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Diversifying the Corn Belt: Policy Pathways for a Resilient Agricultural Future

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1. Introduction

Agricultural diversification has the potential to increase farm resilience, support local food systems and rural community vitality, and reduce negative ecological impacts of monoculture crop production (Kremen & Merenlender, 2018). Mounting global and regional evidence shows that diversifying agricultural systems to include multiple crop, non-crop vegetation (i.e., prairie strips, hedgerows), and livestock species can result in systems that are equally as productive as conventional, monoculture systems (Dainese et al., 2019; Tamburini et al., 2020) and build healthier agroecosystems in the process (Aguilar et al., 2015; Gaudin et al., 2015; Lin, 2011). Depending on the system, diversification can reduce input costs (Zhao et al., 2022), naturally disrupt cycles of pests and disease (Li et al., 2023), and build soil fertility (Yang et al., 2024). As a risk management tool, farmers benefit from diversification of production and markets through greater resilience to extreme weather and other environmental disruptions and to market fluctuations (Bowles et al., 2020; Tamburini et al., 2020). Consumers benefit through greater local food security (Hertel et al., 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2024) and robust supply chains that are less susceptible to natural, economic, health, and political disruptions (Petersen-Rockney et al., 2021).

In the US Corn Belt comprising Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, where 94% of crop production is dedicated to corn and soybeans (USDA-NASS, 2024), including a broader array of crops, livestock, and non-crop species in production systems and markets is critical. Just a century ago, the landscapes of the Corn Belt were filled with diverse rotations including crops such as corn, wheat, potatoes, and hay integrated with pastured livestock (Bogue, 1963; Hart, 1986). A combination of federal policies, changes and investments

in agricultural technology and infrastructure, and developments in global grain markets heavily favored corn and soybeans, making it easier economically and agronomically to grow them, and harder to grow other crops. Over time, diversity was replaced with an industrialized agricultural model that focused on fewer crops for greater production efficiency. While corn and soybeans have dominant roles in food, animal feed, fiber, material, and fuel markets, and will likely continue to be core crops in the region, incorporating more diversity provides a unique opportunity to support more resilient food and farming systems.

There are many types of diversification strategies at the production and market levels. Production diversification includes the management of multiple species at multiple spatial and/or temporal scales; for example, trees integrated into cropping systems (spatial), or crops rotated across a number of years (temporal). We understand production diversification in this brief to be a set of five key strategies identified by our team of academics, and practitioners working in agriculture research, Extension, and education. These key strategies include extended rotations, perennial pasture/forage or perennial biomass crops, agroforestry, grazed livestock, and horticultural food crops. Figure 1 describes each strategy in more detail. Diversification at the market level means a diversity of markets for both farmers and consumers and robust local and regional value chains to support the production, processing, and sale of diverse products.

Our team of scientists and practitioners conducted a comprehensive study to understand farmer perspectives on diversification and the challenges and opportunities to diversification in the US Corn Belt. We spoke to over 136 farmers through focus groups and interviews (Traldi et al., 2024), surveyed 725 farmers (Asprooth et al., 2025a), and over the course of three years conducted a series of Re-imagining Agricultural Diversity (RAD) meetings (10 in total) with 178 agricultural stakeholders across Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. Participants included farmers, non-operating landowners, agriculture retailers, certified crop advisors, farming-focused non-governmental organizations, agricultural investors and bankers, policymakers, educators, agency staff (federal, state, and local), Extension staff, land managers, processors, and representatives from packaged consumer goods companies (see Appendix a. for more detail on our RAD team methods).

The research highlighted that farmers are interested in production and market diversification and understand many of their benefits. Participants told us that diversification makes sense in their region to more fully utilize the growing season, improve the productivity and profitability of areas where corn and soybeans do not grow well, and create greater economic opportunities on farms and in rural communities. From surveys, we learned that significant numbers of farmers believe that diversified systems are superior to non-diversified systems at achieving a range of environmental, agronomic, and economic goals (Asprooth et al., 2025a). Many farmers we surveyed agreed that “in the future I would like to see

more types of crops/trees and/or grazed livestock produced in my community.” However, participants also made it clear that significant challenges exist to adopting diversified systems. Many of these challenges require broader structural and institutional changes that must be addressed at the policy level, with policy referring to public laws and programs that governments establish and implement through formalized decision-making processes.

In this brief, we describe key challenges to creating a more diverse agricultural landscape, with a focus on policies and markets. We then provide a set of salient policy opportunities that our RAD team participants prioritized as important pathways to address these challenges and enable farmers to diversify. This brief aims to elevate the voices of farmers and agricultural stakeholders and to inform policymakers and other agricultural decision makers as they consider ways to support farmers and create more regenerative, resilient agriculture and food systems.

2. Diversification Challenges

An interrelated suite of challenges in the US agricultural system makes diversification difficult, especially in the Corn Belt. The following section outlines several of the most pressing challenges that constrain diversification in the region, identified through analysis of our focus group, survey, interview, and RAD team meeting results and through academic and grey literature. We focus on two major categories: policies and markets. Policy-related challenges include those related to federal Farm Bill policies, including crop insurance and conservation incentives. Market-related challenges include lack of access to markets, burdensome regulations, inadequate infrastructure, and barriers to institutional procurement of local food products.

Policy-Related Challenges

Federal policies have developed over time to favor corn and soybean production in the Midwest, at the expense of other crops. Specifically, Farm Bill programs, including federal crop

DIVERSIFIED PRODUCTION SYSTEM	DESCRIPTION
 Extended Rotations	In addition to corn and soybeans, extended rotations can include small grains like oats, wheat, and cereal rye; forages like alfalfa; and other row crops like buckwheat, peas, and sunflowers. While cover crops provide environmental benefits, DCB does not consider their use in an exclusive corn-soybean rotation as diversification unless the cover crops are incorporated in an extended rotation or one of the other diversified production systems listed here.
 Perennial Pasture/Forage and Perennial Bioenergy Crops	This category refers to perennial crops in permanent stands or pasture. This could include alfalfa and various perennial grasses, legumes, and forbs, as well as alternative bioenergy and/or biomass crops like miscanthus and switchgrass.
 Agroforestry	Agroforestry refers to the intentional integration of trees and other woody perennials (e.g. shrubs) on farms. Examples include alley cropping (planting trees in wide rows), windbreaks, riparian forest buffers, trees integrated with livestock production (silvopasture), and the cultivation of forest plants and mushrooms (forest farming). Agroforestry does not include farm woodlots (e.g., those managed for fuelwood or timber) or fruit tree monoculture systems (e.g., apples) if they are not integrated with crop or livestock production.
 Horticultural Food Crops	Horticultural food crops include fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs, such as tomatoes, pumpkins, melons, apples, berries, spearmint, and peppermint.
 Grazed Livestock	Cattle, goats, and sheep: Livestock fed a forage-based diet derived from pasture or annual forages. Livestock can graze through the lifecycle after weaning or during their duration on the farm with maximum access to perennial pasture or grazed annual forages during the grazing season. Poultry and hogs: Livestock provided maximum access to perennial pasture, grazed annual forages, or wooded areas during the grazing season. Does not include animals raised in confinement or on a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO).



Figure 1. Key diversification systems

insurance and conservation programs, are oriented towards farming systems that produce commodity crops such as corn and soybeans (McFadden & Hoppe, 2017).

The Federal Crop Insurance Program (FCIP) plays a significant role in shaping US agricultural systems. Administered through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency (RMA), it is primarily designed to support the core commodity crops grown in each region. Currently, taxpayers subsidize around 60% of the federal crop insurance premiums farmers pay through a public-private partnership with insurance companies (USDA-ERS, 2025). The commodity crops most commonly grown in each county are those that have individual or “off-the-shelf policies” available for farmers, while other crops require more complex underwriting. This structure makes it harder to insure minor or alternative crops and reduces the need for diversification as a risk management strategy. The Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), administered through the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), offers protection for crops that are not insurable through federal crop insurance, but the protection is not comparable to that provided by FCIP.

