

Strengthening Conservation Delivery Through Collaboration



As conservation programs have evolved over the last 80 years, so have opportunities to reevaluate delivery methods. In 2018, at the NACD Annual Meeting, NACD, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Land O'Lakes Truterra discussed strengthening conservation delivery through collaboration with a new partnership between public and private sector, facilitated by the **Franklin County Conservation District (FCCD)** in Ottawa, Kan. The local farmers' co-op and the USDA service center, which houses FCCD, share many of the same customers. When the opportunity arose to connect local producers' agronomic decisions and conservation implementation, the FCCD board was well positioned to serve as the lead in the pilot project.

In 2019, NACD, in partnership with NRCS and Land O' Lakes Truterra awarded funds through a [technical assistance grant to FCCD](#) to hire a conservation agronomist to advance sustainable agricultural practices and environmental outcomes in a multi-county area.

One of the many benefits to working directly with NRCS and local conservation district offices is the ability to connect producers to

revenue opportunities that make implementing conservation practices rewarding for both their soil and bottom line. Some growers may have little knowledge of federal programs, and the application process can be complex, so having a conservation agronomist is instrumental in helping them find conservation solutions.

In November of 2019, the conservation district hired **Kaitlin Gibbons** to serve as the conservation agronomist across nine counties. Her duties include serving as a conservation leader in the area to expand public-private partnerships with ag retailers, crop consultants, state and federal conservation agencies and other organizations to help advance a voluntary, incentive-based approach to private lands conservation.

"My favorite part of my job is working with farmers who are excited to implement and improve conservation on their land," **Gibbons said**. "On the conservation side, I am not trying to sell them anything. My goal is simple: I want to help them improve their land so it can be sustained for the future generations."

As a conservation agronomist, Gibbons shares her time between FCCD and the Ottawa Co-op.



Conservation Agronomist Kaitlin Gibbons, pictured outside the FCCD office

She has gained valuable conservation planning training from the conservation district office staff and is equipped to assist farmers with the conservation planning process. She assists producers with Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and state cost-share contracts and has become knowledgeable in assisting with nutrient management and cover crop planning.

Gibbons works with the Ottawa Co-op and their member-owners to find conservation solutions as well. Demonstrating the value of being a good steward of the land and investing in conservation to the farmer can be challenging. She leverages the Land O' Lakes sustainability tool, the Truterra Insights Engine, to show farmers the value of implementing sustainable practices such as adopting no-till, cover cropping, grid sampling and split applying nutrients. "The Truterra Insights Engine allows you to pinpoint the value of sustainability by running different conservation practice simulations on individual fields, which has completely changed the conservation conversation," **Gibbons said**.

Gibbons was able to bring conservation revenue opportunities to a local grower, **Greg Lefmann**, who didn't know he would be eligible for local watershed funding to incorporate cover crops into his operation and convert his acres to no-till. The additional funds from the watershed program helped offset his costs to make his farm more sustainable. "I have been a longtime, conventional tillage farmer," **said Lefmann**. "I was considering changing my operation to include no-till practices. Kaitlin has really helped me in the process of making this change."

The pilot project has been successful, demonstrating the effectiveness and efficiency of working in collaboration with partner organizations and their shared network of producers. Gibbons has been able to provide more technical assistance and reach a wider audience of local growers with this grant and collaborative network of partners.

Franklin County Conservation District is paving the way for conservation agronomists and demonstrating that creative and innovative public-private partnerships can forge the future for engaging farmers in conservation solutions.