

State-federal partnership invests \$15M in climate-smart agricultural practices



Left: The Fillmore SWCD organized informational meetings for landowners to coincide with each batching period. **Center:** Cereal rye was planted as a cover crop on a Fillmore County farm participating in the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture pilot program. **Right:** Fillmore SWCD staff helped landowners sign up for the program at several in-person events. **Photo Credits:** Fillmore SWCD

A state-federal pilot program designed to increase adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices has provided more than \$15 million in direct financial assistance to Minnesota landowners over the past two years. The effort will convert more than 147,000 acres into agricultural practices that help temper the negative impacts of a changing climate.

The [Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture](#) is an \$80 million pilot program funded by the USDA's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities. Four states — Minnesota, Virginia, Arkansas and North Dakota — are participating in the pilot program, which is led by the Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Participating farmers and ranchers are reimbursed \$100 per acre or animal unit for adopting [climate-smart practices](#) such as cover crops, no-till, nutrient management and prescribed grazing. Climate-smart practices are those that sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase soil health and improve water quality.

"The idea behind this program is simple: If we want farmers to implement these

beneficial practices on a larger scale, we need to compensate them above the base cost of implementation," said Jennifer Hahn, federal conservation programs coordinator for the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), which partnered with local governments to administer the pilot in Minnesota. "The benefits of these practices extend beyond climate protection — and include stabilized or improved yields, fewer vehicle- and equipment-related costs, and less time spent in the field."

BWSR became aware of the opportunity to participate in this unique pilot program through Eunie Biel, who lives in Fillmore County and represents Minnesota townships on BWSR's Board. Biel served on a steering committee for the Rural Investment to Protect our Environment (RIPE), a nonprofit organization that focuses on

regenerative agriculture and renewable energy in rural America. When the RIPE committee began discussing the Alliance program, Biel brought the idea to BWSR staff to see if the program would be a fit for the agency.

"We want to make conservation agriculture the norm across the country," Biel said. "This work is expensive, but healthy soil creates a public benefit. The more people we can get to try this out, the better."

BWSR staff applied on behalf of the agency, and Minnesota was accepted in December 2023 as one of four participating states.

BWSR's Board formally approved the program in April 2024, and the first application period began that summer. Eight soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) are participating in Minnesota's Alliance program: East



**Alliance to Advance
Climate-Smart Agriculture**

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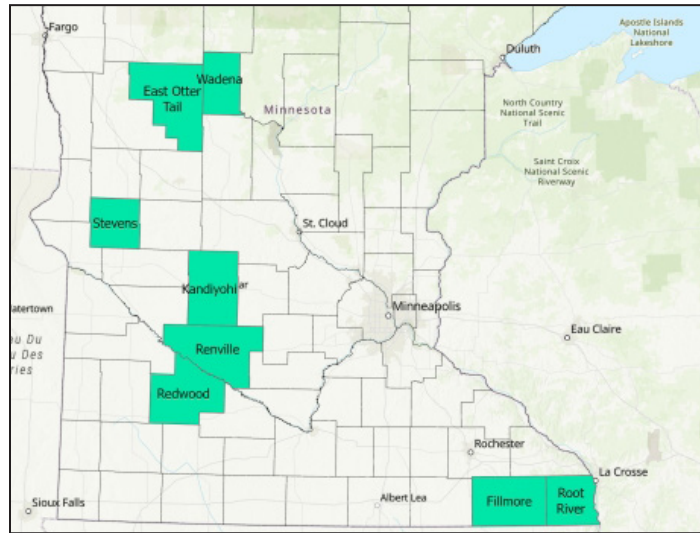


— Eunie Biel, BWSR Board member

Otter Tail, partnering with Wadena; Root River (which serves Houston County); and Kandiyohi, Fillmore, Redwood, Renville County and Stevens. BWSR [provided \\$2.1 million in grant funding](#) to those SWCDs in April 2024 to help with administrative costs.

Landowners were selected based on a lottery system, and sign-ups were organized into four batches. The initial application period in summer 2024 resulted in nearly 400 producers receiving approximately \$6 million in reimbursement funds. A second application period in early 2025 yielded more than 400 producer signups for a total of approximately \$5 million in reimbursements. The program’s third application period took place in June and July 2025, with more than 240 producers receiving \$3.7 million in funding. SWCDs participating in the Alliance program concluded a fourth sign-up period this spring, working with 98 producers who will receive approximately \$1 million in reimbursement funds.

In Fillmore County, more than 400 landowners received \$5.4 million in Alliance funding over the past two years to enroll 53,896 acres in climate-smart practices. Fillmore SWCD nutrient management specialist Sara West said the Alliance program complemented the district’s



Participating counties include Fillmore, Houston, Kandiyohi, Otter Tail, Redwood, Renville, Stevens and Wadena. **Map Credit: BWSR**

existing soil health offerings — cost-share and technical assistance options have been available via the district for more than 15 years.

“Soil health is good for everybody: it’s good for the environment, the crops, the public, the water quality,” West said. “Whether you’re taking your kids tubing this summer or just trying to enjoy nature on a 75-degree spring day, everything we do impacts not just the farmers but the public and the entire environmental picture.”

The Fillmore SWCD began marketing the program by sending more than 4,400 postcards — one to every landowner in Fillmore County who owned more than 3 acres. Next, the district held outreach events at the beginning of each batching period where producers could learn about

the program and sign up.

