Letter from Executive Director

It’s Spring! We just wrapped up our Spring SHP staff meeting in St. Louis where we prepared for soil sampling for 2019. Soil sampling is one of our busiest times of the year, and the SHP team has been moving fast. From the Summit to Commodity Classic and now on to soil sampling. No wonder I can’t believe how quickly 2019 has gone by! There is no downtime for this team.

We kicked off the year with the Summit. This was our first-ever public summit and our most diverse one yet. Thank you to all who took our Soil Health Summit survey. Your feedback has been really helpful in identifying what elements worked and which ones we should change. For those who missed the data presentation, we will be sharing publicly available data insights over the next months. All SHP farmers should have received this data from your Field Managers.

Our booth at Commodity Classic had many visitors looking to learn more about soil health, try out the developing Carbon Insetting Framework, sample some gummy worms, and share stories about their experiences with various practices and how we can do more for soil health. This was the first Commodity Classic for most of the team so it was great to meet and connect with so many folks.

In this issue, we share more about the upcoming soil sampling, our new Farmer Advisory Committee, data analysis updates, and some personnel shifts. I’d like to highlight one of the personnel changes - our team said goodbye to Elyssa and celebrated how much she has done for SHP. While we will miss her daily interactions with the team, we know she will continue to be an advocate for soil health.

Shefali V Mehta, Executive Director
Soil Health Partnership

Watch your mail – soil sampling kits are on their way!

Written by: Jack Cornell

SHP is gearing up to send out all soil sampling kits for those sampling this spring. SHP follows the recommendation from our SHP Scientific Advisory Council to soil sample for routine soil data (P, K, pH, BpH, OM, S, Zn, Ca, Mg, Na, %BSAT, etc.) to be conducted pre-plant/pre-fertilizer (within a month of planting) every year for each farm. Subsequent Haney Soil Health and Cornell Soil Health tests will be conducted in the pre-plant/pre-fertilizer window (within a month of planting) in alternating years based on when a grower sampled last.

Our field staff has been working diligently to connect with all soil samplers to make sure we have a successful soil sampling season. Your local SHP Field Manager will be your resource to answer any questions you may have. In addition to our field staff, all soil sampling kits will provide documents to guide samplers in preparing for and taking soil samples according to Soil Health Partnership protocols, as well as in shipping and billing those samples.

Please call or email your local SHP Field Manager with any questions. Should any questions arise while sampling, please don’t hesitate to call. We are here to help! We want to provide you with high-quality data and that process starts with a good soil sample!
Agriculture is a family business. Roles and responsibilities of that business evolve and change throughout the seasons.

It was bittersweet to announce that March 19th was Development Director Elyssa McFarland's last day at the Soil Health Partnership. Elyssa will be managing her family's farm in southeast Iowa.

Elyssa joined SHP in 2015 as a Field Manager for Iowa and then also Missouri. She was promoted to Key Relationships Director in 2017 and then Development Director in 2018.

"From growing up on the farm to a classroom at ISU to a lab bench in Madison, Wisconsin, I always knew that there was more to managing soils on the farm than fertilizer prescriptions and conservation plans," said Elyssa. "However, I did not know until I joined SHP in 2015 that this knowledge could be measurable, actionable, and communicated."

Elyssa's love and passion for soil health are evident. Whether enrolling over 20 farmers in Iowa and Missouri, leading a breakout session or panel discussion, or hosting over 50 engagement events, Elyssa was dedicated to building the SHP community.

"Elyssa gave a wealth of knowledge and desire to improve how SHP interacts with our soils data. She always had a grounded perspective of making sure what we do is relatable to growers, whether it is a new soil sampling procedure or partnership," said Field Team Director Jack Cornell. "Elyssa was a person that you could feed off her passion and energy towards improving soil health and how it relates to farm economics."

"It is not often that we get to lead teams with exceptional people, and I was able to experience that by working with Elyssa. She leads with her passion and expertise. She perpetually looked to improve our work for the farmers and challenged us to see better solutions. She will be quite missed by us but agriculture is lucky to have an individual like her," shared Executive Director Shefali Mehta.

"I have learned so much through this program and will miss each of the farmers, team members, and partners so much. Please know that I am always happy to chat about what is happening on your farms and would love to hear from you from time to time," Elyssa said.

"And if you are ever in SE Iowa, please feel free to text or call. It would be great to have you visit the farm!"

Please join us in thanking Elyssa for her service to SHP. She will be missed, but we look forward to working with her in this new capacity.

