Illinois STAR FAQ

Instructions, definitions, and frequently asked questions for 2026 Crop Year

General STAR

1. *What is the definition of STAR's Crop Year?*
   STAR is focused on improving in-field management and sets our Crop Year to capture all field preparation activities starting after harvest (Fall 2025) and including any pre-plant and in-season activities up to the following harvest (Fall 2026). Cover crops interseeded prior to initial harvest should be included with the crop year's data.

2. *How do I order a field sign?*
   You will have the opportunity to order signs for your field after receiving your score by clicking "Order Your STAR Sign Here". This will be shipped at no cost to the address you have listed in your profile. Please reach out to the STAR team if you do not receive your sign within 2-3 weeks of ordering.

3. *Who will know my STAR rating(s)?*
   While we strongly encourage participants to post field signs to display their STAR ratings, your ratings are confidential and will not be shared with anyone but you. If you need any assistance from a STAR admin user and contact them giving your permission, the admin user may be able to view and edit your fields and forms. Field-level practice data will be aggregated for use in tracking STAR participation and program outcomes on a state/county basis once personal identifiable and specific location data have been removed. Please see our Terms of Use and Privacy Policy on our website for more information.

4. *How will my answers be verified?*
   Once the enrollment period closes, STAR will identify a random selection of submitted field forms for verification. Fields that have been selected for verification will be flagged in the STAR Tool Producer Dashboard and will include links to a field form specific verification evidence checklist. State Affiliate admins will assign Verifiers to groups of fields based on location and other logistical criteria. The assigned Verifier will contact the randomly selected participants to confirm the use of the practices identified on their Field Form(s) and provide next steps on completion of the process, including uploading documentation into the STAR Tool. The required verification evidence and information that may be requested from participants varies from state to state and will be provided in advance. Examples include cost share enrollment documentation, conservation plans, as applied nutrient maps, dated photo or aerial images, trusted advisor confirmation, product receipts, etc. Verifiers will work with participants to complete the process and will sign-off on a Verification Report form for each field form through the STAR Tool.

STAR Web Tool

5. *How do I modify my account?*
   Click on the "Account" button in the lower left corner of the page. You can adjust your name, phone, password, and mailing address here. You are not able to change the email address once the account has been created unless you contact a STAR Administrator. If that is the case, send an email to

info@starconservation.org and we will help you out. If you scroll to the bottom of the Account page, you can click on "Access Profile Information". There you can change your profile setting as a farmer or rancher (currently only one type is allowed per email address) and edit the farm/ranch info that was asked when confirming your account.

Note that your mailing address listed here will be where your field sign gets shipped to if you request one. Your phone number or email will be used to reach out if your field is selected for verification, so please ensure that it stays up to date.

6. *How do I contact someone for assistance with the STAR Tool or STAR in general?*
   You may contact the STAR team by clicking on the "Support" button in the lower left corner of the page. This will be route you to our Contact Us form where you can provide more information about your question or concern. Please check "WebTool Support" if you are looking for troubleshooting support on startool.ag.

   Also, after completing a field form and receiving a STAR score, you will see your STAR state-level point of contact and a local STAR Navigator contact (where available). The STAR state-level contact can help with any questions about the STAR program and your enrollment, while the local STAR Navigator contact can help with any technical questions regarding conservation assistance and relevant programs. You can also navigate back to this point within the Web Tool by going to your Field List and clicking the star-shaped icon below your field to bring up your scorecard.

   If you have questions about a specific resource you are interested in from the Resources tab, you can find the point of contact for that resource by clicking on the title.

7. *How do I add a field?*
   You can add a field from the home page of the Web Tool or within the My Field List tab by clicking the "Add New Field" button in the top right corner of the page. Once in the Create New Field screen, you can follow the tutorial by clicking the book icon on the left side of the map view.

8. *How do I get my STAR score?*
   Once you have added a field, in the My Field List view, you can click "Forms Not Started" on the top of the screen or click the down arrow next to a particular field to show the "Start Field Form" button. You will receive your STAR score upon completion of the field form.

9. *How did STAR know my crop rotation?*
   When available, your crop rotation is automatically provided by our interface with Cropland Data Layer (CDL), which uses publicly available data to fill in your cropping history. If something is incorrect, you can edit the crop rotation by changing the crop selected from the dropdown menu.

10. *While reviewing my summary, I see there is something to correct. How do I do that?*
    From the summary page, you can click "Go To Section" to make any edits in areas of the form that need adjustment. You can follow the form through the rest of the steps again to return to the Confirmation screen, or you can jump to it by clicking the last Step # listed at the top of the form. You will not be able to edit the form after submitting unless an administrator unlocks your field.

Fillable PDF/Hard Copy Field Evaluation Form

11. *Should I mark something in each section of the field evaluation form?*

Yes, it is very important to mark all applicable activities in each section. Separate forms should be completed for fields (where management practices differ at all) you would like rated.

12. *Why am I asked to sign and date the Field Form?*
    Your signature acknowledges that you have completed the form as accurately as possible and that you understand your field may be randomly selected for verification.