“We wanted to streamline things both for us and for the producers, so we tried to make it a one-stop shop,” said Riley Buley, Fillmore SWCD administrator. “One of the things we were excited about was that this program wasn’t just for cover crops. It gave producers a nice menu of options if cover crops weren’t the best choice for their operations.”

The Fillmore SWCD helped five additional landowners enroll 6,749 acres in a livestock sub-program, which helps producers develop and implement Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs). These plans aim to improve nutrient balance and promote sustainable management practices. A total of \$1.85 million was provided to livestock sub-program participants over

the course of the four sign-up periods.

Implementing the program brought some challenges. The transition from the Biden administration to the Trump administration part-way through the program caused uncertainty around timelines and available funding. A federal shutdown increased uncertainty. The program’s model was efficient, but also new to SWCD staff, and required working with out-of-state contacts at Virginia Tech. Staff had to learn an online dashboard system and keep track of changes to program parameters as participants and administrators discovered what worked and what didn’t.

Buley said the benefits far outweighed the challenges.

“Some people want to implement conservation, but they don’t know where to start, and soil health can be a good way to get a foot in the door,” Buley said. “This program really provided that.”

Roughly 200 miles northwest of Fillmore County, Redwood SWCD staff helped 319 landowners receive \$4.7 million to enroll 36,977 acres into climate-smart practices through the Alliance program. The district did not conduct formal outreach, relying instead on word-of-mouth.

“We’re in the business of helping many people, not just one or two,” said Redwood SWCD resource specialist Brian Pfarr. “Word of mouth is what traveled and made this thing go. Every time a producer came in and signed up, we’d see two of their neighbors shortly after.”

Eighteen Redwood County producers participated in the livestock sub-program, receiving a total of \$1 million in reimbursement payments. The CNMPs developed for these producers frequently

involve site assessments by a crop consultant, which can give farmers a better picture of their soil health and nutrient levels.

“We had one producer who had never taken soil samples before, so this was a real eye-opener for him to see what’s really going on,” Pfarr said. “These plans make recommendations and help them set realistic goals. They help producers to not over-apply nutrients.”

Pfarr said Redwood SWCD

staff faced similar challenges as Fillmore SWCD staff — uncertain timelines, potential federal government shutdowns and adapting to a new reporting system. Like Fillmore SWCD staff, Redwood SWCD staff submitted applications on behalf of local landowners to streamline and simplify the process.

“We want to give them good guidance and technical support and make it as easy and straightforward as we can,” Pfarr said.

SWCDs have until September 2027 to complete administrative tasks associated with the pilot program.

According to Buley, interest in soil health practices continues to outpace available funding.

“Having millions of dollars to support soil health work is huge,” Buley said. “Now, we need to figure out how to keep that going in the future.”

Climate communicators: Minnesota nonprofits boost Alliance program

Minnesota’s Alliance program was supported by a coalition of nonprofit partners that raised awareness about opportunities throughout the pilot.

The Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) assessed the technical capacity of participating SWCD resource professionals and enhanced tools for program delivery. “This program aligns with our mission of a voluntary approach to locally led conservation,” said MASWCD Executive Director LeAnn Buck. “There is the saying, ‘you manage what you measure,’ and this pilot is an effort to not only implement soil health practices but build a stronger, data-driven understanding of the benefits of resilient soil health systems.”

The Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU) leveraged communications outlets including its monthly print magazine, direct

mailings and weekly email newsletters to promote the program and reach new audiences. MFU also included information about the program when exhibiting at conferences and other relevant events. “Farmers are experiencing the impacts of our changing climate, whether through drought, severe storms, increased pests or heat exposure,” said Danielle Isaacson, MFU climate and working lands program manager. “MFU members recognize that soil health is key for the resilience of their farm operations and is a solution to help improve water quality and our natural resources.”

The Minnesota State Cattlemen’s Association (MSCA) shared program information on social media and in weekly and bi-monthly newsletters and promoted the program at in-person events such as MSCA’s annual convention. “Healthy soil is the foundation of productive

grazing systems,” said MSCA Executive Director Kaitlyn Root. “When producers implement practices like rotational grazing, cover crops and reduced tillage, they improve water infiltration, increase organic matter and build more resilient forage systems. That translates to more consistent feed availability, especially during drought conditions, and ultimately supports herd health and performance. In a business where margins can be tight and weather is unpredictable, those benefits matter.”

Renewing the Countryside (RTC) promoted the program by designing and leading several stakeholder feedback sessions and sharing details via newsletters and other regular publications. “We particularly focused on reaching farmers who may not have worked with or known of their local SWCD,” said RTC Executive Director Jan Joannides. “Soil health is critical for successful, durable farming

operations. It is also critical for so many other things that impact both farms and greater communities, like water retention and quality, biodiversity and carbon sequestration.”

The Sustainable Farming Association (SFA) worked with MFU and Renewing the Countryside to include program updates in its communications to members, raising awareness about program opportunities. “We believe that shifting to a farming paradigm that encourages and incentivizes the implementation of soil health practices on many more Minnesota farms will lead to healthier soil, more nutrient-dense food, cleaner air and water and more robust rural communities,” said SFA Executive Director Lucinda Winter.

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