

## FARMER SURVEY

The Farmer-Led Watershed Councils wanted input from local farmers to see:

- What is currently being done in the watersheds
- How conservation is going/perceived
- What farmer-led councils should focus on



### RESPONDENTS



Surveys were mailed to producers identified who operate significant acreage in 4 watershed areas. 210 producers in total were sent a survey. 77 (37%) producers responded.

The median farm size of respondents was between 200-500 acres rented and 200-500 acres owned.

Respondent crop profile generally matches cash grain farming in our region.

#### CROPS REPORTED PRODUCING

**88%** Corn  
**72%** Soybeans  
**41%** Beef  
**35%** Small Grains  
**22%** Dairy

**69% have attended a farmer-led watershed hosted event.**

### NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT PLANS (NMPs)

- 60% reported having NMPs
- Of those, 60% report consulting NMP for decision making.
- Larger farms more likely to have & use NMPs.



### SOIL TESTING



97% report using soil testing to help them make management decisions on their farms.

### GRASSED WATERWAYS

- 94% reported using buffers and/or grassed waterways to control erosion.
- Over HALF of respondents did NOT receive cost-sharing for those practices.



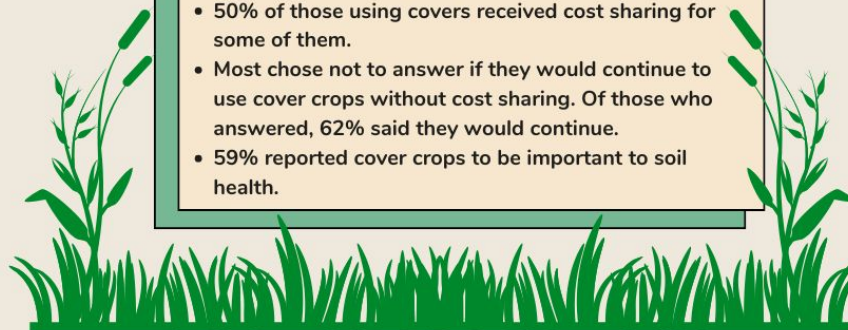
### TILLAGE



- 62% reported doing some fall tillage.
- 56% report no-tilling more than half of their acres annually.
- Only 1 of 73 respondents has tried reduced tillage and stopped.
- 15% said they have NOT tried reducing tillage but ARE interested. 79% said they will continue to reduce tillage when answering the same question.

### COVER CROPS

- 64% report using cover crops on SOME of their acres.
- Of those who don't currently use cover crops, 50% reported interest in using them.
- The majority of cover crop users are new. 54% have been using them regularly for less than 5 years.
- 50% of those using covers received cost sharing for some of them.
- Most chose not to answer if they would continue to use cover crops without cost sharing. Of those who answered, 62% said they would continue.
- 59% reported cover crops to be important to soil health.



### STEWARDSHIP SENTIMENT



"Farmers have a responsibility to minimize erosion from their fields."  
- 87% farmers STRONGLY agreed., 0 disagreed

**100% OF RESPONDENTS HAD A POSITIVE VIEW OF THE PHRASE "SOIL HEALTH."**



The most common answer to "landowners who I rent from encourage conservation" was "no opinion" followed by "somewhat agree".

**When asked how funds should be used :**

- 70% said to pay farmers for actions
- 16% said to educate farmers
- 14% said pay farmers based on pollution reductions
- 0 felt that funds should NOT be used to reduce pollution





Hello,

Your local Farmer-Led Watershed Council is conducting a survey of all farmers operating over 80 acres in our watershed. The goal of this survey is to get a sense of where we farmers stand in terms of water quality practices in local agriculture and what our watershed councils should be prioritizing. Your answers will help us determine the actions of the Watershed Councils for the next two years.

Your participation is voluntary but will be greatly appreciated. We expect it will take you no more than 15 minutes to complete the survey. Your responses will be treated as strictly confidential, which is why we are working with the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Wisconsin – River Falls. The SRC will ensure that your name will not be associated with any of your responses to questions.<sup>1</sup>

We know this is a busy time for all of us, but I hope you can complete the survey by **March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024** and return your response in the enclosed postage-paid envelope. As a thank you, if you choose to return the survey and fill out the separate entry form, we will enter you into a drawing for a **\$300 Visa Gift Card**.

