

DIVERSE CORN BELT PROJECT



Expanding opportunities for farmers, consumers, and rural communities



The Diverse Corn Belt Project (DCB) is a five-year, multi-disciplinary research project exploring opportunities for and barriers in adding more crops and grazed livestock to rotations in the Corn Belt and investigating the real-world impacts of diversified farming systems. With more than 30 research partners on the DCB Team, we are seeking concrete options for diversification and understanding the agronomic, economic, social, infrastructure, and policy changes that could make these options viable.

Our hypothesis—backed by extensive data we’ve gathered during the last four years—is that greater diversity in crops, livestock, and people in the Corn Belt farming community will improve risk management options, resilience, and profitability.

PROVIDING MORE OPTIONS

For decades, farmers in America’s Corn Belt have become world-class specialists in producing millions of tons of corn and soybeans. In 2024, farmers in the DCB focus states of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa harvested 5.9 billion bushels of corn, 1.6 billion bushels of soybeans, and 13.2 million tons of silage on 55.5 million acres.

The current corn-soybean rotation is strongly reinforced by national policy, economic incentives, infrastructure, and culture. We recognize that while this farming system works well for some, it creates challenges for others.

Diversity in the Corn Belt begins with one of DCB’s five systems: Extended Rotations, Grazed Livestock, Horticultural Food Crops, Agroforestry, or Perennial and Bioenergy Crops.

ROOTING RESILIENCE IN DIVERSITY

In biological systems—and economic and social ones—resilience is rooted in diversity. DCB’s goal is to expand diversification opportunities that benefit farmers, communities, the regional economy, and the environment. The DCB Team, funded by USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture, has entered the final year of an intensive five-year exploration of diversity options for the Corn Belt states of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa.

We seek to understand these challenges and constraints that may complicate diversification, as well as the leverage points for reducing those challenges. That’s why the DCB Team works with farmers, planners, processors, investors, policy makers, and other stakeholders to explore the many interconnected factors that will lead to greater opportunities in the region.



MAKING CONNECTIONS AMONG FARMS, MARKETS, AND LANDSCAPES

The DCB Team includes researchers in social sciences, agronomy, entomology, chemistry, economics, Extension, education, and more. The team investigates diversity on several levels:

- **FARM:** Agronomists, entomologists, and soil scientists gather evidence of changes in crops, soils, pest and beneficial insect populations, and more indicators on a wide range of farms—from corn-soybean operations to diversified farming systems.
- **MARKET:** Agricultural economists and social scientists engage with people all along the value chain, including producers, processors, wholesalers, grocers, and consumers. Our researchers dig into the fundamental shifts in markets and infrastructure needed to create demand for diverse crops.
- **LANDSCAPE:** We conduct analyses of policy, insurance and support programs, societal attitudes, and other factors that could foster greater adoption of more diverse annual and perennial crops—as well as livestock—across the landscape.



GATHERING DATA

Over the past four years, the DCB Team has gathered data in several environments with a wide range of methods. Our innovative approaches include:

- **IN THE FIELD:** Our scientists collected water and soil samples from farms and nearby locations to explore the environmental impacts of different farming systems. Fresh research methods included analyzing in-field audio recordings to estimate insect populations and diversity and exploring how accurately farmers can use their sense of smell to assess soil health.
- **IN THE COMMUNITY:** We conducted focus groups with farmers and one-on-one interviews with community members to understand their perspectives on agricultural diversification. Reimagining Agricultural Diversity (RAD) Teams met several times in each study state to dive deep into challenges and opportunities facing diverse agricultural systems. Participants explored attitudes toward diversity and guided some of the field and lab research.
- **IN THE MARKETPLACE:** We conducted detailed surveys with food processors and retailers, who shared their insights on the motivations and barriers impacting diversification.
- **PROJECTING IMPACTS OF DIVERSIFICATION:** Our modeling team uses sophisticated software to combine field data and survey insights to predict economic and ecological outcomes from a wide range of diversification scenarios.



SHARING THE RESULTS

We want to keep our stakeholders throughout the Corn Belt engaged in the diversification conversation. As we gather data and draw conclusions, our network of Extension and education professionals share insights across the Midwest, from talks at farmer field days to our diversecornbelt.org website, which is constantly growing.

Our hope is that DCB's findings can help inspire policymakers to create an encouraging environment for diversification, supply chain partners to open avenues for Corn Belt-grown produce, and farmers to adopt diversification strategies for greater resilience and success.

LEARN MORE

Visit diversecornbelt.org, subscribe to our newsletter, meet us at one of our meetings or field days, or contact:

Emily DeaKyne • Project Manager, Diverse Corn Belt • eusher@purdue.edu • (765) 496-0997

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