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# Acceptance of conservation practices by commodity farmers: A Case Study

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This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 2018-38640-28416 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number LNC18-407. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



**National Institute of Food and Agriculture**  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# Q: What is the role of occupational identity as a motivator in adoption of conservation practices by commodity farmers?

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*"Occupational identity" is a sociological term that describes the degree to which your self-image is attached to your career. **In this case occupational identity = farmer.***

# Background

- Adoption of conservation practices historically a slow process
- Research has raised many unanswered questions about farmer motivations
- Literature identifies occupational identity as an unexplored motivator
- Occupational identity a relatively “black box”



# Purpose

1. To understand more about the role of occupational identity as a motivator in adoption of conservation practices by commodity farmers.
2. How might educators increase the acceptability of conservation practices?



# Methods

- 20 in-depth interviews with commodity farmers in Central Illinois
- Single proprietors of family farms or shareholders in family farm corporations
- All male
- Varied levels of use of conservation practices
- Varied age range and farming experience



# Findings

*We assumed we would find clear differences in the identity narratives of farmers who had adopted a relatively high number of conservation practices and those who had not.*

**We found little difference.**

*This led us to propose identity as a reflection of how farmers interact with the industrial agriculture system rather than as a driver of their behavior.*

# Tepid endorsement of conservation

"I mean, I don't have anything **against** conservation."

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

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



# System has Constraints/Limits

Commodity farmers share an identity embedded in the **market-oriented** system of **industrial agriculture**.

They evaluate all potential practices within its context.

*Most of the elements that affect a farmer's decision about a proposed conservation practice are already in place in the system at the time the practice is introduced.*

# High Yield = Symbol of Farmer Fitness

- Yield is a proxy or “symbol” of profitability
- High yield is “proof” that a farmer is competent and will be able to pay high rents over the longer term
- Untested practices could negatively affect yield are risky and approached with extreme caution



# Functional Concerns

- Learning curve a temporary risk to yield and profits
- Additional trips to far-flung fields during crucial time periods
- Access to specialized equipment and inputs



# System Conditions

- **Scarce input:** Land
- **System power and influence:**  
Landlords and their farm managers,  
equipment costs, land and input costs
- **Emerging competitive advantage:**  
Speaking the “language” of  
landowners/farm managers;  
implementation of conservation  
practices



# Key Takeaways

- **Shared farmer identity linked to industrial agriculture system:** Independent, competitive, adaptable, market-oriented
- **Reliable information sources:** Professional service providers, corporate representatives, industry-sponsored meetings and conferences, commercial information services, non-competing commodity farmers
- **Advocates of conservation practices are to be “appeased” or resisted:** Landlords, consumers, commodity buyers, federal government programs

# Recommendations

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.

**Remove barriers + incentives / support = conservation**



# Cover Cropping Intervention Examples

- NE \$1 inter-seeder lease
  - *Reduced barrier of access to specialized equipment*
- IL fall covers for spring savings premium discount
  - *provides \$10/acre crop insurance rebate*



# Further Consideration

- How can we design educational programs that more accurately reflected farmer identity vs. the perspectives of educators?
- How will the dominant sources of power and influence in commodity agriculture affect the acceptance of conservation practices into the future?
- How will farmland consolidation affect the implementation of conservation practices?





# Thank You!



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