

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farmer Identity and the Acceptance of Conservation Practices by Commodity Farmers: A Case Study

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Overview and Methods

Over the last several decades much effort has been focused on encouraging commodity farmers to adopt conservation practices. Though these practices have clear benefits, the pace of adoption continues to be relatively slow. Existing research does not explain why some farmers, operating under similar conditions, adopt conservation practices and others do not. It has been suggested that identity plays a role in the process, but its impact is not well understood.

The objectives of this case study were: 1) To learn if and/or how identity plays a role in adoption of conservation practices by commodity farmers and 2) To provide recommendations for educators on how to increase the acceptability of these practices. While the specifics of this study are not generalizable beyond its particular context, we hope that illuminating the role of identity in the conservation decision-making process will be of assistance to educators in developing programs.

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 East-Central Illinois commodity farmers in late 2019 and early 2020. Some of these family farmers had incorporated a large number of conservation practices and others none at all. Cover crops were discussed at length since most had either adopted or were considering adoption of this practice. The findings were drawn from the interview data and reflect the farmers' perceptions at one place and time.

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Summary of Findings

The interviewees identified strongly with their role as farmers. “Freedom” and “independence” were frequently mentioned as the most positive attributes of being a farmer. One farmer commented, “Well, just being independent, versatile and productive are important parts of my identity. Not necessarily tied to a vocation, but just sort of intertwined with it.” The farmers saw themselves as adaptable independent actors who were able to succeed in a competitive environment and they relished this role.

After talking at length about how “freedom” was the thing he liked most about farming, one farmer laughed and said the “lack of freedom,” was what he liked least. Though the farmers valued their independence, they were always aware of the forces beyond their control. They acknowledged that their decisions were mostly tactical, a matter of deciding what to do and when to do it based on their reading of the situation at any given time.

Farmers especially enjoyed the yearly cycle of commodity farming which provided the opportunity to “go again.” They enjoyed the rhythm of the seasons: the hard work of the spring and fall, and the relative quiet of the winter when they turned their attention to other jobs, conferences and educational activities, and took time for family and leisure activities. Working outdoors and operating large machinery were also mentioned frequently as positive aspects of the occupation.



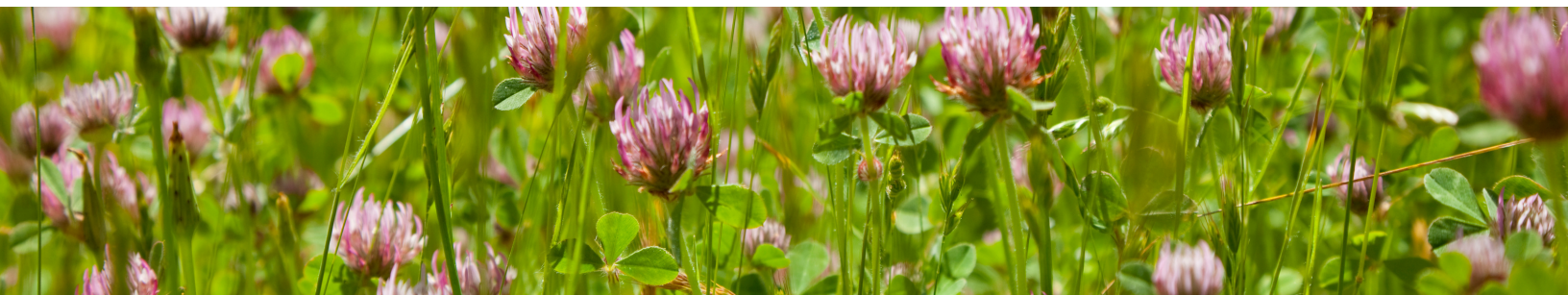
In the industrial agriculture system, where investments in technology and machinery were increasing capacity and margins were shrinking, access to land was the limiting factor. It placed landlords and their representatives in a position of power, and farmers in competition with each other for scarce land. One farmer commented, “Most guys have too much equipment and could easily farm another couple hundred acres and everybody wants to . . . it's competitive.”

