



Wisconsin's
Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Summary Report

Interagency Water Quality Workgroup
March 2026



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Introduction

Wisconsin is one of 12 member states of the Mississippi River/Gulf of America Hypoxia Task Force (Hypoxia Task Force). The Hypoxia Task Force was established in 1997 to understand and address causes and effects of high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus delivered by the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers into the Gulf of America and resulting annually in a large hypoxic (low oxygen) or *dead* zone. This hypoxic zone has a significant negative impact on marine life, including commercial fisheries. Representatives from state agencies coordinate with representatives of the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) to identify and implement strategies to reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus entering the Mississippi River. In Wisconsin, representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) participate in Task Force meetings and activities.

In 2008, the Task Force produced an [Action Plan](#) which called for states within the Mississippi/Atchafalaya River Basin to “complete and implement comprehensive nitrogen and phosphorus reduction strategies”(p.32) with a completion target date of 2013. Wisconsin’s [Nutrient Reduction Strategy](#) was published in November of 2013. While the Hypoxia Task Force is focused on reducing nutrients entering the Mississippi River Basin, Wisconsin’s strategy also addresses efforts to reduce nitrogen entering groundwater and nutrients entering the Great Lakes Basin. Two implementation progress reports to the 2013 Nutrient Reduction Strategy were published by DNR in 2017 and 2020.

In 2022, funding became available to the DNR through USEPA to support Task Force states in revising and enhancing implementation of their Nutrient Reduction Strategies. Wisconsin invested a portion of those funds to hire a Nutrient Reduction Strategy Coordinator and to support the development of a new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (‘Loss’ was added to the title to reflect the focus on reducing the *loss* of nutrients from the landscape to surface and groundwater) in collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies and stakeholders.

The decision to develop a new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, rather than updating the existing strategy was based on the fact that, while the original strategy provided a thorough overview of existing programs and policies aimed at addressing sources of nutrients to surface and groundwater, it did not identify specific strategies to modify and coordinate programs and resources across agencies and organizations toward a set of common goals and objectives. Furthermore, there was very little effort to involve non-governmental stakeholders in the development of the original strategy.

The following report describes the stakeholder engagement process and the outcomes of that process, which will be used as a foundation for the development of a new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy for Wisconsin. The report describes the methods and outcomes of two phases of the stakeholder engagement process: 1) interviews and listening sessions, and 2) the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable, which took place on December 9, 2025.

The approach to developing a new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy

In January of 2024, DNR convened the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup (IWQW), comprised of representatives from state (DNR, DATCP) and federal (Natural Resources Conservation Service) agencies; University of Wisconsin – Madison, Division of Extension; and Wisconsin Land + Water Conservation Association (representing counties) to assist with the development of the new strategy. Early in the deliberations of the IWQW, it was determined that in order to have a meaningful impact on nutrient loss, it was imperative to focus on agricultural sources.

The IWQW also recognized the importance of engaging stakeholders early in the process to ensure that their concerns, interests, and ideas were reflected in the new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. Therefore, in the spring of 2025, the IWQW initiated a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process focusing on farmers, other representatives of the agricultural industry, Extension educators and specialists, county land and water departments, and non-governmental environmental and conservation organizations.

Interviews and listening sessions

Throughout the spring and summer of 2025, two DNR staff from the Office of Agriculture and Water Quality conducted a series of interviews and listening sessions with stakeholders to gather their responses to the following three questions:

- 1) What is working to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land?
- 2) What's not working or needs to be changed to improve efforts to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land?
- 3) What would you like to see in a statewide nutrient loss reduction strategy that could accelerate efforts to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land?

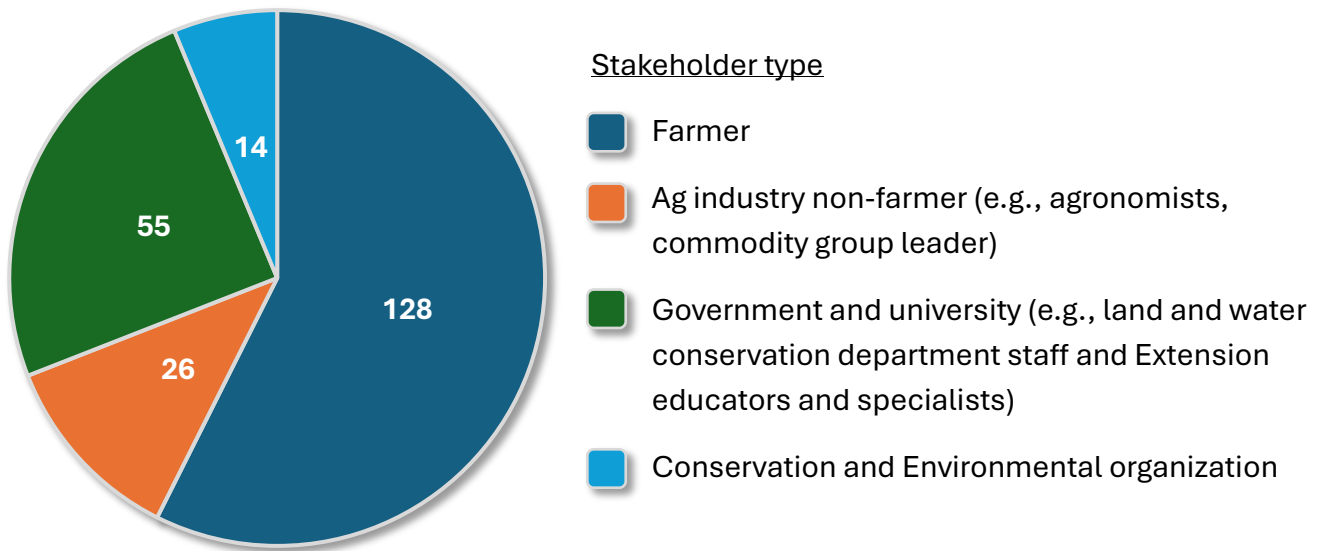
Interviews were conducted with individuals or small groups (2-4 individuals). The interviewers also attended meetings of county land and water departments, producer-led watershed groups, and other pre-existing groups where representatives of the agricultural and conservation stakeholders were present to solicit feedback on those questions. One on-line listening session with county land and water department staff was organized and facilitated by Wisconsin Land + Water Conservation Association. The interviewers recorded detailed notes from every interview and listening session.