For minor crops with no “off the shelf” policy, farmers must obtain a written agreement with their agent and require four years of Actual Production History (APH) of the crop they want to insure, which many will not have when trying new crops. Programs specifically geared towards small- and medium-scale diversified farms, such as the Whole Farm Revenue Insurance Program (WFRP), which protects the farm as a whole based on previous revenues as opposed to individual crops, are widely noted to be challenging for farmers and insurance agents to access and utilize (Asp-rooth et al., 2025b; Morris et al., 2019). Because insurance agents earn more from multiple individual crop policies that take less time to administer, they have less incentive to sell WFRP policies.

By subsidizing the premiums farmers pay on their crop insurance, the government inadvertently reinforces the specialized production of a narrow set of insurable commodity crops—systems that can be riskier, less sustainable, and ultimately promote the consolidation of fewer and larger-scale farming operations (Azzam et al., 2021; Chem-eris et al., 2022; Kurdyś-Kujawska et al., 2021). Today, most farmers rely heavily on crop insurance for their primary cash crops. Without subsidized crop insurance, farmers would likely insure fewer acres and use more agronomic means of distributing risk, including more diversified rotations that are more resilient to crop price volatility and ecological and climate shocks (O’donoghue et al., 2009; Yu & Sumner, 2018).

The primary way in which sustainable land management is encouraged through the federal crop insurance program is by requiring conservation plans on highly erodible land. As of 2014, all acres deemed highly erodible land require a conservation plan through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and compliance with this plan

to remain eligible for USDA programs like crop insurance (USDA-NRCS, 2022). These conservation plans can support diversified farming systems like an extended crop rotation, or other practices that have synergies with diversified farming systems like no-till or cover crops. However, farmers do not always comply with their plans, especially when commodity prices are high and farmers face stronger economic incentive to maximize yield over potentially less profitable conservation practices (Holland et al., 2020). Compliance with conservation plans is also generally poorly enforced, and the system of reviewing compliance is inadequate (NSAC, 2018; USDA, 2016).

Conservation programs, including working lands programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and land retirement programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) are designed to pay farmers to meet conservation-specific goals that do not always align with production diversity. While some EQIP programs, such as the seasonal high tunnel program, have provided strong support for diverse operations (Bruce et al., 2019) and EQIP includes stipulations that allow farmers to harvest crops (USDA-NRCS, 2021, 2025), the program is not focused on diversifying production. EQIP funds practices such as cover cropping, prescribed grazing, managing nutrient runoff, and wildlife habitat management, as well as conservation crop rotation to meet conservation-specific goals (Bipartisan Policy Center, n.d.). CRP includes stipulations that prevent farmers from harvesting crops or grazing animals on acres enrolled in those programs except in an emergency (USDA-FSA, 2025). These stipulations complicate the potential for farmers to economically benefit from using diversified practices on those acres. As a result, many farmers bring acres enrolled under CRP back into production once their contract ends (Bigelow et al., 2020). NRCS conservation staff training and producer outreach in the Corn Belt have emphasized practices that are beneficial to dominant commodity cropping systems of simplified corn and soybean rotations and confined livestock operations, resulting in correlated producer demand and EQIP allocations.

The organizations administering and providing support for these programs, including federal agencies such as NRCS and FSA and technical assistance organizations, are limited in the resources and knowledge needed to aid farmers in adopting diversified farming systems as conservation strategies (Miles et al., 2017). Resource limitations also constrain these organizations’ abilities to adequately support farmers through their program contracts (Meridian Institute, 2024). For example, funding for federal technical assistance, which is primarily administered through the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) program within NRCS, has been declining for decades (Stubbs, 2024). Additionally, program resources tend to be used less by beginning, small-scale, and historically underserved farmers (Nickerson & Hand, 2009), all of whom tend to be more likely to use diversified systems (Barbieri et al., 2008).

¹ HEL is land that can erode at an excessive rate because of soil properties, leading to long-term decreased productivity (USDA-NRCS, n.d.).

Market-Related Challenges

In the Corn Belt, farmers' limited access to markets for diverse agricultural products is one of the most prominent challenges facing diversification. Processing, distribution, retail, and wholesale markets for diverse local food products are often missing or geographically distant (Asprooth et al., 2025a; Traldi et al., 2024; Weisberger et al., 2021). Additionally, the institutional procurement of these products is constrained by the lack of infrastructure and limited access to resources.

Post-harvest market infrastructure, including storage, aggregation, processing, and manufacturing, is lacking for diversified products, especially small- and medium-scale processors. Small- and medium-scale processors are challenged by myriad requirements imposed by regulations, including national, state, and local food safety requirements; inspections; rules guiding the sale of products across state lines; and USDA labeling of food products (Buckley, 2015; Fitzsimmons et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2012; Thistlewaite, 2020). Complying with regulations requires access to larger labor pools and adequate financial capital to support required testing and monitoring of processed products and to cover necessary expenses, such as insurance and regulatory fees and permits. Larger, more capitalized processors are better able to comply with regulations than small- and medium-scale processors (Taylor, 2008). Thus, the costs of meeting these regulations create more constraints on smaller-scale processors relative to larger-scale processors (Kang, 2025) and constrain smaller-scale processors from entering the market (Klapper et al., 2006). Over time, this dynamic has contributed to a loss of small-scale and local processors for diverse local food products from the Midwest landscape (Adalja & Lichtenberg, 2018; Bovay et al., 2018; MacDonald et al., 2018).

The USDA does include food safety exemptions to support small- and mid-scale processors, including qualified facility exemptions for very small processors (less than \$1,000,000 in annual sales), staggered compliance dates for small and very small processors, exemptions for low-risk food products (e.g., honey, maple syrup, jam) produced via small on-farm processors, and other types of exemptions to accommodate small processors (USFDA, 2017). Many US states have extended regulatory exemptions beyond those existing at the federal level, including full license exemptions for processors with sales less than \$10,000 (e.g., Vermont Department of Health, 2025), processors handling products sold to direct-to-consumer markets (e.g., Kansas Department of Agriculture, 2026), and processors operating in-home kitchens (e.g., New York Department of Agriculture and Markets, 2026). However, these exemptions are limited to the individual states that mandate them. Despite current federal exemptions, there is still a need to address the regulatory barriers that small-scale processors face to increase the number of local processors and enhance market competition (NSAC, 2025a; Williams et al., 2021).

To address the challenges posed by a lack of necessary market infrastructure, government programs offer financial incentives to support the development of new market infrastructure for localized or specialty crops and products, as well as expansion of the scope or scale of existing infrastructure (e.g., USDA's Local Meat Capacity Grant Program; USDA-AMS, 2025). These programs cover a percentage of the financial capital necessary for market infrastructure development and often require cost share or matching by the farmer or business. Payments for these programs are typically structured as reimbursements for costs accrued during the development of market infrastructure. For example, the Illinois Meat & Poultry Supply Chain Capital Grant Program offers grants that reimburse up to 20% of the financial capital necessary for developing or expanding market infrastructure (Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, 2022). Despite the expansion of market infrastructure under these programs (USDA-FNS, 2024), they are challenged by unstable funding sources (Brooks, 2025) and may not be accessible to entities that do not have the financial capital necessary to participate in cost share programs that require matching funds and distribute grant funding via reimbursed payments (e.g., Environmental Law Institute, 2024; Meldrum et al., 2024; USGAO, 2024).

Institutional Procurement of local food by institutional buyers (e.g., schools, hospitals) can help farmers diversify by creating large-scale market demand for diverse local food products (Fitch & Santo, 2016; Love et al., 2025). However, these buyers often lack the resources and structure that enable consistent procurement (Faulkner et al., 2023). For example, schools purchasing unprocessed products from local farmers for school lunch programs would need to have food preparation infrastructure to prepare fresh food and meet food safety regulations (Faulkner et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2012). Further, local food products sold through direct markets (e.g., farmers markets, direct wholesales to institutional buyers) are often more expensive than products sold through the conventional supply chain, depending on the seasonality and type of product (Salisbury et al., 2018; Valpiani et al., 2015). This can constrain the ability of institutional buyers to choose to purchase from local farms and businesses over large-scale vendors.

