Wallace Center AT WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

ARTISAN GRAIN COLLABORATIVE

Forever Green

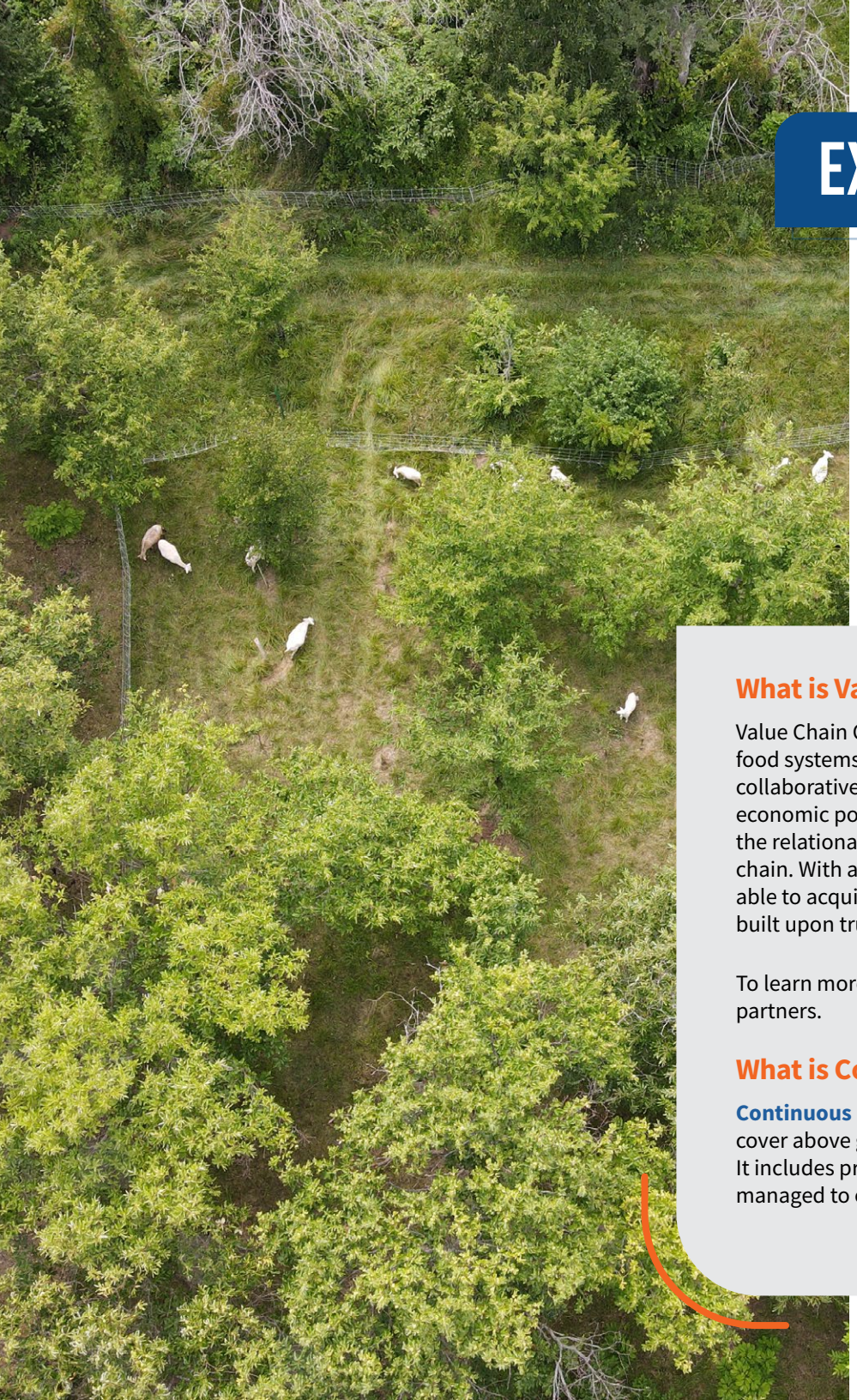
GreenLands Blue Waters

SAVANNA INSTITUTE

WISCONSIN FOOD HUB COOPERATIVE

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR ADVANCING VALUE CHAIN COORDINATION IN THE MIDWEST

HOW DO WE WORK COLLECTIVELY AND STRATEGICALLY TO AMPLIFY OUR VALUE CHAIN COORDINATION EFFORTS AND TRANSFORM THE AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE WITH CONTINUOUS LIVING COVER?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Midwest is at a critical juncture in transforming its agricultural landscape toward regenerative practices and continuous living cover (CLC). While interest in sustainable farming is growing, efforts to build the necessary value chain infrastructure to bring these products to market remain fragmented and under-resourced. This strategy document outlines a collaborative framework to strengthen Value Chain Coordination (VCC) across the region, enabling farmers, businesses, and communities to thrive in a more equitable and resilient food system.

What is Value Chain Coordination (VCC)

Value Chain Coordination is a market-based approach to developing local and regional food systems that better serve communities. Value chain work includes the development of collaborative ties among businesses along the food supply chain, with the expectation that the economic position of these supply chain members improves. Value Chain Coordination develops the relational infrastructure, in the form of skills, competencies and relationships, in a food value chain. With a strong relational infrastructure, individuals and organizations are far more readily able to acquire and utilize hard infrastructure in their communities. Value Chain Coordination is built upon trust and transparency in relationships.

To learn more about VCC, **read through these "Quicksheets"** developed by Wallace Center and partners.

What is Continuous Living Cover (CLC)

