

NSHC Background Info and Goals

In May of 2023 a group of committed individuals decided to establish an independent, non-profit Soil Health Coalition in Nebraska. The purpose of the Coalition is to advance producer-centered education, outreach, and adoption of soil health principles to build resilient farms, ranches, and communities across Nebraska.

The Coalition is chartered in the State of Nebraska as a non-profit organization and has submitted required material to the IRS to become a tax exempt 501c3 organization.

Background

In recognition of the need to achieve more rapid and widespread adoption of soil health practices with multiple benefits, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB 243 in 2019. The legislation created a 17-member Healthy Soils Task Force (HSTF) task with developing a Nebraska Healthy Soils Initiative.

The Healthy Soils Task Force concluded that healthier soils produced through best soil management practices improve yield stability, produce greater financial returns over time, reduce the need for chemical inputs, increase water infiltration rates and water storage capacity making soil more resilient to drought, flooding, and erosion, and protect and improve water quality.

The task force also concluded that two significant barriers to adoption of healthy soil management practices by agricultural producers are uncertainty of the positive economic return on investment in healthy soil management practices and the lack of education and information available to a broader audience/

(With the general public's growing interest in how food is grown relative to human health and long-term resiliency of our natural resources, greater adoption of healthy soil management practices is beneficial to both rural and urban contingencies. A voluntary grassroots effort to accelerate the means to protect and enhance Nebraska's soil and receive the benefits described in the task force report should be encouraged and supported.

With these well documented goals in mind, in 2022 the Legislature passed LB 925, the Resilient Soils and Water Quality Act, to authorize funding to hire a Facilitator and form producer learning communities across Nebraska. The legislation authorized funding to hire an independent Facilitator to lead a collaborative effort across Nebraska to organize the producer learning community and assist the producer learning community in acquiring gifts, grants, and sponsorships. The producer learning community is to be comprised of active agricultural producers, landowners, and others who have an interest in soil health and water quality.

The Resilient Soils and Water Quality Act identified the following six specific purposes as being necessary to accelerate the voluntary, grassroots effort to protect and enhance Nebraska's soil and work to achieve the benefits described in the Task Force report.

Initiate first steps to accelerate the use and scope of Best Management Practices (BMPs) for healthy soil management practices.

Protect and improve soil and water quality throughout the state.

Protect the public's health and enhance agriculture production and profitability.

Address soil health economics, resource stewardship, and managerial and environmental issues.

Increase awareness, education, and promotion of healthy soil BMPs through producer-to-producer, peer-to-peer, and mentoring relationships, networking, and sharing of technical information.

Provide observational proof of healthy soil benefits through access to demonstration and research farms and data.

Furthermore, the Healthy Soils Task Force Report recommended the following strategic goals to advance producer-centered education, outreach, and adoption of soil health management systems across Nebraska:

1. Establish the Nebraska State Soil Health Hub with Regional Proving Grounds

The Soil Health Hub facilitates coordination, collaboration, and communication among existing soil health efforts in partnership with producers and non-operating landowners. The Soil Health Hub will be a mechanism to bring all soil health stakeholders together, build upon and enhance existing efforts, and create a strategic vision for shared implementation.

2. Form a Nebraska Producer Learning Community

The Learning Community will complement the Soil Health Hub by being an organized community of progressive soil health producers. Peer-to-peer relationships will aid in improving and advancing farm economics, resource stewardship, and the management of environmental issues on working farms and ranches.

3. Develop the Next Generation of Soil Health Practitioners

It is imperative to build the systems and the frameworks to encourage, recruit, and train young people who are interested in careers in soil health. We need to facilitate the development of the next generation of farmers, ranchers, technicians, conservationists, educators, entrepreneurs, agronomists, agribusiness workers, and leaders to ensure a productive and sustainable future for Nebraska.

4. Recruit \$50,000,000 in Additional Soil Health Funding and Incentives Over the Next 10 Years

Corporate, public, and private groups are committed to helping implement soil health practices. Our objective is to recruit these funds to be used by producers to learn and implement soil health practices. The Nebraska Soil Health Hub will act as an economic development engine to recruit funding sources to promote soil health adoption in the state. Grants, industry partnerships, carbon and environmental incentive programs, and other funding sources will be sought.

5. Establish Nebraska Soil Health Measurements and Benchmarks

Appropriate criteria or metrics need to be established that reflect the soil health status of a field. There is a current lack of metrics used by all to measure and manage soils to improve soil health. The HSTF is recommending the formation of a Soil Health Measurements and Benchmarks committee that will be tasked with establishing a standard set of soil health measurements for Nebraska, determining the current benchmark levels of soil health in our state, and develop a suite of tools that bring together the best and most practical key performance indicators of soil to measure the effectiveness of the management system being used.