The farmers' most reliable sources of information tended to be representatives of large corporations from whom they purchased machinery, equipment and inputs. In addition, they followed a wide variety of other professional communicators who spoke the same market-based language. They were friendly with other local farmers, but at the same time regarded them as competitors for land.

Farmers described their own decisions, including conservation decisions, in the language of the market: yields, profitability, margins and competition. Most characterized farming as a series of yearly cycles based on inputs and outputs. Conservation practices were described by adopters as a competitive advantage or at least as a way to put themselves into the good graces of powerful conservation advocates. Others described conservation as a risk to reputation and profits, nothing more than “look good” or “feel good,” unless one had highly erodible soil (which most of these farmers did not).

While all the farmers' narratives reflected a strong identification with the system of industrial agriculture, the early adopters of conservation practices tended to see themselves as system outliers in some respects. These farmers, who had adopted a variety of conservation practices over many years, attributed their behavior to personality traits, skills and interests they believed were not widely shared among their peers. They opined that the longer-term nature of conservation was at odds with the input-output based conception of commodity farming as a series of one-year cycles and saw themselves as less interested in acquiring and operating the newest and largest machinery compared to other farmers. But it was only recently that they had recognized the competitive advantages that conservation practices could provide with landlords, farm managers and commodity buyers. One conservation-minded farmer said, "If I'm promoting our farm over another one, that's our edge, the sustainability edge."

Farmers who had more recently experimented with cover crops indicated that they were responding in large part to the desires of landlords and commodity buyers. The conservation-committed had discovered they were well-positioned to satisfy these desires and were able to use it to their advantage.



In this case study, conservation was peripheral to the prevailing discourse among farmers' most trusted sources of information within the system. Conservation advocates tended to represent groups who at best were thought to be somewhat irrelevant or at worst to be ignorant or misguided: consumers, commodity purchasers, landlords, universities and government agencies. All of the farmers were acutely aware of conservation advocates as forces that could have a direct or indirect impact on their farm operations. While a combination of "carrots and sticks" by advocates caused a few of the reluctant farmers to experiment with cover crops, even those who had long been committed to conservation did not view the conservation advocates as allies. They were described as forces that could create opportunities or must be "appeased"; they could not be completely ignored.

Conservation objections were typically framed in terms of yield and profitability concerns, which conformed to the prevailing pattern of input-output based discourse within the system. For example, a farmer who had not implemented any conservation practices summed up his position this way: "I feel like what we're doing yields us the highest yield, but I could be wrong there . . . If there was some type of financial incentive, we could consider trying other things. If somebody shows me enough data to convince me one way or the other. None of us is stuck in our ways . . ."

There were a number of functional challenges to the implementation of conservation practices. While they were not the focus of this study, they are important. Adoption of conservation practices increased operational complexity: a temporary risk to yields and profitability presented by the implementation learning curve, pressure on already scarce time and labor caused by additional trips over widely dispersed land, and a lack of required equipment. These barriers were not considered insurmountable with regard to cover crops, though they may have caused some farmers to resist or delay adoption. For example, one farmer described implementation in terms of "battling with cover crops," but ended his comments on the topic with, ". . . it just gets down to managing it."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The situation-specific dynamic quality of decision-making at which commodity farmers excel makes a durable predictive model for conservation decision-making elusive. Even when all of the variables are carefully identified and the methods are painstakingly developed (Addison, et. al., 2013), attempts to model conservation adoption decisions contain the assumption that an aggregate snapshot at a given moment is predictive of the future.

Commodity farmers are situated in a larger context or system in which interactions with people, technology and institutions continuously combine and recombine to create a shared identity. While they value their independence, in many ways they are not autonomous decision makers. The institutions, technologies, objects and other persons in the system combine to create opportunities and constraints (Latour, 1999).

We predicted that the identity narratives of farmers who had adopted a relatively high number of conservation practices would highlight a different decision process based on a different set of variables than the farmers who had adopted few or none of the practices. Instead, we found that the language and discourse was remarkably similar across the farmers.