Continuous Living Cover (CLC) refers to agricultural systems that maintain year-round vegetative cover above ground and living roots in the soil to improve soil health, water quality, and resilience. It includes practices like using **cover crops**, **perennial forages and grains**, and **agroforestry**, all managed to ensure the ground is covered with plants and roots throughout the year.

Led by the Wallace Center at Winrock International and supported by a USDA Regional Food Systems Partnership (RFSP) planning grant, this initiative brings together mission-driven organizations from across the Midwest. Through inclusive outreach, peer learning, and strategic planning, partners have co-developed a shared vision and actionable strategy to advance VCC in support of regenerative agriculture. The vision centers on increasing the acreage under regenerative and CLC practices *and* expanding the range of products grown using these methods. A network of farmers, entrepreneurs, and support organizations will work together to build markets, share knowledge, and develop the infrastructure needed to scale these practices regionally.

The strategy centers on three focus areas:

1. **Shared Services for Keystone Businesses** – providing technical and operational support to critical regional enterprises.
2. **Market Intelligence Sharing** – improving coordination and efficiency through shared tools and buyer engagement.
3. **Leadership Relief and Strategic Development** – supporting organizational and business sustainability through fellowships and strategic planning resources.

To implement this strategy, partners will convene as the Midwest Continuous Living Cover Working Group, a values-aligned coalition committed to collaborative action. This group will serve as the central coordinating body, fostering long-term relationships, shared learning, and strategic alignment across the region.

Together, this work lays the foundation for a regenerative, resilient, and regionally rooted food system that supports farmers, strengthens communities, and restores the land.

