Illinois' MRTN is the best available tool for predicting profitable nitrogen application rates that won't leave corn short on this key nutrient (if anything, it tends to overestimate rates).



Find the MRTN rate in your region at [CornNRateCalc.org](https://CornNRateCalc.org)

Corn HIGH-SPR, N TIMING   2015-24 AVG VALUES	>40% FALL	MOSTLY PREPLANT	MOSTLY SIDEDRESS	50% PRE/ 50% SIDEDRESS	3-WAY SPLIT
NUE (lb N/bu grain)	0.96	0.90	0.89	0.92	0.91
# fields	3,326	1,589	1,807	556	701
Yield per acre	226	221	225	224	228
GROSS REVENUE	\$968	\$945	\$958	\$957	\$977
N fertilizer	\$104	\$98	\$97	\$110	\$106
Other direct costs	\$357	\$330	\$347	\$356	\$380
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS*	\$461	\$428	\$444	\$466	\$486
Field work	\$17	\$16	\$18	\$17	\$20
Other power costs**	\$110	\$104	\$108	\$108	\$109
TOTAL POWER COSTS	\$127	\$120	\$126	\$125	\$129
OVERHEAD COSTS	\$41	\$41	\$41	\$41	\$41
TOTAL NON-LAND COSTS	\$629	\$589	\$612	\$632	\$656
OPERATOR & LAND RETURN	\$338	\$356	\$347	\$325	\$321

\*Direct Costs = fertilizers, pesticides, seed, cover crop seed, drying, storage, and crop insurance

\*\*Power Costs = tillage, fall fertilizer application, spraying, planting, cover crop planting, spring/in-season fertilizer application, harvesting, and grain hauling

NUE = Nitrogen Use Efficiency

SPR = Soil Productivity Rating





**PCM FARMER SURVEY RESULT**  
(Based on PCM data)

**68%**

of PCM farmers who don't already use MRTN rates say that they are likely to apply nitrogen at MRTN rates

**66%**

of PCM farmers who don't already apply nitrogen in season say that they are likely to apply nitrogen in season

**Corn** N RATE, HIGH-SPR, LBS  
PER ACRE | 2015-24 AVG VALUES

	<150	151-175	176-200	201-225	>225
# fields	218	710	2,139	3,063	1,849
<b>AVG Corn Yield (bu/a) 2015-24</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>OPERATOR &amp; LAND RETURN</b>	<b>\$344</b>	<b>\$355</b>	<b>\$352</b>	<b>\$341</b>	<b>\$332</b>
GHG emissions (metric tons CO <sub>2</sub> e/a)	0.42	0.63	0.69	0.77	0.91

**SPR** = Soil Productivity Rating

*Note: When reviewing these tables, please keep in mind that the nitrogen values represent the TOTAL nitrogen fertilizer application rate, including any nitrogen applied in MAP or DAP or with herbicides or other sources.*



**Curious how nitrogen  
fertilizer rates affect corn  
yield and profitability on  
low-SPR soils?**

**PCM is now publishing  
low-SPR results on our  
website. Learn more at  
[precisionconservation.org](https://precisionconservation.org).**

# Most Profitable Acres by Tillage Practice

Here's a look at the top 25% most profitable fields based on tillage practices.

