

# Full switch: Renville County farm's soil health transformation



**Watershed-Based Implementation Funding is funded solely by the Clean Water Fund. WBIF grants support watershed planning partnerships throughout Minnesota.**

A Renville County farm family is incorporating soil health practices into its entire 1,584-acre operation with support from a Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) grant the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) awarded to the Central Minnesota River Watershed Partnership (CMRWP) Joint Powers Board.

Schwindt Farms, Inc. — operated by Rick Schwindt and his son, Mitch — produces corn and soybeans in western Renville County. They first planted cover crops in fall 2023, incorporating several mixes that included cereal rye, kale, oats, lentils and barley. This spring, they practiced no-till across the farm for the first time.

“When switching to regenerative practices, I learned to spend more time on the farm and be interested in each stage of the crop,” said Mitch Schwindt, who discussed the transition on behalf of the family. “Before, we did everything

the same for every field. (With these practices) you learn when to plant, when to terminate, when to spray, and just be more deliberate in the process.”

The Schwindts worked with the Renville County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to secure a \$427,750 contract to support the transition. The contract requires them to maintain the soil health practices for three years, but Schwindt said they intend to continue indefinitely. Although the contract doesn't require a landowner match, Renville County SWCD Administrator Holly Hatlewick said converting the operation cost more than the funding provided. The contract draws from a \$1.33 million WBIF grant BWSR awarded to the CMRWP in September 2022 to support the Hawk Creek-Middle Minnesota Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan.

Local governments form planning partnerships to collaboratively write

*Cover crops emerged amid corn stubble at Schwindt Farms, Inc. in western Renville County. The Schwindt family is incorporating soil health practices into its entire 1,584-acre farm with support from WBIF from BWSR.*

**Photo Credits:**  
Renville SWCD

Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans (CWMPs) through BWSR's One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) program. These water plans identify the highest-priority resource concerns within a specific watershed or planning area. Once BWSR approves a plan, the partnership becomes eligible for WBIF. Actions in plans developed under the Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act and county groundwater plans are also eligible for WBIF.

Planning partnerships use WBIF to pursue projects based on a watershed's greatest needs. The Hawk Creek-Middle Minnesota CWMP identifies soil health practices as a priority goal to help reduce erosion and manage runoff. The partnership has also used WBIF for water storage projects — another priority identified in the CWMP.

"What WBIF allowed us to do is make scalable changes," said Hatlewick. "With WBIF, we're able to fund large contracts like the Schwindts' and actually move entire landscapes forward. It's nice to have a pot (of funding) ready when a willing landowner comes in."

More Minnesota farmers are adopting soil health practices each year. According to the USDA's [Census of Agriculture](#), Minnesota saw a 31% increase in acres planted with cover crops from 2017 to 2022. According to the census, Minnesota is one of the Top 10 states for cover crops in the nation with more than 760,000 acres planted.

The Schwindts have used the funding to purchase new equipment, including an air seeder, to plant cover crops and soybeans. They've also adjusted existing equipment, such as a corn head for their



*Mitch Schwindt, left, and his father, Rick Schwindt, stand in front of their combine. The corn head was modified to better manage their no-till system. WBIF dollars supported the equipment upgrade as part of a full-farm transition to incorporate soil health practices.*

combine, to better manage residue in their no-till system. Schwindt said the family sold its traditional tillage equipment to fully commit to soil health practices. In addition to no-till and cover crops, the Schwindts are introducing conservation crop rotation by adding navy beans and cereal rye to their operation.

"Having this money helps us and we know it's a good investment in the future," Schwindt said. "Spending these dollars wisely is important."

Schwindt said erosion was a primary motivator when deciding to transition the entire operation.

"Last winter, there wasn't much snow cover," Schwindt said. "We saw a lot of neighbors with black snow in the ditches, and we didn't have any because of the no-till. There's a lot less soil blowing away."

Hatlewick said erosion is a concern for many Renville County producers.

"Many growers are struggling with watching their soil move," Hatlewick said. "That's a big piece of this — let's keep that raindrop where it lands. We're heavily drained in Renville County, there's a lot of water moving. All the basic principles of soil health — better infiltration, better nutrient absorption, less erosion, those are all benefits producers can see."

The Renville County SWCD was an early promoter of soil health practices: In 2015, the SWCD with its partners at the Hawk Creek Watershed Project launched a cover crop cost-share program that offers per-acre payments to producers implementing no-till, strip-till or cover crops. Payment rates vary based on which practices are implemented.

In April, the SWCD was among those selected by BWSR to receive an [Alliance to Advance Climate Smart Agriculture grant](#), which will enable the district to support more farmers who implement soil health practices. The alliance program offers \$100 per acre or animal unit to

producers who voluntarily implement practices that sequester carbon, improve soil health, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve water quality. Hatlewick said the SWCD also helps connect area producers with other incentives, such as the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

The Renville County SWCD also has invested in staff training related to nonstructural conservation practices. The SWCD requires technical staff to receive [Job Approval Authority](#) for soil health practices.

This spring, [BWSR awarded a total of \\$17 million to 40 SWCDs in Minnesota](#) — including the Renville County SWCD — to support soil health staffing.

"These are relatively new practices being offered to producers through state funding," said BWSR Board Conservationist Luke Olson, whose work area includes Renville County. "These management practices are different than the traditional, more structured conservation projects. Developing that peer-to-peer contact through soil health staffing will make a big difference."

Hatlewick said that assisting farmers in implementing these emerging practices requires trust and open communication.

"Everything we do is relationship-based, but I think these nonstructural practices are even more so. We're asking producers to change their business model. It's more than just signing a contract. So much of this work is based on trust and relationships."