Interviews and listening session participants were identified through existing professional networks and recommendations from members of the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup and interviewees. In some instances, the interviewers were invited directly by organizations such as producer-led watershed groups and lake associations, to attend their meetings and solicit input from stakeholders. In general, interviewers sought out individuals who had leadership roles or who were actively engaged in efforts to increase adoption of conservation practices and other methods to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land. There was also an effort to include stakeholders from as many counties as possible, individuals and organizations representing Wisconsin's diverse range

of commodities (e.g., corn and soybeans, dairy, beef, vegetable and potatoes), and farm size from small grazing operations to large row crop and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

In total, over 80 interviews and listening sessions were conducted, involving more than 220 individuals. Table 1 shows the number of individuals who participated in an interview or listening session, broken down by stakeholder type.

Figure 1. Number of participants in interviews or listening sessions by stakeholder type.



Notes from the interviews and listening sessions were analyzed by a team within the UW-Madison, Division of Extension Natural Resources Institute. Several artificial intelligence (AI) platforms were used to assist the team with identification of recurring themes. The objective of the analysis was to identify recurring themes from the interview notes across all stakeholder types. The recurring themes were then organized into the following five overarching themes:

- Peer networks and local partnerships
- Trust and communication
- Economic opportunities and funding
- Technology and research
- Consistency and accountability

Recurring interview themes were categorized into each of the five overarching themes as shown next in Table 1.

Table 1: Recurring interview themes.

Overarching Theme: Peer networks and local partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producer-led watershed groups (PLWGs) are essential to promoting conservation practices by creating a learning community of farmers; promoting change through peer pressure;

offering farmers options rather than mandates; and facilitating equipment sharing and technical support.

- County Land and Water Conservation Department staff serve as trusted advisors and are uniquely positioned to connect farmers with other stakeholders and experts.
- Partnerships between PLWGs, cooperatives, technical colleges, and non-profits enhance outreach and resource sharing.
- The state should support county-level leadership to expand their role in connecting farmers with conservation partners.
- Encourage long-term funding to PLWGs to maintain momentum and support innovation.
- Include non-operating landowners, lake associations, and community groups in PLWG activities.

Overarching Theme: Trust and communication

- It can be difficult for farmers to understand agency roles in conservation and regulatory enforcement. There is a learning curve involved in understanding how agencies operate and how to navigate available resources (e.g., cost-share programs).
- County staff, local champions, and independent agronomists are trusted messengers, especially when they work directly with farmers.
- Field days and demonstration farms help build trust through visible, local success stories.
- Soil health and economic framing of conservation messages resonates with farmers more than politically charged terms like regenerative agriculture.
- There is a trust issue with some agencies, especially DNR and regulatory bodies, due to perceived lack of transparency and responsiveness.
- Regulatory pressure erodes relationships when not balanced with voluntary approaches.
- Inconsistent enforcement and lack of follow-through on complaints diminish trust.
- Lack of coordination among agencies (DNR, DATCP, NRCS) creates mixed messages.
- Farmers need safe spaces to share concerns and seek feedback without fear of enforcement.
- More incentive and cost-share programs are needed that reward long-term adopters of conservation practices.
- Existing, trusted networks (PLWGs, co-ops, crop consultants) should be leveraged for outreach.

Overarching Theme: Economic opportunities and funding

- Cost-share programs help offset initial costs and encourage adoption of conservation practices.
- Cover-crop rebate and Nitrogen Optimization Pilot (NOP) programs are well-received and impactful.
- The Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) tax credits provide annual incentives for conservation and open doors for counties to meet and develop relationships with farmers and landowners.
- Part of what makes PLWGs effective is they can offer flexible funding and community recognition, which motivates conservation adoption.

- Buyers (e.g., Walmart, McCain Foods) increasingly require sustainability plans from their growers, creating economic incentives for growers.
- Sharing of equipment and knowledge within PLWGs reduces individuals' costs and lowers risks associated with adopting new technologies and practices.
- More funding is needed for PLWGs as funding is spread among more and more groups.
- Incentive and cost-share programs should be expanded to include more small farms and to reward long-term adopters.
- Support is needed to develop markets for alternative crops (e.g., small grains, forage) to incentivize more diverse rotations.
- Barriers to participation in cost-share programs need to be reduced to increase participation, including extending time frames, reducing paperwork, and increasing flexibility in how conservation objectives are accomplished.
- Provide more information to farmers about the short- and long-term economics of conservation practices.

Overarching Theme: Technology and research

- Several technological tools and practices were mentioned as helpful to reduce nutrient loss, including variable rate technology (VRT), split nitrogen applications, low disturbance manure injection, petiole sampling, moisture probes, real-time soil data (e.g., moisture, nutrient availability), drone seeding and interseeding cover crops.
- UW Discover Farms and similar applied research partnerships help provide trusted, on-farm data and can help address issues specific to a region or industry.
- Field days, pasture walks, demo farms, and farmer-to-farmer peer support all facilitate adoption of conservation practices and related technologies.
- Advanced technologies that could support conservation can have a very high initial cost and can be very complex to use.
- Farmers can feel overwhelmed with information and the lack of centralized, farmer-friendly decision tools.
- University recommendations and agency regulations often lag behind the rate of development of new technologies.
- Publicly owned equipment (e.g., no-till drills, manure injectors) rental programs facilitate farmers trying out new and expensive equipment without the high initial investment.
- Conservation professionals need more training in the use of decision-support and predictive modeling tools.
- Farmers and PLWGs benefit from technical support and oversight for on-farm research and experimentation.

Overarching Theme: Consistency and accountability

- County Land and Water Conservation Departments are often trusted more than state agencies. Long-term relationships with local staff support compliance and cooperation.
- Farmland Preservation incentivizes compliance with conservation standards, provides counties with leverage to enforce nutrient management plans, and creates an opening for on-farm visits and conversations.
- Flexibility in programs like the Multi-Discharger Variance (MDV) program allows for creative solutions.