Government programs, such as the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), aim to address some of these challenges by offering financial resources for purchasing local food directly from farmers (USDA-AMS, 2026). When centering local economic growth and environmental sustainability, these programs can also lead to positive social and environmental impacts (Campbell, 2023). For example, the initial implementation of the Good Food Purchasing Program framework, which guides institutional procurement through a values-based design was focused on supporting local economies and led to an increase in local sourcing of produce and the creation of new jobs in the food supply chain (Daniels & Delwiche, 2022). However, existing institutional procurement programs are limited in the resources they can provide to institutional buyers as they require more capital to develop

ACRONYMS:

RMA: Risk Management Agency of the US Department of Agriculture

FSA: Farm Service Agency of the US Department of Agriculture

APH: Actual Production History

WFRP: Whole Farm Revenue Protection Program

NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service

EQIP: Environmental Quality Incentives Program

CRP: Conservation Reserve Program

CSP: Conservation Stewardship Program

HEL: Highly Erodible Lands

GAP: USDA Good Agricultural Practices

necessary food preparation infrastructure than what procurement programs currently provide (Wallace Center, 2023).

3. Opportunities

In an increasingly complex agricultural system, shifting to a more diverse landscape will require a multi-pronged approach to addressing the range of challenges listed above. We present a variety of policy levers that can promote that shift; ideas generated from a unique participatory process. Through our series of RAD meetings with agricultural stakeholders, we identified four policy pathways, each with specific policy opportunities to support their fruition (see Appendix a. for full research methods). Over the three years of RAD meetings, the following themes emerged as the most important levers of change: crop insurance, conservation incentives, post-harvest market infrastructure, and institutional purchasing. Appendix b. provides an overview of each challenge and associated opportunities. To capture the diversity of perspectives shared by participants, the opportunities outlined below vary in both their feasibility and their transformative potential. Our team of academics and agricultural practitioners ranked each policy opportunity using a set of criteria that determined each idea's feasibility and transformative potential (Table 1).

Dimension	Criterion	Scoring Guide (0–4)	Supporting Literature
Feasibility 0 = Low 20 = High	Administrative Complexity	0 = Requires new structures or major regulatory changes; 4 = Uses existing programs	Hall, 1993; Lindblom, 2018; Pierson, 2000
	Political Support	0 = Strong opposition; 4 = Broad bipartisan/stakeholder backing	Bonanno & Busch, 2015; Hacker & Pierson, 2010
	Economic Cost	0 = Major new funding required; 4 = Low or covered by existing budgets	Orden et al., 1999; Wildavsky, 1986
	Technical Readiness	0 = Untested or emerging technologies; 4 = Proven, widely available practices	Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984
Transformative Potential 0 = Low 20 = High	Impact on Core Challenge	0 = Marginal improvement; 4 = Addresses root causes of the issue	Meadows, 2015; Vanloqueren & Baret, 2017
	Scale of Change	0 = Narrow application; 4 = Broad landscape/system change	Geels, 2011
	Long-Term Sustainability	0 = Short-term gains only; 4 = Enduring benefits	Gliessman, 2016; Grin et al., 2010
	Innovation Level	0 = Minimal changes; 4 = Major changes	Meynard et al., 2017
	Co-benefits	0 = Narrow focus; 4 = Multiple benefits	Renting et al., 2009; Scoones et al., 2015

Table 1. Criteria for Scoring the Feasibility and Transformative Potential of Policy Opportunities

Feasibility considers each policy idea in light of the following criteria: administrative complexity, political support, economic cost, technical readiness, and farmer acceptance. Transformative potential considers the following criteria: impact on core challenge, scale of change, long-term sustainability, innovation level, and co-benefits of the policy idea.

The figure below presents the feasibility and transformative potential of each policy idea using a cumulative score of the criteria scores for both dimensions (see Figure 2). A score of 0 for feasibility indicates low feasibility, whereas 20 indicates high feasibility. A score of 0 for transformative potential indicates low transformative potential, whereas a score of 20 indicates high transformative potential. The cumulative score is given for each opportunity below. Appendix c. provides a more detailed breakdown of scores by criterion shown in Figure 3.

Opportunity 1: Crop insurance

The US federal farm safety net is an important way in which farmers are protected from both market and environmental risks. Federal crop insurance through Title XI of the Farm Bill—the key tool in our farm safety net—can do more to build on the synergies between risk reduction and on-farm diversification, support a broader range of types of farms and agricultural products, and incentivize ingenuity, conservation, and resilience.

A. Increase enforcement of conservation compliance for Highly Erodible Lands (HEL). Create an updated auditing system to ensure compliance with NRCS conservation plans to be eligible for federally subsidized crop insurance and other USDA programs. The system should be the least onerous for both farmers and NRCS staff in terms of time and paperwork. Ensure enforcement and require USDA to report compliance results. Conservation plans include diversified rotations along with other practices, such as no-till or cover crops, that can lead to or provide synergies with diversified farming systems.

Enforcing conservation compliance is scored moderately feasible (score = 10.1) as it would use an existing compliance system that is already tested but would require some new funding to support. It would likely garner farmer resistance (AFBF, n.d.) and low bipartisan/stakeholder support given that it would require an increase in NRCS staffing and farmers tend to be resistant to increased regulation. The transformative potential for this opportunity is scored somewhat low (score = 7.3) as this opportunity is limited by marginal improvements and minimal changes to crop insurance and is narrow in focus. In addition, it would likely only moderately support enduring benefits to diversification given the current system of compliance. Producers are allowed 12 months to fix fields/practices out of compliance and then will automatically be checked in the next enforcement cycle. A farmer can temporarily adhere to compliance standards, after which they will not have to address compliance for up to nine years, assuming 10% annual compliance checks at the county level. Adapting the 12-month grace periods

provided for farmers to come into compliance may enhance the transformative potential of this opportunity.

B. Make diversification-enhancing WFRP policies easier to sell. Reduce paperwork, improve underwriting tools, and provide technical training and assistance to educate insurance agents and other crop advisors about WFRP. Explore providing incentives for insurance agents to sell WFRP policies, such as compensation bonuses and metrics (NSAC, 2025b).

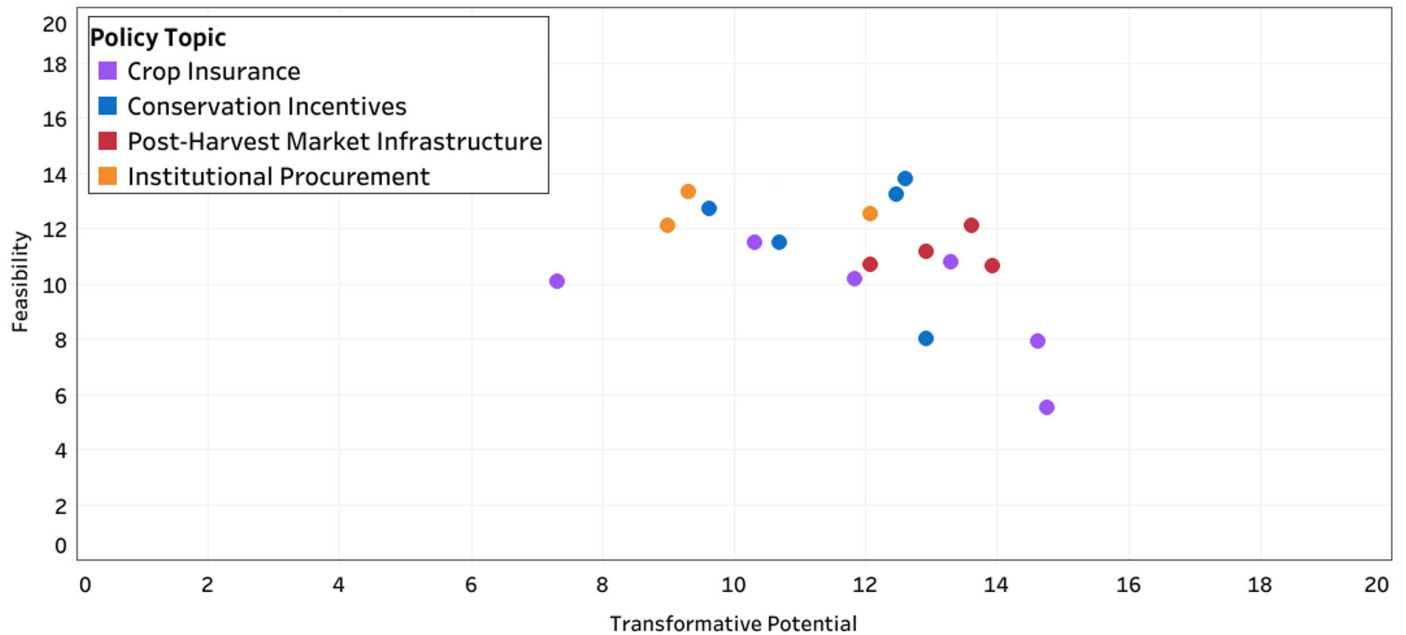
This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 11.5) as it would require moderate changes to WFRP's administration, would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support but higher farmer acceptance, would need some new funding to support, and is somewhat proven in its ability to address program administration challenges. The transformative potential of this opportunity is also scored moderate (score = 10.3) as the opportunity would moderately affect the core challenges constraining the use of WFRP, has a somewhat narrow focus, has some enduring benefits (e.g., increased use of WFRP), and minimally changes WFRP overall.