PHOTO: ASKEGAARD ORGANIC FARM | BETH MCCONNON

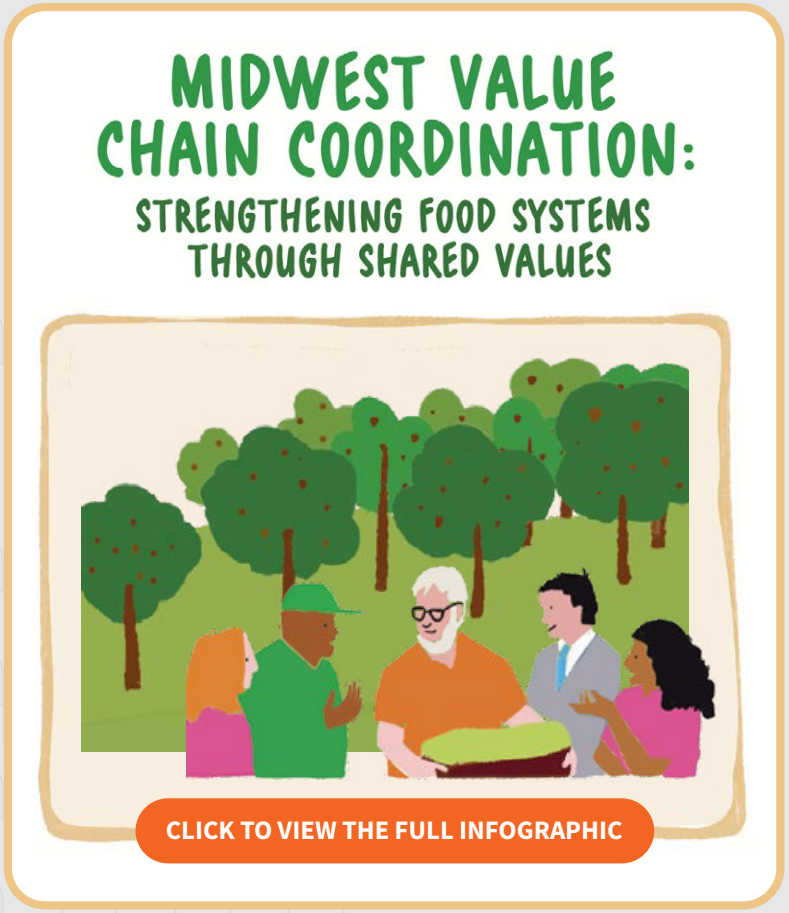
CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT MIDWEST AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The Midwest is the center of conventional agriculture in the U.S. While such agriculture is highly productive, it also creates environmental, economic, and social problems. This stems from a reliance on monocultures and intensive livestock systems that depend heavily on machinery and chemical inputs. This approach wears down the soil while also releasing nutrients to waterways and pollution into the air – harming both people and animals. It also offers farmers few options to be profitable and many must "get big or get out" to survive. As farms consolidate and mechanize, it reduces the need for local labor, leading to job loss, economic and population decline in rural communities. In response, farmers, non-profit organizations, universities, government agencies and others have worked for decades to shift the region's agriculture landscape. For many, the goal has been to improve the health of the environment and rural economies while producing nutritious food that improves the wellbeing of farmers, workers, and consumers. This can be accomplished by growing a wider variety of crops and livestock using practices that create healthy soil, connected to businesses that support their workers, consumers, and communities. Some refer to this as "regenerative" or "perennial" agriculture that keeps continuous living plant cover on the land.

Growing more crops and animals with regenerative practices can help more farmers, workers, and consumers in the Midwest thrive, but only if these products can be moved and sold to enough consumers. Conventional agriculture has resulted in extractive supply chains. Making big changes to conventional agriculture requires building regional value chains that link farmers, workers, and consumer with a high level of fairness. This requires collaboration between different stakeholders, including farmers, consumers, food processors, distributors, and policymakers. Increasingly, those working to change Midwest agriculture are aware of this and interested in building regional value chains that support farmers and communities. This includes a growing interest in not just the physical infrastructure of value chain coordination (i.e., processing plants, food hubs, etc.) but also the human infrastructure of value chain coordination (i.e., shared knowledge, peer-learning, etc.) that help make local and regional food systems consistently successful. Unfortunately, efforts to expand value chain work in the Midwest that regenerative practices and continuous living cover are often nascent, fragmented, and uncoordinated. Many of the organizations involved in this project were already engaged in parallel efforts to advance continuous living cover and value chain coordination and consistently expressed a need for deeper collaboration—yet lacked the time and capacity to initiate and sustain such coordination on their own.

PHOTO: MEADOWLARK ORGANICS

BUILDING THE REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP



To combat this, in Spring 2022, a small group of Midwest stakeholders met in Wisconsin to better understand each other's efforts to build and sustain value chains for agricultural products from perennial and continuous-living cover systems. Participants included peer organizations already collaborating on small grains, perennials, and other continuous cover crops: Artisan Grain Collaborative, University of Minnesota Forever Green Initiative, Grassland 2.0, Green Lands Blue Waters, Savanna Institute, and Wallace Center at Winrock International.