- Counties often lack resources to enforce regulations (e.g., NR151) effectively.
- Agency staff turnover and limited field presence hinders consistent enforcement.
- Conflicting standards between agencies creates compliance challenges.
- There is a need for more clarity around Nutrient Management Plans (NMPs), for example, how often are they audited for compliance, how are they reviewed and approved?
- Agency (e.g., DNR, counties) staffing capacity should be increased to allow for more field inspections and enforcement.
- Align standards across agencies (e.g., unify SnapPlus and RUSLE2 models).
- Better coordination between DNR, DATCP, NRCS and local governments is needed.

Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable

As part of the stakeholder engagement process, the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup agreed to convene stakeholders at an in-person meeting on December 9, 2025 at the Food + Farm Exploration Center in Plover, Wisconsin. The purpose of the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable was to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to review and discuss the themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews and to identify up to five priority actions and five priority strategies for each of the five overarching themes. The outcomes of those discussions will be used by the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup to inform the nutrient loss reduction strategy for agricultural land. The Roundtable was also seen by the IWQW as an opportunity for stakeholders to learn more about the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy and as a starting point for building a shared sense of ownership of the strategy.

Participation in the Roundtable was by invitation. There was no cost to attend. All individuals who participated in a one-on-one or small group interview received an invitation. Organizations representing the agricultural industry, producer-led watershed groups, and several conservation and environmental organizations were also given the opportunity to send up to two representatives to the Roundtable. Wisconsin DNR, DATCP, NRCS, UW-Madison Extension, and Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association were represented by members of the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup. Staff from ten county land and water conservation departments also attended. In total, 140 individuals attended the Roundtable. See Table 2 for a list of non-governmental organizations represented at the Roundtable on December 9.

Table 2. Non-governmental organizations represented at the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable (in no particular order).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Farmland Trust • Clean Wisconsin • Farmers of the Sugar River • Dairy Business Association • Discovery Farms • Fond du Lac County Watersheds Alliance • GrassWorks • Farmers of the Roche a Cri 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Midwest Food Products Association • Pheasants Forever • Dodge County Farmers for Healthy Soil and Healthy Water • Bad Axe Watershed • Buffalo Trempealeau Farmer Network • Farmers of the Barron County Watersheds • Lake Wisconsin Farmer Watershed Council
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Petenwell and Castle Rock Stewards • Jefferson County Soil Builders • Shawano County Watershed Advisory Council • Sand County Foundation • Upper Mississippi Basin Association • Wisconsin Association of Professional Agricultural Consultants • Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation • Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peninsula Pride Farms • Yahara Pride • River Alliance of Wisconsin • The Nature Conservancy • Wisconsin Corn Growers Association • Wisconsin Agri-Business Association • Wisconsin Farmers Union • Wisconsin Pork Association • Wisconsin Soybean Association • Wisconsin’s Green Fire
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A professional facilitator from Living Giving Enterprises was hired to assist the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup in designing and facilitating the conversations that occurred at the Roundtable. A copy of the agenda is provided in Appendix A. Participants were provided with five Theme Briefs (see Appendix B), one for each of the five Overarching Themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews and listening sessions. The Theme Briefs highlighted the recurring themes that emerged from the stakeholder interviews and listening sessions and posed a set of questions to guide discussion. After an initial introduction to the Themes in the form of brief ‘Flash Talks’, participants self-selected which breakout session they would participate in for the remainder of the day.

During the breakout sessions, facilitators assisted participants in identifying Priority Strategies and Actions to expand and support ‘what’s working’ and to address ‘what’s not working’, with the ultimate goal of reducing nutrient loss from agricultural land. An initial list of Strategies and Actions was captured on flipchart paper (for the complete list of Strategies and Actions identified during the morning brainstorming session, see Appendix C). After lunch, each breakout group completed a poll to identify the top five Priority Strategies and Actions.

The top five Priority Strategies and Actions identified by the Roundtable participants are presented, below. They are ordered by number of votes received by breakout participants (items at the top received the most votes). Note that some Themes have fewer than or more than five Priority Strategies or Actions. If fewer than five, the items included were the only options that received votes by the breakout participants. If more than five, two or more items received the same number of votes.

Table 3: Priority Strategies and Actions for each theme as identified by Roundtable participants.

Theme: Peer Networks and Local Partnerships	
Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize presence + value placed on building relationships. • Collaborative info + data sharing across regions & groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency staff build a strong relationship with at least one farmer and one group/organization.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate coordination + relationships between farmers + nonprofits + agencies. • Share efforts and actions outside of groups and with communities and other local orgs. • Collaboration + coordination between agencies to communicate more + leverage resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide direct administrative support for peer networks. • Conduct a landscape inventory of technical assistance support in the state + publish it. • Hold regular meetings for lead farmers/presidents of producer-led groups. • Agencies and organizations learn more about farmers and the culture they represent.
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Theme: Trust and Communication

Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile resources that assist trainers on specific topics. • Long-term planning for PLWGs and other organizations to maintain continuity. • Plan + implement collaborative gatherings specific to a topic. • Develop directories of agronomists and other human resources. • Long-term planning for PLWGs and other organizations to maintain continuity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have conversations w/ specific people to discuss expectations and build relationships. • Share dollar value of conservation practices. • Advocate for more funding for producer led watershed groups. • Host field days to show success stories + invite community + representatives. • Provide basic ag + conservation education for local representatives/officials. • Call your local land conservation staff to build relationships proactively.

Theme: Economic Opportunities and Funding

Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay for performance. • Public/Private partnerships. Ag biz involvement, better utilization of private industry conservation services. • Private sector investment in conservation.(e.g. matching public funds). • Determining financial ROI- Understand farm profit triggers from soil health at yr 1, 2, 10. Measure ROI of conservation for storytelling to farmers, bankers, legislators, etc. • Rethinking how we prioritize funding. EG pay for performance, more small and mid-sized farmers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map cost-share & other incentive programs: what's available, from whom, requirements? Make easier to apply. • Public/Private Partnerships - to benefit PLWGs + increase funding access for PLWGs. • Training of staff to know and sell programs. • Extend enrollment period & implementation. • Equipment rental. • Mentoring programs (Paid).

