



FROM THE GROUND UP

ftgup.org

A Farmer-Led, Farmer-Centered Approach to Conservation Research

2026 Impact Report: Year 2 of 5

For the past two years, the From the Ground Up (FTGUp) project has been changing the traditional agricultural research model by empowering farmers to lead. Rather than running controlled experiments on university research plots or telling farmers what researchers want to study on their land, our university scientists and staff are supporting groups of farmers who have identified practices they want to test on their own farms. The focus is on assessing the performance of conservation practices under working farm conditions.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS:

Step 1: Groups of farmers in Ohio and Missouri design and implement research projects to answer questions about conservation practices in their own fields.

Step 2: Research partners at Ohio State University, University of Missouri, Central State University, and Lincoln University of Missouri help farmers stay on track. Researchers collect and analyze samples to assess impacts on productivity, soil health, and economic outcomes.

Step 3: Based on their group's findings, farmers are supported to present results to peers at field days, agricultural conferences, and other events.

ELEVATING FARMER VOICES

Throughout the process, farmers share knowledge amongst themselves and exchange ideas with researchers.

For example:

- Farmer group leaders and project managers meet quarterly to discuss projects.
- All important decisions are made jointly by farmer leaders and project managers.
- Farmers share what they learn with other farmers through farmer-led field days and workshops.
- Farmers serve as ambassadors in the media and at meetings where conservation practices and policy are discussed.

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FIRST TWO YEARS

From the Ground Up is funded by a \$10-million grant from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. In the first two years of the five-year project, more than 150 people, including more than 60 farmer participants, have:

