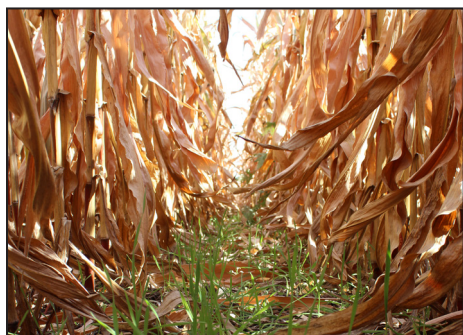


Soil health funding accelerates practice implementation statewide



Left: Cover crops were planted into corn on a Faribault County farm. **Photo Credit:** Faribault SWCD **Middle:** Cover crops were seeded into standing corn via drone on a Renville County farm. **Right:** A cover crop mix that included annual rye, flax, fava beans and kale was interseeded with corn on a Renville County farm. **Photo Credits:** Renville County SWCD



BWSR's Advancing Soil Health in Minnesota Agriculture Initiative is funded in part by \$11.4 million in Clean Water Funds. Other funding sources include \$17.6 million in state general funds and \$25 million in federal Regional Conservation Partnership Program grant funding.

State and federal investments totaling more than \$50 million are helping soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) rapidly accelerate soil health practice implementation across Minnesota.

"Healthy soil is essential for agricultural livelihoods and for making Minnesota landscapes resilient to our changing climate," said Jared House, soils programming coordinator for the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). "These significant investments in improving soil health in Minnesota are helping landowners make systemic changes that boost crop yields while simultaneously increasing environmental benefits in the long term."

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) defines soil health as the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital, living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals and humans. This functionality is reflected in the soil's balanced biological,

chemical and physical properties, which are directly affected by how the land is managed. Conservation practices such as cover crops, strip-till, no-till and rotational grazing help improve soil health.

BWSR in spring 2024 launched the Advancing Soil Health in Minnesota Agriculture initiative, which offers multiple funding opportunities for soil health-related staffing, outreach, technical assistance and practice implementation. Seventy eligible SWCDs automatically qualify for most initiative funding, a change from the traditional competitive grant process.

In August, eligible SWCDs were able to request an initial \$180,000 base grant from BWSR for soil health practice implementation. Once that funding is spent, SWCDs can request an additional \$120,000 per month until BWSR initiative funding is depleted. Of Minnesota's eligible SWCDs, 66 accepted the base grant and 30 have requested additional

funding. Eligible SWCDs include those where at least 30% of land is considered cropland.

The initiative is supported by several state and federal funding sources: \$17.6 million from the General Fund and \$11.4 million from the state Clean Water Fund make up state contributions. The \$25 million [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCPP) grant BWSR received from NRCS in November 2023 provides federal funding for the initiative.

The initiative has offered several other noncompetitive funding opportunities since spring 2024 for outreach and education efforts, technical assistance and practice implementation.

"It's been a fantastic change to have these noncompetitive funds," said Holly Hatlewick, Renville County SWCD administrator. "It's putting projects on the ground, and that's been tremendous. It's allowed us to spend more time working with customers and

be focused on them, rather than applying for grants.”

With leveraged funding, the Renville County SWCD more than doubled participation in its soil health cost-share program within three months. In addition to the base grant, the SWCD requested funding in four subsequent months for a total of \$660,000 as of early December. The Renville County SWCD also received a competitive \$735,000 soil health staffing grant and a \$150,000 noncompetitive grant for soil health delivery through the initiative in summer 2024, bringing the total received in initiative funding to nearly \$1.55 million.

“We went from working with about 20 producers to working with 58 in a single season,” Hatlewick said.

In three months, those producers enrolled a combined 15,000 acres into soil health practices such as cover crops, prescribed grazing and strip-till and no-till.

The Renville County SWCD began offering local cost-share assistance for soil health practices in 2015, but funding was limited.

“We weren’t able to target a lot of landowners and acres (in the beginning) because we’d run out of funds,” Hatlewick said. “By giving us the security of knowing there will be more money, we can talk to that customer, make a conservation plan and see the funding light at the end of the tunnel. We now have a clear target and timeline we can give customers.”

Immediately west of Renville County, the Yellow Medicine SWCD has used initiative funding to ramp up outreach and education efforts. District staff sent more than 700 postcards advertising its soil health



*Purple-top turnip was planted as part of a cover crop mix on a Yellow Medicine County farm. Soil health funding from BWSR has supported new contracts with 26 producers on approximately 2,350 acres in Yellow Medicine County since August. **Photo Credit:** Yellow Medicine SWCD*

cost-share program this fall, which yielded about 100 phone calls to the SWCD office.

Yellow Medicine SWCD conservation technician Michael Pitzl, who oversees the district’s soil health cost-share program, said one goal is to target producers who are new to soil health practices.

“We’re really trying to fund people who have never done it before,” Pitzl said. “I’d say there’s still a lot of skepticism. Some people want to do things the way they’ve always done it, and don’t see a need to change. But with new generations, or multigenerational farms, we’ve noticed increased interest.”

The Yellow Medicine SWCD accepted the \$180,000 base grant option and has made two additional \$120,000 funding requests since August for a total of \$420,000 in initiative funding. To date, this funding has supported new contracts with 26 producers on approximately 2,350 acres.

Faribault County SWCD

Co-Program Administrator Nathan Carr, who oversees the district’s soil health cost-share program, said having ongoing funding available is important since districts are striving to make long-term, systemic changes. The SWCD started a soil health cost-share program in 2016, but like other SWCDs, struggled to find consistent and ongoing funding.

“The new funding has really shifted things,” Carr said. “It gives us an opportunity to reach more producers within our county.”

The Faribault County SWCD accepted the base grant for soil health practices of \$180,000 plus four monthly requests for \$120,000. Combined with a \$120,000 noncompetitive grant that supports outreach, education and soil health delivery, the district has used approximately \$780,000 in initiative funding.

Since August, the Faribault County SWCD has worked with 30 producers to implement soil health practices on more than

12,000 acres. In one case, the funding helped a producer convert his entire operation to cover crops.

“Seeing that producer go from trying cover crops on about 80 acres one year to converting his entire 1,400-acre operation the next was exciting,” Carr said. “That’s what I consider a big success.”

In addition to supporting local adoption of soil health practices, the initiative aims to directly address priority natural resource concerns. Overall project goals include reducing nitrogen use by an estimated 6 million pounds and keeping 215,000 pounds of phosphorus and 25,000 tons of sediment from entering Minnesota waters.

BWSR is accepting applications for initiative soil health delivery funding via a Request for Interest process that closes Jan. 5. [Learn more about the RFI process.](#)

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.