This project is being managed at the direction of the Farmer-Led Watershed Councils by our coordinator, **Tara Daun**, who can be reached at 715-492-0329 or [tdaun@wisconsinfarmersunion.com](mailto:tdaun@wisconsinfarmersunion.com). If you have any questions about the substance of this survey, please contact her or visit our website at [farmerledwatershed.org](http://farmerledwatershed.org). Questions about the implementation of the survey should be directed to Dr. Shaheer Burney, Director of the SRC, at [shaheer.burney@uwrf.edu](mailto:shaheer.burney@uwrf.edu).

If you'd prefer to do the survey online, you can follow the QR code below.

Sincerely yours,

Farmers of the Dry Run, South Kinni Horse Creek Area, and Hay River Watersheds

[www.farmerledwatershed.org](http://www.farmerledwatershed.org)



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<sup>1</sup> This research has been approved by UW-River Falls's Institutional Review Board (IRB# FY2022-61). Participation in this survey is voluntary and you can stop at any time. If you choose not to participate or stop participating, or skip any questions, there will be no negative consequences to you. Participating will not change anything about your relationship with the researchers or our departments. Participation will not expose you to any risk beyond the normal level of stress that is encountered in your daily routine. If you have concerns about the study, please contact Greg Ruegsegger, Chair of the IRB, at [irb@uwrf.edu](mailto:irb@uwrf.edu).

# Farmer-Led Watershed Council Survey 2024

Fill the circle that most closely matches your opinion.

Like this: ☐ Not like this: ☒ ☐ ☐

## Your Farm

1. Which of the following do you typically produce on your farm? (mark all that apply)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Corn                                  | <input type="radio"/> Beef                  |
| <input type="radio"/> Soybeans                              | <input type="radio"/> Dairy                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Forage/Alfalfa                        | <input type="radio"/> Fruits/Vegetables     |
| <input type="radio"/> Small grains (e.g. oats, rye, barley) | <input type="radio"/> Other (specify) _____ |

2. Typically, how many acres do you farm:

- |           | 0                     | < 100                 | 100 - 199             | 200 - 499             | 500 - 999             | 1,000 – 3,000         | 3,001+                |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. Rented | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| b. Owned  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

3. Which of the following best describes decision-making responsibilities on your farm?

- |                          |   |   |   |  |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| I make all the decisions | I have more decision-making authority than others | I share decision-making with others equally | I have less decision-making authority than others | I have little/no decision-making authority |
| <input type="radio"/>    | <input type="radio"/>                             | <input type="radio"/>                       | <input type="radio"/>                             | <input type="radio"/>                      |

## Farming Practices and Opinions

4. Do you have a Nutrient Management Plan (NMP)?

- |  | NA                    | Yes                   | No                    |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. If yes, do you consult your NMP regularly before making management decisions? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

5. Do you use waterways and field buffers on your fields to minimize erosion?

- |  |                       |                       |                       |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. If yes, did you receive cost-sharing to establish most of your waterways/buffers? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

6. Do you use soil testing to help you make management decisions on your farm?

- |   |                       |                       |                       |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. If yes, has soil testing led you to apply less nitrogen or phosphorous to your fields? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

7. Have you mapped field profitability to find field areas that are unprofitable?

- |   |                       |                       |                       |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| a. If yes, have you changed planting patterns based on field profitability? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| b. If no, have you considered having your acres mapped for profitability?   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

8. In terms of your opinions about cover crops, with which of the following do you agree? (mark all that apply)

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> They are critical for me to control erosion   | <input type="radio"/> They are important for improving my soil quality | <input type="radio"/> They don't work on my farm     |
| <input type="radio"/> They aren't worth additional management costs | <input type="radio"/> I don't see any real benefit from them           | <input type="radio"/> They improve my farm's profits |
| <input type="radio"/> They increase my herbicide costs too much     | <input type="radio"/> I don't know enough about their costs/benefits   | <input type="radio"/> Other (specify) _____          |

9. Do you use cover crops on any of your acres?		Yes <input type="radio"/>	No (skip to #14) <input type="radio"/>
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10. About what proportion of your total acres (owned + rented) are planted to cover crops on average?			
Less than one-quarter <input type="radio"/>	One-quarter to half <input type="radio"/>	More than half and up to three-quarters <input type="radio"/>	More than three-quarters and up to all of it <input type="radio"/>

11. For about how many years have you been using cover crops regularly on your farm?				
< 1 Year <input type="radio"/>	1 – 5 Years <input type="radio"/>	6 – 10 Years <input type="radio"/>	11 – 20 Years <input type="radio"/>	21+ Years <input type="radio"/>