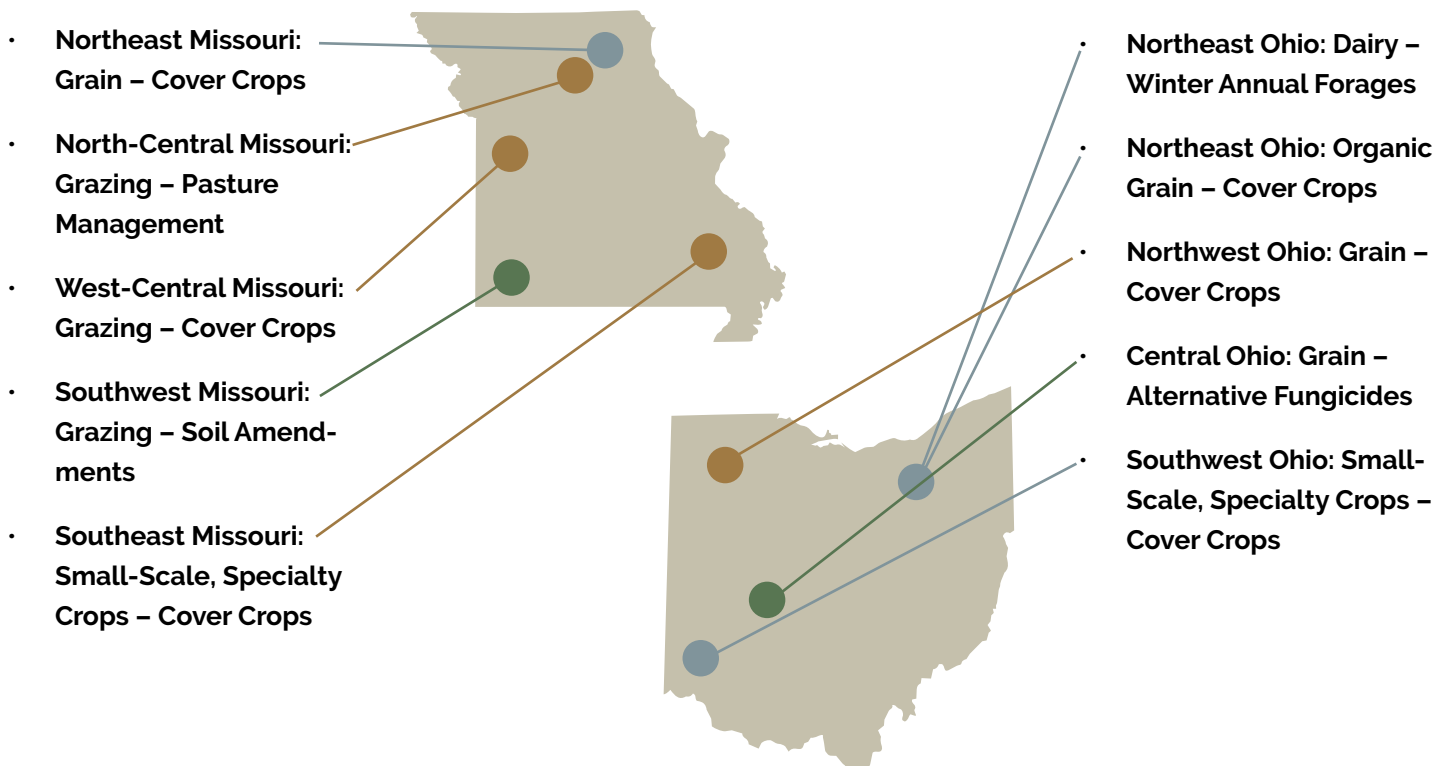


Corn from the Central Ohio node, which is testing alternative fungicide practices on corn and soybeans.

- Collected and analyzed ~600 baseline soil samples and more than 1,000 plant samples.
- Measured water infiltration on 60 farms.
- Installed nearly 70 on-farm weather stations.
- Developed new watershed models to explore the potential impact of farmer conservation practices on larger landscapes.
- Engaged dozens of community leaders and industry partners to connect our work with existing conservation initiatives.
- Brought on a first cohort of 8 summer student interns.

WHAT'S IN A NODE?

Farmers are grouped into 10 “nodes,” each of which is led by one farmer leader who has recruited others with similar farms in their region. The farmers in each node determine together what they will study and how. Researchers may suggest specific monitoring methods aimed at generating robust data that will better answer their questions. However, the researchers do not dictate specific farming practices or inputs. This preserves the real-world farming environment.



Find more details on each node and their on-farm research at ftgup.org/the-project/on-farm-research-nodes.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



Donee Boykin grows vegetables and herbs on Endigo's Herbals & Organics, her half-acre, regenerative farm in Trotwood, Ohio. She leads a group of **small-scale specialty crop farmers in southwest Ohio** studying how winter cover crops affect their soil health and yields long-term. They designed

their project to complement what they were already doing and to accelerate their personal goals of bettering their soil and ability to feed people.

Boykin says the project cultivates a valuable community. She recalls meeting a large-scale grain farmer from a different node. They farm differently, but they found common ground as land stewards and learned from one another. For example, he introduced her to the idea of burning cover crops as a termination method.

Her own node decided to meet monthly, to talk about the project and to more generally support each other by sharing knowledge, ideas, and seeds.

"It's very important for us to be here," Boykin says. "You're going to get more accurate results, outcomes and possible solutions when research is farmer-based vs. someone in a lab somewhere dealing with hypotheticals."



Tomatoes from the Southwest Ohio specialty crops node led by Donee Boykin. Her team is examining the impact of winter cover crops on weeds, soil health, and crop yield.



Farmers in the Southwest Missouri grazing node apply different soil amendments to pastures by drone. They are testing worm castings, urea fertilizer and Texas Pasture Plus Fertilizer.



When **Adam Boman** first heard farmers in the From the Ground Up project would come up with their own research concepts and designs, he thought it sounded too good to be true.

"But that is how it was set up," says Boman, who raises sheep and grass-finished cattle and leads a grazing-focused node in southwest Missouri.

Boman's team of ranchers in southwest Missouri initially planned to test the alternative fertilizer treatment Green Lightning on their pastures. However, after their first season, they decided they wanted to pivot to look at soil amendments focused on building soil health with fewer inputs long-term. Because this project is truly farmer-led, they were not locked into their original study. Researchers backed them up, helped them redesign their treatment protocols, and took new baseline soil samples where necessary.

"[The project] is very neat," Boman says. "I can see how it can pay dividends for a long time, understanding and having the dialogue we're having."

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WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

- Farmers and the project team are excited about this bold new approach. Farmers are most engaged when recruited by farmers they already know and respect.
- Flipping research from researcher-led to farmer-led is challenging for both sides.
- Researchers must recognize they cannot control all variables in these projects. Variability is a reality in farming that must be reflected in research if it is to be effective.
- Farmers must determine their own research questions and designs as well as keep strong records. They need to do this with limited time and energy.
- Investment in dedicated research and engagement coordinators is crucial. They provide the facilitation and support needed to maximize farmers' time and value.



Farmer Scott Myers explains the research that his group of organic farmers are doing on-farm in Northeast Ohio to other farmers, researchers and students.



Missouri farmer Josh Payne chats with Kamal Deep, research and engagement coordinator for From the Ground Up in Missouri. Payne is part of the West-Central Missouri grazing node.

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