



Welcome

This is the first newsletter from the Diverse Corn Belt project (#DCB), a five-year, multi-disciplinary research program exploring opportunities beyond corn and soybeans for Midwestern farmers.

Our goal is to plant the seeds for new opportunities and enhanced resilience for all types of farmers—large and small, conventional, organic, or anywhere in between.

To make it happen, more than 30 investigators on this team and scores of farmers and other stakeholders are working to envision more diverse agricultural systems in the Midwest and chart roadmaps to help the region get to them. We are digging deep into a wide range of factors that affect the viability of new options in a deeply entrenched system, including:

- Agronomic, entomological and soil health effects in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa
- Equipment and management changes needed to diversify
- Markets and infrastructure needed for additional crops or livestock
- Receptivity of lenders and other influencers to diverse alternatives
- Policy changes required to encourage diversification
- Social and psychological influences on diversification
- and more.

In this newsletter, we will describe the foundation of the project and how our broad-based research team is approaching the challenge. We will introduce you to some of our team members. And we will ask for your insight. After all, we need the help of farmers, crop advisors, policy makers, bankers, processors, retailers, non-farm neighbors and others to get our arms around diversity and map the future together.

I hope we will be able to team up as we explore a diverse Corn Belt.

Linda S. Prokopy, Ph.D.
Purdue University
Diverse Corn Belt Project Director



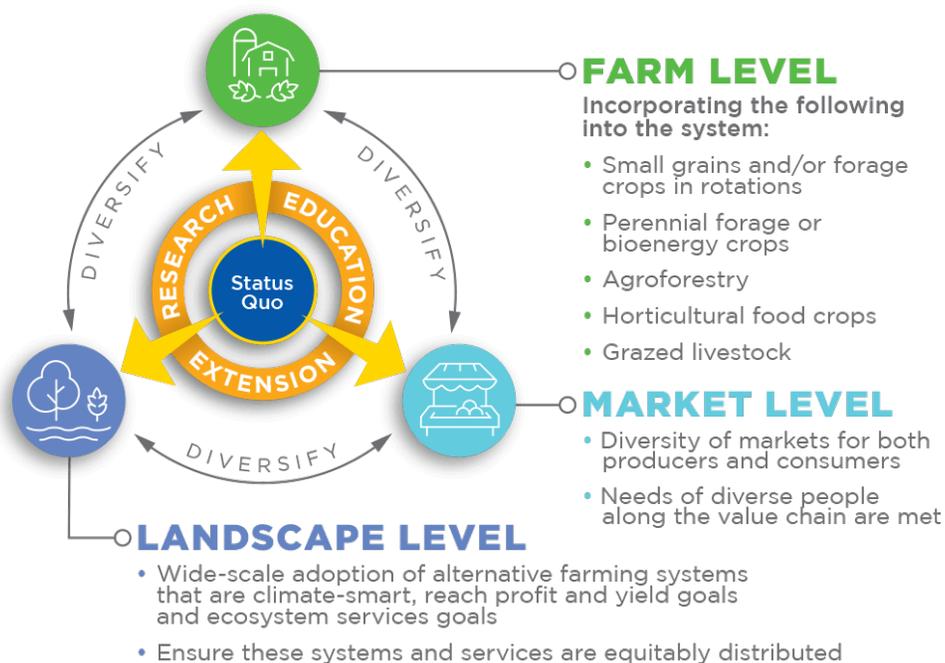
What Is Diversity?

The term "diversity" has several meanings to the Diverse Corn Belt team. It can refer to crops beyond commodity corn and soybeans, or incorporating grazing or perennial crops into corn/soybean operations. It can refer to creating new markets for the products farmers produce. And it can reflect the backgrounds of the people doing the farming and the way they farm.

Members of the Diverse Corn Belt team are exploring three levels of diversity:

- **Farm-level diversity**, which includes more options for crop rotations, perennial crops for forage or bioenergy, grazing livestock, agroforestry, and horticultural crops.
- **Market-level diversity**, creating channels for processing and marketing a wider variety of agricultural products and meeting the needs of diverse people all along the value chain.
- **Landscape-level diversity**, a wide-scale proliferation of profitable, resilient, climate-smart farming systems that achieve yield, ecosystem, and equity goals.

Our hypothesis is that greater diversity will have benefits on the farm, market and landscape levels as well as on the community level. Through this five-year project, we will test that hypothesis in biological, economic, policy, and sociological terms.