13. *Field Evaluation Form Questions*

    Section 8. Crop Rotation

    Rotating crops helps to improve above-ground and below-ground diversity. Ideally, a field would never have more than two continuous years of a crop (one exception would be continuous forage or hay). Incorporation of a winter hardy crop, such as wheat, or perennial crop into a corn/soy rotation offers several benefits including, but not limited to, improved soil structure, increased organic matter, greater diversity of soil biology, and reduced nutrient loss. The "other" crop could be milo, sunflowers, canola, etc.

    Section 9. Conservation and Management Practices

    This section includes several recommended practices to reduce nutrient and soil loss in addition to the in-field management practices that STAR prioritizes. Items should be selected only if applicable to the individual field being evaluated. The structural practice items in this section should only be selected if they are still functioning as intended.

- A conservation plan is encouraged, and selecting this item assumes that the plan is being implemented in such a way that reduces sheet and rill erosion to "T." The soil loss tolerance rate (T) is the maximum rate of annual soil loss that will permit crop productivity to be sustained economically and indefinitely on a given soil. Erosion is considered greater than T if either water (sheet and rill) erosion or wind erosion rate exceeds the T.

- A written nutrient management plan is often completed with the help of a retailer or private consultant and does not have to be an NRCS 590 plan. STAR recognizes it is best, however if the person helping with any advice is a Certified Crop Advisor.

- The option, "Attended a soil or nutrient management meeting/field day," includes any meeting that included some discussion or recommendations related to soil, nutrient use, tillage, or cover crops, including field days, no matter the length of time. The meeting/field day should have occurred within the past year at the time of completing the form and can be counted toward every field evaluated during the current crop year.

- The "Enrolled in a Federal, State, or Local Conservation Program" includes NRCS programs such as CSP and EQIP, state programs such as Partners for Conservation, or local conservation programs. Participation in Precision Conservation Management (PCM) is addressed in a separate option.

NRCS Conservation Practice Standard Definitions

Saturated Buffer: A subsurface, perforated distribution pipe used to distribute drainage system discharge beneath a vegetated buffer along its length and discharge channel. For more information, see NRCS CPS 604.

Bioreactor: A structure that uses a carbon source to reduce the concentration of nitrate nitrogen in subsurface agricultural drainage flow through enhanced denitrification. For more information, see NRCS CPS 605.

Constructed Wetland: An artificial wetland ecosystem with hydrophytic vegetation for biological treatment of water. For more information, see CPS 656.

Terraces/Contours/WASCOBs

- *Terrace:* An earth embankment or a combination ridge and channel, constructed across the field slope. For more information, see NRCS CPS 600.

- *Contour buffer strips:* Narrow strips of permanent, herbaceous vegetative cover established around the hill slope, and alternated down the slope with wider cropped strips that are farmed on the contour. For more information, see NRCS CPS 332.

- *Water and Sediment Control Basin (WASCOB):* An earth embankment or a combination ridge and channel constructed across the slope of a minor drainageway. For more information, see NRCS CPS 638.

Grass Filter Strip/Riparian Buffer

- *Filter strip:* A strip or area of herbaceous vegetation that removes contaminants from overland flow. For more information, see NRCS CPS 393.

- *Riparian forest buffer:* An area predominantly covered by trees and/or shrubs located adjacent to and up-gradient from a watercourse or water body. For more information, see NRCS CPS 391.

Grassed Waterway: A shaped or graded channel that is established with suitable vegetation to convey surface water at a nonerosive velocity using a broad and shallow cross section to a stable outlet. For more information, see NRCS CPS 412.

Pollinator Planting

Wildlife habitat planting: Establishing wildlife habitat by planting herbaceous vegetation or shrubs. For more information, see CPS 420.

Windbreak

Windbreak/shelterbelt establishment and renovation: Establishing, enhancing, or renovating windbreaks, also known as shelter belts, which are single or multiple rows of trees and/or shrubs in linear or curvilinear configurations. For more information, see CPS 380.

Section 10. Cover Crops: *What period of time should I include for reporting a cover crop on my field?*

A cover crop credited for the 2026 crop year must have been planted and established in the late summer or fall of 2025, which means it must have had some growth before spring planting. According to NRCS Practice Standard Code 340, "established" means the cover crop was planted "in a timely matter and when there is adequate moisture to establish a good stand." Planting dates for the likelihood of "adequate establishment" will vary by the species and geographic location. It is best to use winter hardy species, including annual ryegrass, cereal rye, etc., as these species provide more soil protection and nutrient capture over the winter months and into early spring than winter kill species.

How do I record my cover crop species?

Select the category that applies to your cover crops. If you planted cereal rye, select "Winter hardy single species." If you planted cereal rye and clover, select "Winter hardy – 2 or more species." If you planted cereal rye and radish, select "Winter hardy – single species" and "Winter kill - single species." It should be noted that planting more than one species will encourage additional above and below ground biodiversity that may offer distinct soil health benefits when compared to single species.

