

CONSERVATION AGRONOMIST VALUATION

AGRICULTURE'S CLEAN WATER ALLIANCE
IOWA SOYBEAN ASSOCIATION

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Introduction

In February 2024, the Making Retail Conservation Real conference brought hundreds of participants together in Des Moines to discuss the current state of conservation agronomy in agricultural retailers and to lay out the foundations for a strategic vision for future activity. As a follow up to those conversations and subsequent actions, this research brief sought to assess developments and progress in retailers over the past two years. Virtual interviews were conducted in January-February 2026 with ten individuals based in six different organizations across Iowa. All of these retailers have at least one conservation agronomist (CA) serving their growers. The interview protocol aimed to explore the valuation, both tangible and intangible, these professionals bring to their retailers. On average these conversations lasted about 45 minutes and were coded in the aggregate for thematic analysis.

Across all interviews with retail leaders and conservation agronomists, several themes emerged regarding the development of this role and the value it brings to retailers. Conservation agronomy is evolving from an experimental function in retail towards becoming a strategic capability. While most of these organizations do not yet track granular ROI metrics, evidence suggests that CAs generate both tangible and intangible value across revenue stability, customer retention, market positioning, risk mitigation, and long-term supply chain competitiveness.

Findings

Strategic Focus and Team Integration

One consistent leader insight: The creation of conservation agronomist roles was largely driven by recognition that traditional sales agronomists lack time and capacity to manage increasingly complex conservation programs. Conservation cannot simply be successfully layered onto already burdened sales agronomists. Retailers described traditional sales agronomists as at capacity with their sales goals and P&L responsibility. Creating a conservation agronomist role provides 100% focus on practice implementation, program navigation, and documentation, which frees the sales teams to maintain commercial performance.

The administrative complexity of conservation programs alone justifies dedicated expertise. Growers rely on conservation agronomists to evaluate multiple programs and determine which align best with their operations. Common CA responsibilities across retailers include cover crop planning, strip-till implementation, nutrient management

optimization, cost-share navigation, carbon program enrollment, edge-of-field practice coordination, and documentation/data management.

In alignment with earlier research, some of the retailers reported early concerns about potential tension between conservation and traditional sales goal. However, these issues have been overcome by aligning compensation structures and clear role definitions to build shared wins rather than internal competition. Across the retailers who took part in this study, there is a clear separation between the job responsibilities of the two groups of agronomic professionals. As trust builds among team members, CAs are seen as specialists who are in fact making sales agronomists' jobs easier and enhancing their customer relationships. The highest impact comes when the teams are integrated and striving towards overall common goals.

"In the beginning there was probably a little tension... now they're just part of the team."

"If it's product sales [like cover crop seed], the sales team gets credit."

Tangible Value Creation

Retailers identified multiple concrete value pathways:

Competitive Differentiation

Retailers without conservation capacity are increasingly perceived as incomplete service providers. Conservation agronomy functions as a differentiator in competitive bids, especially among progressive growers.

"It's another layer of professionalism."

"We're definitely investing during a tough market to gain a competitive advantage."

Customer Retention and Reduced Churn

Conservation agronomy deepens relationships by expanding the retailer's role from input supplier to strategic advisor. This increases switching costs. Retailers repeatedly noted that growers rarely change retailers without significant dissatisfaction. Conservation services add another dimension of embedded partnership.

"It's one more aspect of the relationship locking them in."

"We try to track if those dollars are being spent back with us."

Expanded Revenue Capture

As carbon intensity (CI) scoring and 45Z incentives mature, conservation agronomists may directly influence grain premiums. Optimization of nitrogen timing, cover crop adoption, and reduced tillage can improve CI scores, potentially adding 30–50 cents per bushel in future markets. Therefore, CAs may create a future-facing competitive advantage for retailers prepared to guide growers through documentation, practice optimization, and program alignment. Retailers that treat conservation agronomy as core business infrastructure, rather than as a grant-funded add-on, appear best positioned to capture these emerging opportunities.

“We can tweak your program... and that could gain you an extra 30 or 40 cents a bushel.”

“That score is going to dictate how much you get for your grain.”

“The lower the score, the better the grain revenue will be for you.”

Several retailers structure conservation payments as internal credits, ensuring that incentive dollars flow back into input purchases. This mechanism preserves margin while strengthening loyalty.

Risk Mitigation and Policy Readiness

Conservation agronomists monitor policy evolution and program eligibility requirements. This reduces regulatory risk exposure and positions retailers as compliant and proactive partners. There is a general sense of everyone in this space wanting to promote the virtues of voluntary compliance over formal regulation.