C. Establish state-level discounts to federal crop insurance for using diversified systems. Offer discounts to crop insurance premiums for the use of alternative crops, extended rotations, and for grazing livestock. State, rather than federal, opportunities for insurance incentives for diversified systems may be more feasible to establish as programs administered at the state level tend to be more nimble and more adaptable to the needs of local farmers.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 10.2) as it would require the creation of a new program and possibly a new funding source but would likely have moderate to high political support across stakeholders. Programs like the Cover Crop Premium Discount program, which are largely supported by farmers (Du et al., 2025), have been successful in advancing cover crop adoption in Corn Belt states like Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana (Sawadgo, 2024) and could be applied to diversified crops and extended rotations using the same program structure. This opportunity is also scored moderate in its transformative potential (score = 11.8) as it could encourage diversification through crop insurance, likely translating into moderate increases in the use of diversified systems.

D. Adapt federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products. Create more flexibility in APH requirements for insuring diversified crops via written agreements. Allowing farmers to choose from a range of production years to determine their APH or including fewer year requirements can lessen the burden for insuring crops less commonly grown. Pilot programs for alternative crops using revenue-based models should also be supported to enable farmers to try new crops. A standing working group or task force to modernize crop insurance pathways for emerging and diversified crops can help push the process for new policy development forward.

Graph A - Full View



Graph B - Select View

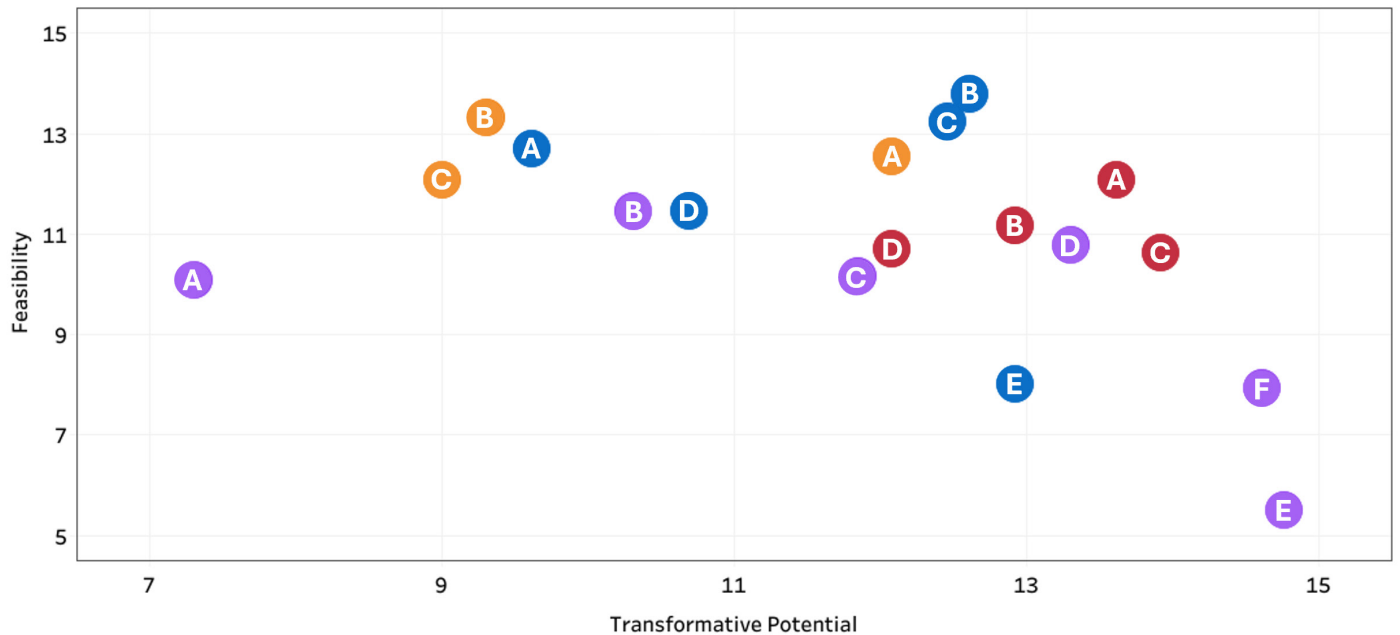


Figure 2. Policy opportunities plotted according to their scored feasibility and transformative potential, including a full graph view (Graph A) with the total possible score ranges for feasibility and transformative potential and a selected graph view (Graph B) that narrows in on the plotted policy opportunities.

Note: Purple A: Increase enforcement of conservation compliance for Highly Erodible Lands (HEL); Purple B: Make diversification-enhancing WFRP policies easier to sell; Purple C: Establish state-level discounts to federal crop insurance for using diversified systems; Purple D: Adapt federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products; Purple E: Tie federally subsidized crop insurance premiums to ecosystem benefits of diversified rotations; Purple F: Reduce or remove federal crop insurance subsidies; Blue A: Add resources and awareness within Title II programs to support beginning, small-scale, and disadvantaged farmers; Blue B: Pilot a "diversified rotation initiative" within EQIP that prioritizes diversified rotations and extend contract periods; Blue C: Adapt CRP to encourage harvestable and perennial crop systems; Blue D: Strengthen local capacity and resource control of Title II programs; Blue E: Tie incentive payments for Title II programs to practice bundles with technical support and business development requirements; Red A: Establish or enhance tax credits for local processing and infrastructure; Red B: Establish or enhance government programs that support local market infrastructure for diversified products; Red C: Support shared infrastructure for local production of diversified crops; Red D: Adapt regulatory rules to decrease barriers for local and/or small-scale processors; Orange A: Increase direct public investment to support institutional purchasing of diverse local food products; Orange B: Invest in research on the benefits of institutional procurement of diverse local food products; Orange C: Develop and disseminate frameworks to guide institutional purchasing strategies and actions.

Adapting federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products is scored moderately feasible (score = 10.8) as this opportunity would require some changes to the existing crop insurance policies and more funding to support a pilot program, would garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support, would enable somewhat untested changes, and is likely moderately acceptable among farmers who may perceive greater opportunity in diversified crops if they see crop insurance supports that are comparable to their commodity supports. The transformative potential of this opportunity is scored higher than moderate (score = 13.3) as the opportunity could address challenges related to the lack of insurance coverage for diversified products, would somewhat change the landscape given that robust insurance products could substantially reduce the risks associated with production of diverse crops, is moderately innovative, and could have some enduring benefits towards increasing the adoption of diversified crops.