Theme: Technology and Research	
Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snap Plus Innovation/Update – (to capture subfield variability). • Flexibility of new tech/tools/measures in rule writing + regulations. • Dairy Manure tech. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data management for predictive modeling. • Tools for real-time measurements. • Share information/research - make easily accessible & public. • Increase & continue NOP trials for years.
Theme: Consistency and Accountability	
Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build consistent goals + messaging (leadership). • Identify major sources of inconsistency (e.g., messaging, views, ideas). • Build interagency workgroups for farmers + counties. • Conduct resource-sharing efforts amongst agencies. • Develop a single point of contact for interagency communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address staff turnover + relationship-building. Set consistent point person for each farm/project. • Determining consistent definitions + messages (e.g., measurements, language). • Develop clearinghouse for local, state, + federal requirements. • Build consistency in measuring water quality improvements. • Host county-level town halls + listening sessions for public, agencies, + farmers.

Participants in the Roundtable were given the opportunity to complete an online evaluation survey at the end of the meeting. Of the 140 participants, 82 completed the survey. Overall, respondents indicated they had a positive experience and that they were feeling more optimistic about the ability of all stakeholders to work together collaboratively to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land, as exemplified in the following quotes from the survey responses:

Thanks for your efforts. This approach will be successful in making a meaningful difference in Wisconsin.

So often these have focused solely on the science (and that’s critical) but neglected the partnerships and people needed to translate that science to agreed upon action. This feels like a valuable step forward.

Several participants also pointed to the importance of what happens next after the Roundtable meeting, as exemplified in the following quote from one participant:

The first step was accomplished – establishing common ground. Next step – how and who – to accomplish the things we set aside is the next effort needed. Getting this diverse group of folks in the same room is a big part of building a successful path forward.

Responses to the evaluation survey questions are provided in Appendix D.

Summary

Reducing nutrient loss from agricultural land is essential to protecting and restoring healthy rivers, streams, lakes, and wetlands and providing safe drinking water in Wisconsin. A statewide Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy represents a gameplan for collaborative action to identify and address the sources of excess nitrogen and phosphorus in our surface and groundwater. The Interagency Water Quality Workgroup has focused on engaging agriculture and conservation stakeholders in the development of the new NLRS to ensure that all the key partners are working together toward shared goals and objectives.

The stakeholder engagement process began with a series of interviews and listening sessions with farmers, other representatives of the agricultural community, county land and water conservation departments, and environmental and conservation organizations. Participants were asked to share what's working and what's not working to address nutrient loss from agricultural land and what would they like to see in a statewide nutrient loss reduction strategy. More than 220 individuals were interviewed, including 128 farmers. Notes from the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes.

On December 9, 2025, 140 farmers, representatives of various producer-led watershed groups, agricultural businesses and advocacy groups, county land and water conservation departments, Extension specialists and educators, and representatives of environmental and conservation organizations came together to identify priority strategies and actions, based in part on the common themes identified in the stakeholder interviews.

The specific Priority Strategies and Actions are provided elsewhere in this document, but the following are overarching themes that emerged from the Roundtable discussions:

- Producer-led watershed groups are playing a critical role in promoting conservation and could do more with additional resources and support from both the public and private sectors.
- Agencies play a critical role in conservation through cost-share and other incentive programs, education and technical assistance, and ensuring compliance with regulations. These roles tend to be most effective when agency staff develop long-term, trusting relationships with farmers and other partners in conservation.
- Information is essential to making informed decisions about conservation. Stakeholders called for agencies and universities to do a better job of sharing information about new technologies and the true costs and benefits of conservation practices in a way that is accessible and meaningful to farmers and their advisors.
- Stakeholders perceive that the various federal, state, and local agencies responsible for addressing nutrient loss from agricultural land do not always communicate a consistent message and sometimes make recommendations and apply rules that are incompatible or contradictory.

Next steps

The outcomes of the stakeholder engagement process, including the Priority Strategies and Actions and summaries of notes from the stakeholder interviews and listening sessions, will be used by the Interagency Water Quality Workgroup as the foundation for the development of a new Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy focused on agricultural sources of nutrients. The IWQW will also identify Priority Actions that can be implemented in the short-term to enhance and expand existing conservation efforts.

The IWQW will continue to engage stakeholders throughout the development of the Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy to keep them informed, solicit feedback, and foster and grow the spirit of collaboration that was evident at the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable on December 9, 2025.

Acknowledgements

The Interagency Water Quality Workgroup would like to acknowledge all the individuals who participated in the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable as well as those who participated in an interview or listening session for contributing your time and ideas to this process. We would also like to acknowledge the following individuals for their outstanding contributions to the stakeholder engagement process:

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Anna James, UW-Madison, Division of Extension

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Jennifer McNelly, UW-Madison, Division of Extension

Amber Radatz, UW-Madison, Division of Extension

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Matt Kreuger, Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association

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Dani Heisler, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

Katy Smith, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

Mark Witecha, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

Randy Zogbaum, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection

Barry Bubolz, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Nathan Fikkert, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Jamie Patton, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Joe Bonnell, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Karl Gesch, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Sean Kennedy, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Katie Majewski, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Stacy Steinke, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Jeffrey Voltz, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Brian Weigel, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Josh Wolf, Upper Mississippi River Basin Association

Appendices

Appendix A: Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable Agenda.

Wisconsin’s
Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy

Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable

December 9, 2025 ♦ 9 AM – 3:30 PM

Food + Farm Exploration Center, 3400 Innovation Dr., Plover, WI 54476

Purpose:
To identify **practical actions and targeted strategies** that can be implemented by and supportive of farmers to measurably reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land in Wisconsin.

