Understanding Farmer and Landowner Barriers to Field Buffers

Vegetative buffers along crop fields are highly efficient at reducing soil erosion and protecting water quality, yet widespread adoption of this conservation practice is lacking in Tennessee and Kentucky. This project aimed to gather information from farmers and landowners to increase understanding of barriers to implementing buffers. Three row crop farmer and two non-operating landowner focus groups were held in January 2025 in northwestern Tennessee and western Kentucky to help identify key benefits and barriers to field buffer adoption in the region. The Nature Conservancy intends to use this information to problem solve with partners and stakeholders and ultimately to help improve programs for farmers and landowners interested in buffers.

Recommendations

Farmers and landowners identified the following characteristics of an ideal program supporting vegetative buffers:

♦ Financial incentives competitive with commodity markets

♦ Technical service providers available to give site-specific guidance

♦ Contractors available for installation and maintenance

♦ Face-to-face educational opportunities backed up with printed/electronic educational materials

♦ Flexible program options

Improved communication between farmers and non-operating landowners is an identified need that complements these recommendations.

Benefits of Field Buffers

♦ Financial benefits to farmers by reducing yield drag

♦ Conservation benefits such as reducing sediment loss to water ways

♦ Practical on-farm benefits such as equipment access

Barriers to Field Buffers

♦ Financial concerns like establishment cost, return on investment, or lost income

♦ Maintenance concerns like weed control and lack of time or proper equipment

♦ Incentive program specifications that are too restrictive

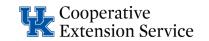Authors: Amanda Gumbert (University of Kentucky) and Olivia Vogel (Marble Creek Consulting)

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The Nature Conservancy

UK Cooperative Extension Service

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