E. Tie federally subsidized crop insurance premiums to ecosystem benefits of diversified rotations. For example, change the USDA Good Farming Practices (GFP) required for all insured acres to include diversified rotations with three or more crops. Farmers who choose not to use a diversified rotation can opt out of the premium subsidy or receive a lower premium subsidy.

This opportunity is scored as having low feasibility (score = 5.5) as it would require the introduction of somewhat new program structures and would likely have low bipartisan/stakeholder support and face farmer resistance due to substantial short-term barriers to diversify rotations. In addition, it would likely require more funding to implement while also adopting somewhat untested strategies. The transformative potential of this opportunity is scored somewhat high (score = 14.8) as it could address root problems with crop insurance and diversification, could drive landscape transformation on a large number of acres, could provide multiple enduring ecosystem benefits, and is relatively innovative.

F. Reduce or remove federal crop insurance subsidies. To ensure consistency with public goals of environmental conservation, taxpayer-subsidized crop insurance should reward farmers using practices that build on-farm resilience as opposed to mono- or bi-culture production. Reducing or removing the ~60% premium subsidy will make longer rotations and other diversification practices more economically rational and can ensure taxpayer dollars support agricultural practices that meet public goals of a sustainable and resilient agriculture in the US.

This opportunity is scored as having low feasibility (score = 7.9) as it would require somewhat major program changes, would likely have low bipartisan/stakeholder support and low farmer acceptance due to farmer reliance on crop insurance subsidies, and although it would not need new funding, it is untested as a solution in the US. The transformative potential of this opportunity, however, is scored somewhat high (score = 14.6) as it could address the issue of moral hazard to the extent that it is furthered by crop insurance

subsidies, could enable some systems change by setting diverse agricultural systems on an equal playing field with mono- and bi-culture systems, and is relatively innovative.

Opportunity 2. Conservation incentives

Conservation incentive programs authorized under Title II of the Farm Bill, such as EQIP, CRP, and CSP, are familiar, well-established tools for encouraging environmentally beneficial farming practices, but can be improved in their design to promote production diversity.

A. Add resources and awareness within Title II programs to support beginning, small-scale, and disadvantaged farmers. For example, the existing Transition Incentives Program (TIP) supports beginning, veteran, and socially disadvantaged farmers who are returning expiring CRP land to production using grazing or other sustainable farming methods. CRP-TIP can prioritize contracts that specifically aim to diversify production while increasing opportunities for scaling and for social diversity among farmers.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 12.7) as it would adapt existing programs, would likely garner low to moderate bipartisan/stakeholder and farmer support, would not require major new funding sources, and has been somewhat tested in other types of programs (e.g., CRP Soil Health and Income Protection Pilot Program; Aussenberg et al., 2024). The transformative potential of this opportunity is also scored moderate (score = 9.6) as it would provide some support to challenges faced by the farmers the program targets as well as some short-term benefits (e.g., immediate financial support for beginning, small-scale, and disadvantaged farmers) and could create moderate changes to Title II programming.

B. Pilot a “diversified rotation initiative” within EQIP that prioritizes diversified rotations and extend contract periods. Unlike CRP, EQIP is used to pay for conservation and technical assistance on working cropland. To encourage multi-year crop rotations that incorporate small grains, legumes, and perennial forages, use multi-year (3-5) EQIP contracts providing payments for their establishment and maintenance.

This opportunity is scored as somewhat high feasibility (score = 13.8) as it is an extension of an existing program, would likely garner somewhat high bipartisan/stakeholder support and farmer acceptance, would mainly use existing EQIP funding to support, and models other similar successful initiatives (e.g., Iowa Soil Health EQIP Initiative; USDA-NRCS, 2021). The transformative potential of this opportunity is scored moderate (score = 12.6) as it could address a lack of diversification practices in EQIP, has the potential to somewhat change the landscape due to the innovative nature of practices established under the pilot programs, would require some changes to EQIP, and would provide multiple economic and environmental co-benefits that come with diversified rotations.

C. Adapt CRP to encourage harvestable and perennial crop systems. CRP is intended to retire sensitive land from production by converting it into long-term vegetative cover. Opening CRP contracts to specific harvestable plantings, perennial crops, agroforestry, biomass, and forage that still achieve the target environmental services could incentivize diversity. For example, provisions in CRP allow haying and grazing for non-emergency use (USDA-FSA, 2025), which can be expanded to other harvestable plantings. This would require changes that extend the length of contracts to support conversion, increase flexibility of plantings and livestock integration, and prevent the reversion of CRP land to conventional row cropping after contracts expire.

This opportunity is scored as moderately feasible (score = 13.2) as it would adapt the existing CRP program to encourage diversification, would likely garner moderately high bipartisan/stakeholder support and farmer acceptance, and would require some untested changes to CRP. Its transformative potential is scored moderate (score = 12.5) as the adaptation of CRP could address some program constraints to diversification, could moderately change the landscape and enable multiple, long-term environmental and economic benefits (e.g., improved soil and water quality and increased farmer incomes if harvested crops are sold), and would require some moderate changes to CRP.

D. Strengthen local capacity and resource control of Title II programs. Increase investment in staffing, training, and funding for local technical assistance that supports farmer participation in Farm Bill conservation programs. This may include NRCS, Resource Conservation District (RC&D) Councils, mentorship programs, or other state and county programs. A possible mechanism for funding these investments includes redirecting some federal resources from the standard conservation delivery model of the Farm Bill to locally administered conservation and production diversity initiatives, rather than expanding total funding for conservation technical assistance. Potential mechanisms for increasing local capacity could be strengthening the existing Cooperative Agreement process, streamlining certification of Technical Service Providers, allowing for more direct contracting with local partners, and emphasizing the feedback function of state technical committees and local working groups.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 11.5) as it would require some changes to Title II program structures, would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support and moderately high farmer acceptance, and would require some new funding and changes (i.e., transferring resources to local entities) that are somewhat proven. Its transformative potential is also scored moderate (score = 10.7) as it could somewhat address diversification challenges related to Title II programs, could provide moderate changes in the landscape, and could enable multiple co-benefits, such as enabling local agency within conservation programs.

E. Tie incentive payments for Title II programs to practice bundles with technical support and business development requirements. Bundling conservation payments for a suite of diversification practices (e.g., extended rotations, grazing livestock), along with technical services and business training to support transition, has better outcomes than individual payments for seed, single practices, or equipment as they are better suited to addressing the multifaceted barriers to diversification (El Bakali et al., 2023). Payment schemes work better when they pay for technical assistance, market development, and risk-reduction together, which would require greater coordination between incentive and other farmer support programs. Contract length should be extended to reflect the time necessary for conversion.

This opportunity is scored moderate for feasibility (score = 8.0) as it would require moderate program changes, would likely garner low bipartisan/stakeholder support and moderate farmer acceptance due to potential opposition to shifting resources across social groups, would require some new funding to support, and applies somewhat untested practices. Its transformative potential is also scored moderate (score = 12.9) as the opportunity could address some major challenges associated with Title II programs and provide some enduring co-benefits, including technical and business support for farmers participating in these programs.

Opportunity 3: Post-harvest market infrastructure

The development of new markets for diversified agricultural products is crucial to catalyzing diversified farming systems and markets in the Corn Belt. There is a pressing need for reliable mechanisms for aligning crop production with access to post-harvest market infrastructure including storing, aggregating, processing, and manufacturing.

A. Establish or enhance tax credits for local processing and infrastructure. Create or enhance tax credits or subsidies supporting both small- and mid-scale processing facilities for diversified products. Tax credits can enable small and medium-sized processors of diversified products (i.e., local meat, specialty grains, fruits) to establish and grow amid rising operating costs (e.g., skilled labor, equipment) and competition from consolidated industrial processors.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 12.1) as it may require adapting or establishing programs or policies, would likely garner somewhat high bipartisan/stakeholder support and farmer acceptance, may require new funding sources, and would rely on mostly proven practices. For example, tax credits for local processing have been successful in aiding the development of market infrastructure in other instances (e.g., Green Acres Mill: City of Albert Lea, 2025). Its transformative potential is scored moderately high (score = 13.6) as the opportunity could somewhat address the need for market infrastructure, would provide multiple benefits for encouraging diversified markets, and would require some policy changes if new tax credits are established.