12. Do you currently receive cost-sharing for any portion of your cover crops?		Yes, for all acres <input type="radio"/>	Yes, for some acres <input type="radio"/>	No (skip to #17) <input type="radio"/>
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13. If you could no longer receive cost-sharing, how likely is it that you would continue using cover crops?				
Very likely <input type="radio"/>	Somewhat likely <input type="radio"/>	Don't know <input type="radio"/>	Somewhat unlikely <input type="radio"/>	Very unlikely <input type="radio"/>

**If you use cover crops, skip to Question 17. Otherwise, continue to Question 14.**

14. Are you interested in trying cover crops on your farm?		Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>
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15. Do you have questions about using cover crops (e.g., which ones to use and why?)		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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16. Have you used cover crops in the past and quit using them?		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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17. How do farmers in your area perceive cover crops?				
Mostly positive <input type="radio"/>	Somewhat positive <input type="radio"/>	Neutral <input type="radio"/>	Somewhat negative <input type="radio"/>	Mostly negative <input type="radio"/>

18. On about what proportion of your total acres (owned + rented) do you use the following tillage practices annually?					
	None	Less than one-quarter	One-quarter to half	More than half and up to three-quarters	More than three-quarters and up to all of it
a. Fall and spring tillage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Spring disc, chisel, or moldboard plow	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Strip tillage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. No-till	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Other: _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. Which of the following best describes your experiences/opinions about reduced tillage and/or no-till practices?			
Never used & not interested <input type="radio"/>	Never used but interested <input type="radio"/>	Used to use but stopped <input type="radio"/>	Continue to use <input type="radio"/>

20. In terms of your opinions about no-till planting, with which of the following do you agree? (mark all that apply)	
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- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> No-till is critical for me to control erosion   | <input type="radio"/> No-till is important for improving my soil quality      | <input type="radio"/> No-till doesn't work on my farm    |
| <input type="radio"/> No-till isn't worth additional management costs | <input type="radio"/> I don't see any real benefit from no-till               | <input type="radio"/> No-till improves my farm's profits |
| <input type="radio"/> No-till increases my herbicide costs too much   | <input type="radio"/> I don't know enough about the costs/benefits of no-till | <input type="radio"/> Other (specify) _____              |

21. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	No Opinion
a. I spend time/money on my land to protect <u>surface water</u> quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. I spend time/money on my land to protect <u>groundwater</u> quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. No-till farming is worth the investment in my watershed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Landowners from whom I rent encourage conservation practices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
e. Neighbors/other farmers encourage me to use conservation practices	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
f. Farmers have a responsibility to minimize erosion from their fields	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

22. How do you react to the following words/concepts and how do you think your neighbors feel?

	My reaction is:		My neighbors' reactions are	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
a. Conservation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
b. Sustainability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
c. Soil health	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
d. Regenerative Agriculture	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### Famer-Led Watershed Councils

	Yes	No	Not Sure
23. Are you familiar with farmer-led watershed councils?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
24. Are you a member of a farmer-led watershed council?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
25. Have you ever attended a farmer-led watershed council event?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
26. If farmers in your area received a grant to implement water quality protections, which <b>one</b> of the following do you think is the <b>best use</b> of that money?			
I don't think it should be spent on any water quality protections	Pay farmers to implement practices to improve water quality (e.g. reduce erosion)	Pay farmers based on pollution reduction (e.g. per ton of reduced soil erosion)	Develop and deliver educational programming for farmers
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

27. **Tara Daun**, Farmer-Led Watershed Coordinator, would like to call you to get more of your thoughts about the farmer-led councils and answer any questions you may have. Please write your name and phone number here if you are willing to receive a follow-up phone call from Tara.

28. If there is there a land stewardship goal on which you think farmers should work together, what is it?

Survey results 2024 note – 81 respondents

Most respondents (2/3) responded to first mailing

Horse Creek 26%  
Hay River 39%  
Dry Run 20%  
South Kinni 14%

92% grow corn, 64% grow soybeans, 59% forage, 33% small grains, 36% beef, 21% dairy, 5% fruits & veggies. Other crops noted were hazelnuts, snap beans, and grass hay.

At least 2 chose not to answer or misreported on how much farmland they rent/own. 53% owned more than they rent, 25% rent-own about the same and 17% rent more than they own. Most common answer for rental acres was between 100 and 199 acres. Most common answer for owning was 200 – 499 acres.

Decision making authority: Most common was they have full decision making authority (47%) with sharing decision making authority the second most common answer. One responded they have no authority.