- Outcomes:**
- ✓ **Understand themes** collected from listening sessions (ref: ‘Theme Briefs’)
 - ✓ **Identify specific ACTIONS, STRATEGIES** of greatest value within themes
 - ✓ **Rate/rank top strategies, actions** of greatest value
 - ✓ **Identify specific next steps** for short-term actions, long-term strategic directions
 - ✓ **Commit to partnering** on specific short-term actions, shaping long-term strategic directions

AGENDA – MORNING

WELCOME

Ag Grand Hall

9:00 AM - 10:20 AM

PURPOSE: TO WELCOME AND ORIENT PARTICIPANTS TO THE TASK OF THE DAY; TO PROVIDE SPECIFIC FINDINGS FROM STATEWIDE INTERVIEWS.

- **Welcome**, Jamie Patton (NRCS) - 10 mins
- **Overview of day, Agenda Review, and Guidelines**, Darin Harris - 10 mins
- **Participant Introductions**: Stakeholder groups represented, Darin Harris - 10 mins
 - Farmers, Conservation Advocates, Private Sector, Public Sector (Governmental)
- **Review of Listening Session Themes- Flash talk(s)**, Chris Clayton, Karl Gesch, Brian Weigel, Amber Radatz, Amy Piaget - 30 mins
- **Farmer Focused Feedback** - 20 mins
 - Representatives from farming interests will take part in “fish bowl” exercise to discuss NEEDS, CONCERNS, and SOLUTIONS. All others will participate using an interactive process.

BREAK & PASSING TIME

to Break Out Rooms

10:20 AM - 10:30 AM

HIGH VALUE ACTIONS & STRATEGIES

Break Out Session 10:30 AM - 12 PM Noon

PURPOSE: TO SPECIFY ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES THAT STAKEHOLDERS CONFIRM AS HAVING THE GREATEST VALUE.

- **Split into “WHAT’s WORKING” BREAK OUT SESSIONS**, referencing THEME BRIEFS.
 - **Peer Networks and Local Leadership**: Ag Grand Hall A
 - **Trust and Communication**: Executive Board Room – 2nd floor
 - **Funding and Economic Opportunities**: Ag Grand Hall B
 - **Technology and Research**: Kitchen Lab – 1st floor
 - **Consistency and Accountability**: Ag Lab Maker Space – 1st floor
- **Each session room will identify short term tangible and high value actions and long-term focused strategies** that can be scaled/implemented by or provide the greatest support to farmers to measurably reduce nutrient loss.

LUNCH

Ag Tech Shed – 1st floor

12 PM Noon - 12:45 PM



AGENDA – AFTERNOON

TOP ACTIONS, STRATEGIES

Break Out Session

12:45 PM - 1:20 PM

PURPOSE: TO RATE AND RANK THE ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES WITH THE GREATEST VALUE.

- **Using list of high value actions and strategies generated from previous session, use polling and stakeholder assessment** to rate and rank the TOP ACTIONS and STRATEGIES.
 - **Peer Networks and Local Leadership:** Ag Grand Hall A
 - **Trust and Communication:** Executive Board Room - 2nd floor
 - **Funding and Economic Opportunities:** Ag Grand Hall B
 - **Technology and Research:** Kitchen Lab – 1st floor
 - **Consistency and Accountability:** Ag Lab Maker Space – 1st floor
- **Select up to 3-5 actions and 2-3 strategies** in each session room.

BREAK & PASSING TIME

to Ag Grand Hall

1:20 PM - 1:30 PM

SHARE THEME TEAM WORK

Ag Grand Hall

1:30 PM - 2:15 PM

PURPOSE: TO BRING RESULTS OF THE BREAK OUT SESSIONS TO THE ASSEMBLED GROUP FOR CLARITY AND REFINEMENT.

- **Report on results of break out sessions** by setting up stations throughout the main room - 30 mins
- **Large group debrief** and assembly of actions and strategies from stations at front of room - 15 mins

BREAK

Ag Grand Hall

2:15 PM - 2:30 PM

MOVING FORWARD

Ag Grand Hall

2:30 PM - 3:15 PM

PURPOSE: TO CLARIFY AND GAIN COMMITMENT TO TOP ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES FROM BOTH FARMERS AND GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS.

- **Compile and display** short term actions and long-term strategies with high impact, leverage
- **Describing process for strategy formation** over the next 6 months (DNR, DATCP, IWQW) and specific points in the process where stakeholders will be asked to partner/participate
- **Commitment session to collect names of participants** who are ready, able and willing to move short term actions forward and join the effort to shape long term strategies

NEXT STEPS, CLOSING

Ag Grand Hall

3:15 PM - 3:30 PM

PURPOSE: TO ACKNOWLEDGE, SPECIFY TODAY'S WORK AND THE WORK GOING FORWARD.

- **Participant evaluation via online survey (QR code) and closing words by sponsors**



Appendix B: Theme Briefs from the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable.

Wisconsin's
Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy

Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable

December 9, 2025 ♦ 9 AM – 3:30 PM

Food + Farm Exploration Center, 3400 Innovation Dr., Plover, WI 54476

THEME BRIEF & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Peer Networks and Local Leadership

BACKGROUND: Farmer peer networks are groups of farmers and trusted advisors who come together to share their experiences and support each other in their farming practices. Peer networks (e.g., producer-led watershed groups, Discovery Farms, Demo Farms) were consistently identified as one of the most effective mechanisms for supporting farmer engagement in conservation and adoption of best management practices. Producer-led watershed groups were the most frequently mentioned and valued example of peer networks.

WHAT'S WORKING:

- Networking with and learning from other farmers in an environment where it is safe to talk about failures as well as successes.
- Building a sense of community and shared ownership of the resource.
- Reducing the risks associated with trying new things.
- Accessing cost-share with a relatively low administrative burden.
- Accessing technical support and equipment.
- Enhancing outreach and resource sharing through partnerships with counties, cooperatives, technical colleges, lake associations, and other nonprofits.
- Discovery Farms and Demo Farms are valued as an effective way for farmers to participate in research that is practical and relevant to their farm and region.
- The Nitrogen Optimization Program was seen as a valuable way for farmers to get immediate feedback on different nutrient management practices.

