

# Ag-E MINDSPACE

Use this framework to strengthen your agri-environmental program with behavioral insights.

## Background

In our budget-constrained world, we're always looking for ways to make our voluntary programs more cost-effective. How can we design programs so that farmers and landowners want to participate and take actions to improve our environment?

Providing economic incentives is one way that we can make these programs attractive, but other factors matter too (and sometimes matter more!). Behavioral scientists have identified simple, low-cost program modifications, frequently called "nudges," that can improve program outcomes based on behavioral insights.

We highlight the insights that are relevant to agri-environmental programs using the MINDSPACE framework, which was developed by behavioral scientists.

## What is Ag-E MINDSPACE?

Ag-E MINDSPACE describes nine categories of nudges that are relevant for agri-environmental (Ag-E) programs: Messengers, Incentives, Norms, Defaults, Salience, Priming, Affect, Commitment, and Ego. Figure 1 describes the behavior associated with each of these categories.

## Application Ideas

Below we've outlined some ways that you can put these insights to work for your program.

**Messengers:** Work with influential members of the community to deliver information about your program, especially when the information may be new or controversial.

**Incentives:** Think carefully about how your incentives are structured and presented to participants. For example, research has shown that farmers prefer upfront payments even if they could earn more through payments in the future. See Behavioral Insights Brief no. 5 Gains from Avoiding Losses for another example of how you can frame your incentives for maximum impact.

**Norms:** Provide information about how other farmers and landowners are engaging in environmental stewardship. See Behavioral Insights Brief no. 2 The Pull of Social Comparisons for more info.

**Defaults:** In your menu of stewardship options, make above-average environmental commitments the default. See Behavioral Insights Brief no. 1 Power of Defaults for more information.

For references and more information about Ag-E MINDSPACE (Behavioral Insights Brief no. 8), visit [www.centerbear.org](http://www.centerbear.org) or email CBEAR co-Directors, Paul Ferraro ([pferraro@jhu.edu](mailto:pferraro@jhu.edu)) and Kent Messer ([messer@udel.edu](mailto:messer@udel.edu)).

Funded by USDA, CBEAR is a consortium of major research universities that uses the most modern science and methods to improve agri-environmental programs.

M	Messenger	We are heavily influenced by who communicates information to us.
I	Incentives	Our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts.
N	Norms	We are strongly influenced by what others do.
D	Defaults	We go with the flow of pre-set options.
S	Salience	Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us.
P	Priming	Our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues.
A	Affect	Our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions.
C	Commitment	We seek to be consistent with our public promises and reciprocate acts.
E	Ego	We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves.

**Salience:** Provide clear, concise, non-technical explanations in program materials and make the application process as simple as possible. See Behavioral Insights Brief no. 3 The Costs of Complexity for more information.

**Priming:** Reach out to people before you ask for their participation. Show them the benefits of participation through influential images and words that may make them more receptive to the program.

**Affect:** Connect with landowners on an emotional level by describing positive impacts of environmental stewardship that they care about, like how their actions can create a better world for their children and grandchildren.

**Commitment:** Ask people to make a public commitment to participate in a program, especially if participation requires sustained actions over time.

**Ego:** Recognize farmers and landowners for their stewardship actions using awards, verification programs, and other public acknowledgments, including signs that can be displayed on their land. Check out the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP), which is an example of a successful voluntary program that recognizes agricultural stewards.

## Testing Ideas

How much impact will these behavioral insights have in your program? This is an important question, and careful testing with randomized controlled trials will give you the answer. Using this approach, we can design evidence-based programs with greater levels of participation, participant satisfaction, and improved environmental outcomes. See Behavioral Insights Brief no. 6 Test, Learn, Adapt for more information.