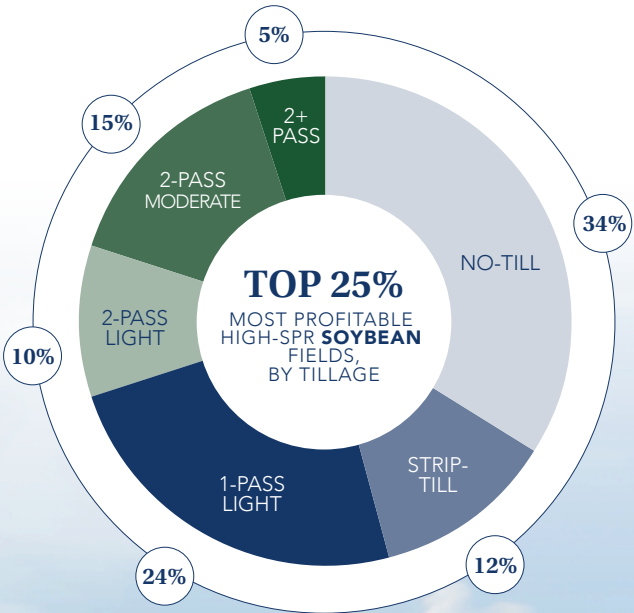
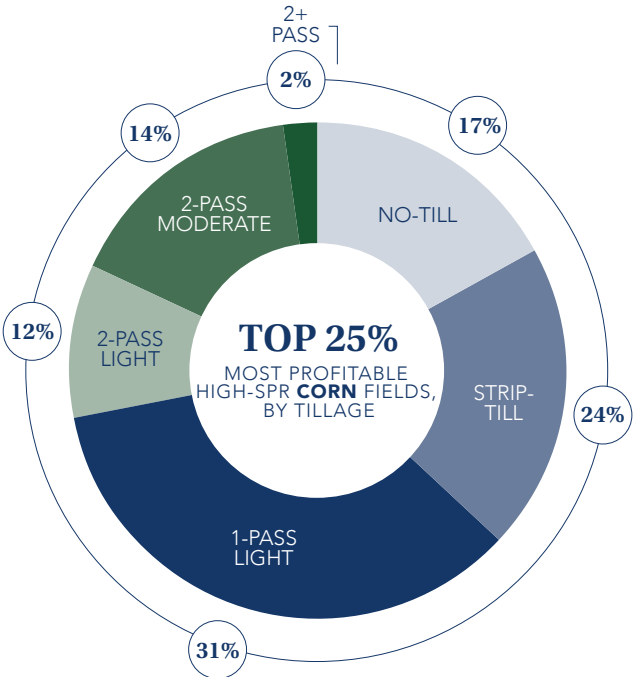
For high-SPR corn fields, **one pass of light tillage** (like vertical tillage) is a top contender for most profitable tillage class, year after year. Strip tillage has also shown promise as a profitable practice in recent years, IF farmers can keep power costs and direct costs in a moderate range. With vigorous hybrids and sufficient rainfall, no-till is another great option for producing high corn yields with lower power costs.

Ten years of soybean data has a pretty solid message regarding tillage: If soils support 70+ bushel yields on average, **no-till** is likely the most profitable system. However, if a no-till system is stalled at <70 bushels per acre, light tillage might increase yields enough to pay for itself.



*I have been involved with PCM for several years. It is important to see where we have been and identify improvements we can make moving forward. I find the comparisons between different cropping systems valuable. We are longtime strip-till corn and no-till soybean farmers. We have also used some cover crops over the past few years.*