The meeting and a follow-up survey surfaced shared perceptions of the benefits, challenges, and opportunities for deeper regional coordination to support policy, funding, and strategic activities. Over the following year, the group developed a set of shared values titled ***Midwest Value Chain Coordination: Strengthening Food Systems Through Shared Values***, which laid the groundwork for broader engagement around a shared vision for regenerative, equitable food systems in the Midwest.

In May 2023, the group hosted a two-day meeting in Madison, Wisconsin to expand the conversation, inviting a wider range of organizations, including those working with underserved farmers, businesses, and communities. Guided by the shared values, the meeting focused on strengthening relationships, sharing current value chain coordination efforts, and identifying opportunities and challenges for future collaboration.

One opportunity identified was applying for a Regional Food Systems Planning (RFSP) grant through United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This funding would facilitate Midwest partners to develop a shared identity and strategy for advancing value chain coordination in support of a transformed agricultural landscape with Wallace Center as the lead organization and facilitator for the partnership. Recognizing the alignment of their goals and the potential impact of coordinated efforts, the group of partners collaborated on the proposal—and were ultimately successful in securing the grant.

PROJECT DETAILS AND METHODOLOGY

To develop this strategy for advancing VCC in support of regenerative agriculture and continuous living cover (CLC) systems in the Midwest, the Wallace Center and its partners undertook a multi-step planning process under the RFSP grant. This process was designed to be inclusive, iterative, and grounded in the lived experiences of those working to transform the region's food and farming systems.

The work began with broad outreach to organizations across the Midwest. Through interviews and conversations, the team gathered insights into how different stakeholders perceive the role of value chain coordination, what challenges they face, and what opportunities they see for collaboration. These findings helped shape a shared understanding of the current landscape and informed the projects' next steps.

Building on this foundation, the Wallace Center hosted a tailored educational series on value chain coordination concepts and foster peer learning among project participants, led by **Kitchen Sync Strategies**. This helped establish a common language and deepen relationships among organizations working in different parts of the region. With this shared knowledge in place, partners came together for a facilitated, in-person planning session to co-create a regional framework and strategy for VCC. This session focused on aligning around a set of shared goals and identifying strategic priorities that could guide collective action.

Through this intentional and inclusive process, the project produced a strategy rooted in shared values, informed by a variety of perspectives, and designed to support long-term transformation of the Midwest's agricultural landscape. As part of its implementation, the strategy will provide structured networking opportunities and targeted technical assistance to support leaders and organizations working on regenerative agriculture and value chain coordination.

Visual roadmap of the Midwest strategy to strengthen value chains through collaboration, highlighting vision, challenges, opportunities, and key activities for advancing regenerative agriculture and continuous living cover.

THE SOLUTION - A MIDWEST CONTINUOUS LIVING COVER WORKING GROUP

To move this strategy from concept to action, the collaborating organizations have committed to forming the **Midwest Continuous Living Cover Working Group**—a values-aligned, action-oriented coalition focused on accelerating continuous living cover adoption and strengthening regional value chains across the Midwest. This working group framework is designed to support implementation and long-term collaboration.

The Working Group will serve as the central coordinating body for this strategy, bringing together mission-driven partners from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Membership is open to organizations that share the group's vision and values and are actively supporting regenerative agriculture and value chain development in the region.

Rather than simply sharing information, the Working Group is designed to coordinate shared work, pool resources, and maintain accountability across organizations. Members will engage in regular virtual meetings and annual in-person gatherings to build relationships, align efforts, and provide expert-led and peer-to-peer support. A shared partner directory will help track geographic and product focus areas, key strategies, and opportunities for collaboration.

MIDWEST CONTINUOUS LIVING COVER WORKING GROUP

Mission

Our working group is an action-oriented collaboration that provides: connection and collaboration opportunities, shared business support resources, market intelligence, and collective strategies that lift up farmers, businesses, and communities.

