Blazing a Trail in Soil Health

When I consider the opportunities available to farmers and communities through the Soil Health Partnership, I am looking forward to another productive year. I appreciate the diversity represented in SHP; mirrored by the diversity our farmers strive for as they manage their soils. This organization is serious about partnerships—bringing in a diverse group of farmers, agriculture businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit associations to accomplish our mission. It is impactful and critical work that we can all feel good about.

We are a farmer-led sustainability effort, blazing a trail in soil health, and I take that mission to heart.

My childhood on a diversified crop and livestock farm planted this respect and passion for farmers and farming. Now, I am grateful for the opportunity to partner with farmers all over the Midwest to make farms better. I am thankful for the agriculture businesses that invest in helping farmers see profitability gains and longevity for their family farms because of these enriching practices. I am eager to lead a tremendous team of soil experts to answer some of the most challenging questions of our day.

As we wrap up 2019 – an extremely challenging year on the farm – and look forward to 2020, I see only good things ahead. Field days this summer were very successful and have given us a great platform to build on in 2020. We have grown our data teams and developed new communication channels to share information. We have investment from conservation groups and state corn grower associations to provide localized knowledge in the new year.

The future is bright for the trail we are blazing in 2020. From your new Senior Director and the exceptional SHP staff serving you, I look forward to using our past as a starting point for a productive and outstanding future.

Happy New Year!

John Mesko, Senior Director
Soil Health Partnership

Winter Meetings Highlight Regional Data From SHP Trials

SHP farmers are invited to attend private winter research meetings in their home states to learn the data insights from local SHP research trials. These events are scheduled locally by SHP Field Managers and are only open to SHP farmers and special guests.

The 2019 Farmer Reports are being finalized and will be shared with you soon. The data contained in these reports is the foundation for the winter research meetings and will make for informative and educational sessions.

These events provide the opportunity to meet with SHP’s Lead Scientist Maria Bowman and your regional Field Managers to discuss data insights from the research trials in your state.

Working toward optimum soil health looks different for every farmer, in every region, and in every season. These meetings provide the opportunity to discuss what we are finding and seeing, to make course corrections, and to plan for the coming year.

To confirm the date, time and location for the meeting in your state, please reach out to your SHP Field Manager.
Field Day Promotes Conversations and Understanding for Legislative Staff

Soil Health Partnership farmers and staff made a connection with Senate and Senate Ag Committee staff on November 22 during a field day in Rock Hill, Maryland.

The field day featured Harborview Farms and SHP farmer Trey Hill, who shared his personal experience investing in the soil health of his farm, including the practices he uses and how they impact yield, inputs, and environment.

The connection and conversation between farmers, SHP staff and legislative staffers were an opportunity to help position agriculture as a partner in the climate change conversation.

“Farmers across the country invest in these practices because they believe in the indirect and long-term benefits, such as healthy soils for their future generations, creating increased land resiliency, and knowing they are giving back to the land that sustains us,” said John Mesko, Senior Director of Soil Health Partnership.

In addition to SHP farmer Trey Hill, the legislative staff heard from Maria Bowman, Lead Scientist at SHP, who discussed the data collection process and how SHP works hand in hand with the farmers to gather data and inform soil health practices. Jim Isermann and Keith Byerly, SHP Field Managers, also presented their personal experiences with cover crops, sharing the risks farmers undertake as they transition their farm management to focus on greater soil health.

Soil Health Partnership is pleased to provide this type of educational opportunity to legislative staff. Also collaborating on this field day were the University of Maryland’s Department of Environmental Sciences and Technology and the USDA-Agricultural Research Service’s Sustainable Agricultural Systems Laboratory.

“It is an important story to tell, and we are thrilled to have legislative partners attend these educational events,” said Mesko.

SHP Features Series on Cover Crops

We’ve Got a Resource for That!

Whether you are trying out cover crops for the first time or you have been experimenting with and honing your cover crop craft for years, you will find the answers to many of your questions in the cover crop featured series at Soil Health Partnership’s “Digging In” blog.