Kent Kleinschmidt, Tazewell County, Illinois

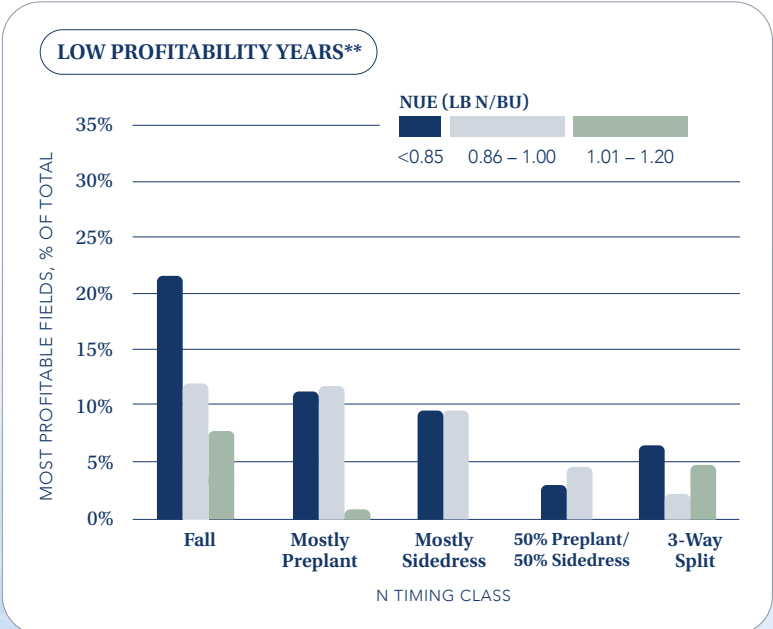
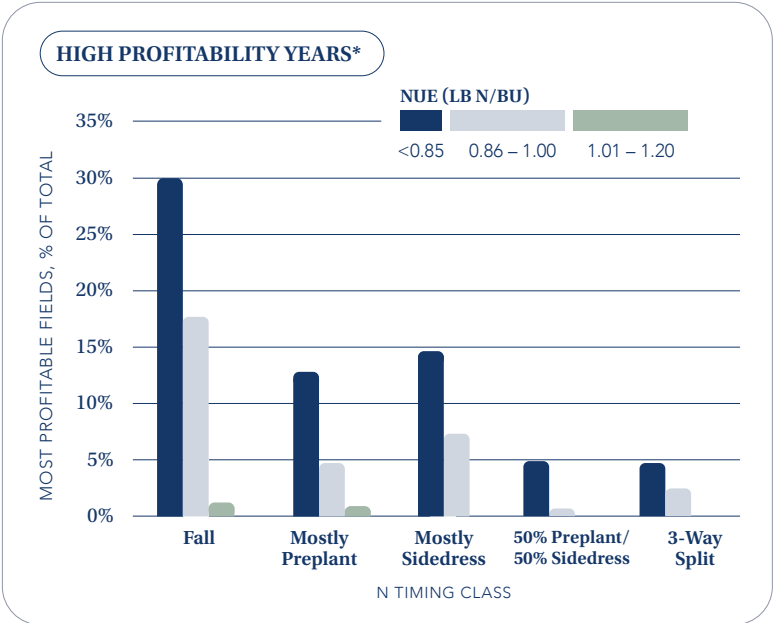


# Most Profitable Corn Acres, by Nitrogen Management

These tables show nitrogen data from the top 25% most profitable fields in our dataset, broken out into “high profitability years” and “low profitability years.”

**In high profitability years, the data shows a clear winner: fall applied nitrogen and lean rates.** Markets and weather can both drive profitability in Illinois, but it’s generally easier to predict markets than weather. The University of Illinois’ MRTN tool is a good way to identify the right N application rate for the current market environment without risking under-application.

**During low profitability years, we see a larger percentage of fields that apply nitrogen in-season land among the most profitable corn fields.** When nitrogen prices are high relative to corn prices, maximizing your Nitrogen Use Efficiency (NUE) is of the utmost importance. Preplant and sidedress applications are also great ways to make sure all of that expensive nitrogen fertilizer stays in your fields!



\*High Profitability Years = 2018, 2021, 2022

\*\*Low Profitability Years = 2015, 2017, 2024





Farming in 2024 felt like threading a needle (or maybe more like jumping through a flaming hoop). Input costs were high, but thankfully, so were yields. Unfortunately, high yields didn't pay off for everyone due to low grain prices.

There are lessons to be learned from years like 2024, and, from the look of things for 2025, you might want to start applying these lessons right now.

### Here's what the data tells us for highly productive soils in Illinois:



#### Make every pound of nitrogen count

If you don't read anything else, read this: Don't overapply nitrogen fertilizer! It doesn't pay for itself in this financial environment. Our data shows that applying more than 200 lbs of nitrogen per acre often leads to negative ROI.



#### Be thoughtful about tillage

Ask yourself if every trip across the field really makes you money. Tillage costs add up fast between fuel, time, and equipment wear. Our data consistently shows that reduced tillage systems pay off. Do less and profit more!



#### Capitalize on cover crop resources

Every year, we have both more acres of cover crops represented in our dataset and more farmers trying them for the first time. We recommend starting small on a well-drained field that you own and growing cereal rye ahead of soybeans. Work with a trusted technical advisor (like a PCM specialist) and enroll in a cost-share program to minimize risk to your bottom line while you learn what works on your farm!



#### Consider in-season nitrogen application

In-season applications can improve nitrogen use efficiency and keep nutrients where you want them: in the field. Farmers who applied nitrogen as preplant or sidedress came out ahead in terms of profitability, particularly in less profitable years. If more farmers do this, we could avoid future regulations. Your downstream neighbors will thank you, too!

