

ASSESSING FARMER UNDERSTANDING OF AGRICULTURAL ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

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Ecosystem services, or the benefits that society receives from ecosystems, are sensitive to land-use change. In the Midwestern United States, many ecosystem services have been traded to favor increased food and fuel provisioning. Although agricultural management strategies have emphasized maximizing food and fuel production to accommodate growing global demand, farm owners and operators may have the opportunity to protect vulnerable ecosystem services while maintaining or even increasing farm profitability. Management decisions made by agricultural producers determine the extent to which agroecosystems restore, maintain and increase ecosystem services. However, the extent to which producers understand ecosystem services is not well documented. To address this, our study evaluated current farmer understanding of the ecosystem services concept and tested the language used by academics and agencies to describe ecosystem services. A mixed method survey was distributed in June 2012 to a randomized sample of one thousand farmers who had received USDA payments across Indiana. Survey questions were tailored to quantify current farmer knowledge of ecosystem services; this included metrics designed to test concept understanding with respect to prior conservation management experience. The project overview, survey results, analysis, and future work will be discussed in this presentation.

Survey responses are being followed by a series of small focus groups with voluntary survey respondents. Focus group questions will assess ecosystem service-based terminology and valuation, as well as farmer interest and willingness to improve on-farm services. Survey and focus group outcomes will be used to create more realistic scenarios that can be modeled for their impact on all ecosystem services.

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