Average and median farm size were in the 400 – 900 acres range between owned and rented land.

Similar to 2022

NMPs: 3 chose not to answer. 63% have NMP (up 3% from 2022), 37% no NMP. Of the 49 respondents with a NMP, 35 (60%) same as 2022 say they “consult the NMP regularly before making management decisions.” [Check farm size comparison](#)

92% of respondents said they use waterways and field buffers to minimize erosion. 71% did NOT receive cost-share for those areas. Close to last time, more not receiving cost-share, slightly fewer using

95% “use soil testing to help make management decisions on the farm” – 65% of those who reported the question as applicable responded yes to “has soil testing led you to apply less nitrogen or phosphorous to your fields” similar to 2022

New question: 30% said they have had their fields mapped for profitability. 66% who said they mapped their fields responded yes to “have you changed planting patterns based on field profitability?”

57 haven’t mapped field profitability of those, 20 (35%) of those responded yes to “have you considered having your acres mapped for profitability?”

## COVER CROPS

45% of respondents agreed that cover crops “are critical for me to control erosion” – UP from 6.8% in 2022

14% agreed that cover crops “aren’t worth additional management costs” – up from 2022  
8% agreed that cover crops “increase my herbicide costs too much” – way up from 2022  
57% agreed that cover crops “are important for improving my soil quality” – slightly down from 2022  
11% agreed “I don’t see any real benefit from cover crops”  
27% agreed “I don’t know enough about the costs/benefits of cover crops” – up from 19% in 2022  
7 (8%) respondents agreed with “They don’t work on my farm”. - down from 2022 Of those 7, 1 farmer said they did not know enough about the cost/benefits of cover crops.  
20 respondents (24%) agreed that cover crops “improve my farm’s profits” – similar to 2022  
One farmer wrote in about cover crops “too much other work to do already” and did not agree with any benefits except “I don’t know enough about the costs/benefits of cover crops”  
One farmer agreed with ALL statements on cover crops and wrote in “crop prices too low”

Another farmer agreed that cover crops are important to control erosion, increase herbicide costs, improve soil health and he didn’t know enough about them and wrote in “Hard to quantify Real \$ impact, more of a feel good practice currently”

Another wrote in of cover crops: “They improve any farm's profits, long term”

2 farmers wrote in concerns about cover crops taking moisture from fields. Another noted that the costs/benefits vary from year to year.

**Q9:** 60% using cover crops (down 4% from 2022)

**Q10:** Of those who use cover crops (27%) 13 reported using cover crops on more than half of their fields (similar to 2022). 16 (33%) reported using cover crops on less than ¼ of their fields (down from 44% in 2022).

**Q11:** 20 (25%) of respondents have been using cover crops for 1-5 years. 21% have been using cover crops for 6-10 years.

2 respondents reported they’ve been using cover crops for less than a year. Both noted they are “very unlikely” to continue using cover crops without cost-share. (one of these was Brent W)

3 respondents have been using cover crops for more than 21 years. None of these 3 received cost-share for any of their cover crops. 2 agreed they improve farm profits and all agreed they are important for soil health. 2 had covers on ¼ - ½ of their acres annually while the other has covers on ½ to ¾ of their acres annually. Only 1 has an NMP. ALL 3 were in Hay River!!!

**Q12:** 50 answered about cost-share for their cover crops. Of those, 16% receive cost-share for all of the acres. 42% received cost-share for some of the acres and 42% received no cost-share for any of their acres (down 8% from 2022)

**Q13:** only 31 chose to answer this. Of those, 71% they were very likely or somewhat likely to continue cover crops without payment (down from 82% in 2022). 16% said they were somewhat to very unlikely to continue using cover crops without costshare (up from 5% in 2022 – following a very dry spring where the narrative was that cover stole moisture from crop).

**Q14:** 31 said they don’t currently use cover crops. Of those, 51% were interested in trying cover crops on their farm (same as 2022 – 50%) and 49% were not interested in cover crops on their farms.



**Q15:** of those who were interested in cover crops on their farms, 68% had questions, but that means 30% who are interested and don't use cover crops don't have questions about how to use them – these are our prime candidates for cost share

**Q16:** 9 (30%) respondents who don't use cover crops have tried them in the past and quit using them (7 more than in 2022). – 6 of those who tried them said they're interested in them for their farms. This is the opposite of what I would have thought. They are not totally demoralized by the experience.

