

# Soil health staffing grant backs farmer mentors in 11 southwestern counties



**B**y connecting farmers with mentors, a soil health staffing grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) aims to boost implementation of soil health practices within the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area's (TSA 5) 11-county region.

TSA 5 was one of 40 recipients [BWSR selected](#) in April to receive a soil health staffing grant. The grants, which are supported by the state's general fund, aim to increase local governments' capacity to provide soil health expertise and guidance to farmers throughout Minnesota. A total of \$17 million was awarded. TSA 5 received \$1.1 million.

TSA 5 includes Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac Qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Rock and Yellow Medicine counties. TSA 5 aims to use the soil health staffing grant to contract with 11 farmers with soil health experience plus eight professional ag consultants — including agronomists and crop specialists — to mentor area farmers. At least one mentor will be available

in each of the 11 counties.

"Everyone has different needs on their farm, and we want to find out what's going to fit each farmer," said Kay Gross, TSA 5 administrative coordinator and the Cottonwood Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) administrator. "These people are well-versed in soil health — they've done it and they've worked through it. They will help farmers understand what works for their specific operation. The mentors can help take all the details into account."

Mentors share their personal experience with soil health practices such as cover crops, no-till and strip-till. Mentors can walk the fields with farmers to see conditions firsthand, help with species selection, provide guidance on when to terminate cover crops, and help calibrate equipment.

"What we're really doing is bridging the gap from our technicians to the farmers," Gross said. "These consultants have more answers than we can give farmers. We're providing

**Left:** Cover crops were interseeded into standing corn on a Rock County farm. **Middle:** Mentors and staff working within the TSA 5 region met July 30 at Painted Prairie Vineyard in Currie. TSA 5 plans to host quarterly meetings to encourage staff and mentors to connect and share advice.

**Right:** Turnips were incorporated into a cover crop mix on a Cottonwood County farm.

**Photo Credits:** Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area

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— Kay Gross, administrator coordinator,  
Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area



them with experts to try to make it as easy as possible for farmers to get helpful information.”

Gross anticipates mentors will offer services equivalent to the work of nearly 1.5 full-time employees. Assigning mentors to county-specific work plans helps tailor services, but mentors are allowed to work across county lines to ensure they can assist farmers who own land in more than one county.

BWSR’s soil health staffing grants cover a three-year period with a one-year

extension option. Hiring mentors as contractors rather than as full-time employees offers TSA 5 flexibility.

“With this approach, we don’t have to worry about losing staff after funding runs out,” Gross said.

Although mentors focus on farmers, they also assist SWCDs with long-term soil health goals. For example: Cottonwood SWCD staff members are working with an agronomist mentor to scout a site for a potential soil health test plot that would give farmers a firsthand look at soil health

practices.

TSA 5 is hosting quarterly meetings for its member SWCD staff and soil health mentors to compare notes, discuss advice, and share what’s working. Gross said she hopes SWCD staff can gain valuable insights from mentors.

The Cottonwood SWCD is involved in another multi-county effort to support farmers’ adoption of soil health practices. Cottonwood County is part of the Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance, which is tapping a \$312,100 Clean Water

Fund grant from BWSR to [support soil health-related outreach](#). Those efforts include producing a series of short videos for farmers about soil health implementation, and posting informational signs with QR codes next to fields that incorporate soil health practices.

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