CHALLENGES:

- Inadequate funding to support producer-led groups, especially as funding is spread across more and more groups each year.
- Limited staff time among collaborators to provide needed administrative and program support to producer-led groups.
- Administrative burden (e.g. annual application) associated with grant programs that support producer-led groups.
- Participation in field-days and on-farm events has been waning in some areas.
- Peer networks are sometimes viewed as exclusive or too narrowly focused by some non-members.

CHARGE TO PARTICIPANTS: How can agencies support the independence of farmer peer networks while also ensuring those networks are delivering measurable outcomes?

- What do peer networks most need from agencies to expand their impact to more farms and more acres?
- How do agencies provide adequate administrative and technical support to peer networks given limited budgets and staffing?
- What do peer networks need to effectively engage with local communities, agencies, and other potential partners (e.g., lake associations)?
- What do peer networks need to share lessons learned with each other (across networks)?



THEME BRIEF & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Trust and Communication

BACKGROUND: Farmers rely on trusted advisors, including other farmers, family members, agency and university representatives, and private consultants. Interviewees frequently mentioned the value of relationships and trust, whether they are seeking advice on nutrient management decisions or interacting with agencies on cost-share programs or compliance. In addition to trust, farmers indicated they value consistency (knowing who they need to talk to and having open communication with that person), an appreciation for the complexities and challenges associated with farming, and flexibility (focus on outcomes and collaborative problem-solving).

WHAT'S WORKING:

- One-on-one conversations are key to increasing farmer adoption of nutrient management practices.
- On-farm consultations help to identify and address specific goals and challenges of farm operations.
- Farmer participation in government programs like Farmland Preservation can provide new opportunities for local staff to visit farms and develop relationships.
- Soil health is an effective way to talk to farmers about nutrient management and to attract participation at field days and other educational events because it is more inclusive than focusing on a single outcome (e.g., water quality).
- Farmers value communication from advisors and agency staff that focuses on solving problems, rather than finger-pointing.

CHALLENGES:

- Because the public sector is facing reductions in funding and staffing, it is increasingly difficult to provide one-on-one consultations.
- Staff turnover and lack of familiarity with agriculture.
- A general distrust of government agencies, especially in relation to regulatory enforcement.
- Absentee and non-farmer landowners are often disconnected from the farmers who rent their land and can be more focused on economic than environmental objectives.
- Many farmers feel overwhelmed by the amount of information available to them and that information is sometimes contradictory.
- Advisors on conservation practices often do not have a background in agriculture and the challenges associated with adopting conservation practices on the farm.

CHARGE TO PARTICIPANTS: How can we reduce the communication and trust gap between agencies, farmers, and their advisors in a way that leads to better environmental outcomes?

- Consider those relationships that have been most helpful to you in your conservation journey. What lessons did you learn from those relationships that could be applied more broadly?
- What advice would you have for agency staff and other advisors to work effectively with farmers?
- What messages about nutrient management from industry, partners, and agencies would resonate with farmers? Who should share those messages and how should they be delivered?



THEME BRIEF & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Funding and Economic Opportunities

BACKGROUND: Nearly every interviewee recognized that increasing participation in nutrient management practices requires attention to the economic realities on the farm. This includes addressing the inherent financial risks involved in adopting new fertilizer and manure management systems, equipment, and practices.

WHAT'S WORKING:

- Cost-share programs help offset initial costs and encourage adoption of new practices.
- Flat-rate incentive payments (standard payment per acre of practice installed) are attractive and straightforward for farmers.
- Programs that allow farmers to rent or borrow equipment to try out new practices (e.g., no-till drill) were frequently cited as helpful for overcoming initial barriers to adoption.
- Market-based incentives and certification programs provide recognition and, ideally, price incentives to farmers for meeting various sustainability metrics.
- Public acknowledgement of farmers who demonstrate an outstanding commitment to conservation incentivizes other farmers and sends a positive message to non-farmers.
- Where it is available, the Farmland Preservation Program offers financial incentives to the landowner and creates an opportunity for county land and water staff to visit participating farms.

CHALLENGES:

- Intermittent and unpredictable funding for programs and application periods that don't correspond to on-farm planning cycles.
- Overly burdensome application processes and reporting requirements.
- Lack of flexibility (focusing on specific practices rather than outcomes and requiring long-term commitments).
- Overly restrictive requirements for participation in cost-share programs.
- Tendency to provide financial incentives for first-time adopters rather than rewarding long-term adopters.

CHARGE TO PARTICIPANTS: How can agencies provide access to cost-share and other incentive programs while also directing those limited funds where they will have the greatest impact on water quality?

- What priorities should agencies and other conservation partners consider when allocating cost-share and other incentive funds?
- What would you do to maximize participation in cost-share programs?
- How can agencies ensure that short-term investments in conservation practices lead to long-term adoption?



THEME BRIEF & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Technology and Research

BACKGROUND: There are continuous advancements in technology and understanding that can help farmers optimize nutrient use for productivity and profitability while simultaneously protecting water quality. Specific advancements mentioned by interviewees include variable rate technology, split nitrogen applications, low disturbance manure injection, petiole sampling, moisture probes, real-time soil nutrient monitoring, drone seeding, and interseeding cover crops. However, there are significant barriers to adoption of emerging technologies and researchers struggle to provide timely information to farmers about the pros and cons of new technologies.

WHAT'S WORKING:

- On-farm research programs like Discovery Farms, Demo Farms, and the Nitrogen Optimization Program (NOP) engage farmers directly in the research process and share the data and research findings with farmers.
- On-farm research programs are generally viewed as more reliable than trials on research farms where conditions may not match local soil, terrain, and climatic conditions.
- Applied research on emerging technologies and industry-specific issues.
- Field-days, pasture walks, and on-farm demonstrations give farmers an opportunity to see and discuss the pros and cons of adopting new practices and technologies.