B. Establish or enhance government programs that support local market infrastructure for diversified products. Expand state and federal targeted incentive programs that focus on expanding processing capacity or upgrading facilities for locally and regionally produced food products. Examples include the Illinois Meat & Poultry Supply Chain Capital Grant Program (Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, 2022) and USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Resilient Food System Infrastructure Program (DATCP, 2025). Enhancing existing programs may require adapting program structures (e.g., reimbursed payments, matching funds) to better accommodate smaller-scale market entities at the local level.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 11.2) as it requires either adapting existing programs or establishing new ones, would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support and somewhat high farmer acceptance given the popularity of existing programs (e.g., USDA-AMS, 2023), would likely require new funding to support, and would apply mostly tested incentives to support market infrastructure development. Its transformative potential is scored moderate (score = 12.9) as the opportunity mostly addresses a lack of market infrastructure, is moderately innovative given the fact that these programs already exist, and could enable multiple benefits (e.g., support infrastructure development and maintenance). However, it would be challenged by individual market entities' financial constraints that may prevent their participation in cost share programs requiring matching funds.

C. Support shared infrastructure for local production of diversified crops. Shared or cooperative market infrastructure, such as cold storage, commercial kitchens, coordinated marketing, transportation facilities, and food hubs, can help address the lack of needed market infrastructure supporting diversified products and overcome cost barriers to developing independent market infrastructure (i.e., non-shared infrastructure). Support for developing shared market infrastructure could be sourced from government or non-governmental entities.

This opportunity is scored as moderate in its feasibility (score = 10.6) as it would require some new programs and funding sources, would likely garner bipartisan/stakeholder and farmer support due to prior support of shared market infrastructure programs (e.g., Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2026), and is a somewhat tested strategy. Its transformative potential is moderately high (score = 13.9) as it could address some of the key market infrastructure challenges using innovative market structures and provide some enduring support to diversification through market access.

D. Adapt regulatory rules to decrease barriers for local and/or small-scale processors. Regulatory rules (e.g., food safety requirements, inspections, rules guiding the sale of products across state lines, and USDA labeling of food products) established with large-scale market entities in mind should be adapted to account for differences in operational logistics (e.g., financial capital and incomes, which can

constrain ability to meet regulations) between large- and more local, small-scale processors and end-users. Adaptations of federal regulations could follow state efforts that exempt small-scale processors from licensing under various circumstances (e.g., direct-to-consumer sales, home kitchen facilities) and expand exemptions for other food products sold directly to consumers. Adapting these rules to accommodate the operational logistics of small-scale processors can help overcome significant regulatory barriers that constrain their entry into the market and competitiveness relative to large-scale entities.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 10.7) as it may require significant changes to regulations for buyers, would likely garner somewhat low bipartisan/stakeholder support but high farmer acceptance, and would use somewhat tested practices. Its transformative potential is scored moderate (score = 12.1) as the opportunity could somewhat address challenges to markets, could provide some landscape change (e.g., leveling the playing field between large- and small-scale processors), is somewhat innovative, and would have some enduring benefits to enabling the growth and resilience of local and small-scale processors.

Opportunity 4: Institutional procurement

The procurement of diversified products by institutional buyers can be a powerful force toward the development of robust and durable markets for diverse locally produced food and generating associated economic benefits. However, institutional buyers need more resources and organizational structures to effectively source and manage a broader range of local food products.

A. Increase direct public investment to support institutional purchasing of diverse local food products. High-priority initiatives include federal programs such as the USDA's Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS), the proposed Local Farmers Feeding Our Communities Act (LFFCA), and state programs such as Illinois Eats. These programs provide funding for private organizations, states, and/or Tribal governments to purchase locally produced food products from farmers. Such programs can be highly effective for catalyzing economic opportunities for farmers and infrastructure development (e.g., on-farm, processing, aggregation, distribution), creating demand for locally produced and processed foods, and providing local communities with fresh, nutritious foods. In addition to increasing investment in programs designed to promote institutional procurement, other incentive pathways such as tax credits to support institutional efforts to enhance local food purchases could be developed (e.g., CDFA, 2023).

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 12.5) as it would support some existing programs and may require the creation of new ones, would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support and high farmer acceptance due to the success and popularity of prior programs (USDA-AMS, 2021), would require some new funding, and uses somewhat tested strategies to enable institutional procurement. Its transformative potential is scored moderate (score = 12.1)

as the opportunity could address some major constraints to institutional procurement of diverse local food products but would not address external challenges (e.g., limitations to supply volumes and institutional budgets for purchasing food; Janssen, 2014; Pinard et al., 2013), would use a more narrow application to support procurement, could provide multiple and somewhat enduring benefits (e.g., increased demand for diverse local food products), and would be moderately innovative, given that these programs are already established.

B. Invest in research on the benefits of institutional procurement of diverse local food products. There have been few rigorous studies documenting how prioritization of institutional procurement from local food systems impacts the communities in which they are embedded. There is a need for more investment in research measuring the impacts of different models of food production and distribution and comparisons of benefits and costs of each, including negative and positive externalities.

This opportunity is scored somewhat high in terms of feasibility (score = 13.3) as it could operate through existing federal research programs, would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support and farmer acceptance, and would use mostly proven practices to support institutional procurement. Its transformative potential is scored moderate (score = 9.3) as such efforts would not directly address institutional procurement issues in the way that incentive programs might but would improve understanding of program impacts and inform future program design. In addition, this opportunity would have a narrow application with lower innovation but could have some enduring benefits towards creating greater program impact.

C. Develop and disseminate frameworks to guide institutional purchasing strategies and actions. Use and/or adapt resources such as the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) framework developed by the Center for Good Food Purchasing (GFPC, 2026) to help Midwestern institutions establish institutional purchasing programs for diverse local food products. Such frameworks provide guidelines for policy and program development (e.g., guidelines around local sourcing to support local economic development, environmental sustainability, animal welfare, community health and nutrition, and equity, accountability, and transparency in food systems; GFPC, 2026) to help ensure that institutional purchasing programs consider the impact of purchases on farmers, local communities, and the environment.

This opportunity is scored moderately feasible (score = 12.1) as it would use some existing frameworks and would likely garner moderate bipartisan/stakeholder support and farmer acceptance but would require community engagement and commitment for developing such a framework. This opportunity may require some new funding to support its activities and uses somewhat proven and available practices. Its transformative potential is also scored moderate (score = 9.0) as the opportunity could somewhat address key challenges by guiding and promoting institutional procurement but would be mostly narrow in scope.

Conclusion

Diversification has the potential to address significant challenges in agriculture and deliver a more resilient and sustainable agricultural system in the US, particularly in the Corn Belt. At a time when many US farmers are facing increasing market instability and external shocks, creating an enabling environment for the domestic production and consumption of local food products is a priority. Diversification combined with market development that promotes production and consumption of local food products supports goals of domestic food security, community economic vitality, and ecological health and financial viability for individual farms. For diversification to thrive, new or adjusted policies and investments are needed that address the social, economic, and policy decisions that drive the industrial, monocultural production of corn and soybeans in the Corn Belt and can steer the region towards a more sustainable path that integrates diverse production systems.

