



## Jumpstarting Conservation Drainage Practices in Illinois

### **Project Summary**

The Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition (ADMC), along with American Farmland Trust (AFT), Illinois Land Improvement Contractors Association (IL LICA), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and The Wetlands Initiative (TWI), were recently awarded a National Fish Habitat Partnership Grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Fishers & Farmers Partnership. **With these funds, this coalition of partners from the IL Sustainable Ag Partnership (ISAP) is working in central Illinois to identify sites where (1) conditions are suitable for conservation drainage practices, and (2) there is local interest in gaining hands-on experience with the evaluation, design, and installation steps associated with conservation drainage practices.** This "learning by doing" experience is critical for successfully installing conservation drainage practices, and it helps build momentum to deliver tile treatment practices at the pace and scale that can impact water quality. ISAP invites your participation and engagement in this effort to "jumpstart" conservation drainage practice installation in Central Illinois.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **Why is additional support for conservation drainage practices needed?**

Agricultural tile drainage systems are one of the main pathways by which dissolved nitrate-nitrogen travels from crop fields into lakes, rivers, and streams, where it impacts aquatic species, harms local drinking water supplies, and degrades downstream ecosystems. Conservation drainage practices – or practices that capture and treat tile water – are extremely effective in removing nitrates, and installing tile treatment practices in large numbers across its agricultural landscapes is a key component of the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.

Designing and implementing a conservation drainage practice is a multi-step process that only becomes easier with experience. The objective of this grant is to guide and support conservation professionals as they move through the outreach, site evaluation, design, and installation steps of conservation drainage projects. The team will build familiarity and hands-on practice implementation experience among the conservation and contractor audiences who work directly with farmers and landowners so that they feel comfortable guiding their clients through the process, navigating its bottlenecks and barriers, and, eventually, using their expertise to work at larger scales.

#### **Which practices can be installed with this funding?**

This project focuses on conservation drainage practices that capture and treat tile water to address water quality concerns primarily related to nitrate-nitrogen. Practices that can be installed through this Fishers & Farmers Partnership-funded effort include constructed wetlands, controlled drainage/automated controlled drainage systems, saturated buffers, and woodchip bioreactors.

### **What types of sites is the team looking for?**

The team is most interested in identifying practice sites that:

- (1) Treat larger drainage areas (>50 acres)
- (2) Treat multiple outlets
- (3) Leverage resources from USDA programs such as CRP or EQIP
- (4) Integrate conservation drainage practices into planned tile installation or improvement projects.

### **Are landowners required to work with USDA-FSA or USDA-NRCS on these practices?**

- While there is no requirement to utilize USDA funding, federal programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) will be presented, and eligibility for and interest in these programs will be discussed with individual landowners.
- All practices will be designed according to NRCS standards, and the project team will follow the NRCS process so that participants gain experience working within NRCS's parameters.

### **What kinds of activities can the grant funds support?**

The grant funds can support a range of activities related to conservation drainage practice adoption:

- Pre- and post-practice outreach and education efforts, including field days
- Costs associated with site evaluation, design, and practice installation
- Out of pocket costs remaining after USDA program reimbursements, if applicable

### **Is there a target watershed for this funding?**

Practice sites located in the Vermillion Headwaters will receive a small location bonus in the overall site ranking due to their potential to benefit USFWS fish habitat projects in that area, but there is no requirement for installations to occur there. The location bonus is separate from the other ranking criteria, and location within the Vermillion Headwaters watershed does not guarantee selection if other criteria are not met.

### **How many sites will be chosen for installation?**

Funding is currently available to support 3-5 conservation drainage practice installations.

### **How can I recommend a site?**

- To suggest sites for consideration and ranking, please provide details on [this form](#).
- Recommended sites will be evaluated in batches.
- The deadline to suggest a site for consideration in batch one is **Friday, October 13th at 5:00 PM Central Time**.

### **What is the anticipated project timeline?**

The project team hopes to identify all potential practice sites in the first batching period. Upon receiving practice site forms, the team will collect necessary additional information to evaluate sites during Fall 2023, make final selections, conduct landowner meetings, and develop site designs by Spring 2024, and plan for installations in Summer 2024.

### **Who can provide more information?**

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