



Sustainable Conservation Practices for Healthier Water and Soil – A Farmer-Led Approach

May 2017 Snapshot



*An after-harvest view of a cover crop established into standing corn. Faribault County, Minnesota
Photo Credit: Faribault County SWCD*

Sustainable: (sus-tain-able) *adjective*

Pertaining to a system that maintains its own viability by using techniques that allow for continual reuse.

Conservation: (con-ser-va-tion) *noun*

A careful preservation and protection of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect.

Practice: (prac-tice) *noun*

The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method.

Research and experience have both shown that upland conservation practices are capable of increasing water quality and soil health. Even more of note, when used in the right place, right time, and with the right management, conservation practices can also be environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. However, the question of why we don't see more of these sustainable conservation practices on the landscape still remains. How can we increase adoption of sustainable conservation practices in order to see an increase in Minnesota's water and soil quality? The staff at Faribault County Soil & Water Conservation District may have discovered the key: a farmer-led approach for education, outreach, and implementation.

In response to landowner needs, the Faribault County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) has made it a priority to regularly host workshops, round table talks, and field days. Recently, efforts have been made to focus these events on specific upland conservation practices: cover crops, strip-till, no-till, nutrient management, etc. A notable example was the February 2017 Soil Health Workshop held in Blue Earth, Minnesota. Faribault County SWCD staff assisted in event management, but it was the local farmers and landowners that requested the event be held. It was these same farmers and landowners that chose specific speakers and topics. One of these speakers was Gabe Brown, a well-known and experienced cover crop and no-till farmer from North Dakota. The event brought in more than 100 attendees, of which about 80% were landowners, from all over Minnesota.



Attendees of the February 2017 Soil Health Workshop. Blue Earth, MN.

Photo Credit: Faribault County SWCD

A smaller, yet still impactful, outreach effort by the Faribault County SWCD was the development of a brochure focused on the benefits of cover crops. The brochure is specifically targeted to more than 150 area farmers with canning crop contracts. It will be utilized for the 2017 growing season and has support from the local canning company. Future opportunities from this initiative are anticipated.

Faribault County SWCD Program Administrator Michele Stindtman notes, “Staff and supervisors have been taking more time and asking our individual landowners and groups what it is exactly that they are looking for: funding via incentives and cost-share or education opportunities. Surprisingly, we are seeing more and more of these answers being focused on the need in obtaining more education.” Landowner questions abound. Who is a local source for cover crop seed? What is the latest date and lowest seeding rate for a cover crop established after late sweetcorn when the next year’s crop will be soybeans? Is there a local farmer with experience with strip-till? I have a piece of land that I don’t want to continue to farm; are there any other options? The list goes on. It’s become clear that landowners are searching for information.



*Spring growth of a Winter Cereal Rye cover crop that was broadcast with a fertilizer spreader after fall sweet corn harvest. Faribault County, MN.
Photo Credit: Jill Sackett Eberhart, BWSR*

In order to offer educational opportunities, maintain consistent funding for Best Management Practices (BMPs), have an additional pool of flexible funding, and maintain and increase professional, trained staff, the Faribault County SWCD has applied for and received funds from various sources. This list includes: local funds, BWSR grant programs such as SWCD Local Capacity Services and State Cost Share, and MPCA funds from both Clean Water Partnership and Section 319.

Faribault County SWCD is not the only group focusing on upland conservation practices in Minnesota. The Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA) and the Hawk Creek Watershed Project are two examples of watersheds with funding. They both have Section 319 grants that include funds for cover crop implementation. Additional SWCDs are also choosing to add cover crops and/or other nonstructural land management practices to their 2017 State Cost Share grant allotment.

Let’s not forget the landowner efforts. The Faribault County area is home to a group of farmers dedicated to practicing and sharing their knowledge of soil health, conservation tillage, cover crops, and other conservation practices. In addition to this group, there are farmer-led groups and organizations focusing on soil health related conservation practices scattered across Minnesota. The Freeborn County Soil Health Team and the Fillmore County Soil Health Team are two such examples.

Interest in sustainable, upland conservation practices is growing from the ground up. Farmers, landowners, local conservation offices, state agencies, and federal agencies are working to increase knowledge and adoption. Whether that adoption comes from education and outreach efforts or from implementation grant funds, these practices can do their part to increase Minnesota’s water and soil quality.