CHALLENGES:

- Cost and complexity of new technologies.
- Challenges associated with the use of nutrient management decision support tools. (e.g., SnapPlus, which is used to develop approved nutrient management plans, is considered cumbersome by many farmers and agronomists.)
- The disconnect between research and practice.
- Outdated nutrient application guidelines.
- Evaluating the costs and benefits of various nutrient management practices applied on the farm without the benefit of consistent, locally relevant monitoring.
- Lack of coordination in the collection and use of data among agencies and universities and lack of transparency in sharing research and monitoring results with the public.

CHARGE TO PARTICIPANTS: How can we ensure that emerging technologies that enable more efficient use of nutrients are accessible and research is timely and relevant to potential users of those technologies?

- How can we reduce the risks to farmers of trying out new practices?
- What research and data support on-farm decision-making? Why would they be useful to you?
- How can barriers related to technology and equipment be reduced? How would that support success with conservation practices?
- How can barriers related to research-based information about conservation practices and technology be reduced?



THEME BRIEF & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consistency and Accountability

BACKGROUND: Interviewees recognized that members of the public are increasingly demanding accountability for public dollars spent to promote conservation practices. Attention has also been focused on agency accountability for enforcing existing rules and monitoring and reporting on adoption rates and impacts of voluntary practices. While not all interviewees agreed on the relative effectiveness of voluntary versus regulatory approaches to achieve water quality goals, there was general agreement that both agriculture and agencies must demonstrate measurable progress on water quality goals. That will require cooperation to identify gaps in the data related to adoption rates and water quality as well as compliance with regulations and performance standards.

WHAT'S WORKING:

- Consistent, open, and honest communication between farmers and agency staff.
- Long-term relationships with local agency representatives who are familiar with the farmers and their farm operations.
- Transparency in terms of data sharing, how enforcement decisions get made, and what metrics are used to assess compliance.
- Producer-led watershed groups increase peer pressure to meet and exceed minimum standards for reducing nutrient loss.

CHALLENGES:

- Inconsistent application of the rules and standards leads to a sense of confusion and unfairness, which erodes trust in agency representatives, the agencies themselves, and the regulatory system.
- Water quality monitoring programs that are remote (in time and location) from where and when nutrient management practices are going on the ground, making it difficult to evaluate local impacts of practice adoption.
- While many of the farmers viewed their nutrient management plan (NMP) as essential to their operation, some felt that other farmers only have an NMP to fulfill a requirement and are not held accountable for compliance with their NMP.
- Farmers and agronomists also pointed to the challenges of working with SnapPlus and outdated nutrient application guidelines as disincentives to adoption of NMPs.

CHARGE TO PARTICIPANTS: How can agencies uphold consistent baseline expectations for nutrient management on all farms while accounting for the diversity of farm operations and local conditions that exist around the state?

- What data would you find most useful to measure progress on nutrient loss reductions at various scales? What sources would you trust to gather and communicate that data?
- How can agencies reduce the burden on farmers who are trying to meet requirements of multiple conservation programs?
- How can field staff hold farmers and landowners accountable for compliance without compromising their role as trusted partners in conservation?
- What would you do to increase compliance with nutrient management plan requirements?

Appendix C: Complete list of Strategies and Actions proposed during breakout brainstorming exercise, by theme.

Theme: Peer Networks and Local Partnerships	
Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative information and data sharing across regions and groups. • Share efforts and actions outside of groups with counties and other local organizations. • Collaboration and coordination between agencies to communicate more effectively and leverage resources. • Facilitate coordination and relationships between farmer and non-farmer watershed groups. • Create a network of funds from organizations; award to watershed groups. • Incentivize personnel/staff retention to maintain relationships. • Extend the funding cycle to 3-5 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency staff build a strong relationship with at least one farmer and one group/organization. • Provide direct administrative support for peer networks. • Conduct a landscape inventory of technical assistance support in the state + publish it. • Hold regular meetings for lead farmers/presidents of producer-led groups. • Agencies and organizations learn more about farmers and the culture they represent. • Develop and conduct a 'Well-being/Human thriving' survey to quantify qualitative data. • Empower farmers to be spokespersons for peer networks. • Peer networks create demands for what they want the state to do in a formal statement. • Having more transparency on cost-share programs.
Theme: Trust and Communication	
Priority Strategies	Priority Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop directories of agronomists and other human resources. • Building and convening networks. • Reach out to people outside your normal social/professional circles. • Plan and implement collaborator gatherings specific to a topic. • Share research & incentive programs more widely and publicly. • Establish timelines and benchmarks for projects, specifically permit progress (Virginia example). • Long term planning for PLWG and other orgs to maintain continuity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have conversations with specific people to discuss expectations and build relationships. • Host field days to show success stories and invite community and representatives (suggestion: rain simulator is a great tool!). • Work with agronomists and others who understand farmer's conservation goals. • Provide basic ag and conservation education for local reps/officials. • Listen. • Focus on positive insights first. • Show dollar value of conservation practices.