This brief highlights a range of opportunities for adapting current agricultural policies and markets, including federal crop insurance, conservation incentives, post-harvest market infrastructure, and institutional procurement, that constrain broader adoption in the Corn Belt. We provide concrete opportunities identified through our participatory research that can help to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent in ways that align with public goals of ecosystem health, improved soil and water quality, and domestic food security. The opportunities presented vary in the degree of change required for their fruition and the support for the opportunity among federal and state decision-makers and agricultural stakeholders. As such, the opportunities include a range that could be feasible across varying political climates. While the policy and market challenges and opportunities highlighted in this work provide crucial information for paving the way for diversification in the Corn Belt, significant additional constraints to diversification remain. These include the need to improve production practices and genetics, strengthen educational outreach, address persisting financial limitations among farmers, and expand access to a robust labor force. The engagement we encountered in our discussions over the past three years suggests broad interest in future research and political decision-making to continue exploring solutions for greater agricultural diversification in the Corn Belt.

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Appendix a: Methods for a Participatory Policy Recommendation Process

This policy brief was developed through a multi-phase, participatory research process that combined qualitative techniques with direct stakeholder engagement over the course of three years. First, our team gathered foundational data on farmer perspectives through 20 focus groups and interviews across Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa (Traldi et al., 2024) and a survey of 725 Corn Belt farmers (Asprooth et al., 2025a). These efforts identified a range of challenges and opportunities related to agricultural diversification, forming a knowledge base that informed the content of subsequent engagement. Building on these earlier findings, we convened a series of Reimagining Agricultural Diversity (RAD) team meetings with a range of stakeholders across the agricultural supply chain. The objective of the RAD meetings was to understand stakeholders' attitudes and perspectives related to diverse agricultural systems, discuss opportunities and barriers to agricultural diversification in the Corn Belt, and co-produce actionable policy recommendations to enable a more diverse Corn Belt. We hosted a total of 10 RAD meetings across Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa, including three structured meetings in each state (meetings 1–3), and a final meeting (4) that included participants from all three states. The content of each meeting informed the next, and participants were encouraged to attend subsequent meetings. A total of 178 individual participants attended the 10 meetings, with 48% of participants attending at least two meetings, including farmers, landowners, retailers, certified crop advisors, farming-focused non-governmental organizations, agricultural investors and bankers, non-farming rural residents, policy makers, educators, agency staff (federal, state, and local), Extension staff, land managers, processors, and representatives from consumer-packaged good companies.

RAD Team Meetings (1–3): We hosted three structured workshops in each state to capture on-the-ground insights about diversification challenges and solutions. Each meeting used interactive facilitation techniques to encourage participants to discuss what is and is not working in the current agricultural system and share their visions for the future of agriculture. The goal of meetings 1–3 was to elicit a broad range of ideas about the barriers to diversification and potential strategies to overcome them. Meetings one and two focused on establishing a baseline understanding of attitudes and perceptions of diverse agricultural systems and explored priorities for the future of Midwestern agriculture. Informed by discussions of the first two meetings, meeting three focused on markets and policies related to diversification. Related to policy, discussions focused on policies and programs that can help or hinder agricultural diversification. Market discussions highlighted needs and opportunities for diverse markets and products.

Qualitative Analysis of Meeting Discussions: Detailed notes and transcripts from the first three RAD meetings were analyzed to distill the major themes and policy-relevant ideas. We employed a computer-assisted summarization approach, using a large language model tool (Microsoft CoPilot) to help identify recurring topics and synthesize participants' input. CoPilot was not used to make analytical decisions autonomously; outputs were iteratively refined and interpreted by the research team to ensure accuracy, transparency, and contextual relevance. This process involved iteratively refining prompts and queries to ensure the tool's outputs aligned with our analytical goals (e.g., accurately grouping ideas by topic). Prompts were customized for each policy topic to guide the tool in extracting the opportunities and barriers discussed from the stakeholder discussions. The research team verified the CoPilot summaries against the original transcripts with a team of "checkers," most of whom participated in the RAD meetings, to ensure validity and reliability. Every distinct challenge or opportunity mentioned by at least one participant was cross-checked with the transcript and included in our synthesis. This structured "checker" protocol required a second reviewer to reference supporting quotes against the original transcripts. Reviewers rated the accuracy of the interpretation of quotes on a 1-5 scale and documented the rationale for each score in a metadata spreadsheet. This exhaustive coding of the discussions yielded a comprehensive list of policy challenges and potential opportunities, organized into several thematic categories.

Identification of Key Policy Topics: Through the above analysis, we identified seven overarching policy-topic areas that encompassed the stakeholder discussions. These included: (1) crop insurance and subsidy programs, (2) conservation incentives, (3) post-harvest market infrastructure, (4) institutional procurement and product labeling, (5) consumer education and connection to agriculture, (6) community vitality and rural development, and (7) other additional resources (such as technical assistance and financing). For each of these categories, all relevant challenges and proposed solutions from the meetings were documented. At this stage, the list was inclusive and attempting to reflect the full diversity of participant contributions.

Prioritization in RAD Meeting 4: Given the broad scope of ideas generated, the research team, in consultation with subject-matter experts, narrowed the focus to a subset of high-priority topics for deeper exploration. The selection was guided by the frequency and urgency of issues raised by stakeholders, as well as the potential for policy intervention. Prior to the fourth RAD meeting, team members synthesized the participant-generated ideas and expert input into a draft set of policy opportunity options under the most prominent topic areas. Meeting 4 convened a mix of DCB team members, stakeholders, and invited experts to review and refine these focused policy options. Participants engaged in structured prioritization activities, using stick-er-based voting to identify which policy opportunities they viewed as most impactful and actionable. These exercises

helped to surface points of consensus and disagreement across a wide range of stakeholder roles and contexts. In this workshop, participants discussed the feasibility, impact, and trade-offs of proposed interventions in four key domains: (1) reforming crop insurance and commodity support programs to better accommodate diversified systems, (2) enhancing conservation incentive programs to encourage diversification, (3) developing post-harvest and processing infrastructure for alternative crops and livestock products, and (4) expanding institutional purchasing initiatives and supportive labeling/standards for diverse products. The facilitated discussion in meeting 4 helped to further refine and prioritize the recommendations, ensuring they were practical and aligned with stakeholders' experiences.

Review and Synthesis: Rather than generating new policy topics, meeting 4 served as a refinement phase focused on evaluating and narrowing previously identified policy themes in prior conversations. After meeting 4, the research team integrated the feedback and outcomes from all meetings into a coherent set of policy recommendations. To ensure accuracy and stakeholder buy-in, a draft of the brief's recommendations was circulated to a group of volunteer participants for review. These volunteers, drawn from the RAD meeting attendees and expert consultants, provided additional comments on the clarity, relevance, and correctness of the proposed policies, and confirmed that the final recommendations authentically reflected the content and tone of prior meetings. This iterative validation helped confirm that the recommended policy opportunities truly reflected the insights from the field and were presented in a manner accessible to a broad audience.

