

Conservation Agronomist Grant Project Final Report

NACD and Land O' Lakes approached the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD) in 2018 to begin a conversation about strengthening conservation delivery through collaborative effort between public and private entities with shared customers. Land O' Lakes had a large farmers cooperative in northeastern Kansas they had been in contact with who was willing to pilot a project. Through collaboration with KACD, the Franklin County Conservation District was awarded funding to pilot a conservation agronomist position to test the public private collaboration for conservation delivery.

Kaitlin Gibbons-Knauss was hired in November 2019 and was ready to cover the nine-county service area of the Ottawa Coop. She would showcase the overlap between agronomic decisions local producers were already making that could fit into conservation programs, often times with cash incentives. Kaitlin began receiving conservation planning training from conservation district and NRCS staff. She was working with local Coop staff to learn the services provided through the Coop. This training, paired with her agronomy knowledge would create an opportunity to showcase successful stewardship and conservation delivery through the pilot project. Kaitlin had a plan and a list of goals and deliverable, then COVID hit. The USDA Service Center was reduced to 25% staff per day with no customer access inside the building. All NRCS farm bill program related trainings came to a screeching halt. Four months into the pilot project was not ideal timing for such a major obstacle.

Thanks to telework and remote learning opportunities, Kaitlin was able to regroup and continue learning Farm Bill program details with NRCS staff. As COVID closures began to loosen she was able to begin spending more time with NRCS staff and appeared things were headed in the right direction. Next thing we knew Coop crop production department and agronomy sales team were facing major turn over. Aside from management, there was suddenly only one part time person left to work with who had been there when the pilot project was first launched, and that person was splitting time between the agronomist work and other Coop duties. Kaitlin saw the need to carry the project on her own with the information she had learned and began making contact with numerous Coop customers whom she knew had a working relationship with the conservation district and NRCS. With her personal agronomy knowledge, learned knowledge of the Truterra insights engine, and Farm Bill program practice lists she began inviting local growers to lunch for one-on-one meetings and crop scouting with producers as a way to get her foot in the door to discuss conservation with them. Once the growers realized Kaitlin was the middleman between possible revenue sources with USDA Farm Bill Programs that coincided with services they were already relying on Coop for, the phone began to ring!

Since Kaitlin was not a government agency representative, she was able to break barriers with several area producers who had previously been hesitant to participate in government programs. She could assist them with the government program application

process, easing their minds about many of the questions and concerns they had preconceived notions about. The Truterra tool provided virtual modeling and gave real estimates of soil health improvements on specific fields in order to showcase the value of implementing conservation practice with operational changes. Equipped with details from the tool and knowledge of Farm Bill incentives growers were seeing positive bottom-line numbers and interest in Kaitlin's work really started to peek interest with more growers.

Local NRCS staff was very grateful for the pilot project as Kaitlin was able to assist with nutrient management components and cover crop details within numerous CSP and EQIP contracts. In addition to assisting with EQIP and CSP contracts, Kaitlin also managed many state funded cost share contracts for single year cover crop incentives. The technical assistance the agronomist position was able to provide staff and producers alike was immeasurable. Having a specialized position to assist with agronomy knowledge allowed the NRCS district conservationist to focus on contract work with the agronomist provided the in field technical assistance and planning work. Kansas NRCS hired an area agronomist during the time of our pilot project and Kaitlin was asked to provide some training assistance to the new USDA agronomist. Kaitlin also assisted with the onboarding of two additional conservation agronomists through similar grants in other areas of Kansas.

The agronomist position was successful in demonstrating the effectiveness and efficiencies of working in collaboration with partner organizations across the public and private sector while working towards the shared goal of sustainability. The project also showed the challenges of working with multiple agencies and organizations across the public and private sector. What began as a three-year project with funds from NACD, Land O Lakes and Franklin County Conservation District, as well as implementation assistance and in-kind support from KACD and Ottawa Coop turned into about a 12-month project that was fully supported by all involved. Unfortunately, with staff turnover and industry challenges following the fallout from COVID we lost the interest and support from Ottawa Coop, which lead to year three funds disappearing from Land O' Lakes. From about the 18-month mark through the end of the project the agronomist position was only supported by NACD, KACD and Franklin County Conservation District. We learned there are still major obstacles for successfully implementing a collaborative public private conservation delivery model. It was an innovative project that we are proud to have been part of, but it was also one that could have generated long term success if the timing had been better.

Kaitlin has since moved to the Miami County Conservation District and administers the Hillsdale WRAPS project.