

Southern Minnesota alliance turns to video for soil health outreach



From left: Faribault County farmer Andy Linder compared cover crop leaf and root growth from cereal rye planted in early October versus late October with Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program intern Adriene Matthews, and MDA Area Certification Specialist Herman Bartsch. The group gathered content for outreach videos.
Photo Credit: Kim Musser, MSU-WRC



In southern Minnesota, one organization is trying a new approach to inform farmers about soil health practices by putting them directly in touch with other farmers via videos and QR codes posted in fields where those practices can be seen. The goal is to reach producers new to soil health, and to attract those more inclined to learn on their own time.

The Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA) is tapping a \$312,100 Clean Water Fund grant awarded by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in 2022 to support soil health practices and related outreach. The grant runs through Dec. 31, 2025.

GBERBA is a joint powers organization consisting of 10 member counties and SWCDs within the Blue Earth, Le Sueur and Watonwan river watersheds. GBERBA member



Kim Musser, Minnesota State University Mankato-Water Resources Center associate director, filmed Cottonwood County farmer Tom Muller in a field of soybeans growing under a cereal rye cover crop.
Photo Credit: Nathan Harder, Cottonwood SWCD

counties are Blue Earth, Brown, Cottonwood, Faribault, Freeborn, Jackson, Le Sueur, Martin, Waseca and Watonwan.

The Clean Water Fund soil health grant BWSR awarded to GBERBA



Left: From left: Bartsch, Blue Earth County farmer Pat Duncanson, and Matthews made soil observations in one of Duncanson’s fields. Duncanson has seen a noticeable improvement in his soil structure since switching to no-till, strip-till and cover crops. **Middle: From left:** Nathan Harder, Bartsch and Matthews left the field after interviewing a Faribault County farmer. The group used blankets to help block the wind while recording audio. **Photo Credits:** Kim Musser, MSU-WRC **Right:** Muller inspected his field of no-till soybeans planted into a cereal rye cover crop in June. **Photo Credit:** Nathan Harder, Cottonwood SWCD

funds its Soil Health Implementation Grant program. The program funds a combination of outreach efforts across GBERBA’s jurisdiction and will also fund soil health practices implemented near public drinking water sources. More specifically, it aims to support cover crop and reduced tillage implementation, federal Conservation Reserve Program incentives, and residue and tillage management with liquid manure application.

As part of its Soil Health Implementation Grant program, GBERBA is focusing on education and outreach for soil and water conservation district (SWCD) staff, plus landowners and farmers. GBERBA set aside \$49,500 of the Clean Water Fund grant for outreach.

With the outreach funds, GBERBA is creating videos to inform producers about soil health practices. At the time of publication, GBERBA had interviewed three farmers and produced seven informational videos. The completed videos are posted on YouTube, with plans to launch a website to house them in the future. Each three-

Videos

ANDY LINDER FROM LINDER FAMILY FARMS DISCUSSES:

- [Terminating cover crops in south-central Minnesota VIDEO](#)
- [Establishing cover crops in south-central Minnesota VIDEO](#)
- [The importance of planting cereal rye early in the fall, comparing two plots planted three weeks apart and describing the difference in stand development and soil structure VIDEO](#)

PAT DUNCANSON FROM HIGHLAND FAMILY FARMS DISCUSSES:

- [Getting fields dried out and ready for planting using cover crops VIDEO](#)
- [Terminating cover crops in south-central Minnesota VIDEO](#)
- [How he had a mindset shift and started incorporating cover crops and other soil health practices VIDEO](#)
- [How he got started using cover crops in southern Minnesota and where he is at now VIDEO](#)

to 10-minute-long video highlights a specific topic or responds to a frequently asked question about soil health implementation. For example: Why is it important to establish cover crops early in the planting season in southern Minnesota?

The outreach funds support additional activities such as hosting field days, creating informational mailings and displays, and developing the resource website.