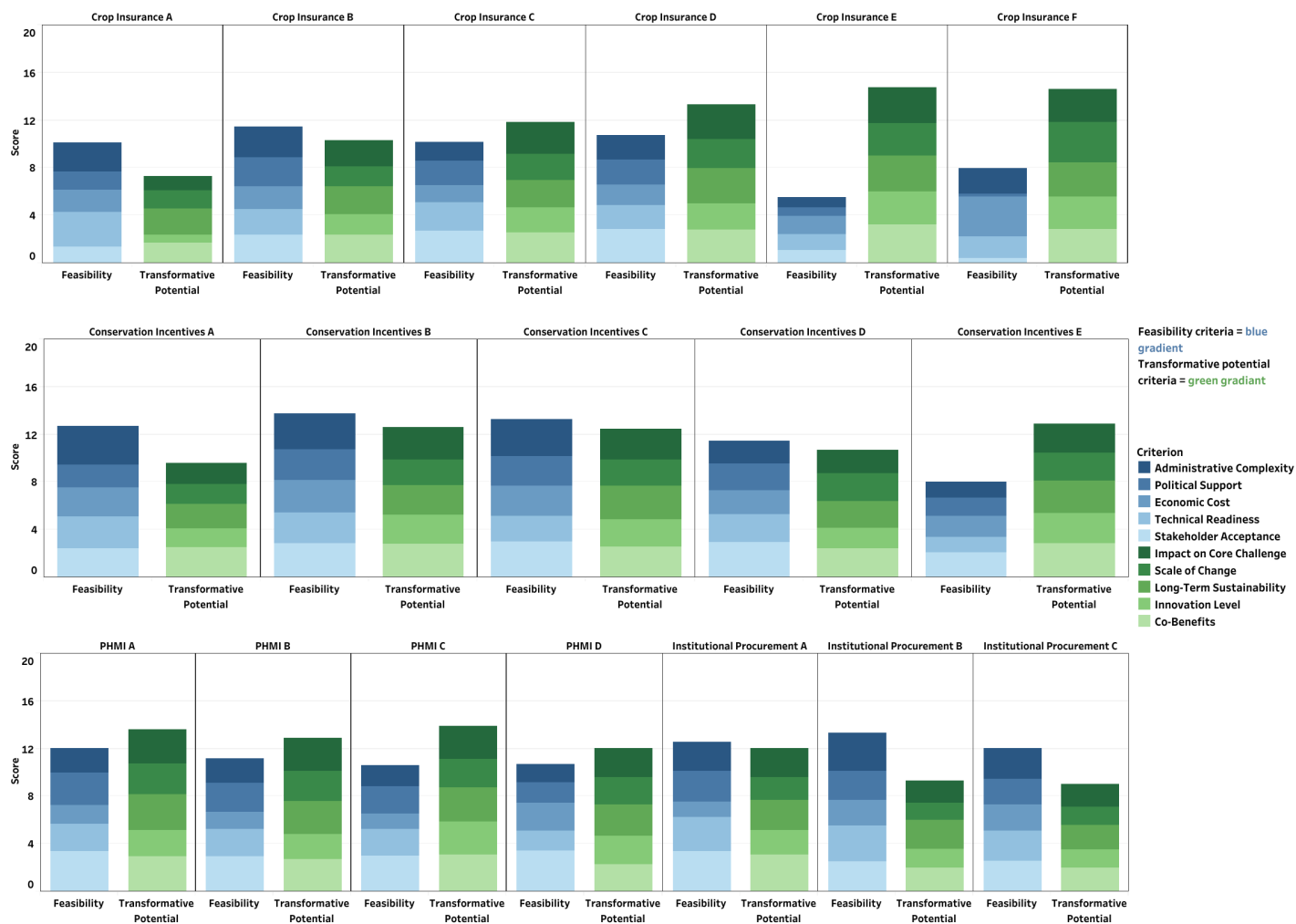
Policy Opportunity Scoring: To better inform stakeholders on the feasibility and transformative potential of the policy opportunities proposed in this paper, we established a list of five criteria for each of the two dimensions (for 10 criteria total; see Table 2 below). The criteria were drawn from the political sciences, environmental and agricultural policy, and institutional theory literature and adjusted by the authors (see Table 1 for literature citations). Via a survey, team members scored each criterion on a 0-4 scale and summed scores across criteria to produce an additive index (minimum = 0, maximum = 20, with a feasibility score of 20 = high feasibility, and a transformative potential score of 20 = high transformative potential) that represents the overall feasibility or transformative potential of each policy opportunity. We calculated average scores for each criterion and then summed scores to create these additive indexes. This process was completed for each policy opportunity to generate the final scores shown in this paper's results.

Through this participatory process, our multi-institution team co-developed policy opportunities with key stakeholders and agriculture leaders among those who would be most affected by them. The resulting recommendations are grounded in empirical research and stakeholder perspectives and aim to address the structural and institutional challenges to landscape diversification in the Corn Belt with feasible, informed policy actions.

Appendix b: Crop insurance, conservation incentives, post-harvest market infrastructure, and institutional procurement challenges and policy opportunities related to agricultural diversification

Topic	Challenges	Policy Opportunities
Crop Insurance	The current system of NRCS conservation compliance is poorly enforced and outdated	Greater enforcement of conservation compliance for HEL
	Insurance agents are more incentivized to sell policies by individual crops than WFRP policies	Incentivize insurance agents to sell WFRP policies
	Subsidized crop insurance premiums incentivize unsustainable practices and systems	Establish state-level insurance incentives to use sustainable diversified systems
	Crop insurance may not cover individual diversified products	Adapt federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products
	Subsidized crop insurance premiums incentivize unsustainable practices and systems	Tie federally subsidized crop insurance premiums to ecosystem benefits Reduce or remove federal crop insurance subsidies
Conservation Incentives	Title II program use tends to lack social diversity, including beginning, small-scale, and historically underserved farmers who are more likely to use diversified systems	Add resources and awareness within Title II programs to support beginning, small-scale, and disadvantaged farmers
	EQIP and working lands programs are oriented around corn, soybeans, and other commodity crops	Pilot a “diversified rotation initiative” within EQIP and extend contract periods
	CRP prevents the harvest of acres enrolled in the program, and CRP acres often go back into conventional production post-contract	Reform CRP to encourage harvestable and perennial crop systems
	Farmers need more technical and business support in adopting diversified practices	Tie incentive payments for Title II programs to practice bundles with technical support and business development requirements
	NRCS and organizations that provide technical assistance lack the resources and knowledge to support diversified farming systems	Strengthen local capacity and resource control over Title II programs, possibly by directing funding away from commodity programs into local conservation and production diversity initiatives
Post-Harvest Market Infrastructure	Local markets, particularly processing, are limited in number for diversified products	Identify innovative ways to catalyze processing through industry and philanthropy
		Establish/enhance tax credits for local processing organizations
		Create shared infrastructure supporting local farm production of diversified crops
	Cost-share programs supporting the development of market infrastructure are constrained by small-scale market entities lacking financial capital to participate in cost-share programs	Establish/enhance government programs that support market infrastructure for both large- and small-scale operations
Institutional Procurement	Regulatory rules governing markets are challenging for local and/or small-scale processors to meet	Adapt regulatory rules to decrease barriers for local and/or small-scale processing
	Institutions lack the resources and organizational structures to purchase and handle diverse local food products	Increase direct public investment to support institutional purchase of diverse local food products
	Existing institutional procurement programs are limited in the resources they can provide	Continue to develop and disseminate GFPP frameworks to guide institutional purchasing strategies and action Invest in research on the benefits of institutional procurement of diverse local food products

Appendix c: Feasibility and Transformative Potential Criteria Figure



Note: Crop Insurance A: Increase enforcement of conservation compliance for Highly Erodible Lands (HEL); Crop Insurance B: Make diversification-enhancing WFRP policies easier to sell; Crop Insurance C: Establish state-level discounts to federal crop insurance for using diversified systems; Crop Insurance D: Adapt federal crop insurance policies to cover more diversified products; Crop Insurance E: Tie federally subsidized crop insurance premiums to ecosystem benefits of diversified rotations; Crop Insurance F: Reduce or remove federal crop insurance subsidies; Conservation Incentives A: Add resources and awareness within Title II programs to support beginning, small-scale; and disadvantaged farmers; Conservation Incentives B: Pilot a “diversified rotation initiative” within EQIP that prioritizes diversified rotations and extend contract periods; Conservation Incentives C: Adapt CRP to encourage harvestable and perennial crop systems; Conservation Incentives D: Strengthen local capacity and resource control of Title II programs; Conservation Incentives E: Tie incentive payments for Title II programs to practice bundles with technical support and business development requirements; Post-Harvest Market Infrastructure A: Establish or enhance tax credits for local processing and infrastructure; Post-Harvest Market Infrastructure B: Establish or enhance government programs that support local market infrastructure for diversified products; Post-Harvest Market Infrastructure C: Support shared infrastructure for local production of diversified crops; Post-Harvest Market Infrastructure D: Adapt regulatory rules to decrease barriers for local and/or small-scale processors; Institutional Procurement A: Increase direct public investment to support institutional purchasing of diverse local food products; Institutional Procurement B: Invest in research on the benefits of institutional procurement of diverse local food products; Institutional Procurement C: Develop and disseminate frameworks to guide institutional purchasing strategies and actions.