Cover crop termination
The longer a winter hardy species is actively growing, the more environmental benefits it provides, so we encourage termination of a winter hardy cover crop after spring planting (thus planting "planted green"). It is important to note that termination timing is a very important aspect of successful cover crop management, and we recommend utilizing cover crop resources and/or reaching out to your local SWCD or NRCS office for technical assistance on cover crop mixes, seeding rates, planting guidelines, and termination strategies appropriate for your operation.

Cover crop resources

https://www.midwestcovercrops.org/illinois/

Section 11. Soil Sampling for Nutrient Management: Soil samples should be collected for each field every four years or less. IL STAR encourages Spring or Summer sampling to provide ample time to incorporate soil analyses into nutrient recommendations for the upcoming crop year. To reduce the uncertainty associated with in-field soil variability, and to inform accurate nutrient management decisions, samples should always be taken from the same locations identified via GPS. If your sampling is done by a soil testing or related service firm, it is likely done using GPS. Grid or zone sizes should be based on the University of IL Agronomy Handbook: https://extension.illinois.edu/global/agronomy-handbook .

Section 12 & 13. Fall and Spring Tillage: Minimal soil disturbance is recommended. No-till systems keep the soil covered and minimize soil loss due to wind and water erosion. STAR acknowledges that fertilizer tool bars are likely to be low disturbance (unless it is a shank-type), and we consider these applications (with the shank type exception) equivalent to no tillage. Strip-till systems also limit soil disturbance compared to full-width tillage systems, but should never be used on Highly Erodible Land (HEL), as the strips become a pathway for gullies to form. Any full width tillage on soybean stubble should be avoided when possible. If a cover crop is planted or manure is applied in the Fall, a shallow tillage operation to incorporate has some benefit, but is still considered a tillage pass. Use of a strip freshener in the Spring is considered the same as strip tillage, again with the assumption it is not on Highly Erodible Land. Tillage

done in small areas of a field, such as rut repair, is not considered part of a routine tillage system and is outside the scope of STAR.

Section 14. Fall/Winter Nutrient Management: STAR discourages Fall and Winter application of fertilizers due to an increased risk of nutrient loss from rainfall on fields without an active crop. If applying MAP (11-52-0) or DAP (18-46-0) in the Fall, it should be applied before December 1st. If NH3 (anhydrous ammonia = 82-0-0) is applied during the Fall through February time period, it should be applied with an inhibitor and when the 4-inch soil temperature is below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Though not recommended, if a Fall through February NH3 application is made, it should represent no more than 50% of the total nitrogen program. Manure/Biosolids are best applied in the Spring when there is less likelihood of leaching or runoff. If manure/miosolids are to be applied in the Fall through February time period, they should be injected or broadcast when the soil temperature is below 50 degrees Fahrenheit and if broadcast, they should be incorporated. Management of such applications should include soil tests to determine exact amounts of nutrients being added. Research on stabilizers used in conjunction with manure applications is inconclusive, and the STAR Science Advisory Committee does not feel that the use of manure stabilizers is warranted at this time.

Section 15. Spring/Summer Nutrient Management: While some crops require additional nitrogen inputs to sustain yields, limiting nitrogen applications can significantly improve downstream water quality. Nitrogen is best applied in the spring and/or summer, as close as possible to the time the crop will use it, minimizing nutrient losses from the field. Manure/biosolids applied during the spring or summer should be incorporated if broadcast.

Section 16. Additional Nutrient Activities: The total nitrogen program for a crop should incorporate residual soil nitrogen, nitrogen made available from organic matter mineralization, and nitrogen applied from all sources throughout the crop year.. The maximum levels identified for this section are based on the maintenance needs for optimal corn yield goals in Illinois and should help to offset and/or limit losses due to leaching and denitrification. The continuous corn rotation allows higher nitrogen rates due to the maintenance needs of corn following corn versus corn following soybeans. Optimally, producers would follow the guidelines of the "Corn N-Rate Calculator" that is a part of the NRCS 590 Nutrient Management standards and specifications (https://www.cornnratecalc.org/). The Corn N-Rate Calculator uses current corn and nitrogen prices to calculate the MRTN (Maximum Return to Nitrogen) but is not required for STAR. Participants should also consider using the 4R Principles (Right Source, Right Rate, Right Time, and Right Place) when making nutrient decisions. More details can be found here: https://nutrientstewardship.org/4rs/.

Limiting phosphorus applications will help to meet the water quality goals of the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. If phosphorus is applied, either in the Fall or Spring, it is best to follow soil test recommendations and apply subsurface. Triple Super Phosphate is a better phosphorus source than MAP or DAP as it does not add the complexity of additional nitrogen. As stated earlier, it is best to apply phosphorus and potassium based on soil testing, but it is reasonable to replace those nutrients using estimated removal rates. Additionally, utilizing Variable Rate Technology (VRT) is economical and environmentally friendly and allows for the placement of fertilizer where it's needed. However, application rates when using VRT should not exceed the recommendations found in the University of Illinois Agronomy Handbook: https://extension.illinois.edu/global/agronomy-handbook. Any fertilizer containing nitrogen or phosphorus, including manure, that is broadcast on either frozen or snow-covered ground increases the likelihood of loss, particularly via surface run-off, and should be avoided.