GBERBA is contracting with Minnesota State University Mankato-Water Resources Center (MSU-WRC) to produce the

videos and website. Half of the \$47,000 contract with MSU-WRC is funded by the Clean Water Fund grant; GBERBA’s discretionary funds cover the balance.

GBERBA is working with Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Area Certification Specialist Herman Bartsch, a Cottonwood SWCD employee whose position is funded by MDA’s Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP). Bartsch helped to write the grant and is helping with soil health outreach.

Bartsch put together a team to develop online

outreach and create a website for area farmers. The team includes GBERBA Administrative Coordinator and Cottonwood SWCD District Administrator Kay Gross, Cottonwood SWCD program technician Nathan Harder, Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa MAWQCP intern Adriene Matthews and MSU-WRC Associate Director Kim Musser. Harder and Gross are paid by funding from the Clean Water Fund soil health grant from BWSR for their time spent on this outreach initiative.

“We put together a farmer advisory group and had a meeting with them early on,” Bartsch said. “We had farmers from around the area that were either (already) using soil health practices or that were kind of interested.”

Through discussions with the farmer advisory group, the outreach team gathered frequently asked questions and potential outreach topic ideas. The advisory group, which consisted of about 10 local farmers from GBERBA’s watersheds, requested short videos and informational field signs. Farmers and producers want to know quick answers and spend three

to five minutes learning from a local farmer who is implementing soil health practices in their field, according to Musser.

“They’re like, ‘Just focus on videos because we want to have answers to these core questions, and we want to listen to them when we’re working the fields,’” Musser said. “We just want to know the hot questions that many of the farmers have and (provide) quick answers from local farmers who have experience with these practices.”

GBERBA framed the entire project based on the advisory group’s advice.

“They want to learn from local farmers who already know and have experimented with soil health practices. We had a long discussion about how much we should focus on what’s working versus personal failures in order to help others avoid their challenges as they’re embarking on experimenting with soil health practices,” Musser said.

The outreach team has been involved in the

video production by interviewing farmers, filming and editing the footage. Topics include cover crop management, equipment needs, manure incorporation, tillage and economics.

“It’s locally driven. We’re using those producers to get that message out,” Gross said. “(Other landowners) want to hear what’s going on ... what works, what doesn’t work.”

The website will also host a GIS StoryMap.

“The GIS StoryMap would help them to find farmers who are experienced with soil health in their counties. We’re planning to have a short summary about their farm and their operation, and then information about how (to) get in contact with them,” Musser said.

GBERBA plans to install 12 informational signs per county in fields that demonstrate soil health conservation. The signs will have QR codes, which can be scanned to view an explanation of what soil health practice that landowner is implementing

on that specific site, as well as the related informational video.

“People drive by, and they see a cover crop field or a no-till field and they’re curious, but they don’t really know what’s going on out there. So (these signs) give them a way to go online and look and get some more information,” Bartsch said, adding that it’s a good opportunity for people who are hesitant to ask questions in person.

The Clean Water Fund grant from BWSR is the primary funding source for the soil health videos and other outreach. However, some fiscal year 2021 Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) for the Watonwan watershed, which includes six out of the 10 SWCDs within GBERBA, will be used to purchase signs within that watershed.

These outreach efforts are helping GBERBA prepare to receive the upcoming BWSR Soil Health Delivery Program grant and the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCPP) soil health funds

that will be made available through the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Soil health delivery grants are one piece of BWSR’s long-term approach to supporting soil health programs statewide. These non-competitive grants support local efforts to raise awareness about soil health practices via outreach and education. In March, BWSR awarded more than \$17 million in Soil Health Staffing Grants to 40 SWCDs to increase local expertise and provide additional contacts for landowners. Later this year, BWSR intends to leverage \$25 million in RCPP funding awarded to the agency by NRCS in November 2023 to offer direct financial support to landowners who implement soil health practices. [Learn more about BWSR’s soil health grants and related opportunities.](#)

“All of this effort is to try to make people understand the benefits of soil health for the watershed health and also their bottom line,” Musser said.