*"If I'm promoting our farm over others, that's our edge, the **sustainability edge**..."*

*"In renting ground it's been my belief in policy, that **I do whatever the landowner wants**"*

*"Most guys have too much equipment and could easily **farm another couple hundred acres and everybody wants to...it's competitive.**"*

*"I think **farmers are going to have to adapt to new things they are not accustomed to.** I think the consumer is going to demand sustainability."*

The family farmers in this study were located in the same geographic area and interacted with similar system conditions. Their identity narratives reflected the market-based industrial agriculture system and its conditions as they were perceived to exist at one moment and place in time. The data revealed how the farmers experienced the system and how they situated themselves relative to powerful system forces. The sources of information they trusted and the reference groups with whom they most closely identified were found within industrial agriculture, as was the language they used to describe themselves and their decision-making processes.

As the system of industrial agriculture evolves, the conditions and the discourse within it are constantly changing. Within this group of farmers, the same conservation practices were likely implemented for different reasons at different times. It was unclear from the interview data why the farmers who adopted conservation practices more than a decade ago, or even several years ago, had done so. As system conditions changed, their identity narratives evolved to emphasize a competitive advantage that did not exist at the time they implemented the practices.



The literature of innovation typically focuses on opinion leadership (Orr, 2003). But in situations such as this, it may be equally important to examine the sources of power in farmers' relationships. For farmers in this highly competitive situation, the tipping point in a conservation decision may be a conversation with a landlord or a communication with a commodity-buyer such as Frito Lay. Both are entities with whom farmers need to foster and maintain ongoing relationships, but do not completely trust.

The importance of personal relationships should also be considered in the adoption of conservation practices. The farmers most trusted the representatives of commercial entities, professionals who were attentive to their needs and with whom they frequent contacts. At the same time, they expressed skepticism about the motives of the representatives' corporate employers.

Morris (2021) found that farmers who had more face-to-face contacts with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) professionals were more likely to adopt conservation practices. Might conservation advocacy groups be conceptualized as untrustworthy monoliths because most farmers have few ongoing personal relationships with conservation professionals?

Farmers are skilled at scanning large quantities of information circulating in the system, deciding what it means and how it should be valued. Some sources are more powerful than others; some content resonates with their values, beliefs and worldview, some does not. All of the farmers in this study regarded cover crops as either an accepted or an emerging practice. Even those who

had not experimented with cover crops indicated they would consider implementation, given the right circumstances. As the farmers noted many times, they are not afraid of change. Framing objections to conservation in terms of yield and profitability concerns conformed to the prevailing patterns of discourse within the system, but it may have obscured identity-based resistance to conservation. For farmers, who cited freedom, independence and productivity as the most rewarding aspects of their occupational identity, it is not a stretch to consider that the advocacy of persons representing conservation-minded groups could encounter passive resistance voiced as a tepid endorsement: “I’m not against conservation.”

Addressing functional challenges would likely not have an immediate impact on the weak support that some farmers expressed for conservation. But in combination with incentives, it could smooth the way for farmers considering implementation.

The farmers’ narratives revealed only a hazy “snapshot” of how farmers perceived the system of industrial commodity agriculture and their position within it at the end of 2019 and in early 2020. Further research to explore in more depth how cover crop awareness developed among commodity farmers over time would be useful in understanding the adoption process. How do conservation narratives and practices come to be accepted in the system where they are peripheral to the input-output based patterns of commodity agriculture and where advocacy often comes from sources viewed as less than trustworthy?

Several recommendations for educators looking to encourage conservation practices include:

- Establishing personal relationships with farmers may help to increase receptiveness to conservation practices.
- Including farmers-presenters who have hand-on experience and a personal stake in the outcome of the conservation practice.
- Discussing the learning curve needed for the implementation of conservation practices and exploring tactics for mitigating risk during the first several years, not just the first year.
- Offering multi-year incentives to farmers, especially those with low risk tolerance.
- Linking farmers to the needed inputs and equipment.

Our final recommendations come in the form of questions: 1) Could educational programs encouraging transition to conservation practices be more successful if they more accurately reflected the language and values of farmers’ identity vs. the perspectives and preoccupations of educators? 2) Given the sources of power in the system of industrial commodity agriculture, could conservation practices assist farmers in maintaining their land base as farmland consolidation continues?

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