## Bottom Line:

Use our data and your personal field data to dial in management decisions that maximize profitability. You can make conservation work for your wallet and the environment. If you need help, consider enrolling in PCM for free to get a personalized Resource Analysis & Assessment Plan each year!

# PCM Tips for Conservation and Carbon Programs

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We know PCM isn't your only option, and we exist to help farmers implement conservation practices on more acres — whether you enroll in PCM or not. Carbon markets and incentive programs are a rapidly changing landscape, and PCM specialists work diligently to stay on top of changes and new opportunities for farmers within PCM and beyond.

**Here are a few things to consider before committing to any incentive program:**



## **Does the program pay for new practices only, or existing practices?**

Many programs require additionality and only pay for practice changes, leaving early adopters uncompensated for their good work. PCM has worked with partners to create opportunities for farmers to get paid for existing practices.



## **What are the length and terms of the contract?**

Flexible contract terms can make growing season decisions much easier for you. PCM and year-to-year carbon market programs offer more flexibility than multiyear contracts.



## **What is the time burden for the farmer?**

Consider the value of your time when deciding on program enrollment and requirements. PCM takes on the brunt of the data collection for you, not every program operates this way.



## **What is the payment structure?**

Outcome-based payments are based on measured carbon assets generated by your farming practices, which are highly variable. Pay-for-practice programs like PCM are the most transparent pricing structures, compensating farmers for implementing a conservation practice regardless of the outcome.



## **What is the funding source?**

Payments can be stacked, but usually only if they are pulling funds from different sources. PCM specialists stay on top of these rules and find opportunities for farmers to maximize their payments.



## **What happens with your farm data?**

Make sure your data is not going to be shared or sold to others before you sign a contract. Data security is a top priority for PCM, and we anonymize your data instantly in our secure portal.

Even if you are not participating in an incentive program, we recommend getting your field data in order. This will be important for your farming operation going forward. There is no single standard way of organizing your data, so you can do this in whatever way works for you. **PCM helps organize your data before delivering confidential RAAP reports each year.**

PCM specialists help enrolled farmers identify profitable in-field practices and navigate available incentive programs. Enroll today to see how we can help make conservation easy and profitable!



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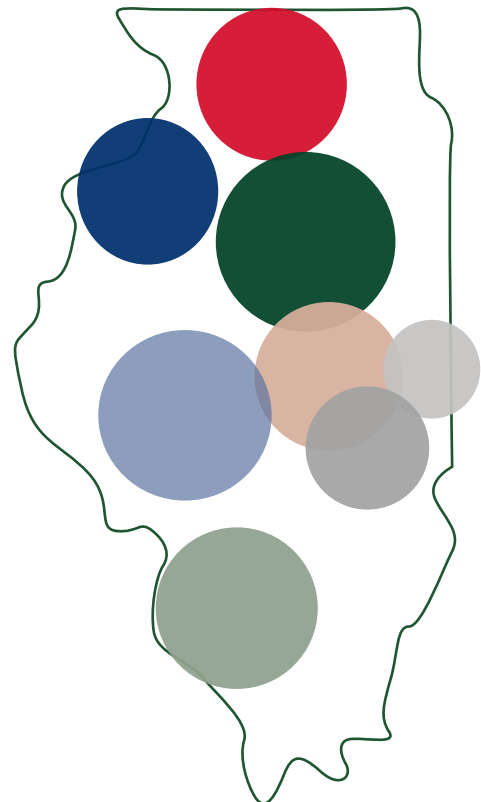
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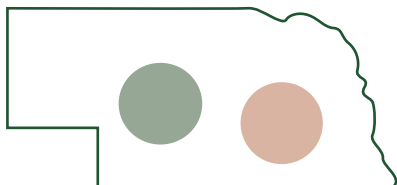
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## Illinois





## Nebraska



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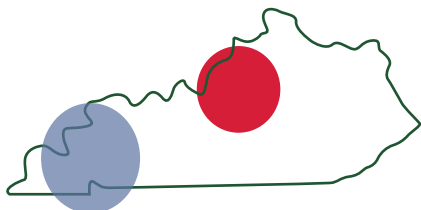
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## Missouri



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This report provides data insights gleaned from 10 years of farm data in Illinois, but the results on nitrogen application, cover crop utilization, and tillage management are useful for farmers across the Midwest.



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