**Q17:** 75 of 81 answered how they think that farmers in their area perceive cover crops. 0 said that cover crops were perceived as mostly negative. 11% perceived cover crops as somewhat negative. 1/3 were neutral. 38% somewhat positive. 17% mostly positive (down 10% from 2022).

NO TILL

**Q18:**

36% Do no fall tillage – (roughly the same), 30% tilling more than half their acres in the fall (doubled from last time)

79% are doing no-till on some acres. 29% doing no-till on less than half of their acres, 50% are doing no-till on more than half of their acres (down slightly from 2022). Only 1 respondent did strip tillage on most of their acres

**Q19:** feelings toward no-till: 7.5% never used and not interested, 12.6% never used but are interested, (down slightly from 2022) 5% used to use but stopped (significantly up from 2022), 74.6% use reduced tillage and/or no-till on their farms.

**New question Q20:** The most commonly agreed with statement for NT was that it is “critical to control soil erosion” farmers did write in that the soil doesn't warm fast enough with no-till and one noted that it is too inconsistent, one noted trouble with planter setup. The most common complaint about no-till 9 of 81 said their herbicide costs are increased too much with no-till but 15 said they didn't know enough about the costs/benefits of no-till. (look into stats on those 15 – of those 15, 8 are doing no no-till and 2 are doing no-till on more than ¼ of their acres. Those 8 are our target demographic – that's 10% of the total respondents who are interested but not doing the practice).

31 said no-till improves farm profits – of those, 23 are doing no-till on over half of their acres – 1 is doing 0 no-till, 1 doing nt on less than ¼ of his acres.

**Q21:** Feelings about conservation: over half strongly agreed (down from 63% in 2022) they spend time/money protecting surface water quality and groundwater quality. 0 strongly disagreed. 5 strongly disagreed that neighbors and farmers encouraged them to do conservation practices while only 7 strongly agreed. 2 strongly disagreed about landowner encouragement. Meanwhile 34 somewhat agreed and 10 somewhat disagreed. Over ¼ had no opinion. 77% strongly agreed that farmers have a responsibility to minimize erosion from their fields. 0 strongly disagreed. (down from 2022)

The most common answer for “neighbors/other farmers encourage me to use conservation practices” was “somewhat agree” followed by “no opinion.” (same as 2022)

**Q22:** Over 97% positive reaction to conservation, soil health, and sustainability but 1 in 5 farmers personally felt a negative reaction to regenerative agriculture. Far fewer chose to answer about their neighbors' opinions. But the scores were lower for all terms with Conservation and Soil Health deemed positively viewed by 85% of farmers' neighbors and regen ag and sustainability right around 80% (these are up slightly from 2022).

Only 1 respondent had a negative reaction to soil health, they also had a negative connotation to the other three words and felt their neighbors had a negative connotation to all the words (this guy farms soybeans and beef and over 500 acres and reported using cover crops on more than half of them—getting cost-share for some of them, had no other feelings on cover crops other than they're important to soil quality). Said cover crops are perceived neutrally and no-tills all his acres. Strongly agreed in personal responsibility and his own practices protect but had no opinion on his neighbors or landowners ideas. Thinks we should pay farmers for reductions over conventional farming – this guy is row 15, so interesting – a really good example of how the marketing and messaging doesn't line up with the actions.

**Q23:** 83% familiar with farmer-led councils, 6% not sure, 10% not familiar (down from 2022) -

**Q24:** 49% members of a council, 7% not sure (up from 38% in 2022)

**Q25:** 69% have been to an event before, 0 not sure (same as 2022)

**Q26:** 72 answered, most want payment for practices, next payment for reductions, some what payment for education.

**Q27:** Willing to get a followup phone call: 35 of 81 willing to get a followup call

Land Stewardship Goal farmers should work on: "More needs to be learned about till benefits + disadvantages of cover crops." "soil health and productivity combined with erosion control" "We need to work to replace erosion while working to improve our image with the general public. Our perception is not always received well by those not in agriculture and many times miss understand."

"certain grade slopes, hills should never be tilled"

"Start taking better care of the Farmers that are practicing conservation & Not Focusing on just getting New ones Better Markets For Farmers using Conservation"

"Reduce chemicals usage and erosion" – not familiar with councils, fully no-till

"Some of the hilly ground should be in grass or hay not row crops"

"Slow down the use of chemicals. Bring the animals back to the grass, reduce row cropping:) Then apply for welfare if you like to eat. " – Rolfe

"Using less synthetic fertilizers and trying to build soil health."

"To preserve our topsoil by reducing erosion and improve our soil health "