Vision

This Working Group will bring together mission-driven partners to accelerate continuous living cover adoption and strengthen regional value chains in the Midwest.

Membership is open to values aligned value chain organizations supporting the adoption of continuious living cover in the Midwest, with a focus in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin.

Activities

Annual in-person meeting of all members to reconnect and realign

Regular in-person and virtual gatherings to gain visibility into one another's work build relationships and provide expert-led and peer-peer support.

Quarterly virtual meetings to coordinate shared services, market intelligence sharing, and general coordination

Shared Services for Keystone Businesses
We provide technical support services (branding, marketing, fractional CFO, accounting, legal, logistics, etc.) to selected keystone businesses working with priority regions and products.

Partnership Listing
We provide a directory of all working group participants, including their geographic and product focus, key strategies, and asks and offers of the community

Market Intelligence Sharing
We collaborate on systems and tools (e.g., shared CRM or buyer database) to share market insights and coordinate buyer outreach to avoid duplication and strengthen market-building efforts.

Leadership Relief and Strategic Development
– supporting organizational and business sustainability through fellowships and strategic planning resources.

THE SOLUTION, CONTINUED:

The strategy is organized around three core focus areas:

Shared Services for Keystone Businesses

The Working Group will develop a program to offer technical support—such as branding, marketing, fractional CFO services, accounting, legal, and logistics—to selected keystone businesses that are critical to regional value chains. By narrowing the scope to priority regions and products, and pooling efforts across organizations, this program aims to be both impactful and fundable.

Market Intelligence Sharing

Members will collaborate on tools and systems (e.g., shared CRM or buyer databases) to exchange market insights and coordinate buyer outreach. This will reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and strengthen market-building efforts across the region.

Leadership Relief and Strategic Development

Recognizing the burnout and capacity challenges faced by founders and leaders, the Working Group will explore mechanisms to provide members with time and resources through a fellowship program, to step back from daily operations and focus on strategic development. This may be integrated with the shared services program to ensure continuity and support.

Together, these focus areas reflect a commitment to not only advancing regenerative agriculture and continuous living cover, but also to building the human infrastructure needed to sustain and scale this work. The Working Group provides the structure and relationships necessary to implement the strategy collaboratively, equitably, and effectively.

CONCLUSION

With this strategic framework in place, the Midwest Continuous Living Cover Working Group will begin convening to activate the strategy through collaborative action, starting with one of the identified focus areas. The group will build on existing relationships and expertise to co-create solutions, share resources, and drive progress toward a more regenerative, resilient, and equitable agricultural landscape in the Midwest.

If you or your organization are interested in collaboration, please reach out! **WallaceCenter@winrock.org**.

ABOUT THE WALLACE CENTER

The Wallace Center is a national program of Winrock International, a global nonprofit advancing social, environmental, and economic equity. Founded in 1983 and integrated into Winrock in 2000, the Center works to transform food and farming systems in the U.S. through regenerative agriculture, equitable economies, and community-led innovation. Wallce Center's 40 years of work supporting local and regional food systems includes dedicated support for value chain professionals (VCPs) and broader VCC.

Over the past decade, the Wallace Center has focused on strengthening VCC, including co-developing the USDA-supported FoodLINC initiative to identify core VCC skills and support pilot projects. Building on this work, the Wallace Center created a five-module training curriculum—now delivered through USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) funding—to build capacity for regional food businesses. It also incubated national Community of Practice (CoP) with over 350 members, offering peer learning, mentorship, and resources that is now hosted by the **Food Systems Leadership Network**.

Given the long-standing VCC work of the Wallace Center and its regional and national networks on the topic, the project partners agreed to the Wallace Center facilitating this project and strategy framework process. The Wallace Center has experience bringing together increasingly diverse groups of individuals, organizations, and entities to develop unifying strategies.

To learn more about the Wallace Center, visit **wallacecenter.org**.

PHOTOS BY: ELISABETH SPRATT AND THE WALLACE CENTER