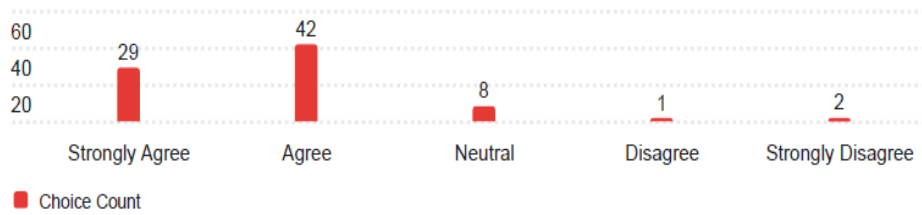
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile resource that assist farmers on specific topics. • Develop cheat sheet/easy button hands on field days (trailers, how to) and/or list of resources for supporting these events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share roundtable participant list. • Advocate for more funding for PLW groups. • Call your local land conservation staff to build relationships proactively. • Invite people to meetings to help grow groups – trusted folks bringing in new people.
<p>Theme: Economic Opportunities and Funding</p>	
<p>Priority Strategies</p>	<p>Priority Actions</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay for performance. • Public/Private partnerships. Ag biz involvement, better utilization of private industry conservation services. • Private sector investment in conservation. (e.g. matching public funds). • Determining financial ROI- Understand farm profit triggers from soil health at 1 year, 2 year, 10 year. Measure ROI of conservation for storytelling to farmers, bankers, legislators, etc. • Rethinking how we prioritize funding. EG pay for performance, more small and mid-sized farmers • More funding for conservation. • Trading. • Market-based incentives for conservation. Certification by Gov’t or 3rd party actor to reward farmers for conservations practices. • Market strategies for consumers . EG buy local, certification for conservation. • State cost-share for variable rate technology & enhanced efficiency fertilizers. • Engage non-farm components of supply chain. • PLWGs: Show outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map cost-share & other incentive programs: what's available, from whom, requirements? Make easier to apply. • Public/Private Partnerships - to benefit PLWGs + increase funding access for PLWGs. • Training of staff to know and sell programs. • Extend enrollment period & implementation. • Equipment rental. • Mentoring programs (Paid).
<p>Theme: Technology and Research</p>	
<p>Priority Strategies</p>	<p>Priority Actions</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SNAP-Plus innovation – (to capture subfield variability). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share information/research. Make easily accessible and public. • Tools for real-time measurements.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible funding (fund continued practices, new tech, offset risk). • Timing of grants, conditions, ideas. • Flexibility of new tech, tools, measures in rule writing and regulations. • Dairy manure tech. • Tools to predict N mineralization from rye. • Increased adoption of strip till to replace full width tillage. • How can we improve P distribution through the soil profile? • Hover choppers, semis, drones, etc. • How do we measure success? • Crop insurance that supports tech/conservation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase and continue NOPP trials for years. • Data management for predictive modeling. • Better models for management and regulation. • Use tech and agencies to identify and protect grassed waterways.
<p>Theme: Consistency and Accountability</p>	
<p>Priority Strategies</p>	<p>Priority Actions</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build consistent goals + messaging (leadership). • Identify major sources of inconsistency (e.g., messaging, views, ideas). • Build interagency workgroups for farmers + counties. • Conduct resource-sharing efforts amongst agencies. • Develop a single point of contact for interagency communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address staff turnover + relationship-building. Set consistent point person for each farm/project. • Determining consistent definitions + messages (e.g., measurements, language). • Develop clearinghouse for local, state, + federal requirements. • Build consistency in measuring water quality improvements. • Host county-level town halls + listening sessions for public, agencies, + farmers. • Set ground rules for public events to create a culture of collaboration/inclusivity in all events, meetings, interagency interactions, etc.

Appendix D: Results from the Agriculture and Conservation Roundtable evaluation survey.

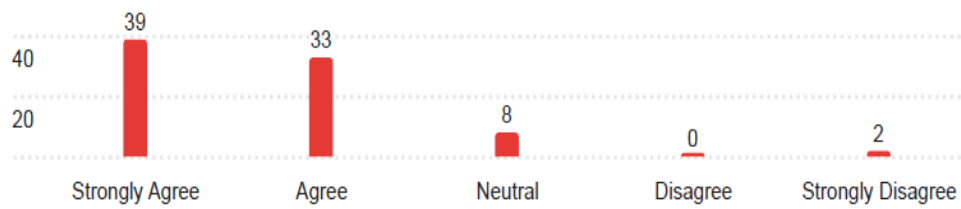
Q1 - Participation in today's roundtable was a worthwhile use of my time.

83 Responses



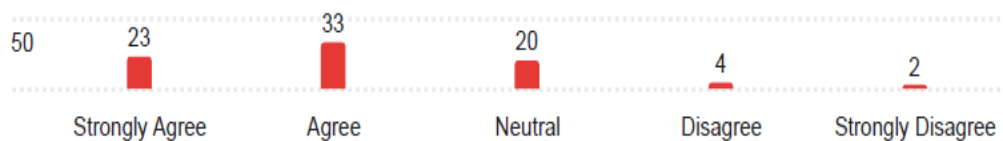
Q2 - I had sufficient opportunity to express my ideas and ask questions.

83 Responses



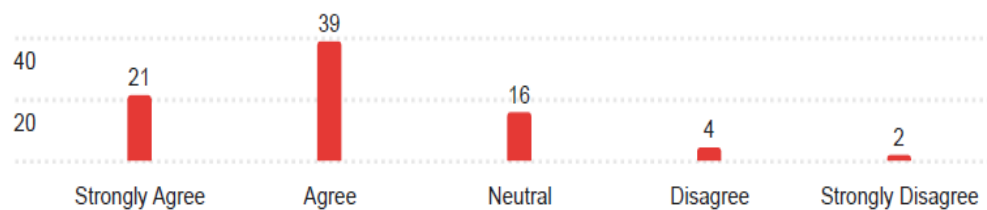
Q3 - Today's roundtable represents a positive step toward addressing nutrient loss from agricultural land.

82 Responses



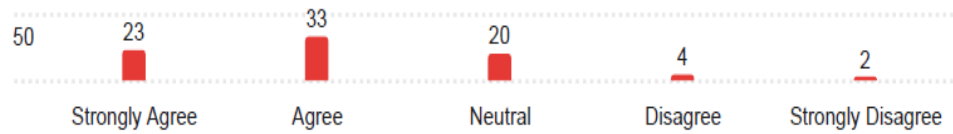
Q4 - My interests and concerns were well represented at this meeting.

83 Responses



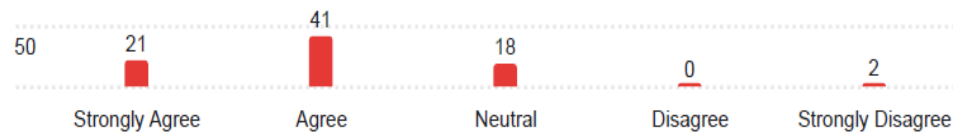
Q5 - Today's roundtable represents a positive step toward addressing nutrient loss from agricultural land.

82 Responses



Q6 - After today, I am more optimistic about our ability to work together collaboratively to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural land.

82 Responses



Q7 - I plan to stay engaged in the process to develop and implement a nutrient loss reduction strategy.

82 Responses

