

Soil health: From field to film



When COVID-19 canceled a field day, Rice SWCD switched to a drive-in format featuring area farmers who incorporated cover crops and conservation tillage

FARIBAULT — With its field day canceled because of COVID-19, Rice Soil & Water Conservation District instead showcased cover crops and conservation tillage via five short films projected on a big white machine shed door.

Teresa DeMars saw lots of great soil health footage from across the country when she curated the drive-in movie night lineup. All five selections screened on a late-August evening on Larry Conrad’s rural Dundas farm were set in southeastern Minnesota.

“The organic urban farmer growing lettuce might not connect with the corn-bean guy. That’s why I chose the

ones that were corn-bean guys talking to corn-bean guys,” said DeMars, Rice SWCD’s public relations and information specialist.

Farmers most trusted and relevant advice comes from neighbors — no matter if it’s relayed during a face-to-face field day or via projector and FM transmitter.

A \$500 grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Minnesota Office for Soil Health



DeMars

Clockwise from top left: Dave Legvold appears in [“Studying My Soil: A Continuous Education through Trial & Error.”](#) Video Image: Strip-Till Farmer Magazine

Andy Linder appears in [“High Clearance Seeding of Cover Crops.”](#) Kevin Connelly in [“Growing No-till Corn Silage and Cover Crops for Dairy in Southeast Minnesota.”](#) and Tom Pyfferoen in [“No-Till Farming in Corn With Cover Crops in Southeastern Minnesota.”](#)

Video Images: Dan Balluff, USDA-NRCS



(MOSH) helped to pay for the projector and transmitter. It was one of eight grants awarded to help promote soil health without in-person field days.

Among the producers featured in the Rice SWCD screening was Dave Legvold, 79, who raises corn and soybeans in Rice and Dakota counties. He appeared in a video produced by Strip-Till Farmer Magazine. A few weeks before the screening, Legvold summarized what he might say to farmers, given the opportunity:

“The first year of going to no-till and strip-till is really scary, and the 23rd year of going to no-till and strip-till is really scary. But you have to think about your children, your grandchildren, or whomever comes to farm the land you’re on now,” Legvold said.

“You need to start making incremental steps,” Legvold said. “Just tinker with it. Find people that you trust and talk to them. We have

a wealth of information out there.”

A science teacher for 35 years in the Twin Cities suburbs, Legvold has hosted research students from four colleges and universities on his farm.

Conrad, 62, the Film on the Farm host, planted cover crops a few years ago after he saw how it worked for neighbors.

He and another neighbor farm nearly 2,000 acres of corn and soybeans. They have aerial seeded cover crops into corn in early September, left the corn stalks standing after harvest, and then followed with soybeans the next year.

“It really reduces our fuel bill, and the yields have been holding adequate,” Conrad said. “The erosion loss is cut way down. I think the drainage is better because you’ve got more roots going into the ground and worms have a lot more burrow holes, so the water

doesn’t run off as bad.”

Rice SWCD staff estimates about 2.5% of the county’s 204,982 farmed acres are planted in cover crops. National Ag Statistics Service 2017 data show about 9% of Rice County farmers were experimenting with cover crops. About 34% of the county’s farmers use reduced- or no-till practices.

Those considering conservation tillage and cover crops typically wonder about seed and equipment costs, risk and management. The videos aim to show how well farmers have made those practices work.

“It shows that it can be done — even with the weather, even with economics. There are farmers that are making it work,” DeMars said. “What these videos do is provide a testimonial by the farmer.”

SWCD and NRCS staff planned to promote related programs between films. The SWCD has an inter-seeding cost-share program and

[“Hugh Hammond Bennett: The Story of America’s Private Lands Conservation Movement”](#) is a 20-minute NRCS documentary.

Video Image: NRCS

offers custom inter-seeding so farmers can try it without investing in equipment or developing their own seed mix. NRCS assistance may help to offset the cost of residue and tillage management.

“My hope would be that we can get some additional producers growing cover crops and doing the reduced tillage,” said Chris Schmidt, Faribault-based NRCS district conservationist. “I think there’s good momentum in Rice County, but it would be nice to see it increase.”

Film on the Farm was an RSVP event limited to 20 cars.

“With everybody kind of being housebound, it sounds like a fun, safe idea to get out and do something again,” DeMars said.