Operational Efficiency Support

In several organizations, CAs occasionally assist with data documentation, acreage tracking, application records, and variable-rate planning during seasonal transitions. This flexible deployment enhances operational throughput for the entire organization when needed.

Intangible Value Creation

Beyond measurable revenue, leaders emphasized less quantifiable, but still highly consequential benefits, as follows:

Brand Equity and Reputation

Conservation agronomists signal stewardship, innovation, and forward thinking. Retailers hosting CAs at grower meetings enhance credibility in sustainability conversations.

“They’re showing up at all the grower meetings.”

“People know who they are now.”

Trust Amplification

By simplifying complex programs and translating policy into practical action, CAs build trust. CAs increase visibility at grower meetings, provide credible technical expertise, and reinforce the retailer's role as a long-term partner rather than a transactional supplier. Farmers reportedly value having a single knowledgeable point of contact for conservation decisions.

Cultural Shift

Introducing conservation roles shifts internal culture toward service diversification and future-readiness. Organizations that integrate CAs effectively report improved cross-team collaboration. Retailers anticipate that a significant segment of the next generation of farmers has a different mindset when it comes to conservation and having experienced CAs will meet these new professionals where they are when it comes to diverse approaches to land stewardship.

Long-Term Supply Chain Positioning

As ethanol markets, downstream buyers, and policy frameworks increasingly reward verified sustainability, retailers with conservation infrastructure gain first-mover advantage in securing low-carbon bushels.

Strategic Optionality

Retailers with conservation capacity are better positioned to respond to emerging programs, grants, or private-market incentives without scrambling to build expertise reactively.

"There are so many programs, no farmer has time to evaluate all of them."

Looking Forward

Challenges

Policy instability, funding interruptions, internal awareness building, and uncertainty around short-term financial returns are all obstacles that retailers will need to face in the future. Several participants acknowledged that conservation roles may not 'pay for themselves' in the first couple of years but should be evaluated over a longer strategic horizon. That said, the one retailer who has done detailed financial analysis reported that the conservation unit became profitable at a point between years three and four.

"We're definitely investing during a tough market to gain a competitive advantage."

"We're going to lose money with this person for at least the first two years."

"Peak excitement was summer of '24... then we had to rebuild trust."

The current state of the agricultural economy in general may also impact willingness to participate in conservation programs. Additionally, over half of Iowa's farmland is leased to tenant farmers while most current public programs are providing benefits that are targeting owner-operators or non-farming landowners. Creating new opportunities for tenant farmers to participate in conservation aligned with their business interests will be important to continue moving the needle. Advocating for more private investment may help mitigate the risk of policy shifts and funding disruptions due to election cycles.

Implications for Retailers

For retailers not yet employing a CA, interview findings suggest several practical implications:

- **Leadership Buy In:** Conservation agronomy should be evaluated on a multi-year strategic horizon, not short-term margin impact or a one-year grant opportunity.
- **Dedicated Focus Is Critical:** Asking sales agronomists to absorb conservation responsibilities without structural changes is unlikely to succeed. Conservation requires sustained attention, technical depth, and program fluency. Effort should be spent on ensuring an adequate pipeline of talent.
- **Alignment of Incentives Matters:** Early clarity around compensation and credit allocation can prevent internal tension. Shared wins accelerate integration. Pay for performance models introduced at some point – recognizing that establishing relationships takes time at the beginning - enhance organizational and environmental outcomes.
- **Start with Strategic Objectives:** Whether the driver is customer retention, carbon markets, 45Z positioning, or brand differentiation, defining the strategic rationale up front helps guide deployment.
- **Measure What You Can, Even If Imperfectly:** While few retailers track granular ROI, simple metrics can provide directional insight, such as:
 - Acres influenced by conservation programs
 - Number of growers enrolled in cost-share or carbon programs
 - Customer retention rates among conservation participants
 - Internal credit dollars retained through structured programs
 - New customer acquisition linked to conservation engagement

- [View the CA Role as Long-Term Positioning](#): Conservation agronomy increasingly intersects with grain premiums, CI scoring, ethanol markets, and policy compliance. Retailers that delay engagement may find themselves reacting rather than leading.

In conclusion, conservation agronomists are evolving from experimental roles to strategic assets. Retailers that approach conservation as an integrated, future-facing capability appear best positioned to capture both tangible and intangible returns. Despite the current economic headwinds farmers face, there was still a sense that there is great potential for the value creation that these roles bring to agricultural retail, given the opportunities to sustain soil health and mitigate environmental challenges.

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