Start at the beginning with “Cover Crops: Where Do I Start?” to help you analyze the risks involved and find cover crop experts to help you along the journey. Patience is key, as implementing a new management practice on your farm will take time to yield success. However, this blog reminds us that when “implemented properly, cover crops are a great tool for farmers looking to improve soil health on their farms.”

In “Cover Crops: Extending the Life of the Soil,” we discuss that many Soil Health Partnership farmers using a no-till or strip till management report getting into the field one to three days before their neighbors that till. Those days can create significant gains, especially in years like 2019!

Weed control, soil compaction and erosion concerns can also be addressed with the correct cover crop program for your region and your soil.

Read “Cover Crops: Which One Should I Choose” to make an informed decision. If you have heard of cereal rye, hairy vetch, clovers, and millet, but you have no idea which might work best for you, get baseline information here and then chat with an expert. The right seed choice to help you accomplish whatever soil health and conservation goals you’ve set for your farm is out there; SHP will help you find it.

These three are but a sampling of the information you can find on the SHP “Digging In” blog. Planting cover crops can be a big change, but the Soil Health Partnership will guide you through it, providing the very best guidance and experts. SHP supports healthy cover crop adoption that is sustainable for farmers and is eager to help you get there.
Know No-Till!

Tillage practices on your farm can make a big difference in your farm’s fuel usage, erosion, nutrient run-off, and overall soil health, but making the decision to switch to no-till requires risk and research before you realize returns. Start your research at the SHP’s “Digging In” blog, with a series on no-till from a farmer who is making the switch.

Maddy Rabenhorst is a fourth-generation farmer in South Dakota, and a SHP Field Manager, who has developed a plan to switch from minimum tillage to 100 percent no-till over the next ten years. In her article “Insights from a First Time No-Tiller,” she shares her journey to transition to a no-till system, pointing out that the experience is different for every farmer, depending on region and soil type of the farm.

She says, “No-till is a management practice that allows the soil to act as the living organism that it is, and while it is a challenge, it is one worth committing to.”

Her blog shares many first-hand tips for the transition like beginning with no-tilling soybeans instead of corn and trying strip-tillage before jumping right into no-tillage. She also advises farmers to expect challenges and plan for them.

Rabenhorst shares even more tips in “5 Things to Consider When Moving to No-Till.” She believes that careful planning is necessary to make the switch successful – and she’s interested in setting every farmer up for success.

Before making the switch, she encourages farmers to consider weed control, planter setup, fertilizer placement, residue management, and seed selection.

As an example, Rabenhorst says that residue management can begin at harvest if you plan ahead. “Having your combine adjusted to ensure a uniform size and distribution of residue should be considered,” she writes.

After you have done the work, made the transition plan, and no-tilled a field, how will you know you are making progress on your farm’s soil health goals? In “No-Till Success: Follow Your Senses,” Rabenhorst explains that a simple walk-through the field in the spring can tell you a lot.

An easy indicator is that you will see worms at work in your soil right away. Worms pull the residue into the soil, minimize compaction, and improve water filtration.

To see even more proof, use your other senses. According to Rabenhorst, you can feel the difference between no-till soil and tilled soil because the tilled soil will show layers and feel compacted, while the no-till soil will feel granular and fall apart in your hands.

Finally, she advises, “Pick up the soil and smell it. When you are protecting the soil and letting it be the living environment that it is, no-till soil smells alive. It is easy to smell the difference.”

Reducing tillage on your farm can yield real money in your pocket. In fact, farmers that till less can see larger returns due to decreased fuel usage and increased nutrient stability in the soil, not to mention better overall soil health and sustainability of family farms.

Learn more about no-till management techniques at SHP’s Digging In blog and start planning your transition today for spring 2020.
Inside this Issue

- SHP hosts educational field day for legislative staff
- All about cover crops
- SHP’s exclusive research meetings
- Transitioning to no-till

More updates are on the way!

We will be contacting you with more with data results and insights. Please add this email to your account so you don’t miss an update!

soilhealth@ncga.com

Winter Calendar

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

Events:

Winter Research Meetings: schedules will be emailed.

Webinars:

March 31: Soil Health Indicators
Register for Soil Sessions on our website!

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

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We are increasing our communications – follow us on your favorite channel. Be sure to use the hashtag #SoilHealth or #SoilSmart, and tag us!

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