Systems-Level Water Transformation: Regenerative Agricultural and Farm Financing

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In partnership with River Alliance of Wisconsin (RAW)

Duke SANFORD HART LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

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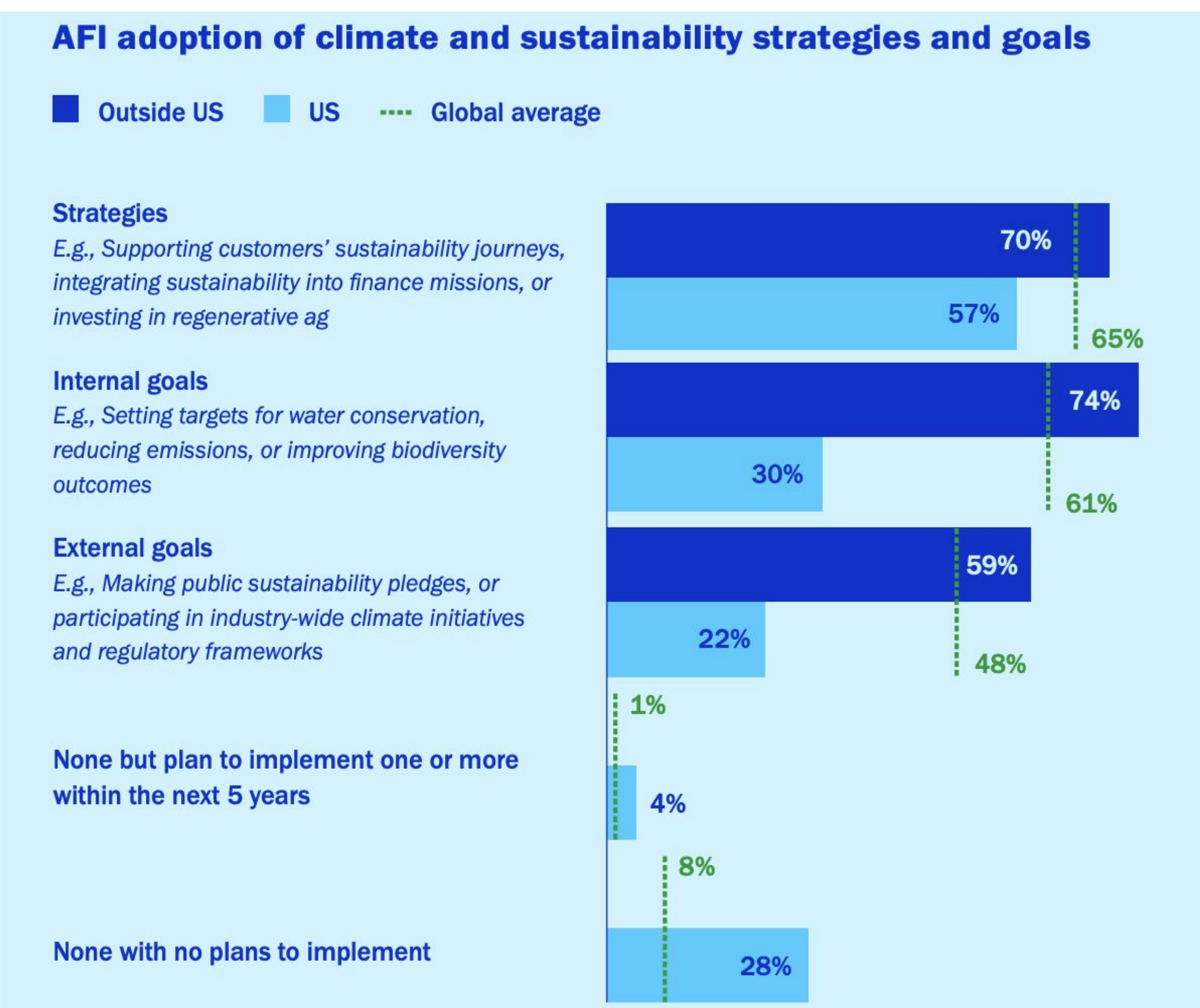
"Long-term farm profitability is not undermined by near-term investments in conservation and climate resilience — it depends on it." - Dick Wittman, *farmer*

Agriculture is the largest source of nonpoint water pollution in Wisconsin, and current agricultural financing fortifies unsustainable farming practices. US agricultural financing institutions lag internationally in terms of climate and sustainability focused financing.



Source: Monast, et al., 2025

A leading cause of this gap is the **lack of lender knowledge of conservation agriculture's environmental and financial impacts.**

- Only 15% of loan officers think they are very or extremely knowledgeable about the financial impacts of conservation agriculture
- 86% believe that having better information on conservation practices would enable them to better assist their clients and adapt loan offerings

Loan officers require more information of conservation practices to expand their financial offerings, which is the **first step towards making conservation agriculture standard market practice.**

Combatting This Information Gap: Farm Finance Workshops

- I helped RAW organize a series of workshops with agricultural lenders and county conservationists
- Each group informs the other of how they operate and general practices. Participants also work through a case study.
- The meetings are geographically focused, and participants that work closely to one another are seated together, making it easier to create lasting partnerships
- Mutual learning is a critical element of the workshop's value.

Learnings and Outcomes

- Participants established new cross-sector relationships and said they gained insight into the links between conservation practice and business risk reduction
  - One lender attendee commented, "there is a monetary value to conservation and conservationists are trying to determine this value. [I plan to] expand my loan narratives to include and promote conservation benefits to analysts and underwriters."
- Conservationist attendees found learning about the lending process fascinating and "useful for their work supporting farmers in land use planning."

Next Steps and Further Questions

- **For RAW:** Analyze feedback and successes/ failures and **institutionalize** conservation education for lendings (gaining strategies **from the extensive report I prepared** covering bank governance, capitalization requirements, risk and federal regulation)
- **For my leadership journey**: Explore questions that arose, including
  - How do I continue to take big, systems level problems and break them down into the right size components to bring about change?
  - In what other ways can I bring people together to bring about new knowledge, and in turn, change?