DCB Objectives

The overall vision of the Diverse Corn Belt project is a more diverse, more resilient, more economically and environmentally sustainable rural community in the Midwest. To achieve that goal, the DCB team has created a long list of objectives, including:

- Co-produce research. That means our researchers are working hand-in-hand with producers, policymakers, processors, and other stakeholders to define diversity, identify the barriers to various options, and help guide the direction of our research.
- Model economic and ecosystem effects of diversified systems and validate them with field observations.
- Conduct visioning sessions with producers and other stakeholders to define diversity, explore barriers to adoption, and consider ethical choices and sustainability outcomes.
- Develop policy guidelines that would reduce barriers to adoption and help achieve resilient intensification through diversified farms, markets, and landscapes.
- Reach out to stakeholders to share our findings.
- Create, pilot, and publish educational materials to help prepare a workforce that is ready and able to support a diversified Midwestern landscape.

Achieving those objectives requires a team that represents a wide range of skills and expertise. We have agronomists, economists, entomologists, educators, social scientists, communicators and more. Some of our researchers are experts in computer modeling, while others are field researchers. We also have researchers who specialize in interviews and focus groups—skilled in asking questions and analyzing the answers.

The team has met in the Quad Cities twice over the past year, and the specialized teams have met regularly in-person or via online conference call all year long. Each team is moving forward on study design, logistics and—in the case of the focus group team—have begun gathering data.



Sharpening Our Focus with Focus Groups

This spring and summer, we held 10 focus groups in our three study states of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. During those meetings, we gathered insight and ideas from 53 farmers representing a range of ages, farm sizes, and degrees of diversification.

The farmers who participated were open, honest, and frank. They told us why they have diversified their operations, or why they haven't—exactly what we need to know. They also shared perspective on all sorts of observations in their communities, from the scarcity of labor in farm country to the abundance of small, diverse operations in Amish communities.

Members of the team are analyzing the data now.

We will be conducting more focus groups in the coming year. Stay tuned and if you are invited to participate, please join us!

Meet the Team

Emily Usher
Project Manager
Purdue University

Emily Usher is a natural resource social scientist working at Purdue University as the Project Manager for the Diverse Corn Belt project. Originally from the Midwest, Emily values the environmental, economic and social opportunities our natural environment provides. Understanding the balance between these three components drives her interests in understanding motivators and barriers to practice adoption, public policy development, and community engagement. Emily wears many hats as Project Manager as she coordinates DCB research teams, mentors students, and promotes DCB across the Corn Belt. Outside of work, Emily



is an enthusiastic gardener, novice home improver, and aspiring chef for her friends and family.

RAD Idea: The DCB RAD Teams

The DCB team is gathering insight from farmers and other stakeholders in three key ways:

- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- RAD Teams
- Surveys

Each method has key strengths. Focus groups bring participants together for a few hours to provide not just answers to questions, but to share thoughts and ideas through a guided discussion. Researchers listen carefully to the conversations and observe how thinking evolves, barriers are addressed, or different ideas on diversity come to light.

Individual interviews provide researchers with an opportunity to explore participants' beliefs and statements more deeply. The one-on-one format allows participants to share their views without peers in the room, and permits the interviewers to follow up on comments they hear during the conversation.

RAD Teams—which stands for Reimagining Agricultural Diversity—are a unique feature of the DCB project. In a way, RAD Teams are like long-standing focus groups, providing a chance for dialogue, comparison, and exploration that will last for the duration of the project. RAD Team members will help set the course of the research, aid in defining key aspects of diversification in the Corn Belt, and create a vision for the future. They will also provide invaluable feedback as data come in and conclusions are being discussed.

While focus groups center specifically on farmers, RAD Teams will include a wider range of stakeholders from throughout the agricultural value chain, including crop advisers, bankers, processors, retailers, non-farming landowners, policymakers, and more.

Surveys will help us quantify the barriers and benefits that emerge in interviews and focus groups. Over the course of the project, we will be surveying farmers, consumers, marketers, and others.

We are currently recruiting for RAD Teams and individual interview opportunities in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. Keep reading to learn more about how you can participate.

Get Involved!

The Diverse Corn Belt project needs insight from stakeholders in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa.

Diversified farmers and conventional corn/soybean growers, livestock producers and crop farmers, landlords and tenants...we are looking for a wide range of perspectives for our interviews, RAD teams, and field research sites.

If you're interested in getting involved, [click here.](#)

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