SHP Farmer Advisory Committee

Farmer input and leadership is critical for SHP’s success. We are taking another step to ensure we are meeting the needs of our farmers. We are forming the SHP Farmer Advisory Committee. This group will provide input on SHP activities and information for farmers across a range of items including sharing data insights, participating in research opportunities, communicating on soil health practices to other farmers, identifying resources to support farmer decisions about soil health practices, and much more. The Committee will meet monthly by phone and once yearly in person. We will also create subgroups for specific, timely topics. The Committee is restricted to enrolled SHP farmers. If you are interested, please contact soilhealth@ncga.com.
Rooted in data

Written by: Maria Bowman

At this year’s Soil Health Summit, we were excited to present preliminary insights from the data we’ve been gathering on your SHP fields during the course of our partnership. As you finished up your harvests, we incorporated as much of your 2018 yield data as we could before the Summit in order to take a look at the impact of cover crops on corn and soybean yields. From the data, we found that growing a cover crop didn’t have a statistically significant impact on average corn or soybean yields in our dataset from 2015 through 2018. Though we know this isn’t true of every farm, no average yield drag gives us a solid starting place to begin to look at impacts of cover crops on yield variability and under different weather conditions, as well as to look at the impact of different types of cover crops on yields.

We also took a look at how soil health properties are changing on some of your fields that have been in the program for 3 or 4 years. One thing we found was that soil organic matter in the Cornell soil health test increased between 1/3 and 1/2 percent, on average, over a 2-3 year period. However, when we looked more closely to see what might be causing this change, we found that both cover crop treatment strips and control strips were showing increasing organic matter over time, on average. Though we’re still looking into why this might be, it’s really made us think about the importance of understanding where you are on your soil health journey and how that is reflected in changes in soil health indicators over time.

These two findings are just a starting place for our research on the impacts of soil health practices on soil health, agronomic outcomes, and profitability. In 2019, we look forward to building on these initial findings.

Mean Corn Yields for SHP Fields in Cover Crop Trial

This graph represents mean corn yield data from a minimum of 8 farms (in 2015) and a maximum of 24 farms (in 2017) engaged in cover crop trials in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. In 2015, there were 33 control strips and 37 cover crop strips with corn yield data, and in 2017 there were 110 control strips and 123 cover crop strips with corn yield data.

Verville promoted to Research and Development Manager

Former Wisconsin Field Manager, Tricia Verville, has accepted the promotion to Research and Development Manager. In this role, Tricia will support the national team through the organization of grants, partners and research. She will actively work on agronomic protocols and flex to meet seasonal SHP project needs.

In addition to research and development, she acts as our team’s Safety Lead. In that role, she works to make sure our team identifies risks in advance in the field, city, and throughout their travels to avoid incidents and be prepared to assist others in a crisis.

“Tricia brings a wide range of skills and experiences to SHP,” said Executive Director Shefali Mehta.

“Our research and development areas are two of our most nascent areas, and Tricia’s talents and support will be critical to expanding SHP’s efforts. We are excited to have her in this new capacity.”

Being raised in rural America gave Tricia a passion to protect agriculture rights and natural resources. Prior to joining the SHP, Tricia worked on environmental regulations in Wisconsin at both the Winnebago County and the State Department of Natural Resources. She also spent multiple years as a Crop Specialist for Insight FS agriculture cooperative. She helped local farmers with on-farm trials, seed placement strategies, and nutrient management planning.

A Certified Crop Advisor since 2013, Tricia enjoys spending her free time outdoors — hiking, kayaking, hunting and water sports.

Tricia resides in Wisconsin and is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where she majored in Soil and Land Management with a minor in Environmental Law Enforcement.

“Tricia brings a wide range of skills and experiences to SHP, our research and development areas are two of our most nascent areas, and Tricia’s talents and support will be critical to expanding SHP’s efforts. We are excited to have her in this new capacity.”

Written by: Maria Bowman
Inside this Issue:
- Soil Sampling Details
- Celebrating Elyssa McFarland
- Farmer Advisory Committee Invite

Spring calendar
See soilhealthpartnership.org for a full list of upcoming events.

Notable dates:
- April 1st: First soil sampling kits go out, expect your soil samplers to see them soon!
- April 15th: Farmer sends planting maps to field manager
- June 1st: Results come back from soil testing

Events:
See soilhealthpartnership.org/field-days-events for our event schedules

Webinar:
Our webinar launches Spring 2019 – see soilhealthpartnership.org/webinar for details.

More updates are on your way!
We will be contacting you more with data results and insights. Please add these emails to your account so you don’t miss an update! soilhealth@ncga.com mehta@ncga.com

We are hiring!
As the Soil Health Partnership heads into its fifth year, the organization is hiring for several roles to support its expanding footprint. Please share these roles with your network. The full position descriptions can be found at soilhealthpartnership.org/careers.

New communications coming this spring!
This spring we are launching a new blog, podcast, and webinar series. Stay tuned to soilhealthpartnership.org for details on how to read, listen, and participate.

Soil Health Partnership – a data-driven, on-farm effort to support more productive and sustainable agriculture through soil health
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