Welcome to a new year with new opportunities for soil health!

In the last three months as our soils rested and weathered the winter, our farmers took a moment to grow - as farmers and soil conservationists. The opportunities for farmers to learn more about current soil research at winter research meetings or to learn what is working and not working on other farms at the Commodity Classic SHP booth invigorates me for 2020.

I hope you were able to dig in to at least one of the opportunities SHP hosted over the winter months and have renewed vigor for spring.

Thank you to the farmers who joined us at the SHP happy hour in San Antonio at Commodity Classic. I am a farm boy that loves connecting with farmers to discuss plants, practices, and profits whenever possible! Thank you for joining me for such a fun opportunity.

With the winter behind us, your SHP staff and I now turn to a fresh growing season. We are focused on bringing you even more opportunities to learn from other farmers, understand the latest research, and experiment on your own farm.

Don’t forget to turn to page 3 and check out our newest venture: the SHP podcast, The People of Soil Health! The information our soil health experts around the country can share is incredible. SHP is committed to always bringing our farmers the latest and greatest information to inform your management decisions. We hope this new-to-us audio delivery method will make the information very accessible, especially from the tractor during spring planting.

The quest for optimum soil health continues!

John Mesko, Senior Director, Soil Health Partnership

Interested in wheat as a cover crop? Read on...

Mike Buis, a Soil Health Partnership farmer from Indiana, plants a wheat cover crop each year on approximately 300 acres of highly erodible land in West-Central Indiana. He’s calculated his net benefit to be about $4 per acre. Could this work on your farm?

Mike’s business case for wheat as a cover crop can be found on Digging In, the Soil Health Partnership blog: bit.ly/2v0E0id.

Beyond seed costs, Mike did not need to factor in additional seeding or terminating costs because he has already adopted minimum-till practices on his highly erodible land to meet conservation requirements. His net benefit is determined through a $6 seed cost and a no-longer-needed $10 per acre weed control cost benefit.

Weed control is natural because of the thick mat the wheat residue forms on the surface of the soil. Wheat as a cover crop effectively acts as a mulch that can suppress weeds and disrupt conditions for the germination of weed seeds.

Without the cover crop, Mike estimates that he would need to apply a higher rate of herbicide – or a more costly mix – that would cost him at least an additional $10 per acre in weed control. Reducing weed control costs is where Mike saw the biggest bang for his buck.

Wheat works for Mike on these acres because of the flexibility of a large planting window and the ease of termination. He simply burns down with an herbicide and plants directly into the residue with a no-till planter. Mike does not harvest his wheat.

If this business case interests you, read more at: soilhealthpartnership.org/shp-blog.
Five soil health leaders recognized at Commodity Classic

Five Soil Health Partnership leaders were honored at the 2020 Commodity Classic in San Antonio, TX on February 27. Each was recognized for outstanding work helping others understand options, practices, and management opportunities in the pursuit of better soil health.

Trinity Creek Ranch in Red Lake Falls, Minnesota received the Super Sprout award for their continuous experiments with management practices to improve soil health, despite the challenges of a shorter growing season and extremely cold winters.

Mark Heckman of Heckman Farms received the Champion Communicator award for his work helping other farmers understand his farm’s soil health journey.

Receiving the Data Dominator award is Daryl and Jason Maple of Maple Farms in Kokomo, Indiana. Daryl and Jason promote optimum soil health from the timely sharing of data with many precision ag programs.

The Exceptional Educator award goes to Doug Palen of Palen Family Farms. Doug and his family enjoy talking about their soil health management experiences, and they jump into many experiences with both feet, giving them even more to teach.

The Ace Agronomist award goes to Darin Kennelly with Precise Crop. A knowledgeable agronomist in his own right, Darin Kennelly shows strong leadership with his test plots.

“These five individuals exemplify the very best of our dedicated partners, and we thank them for their great work,” said John Mesko, Soil Health Partnership Senior Director.

Congratulations to all award winners.

SHP Focuses on 2020 in first Soil Session of the year

Soil Health Partnership Senior Director John Mesko shared his plans for SHP in 2020 during the first Soil Session of the year held on January 28.

Mesko began by reminding listeners that SHP was established five years ago to answer important soil health questions:

• What is soil health?
• How do we measure soil health?
• What is the value of soil health?

In the end, defining some of the questions has created more questions and challenges to meet. One of which is, how do we handle all this data?

“It would have been hard five years ago to understand the volume of data and the means in which the data would be collected and the impact of how that would all happen simultaneously across many different farmers with many different staff working to collect that data,” said Mesko.

SHP will use all the lessons learned over the past five years to fuel their future.

In 2020, SHP will focus on bringing order to the data, the process of collecting the data, and its internal communications.

Check out the full webinar available on YouTube on the Soil Health Partnership channel.
Interested in better understanding how you might provide a longer grazing season for your cattle? Jim Isermann, Northern Illinois & Wisconsin SHP Field Manager, gives all the details for farmers wanting to better understand the opportunities and pitfalls of grazing a cover crop on the SHP blog.

He explains that cover crop grazing can provide benefits to your farm, including saving time, money and improving soil health in the first of his grazing series, “3 Ways Grazing Can Benefit Your Farm.” The benefits are significant, but like most opportunities with cover crops, it’s important to take time to plan.

In his next article, “Grazing Timing and Cover Crops,” Isermann really begins to dive into the planning work, posing some important questions for farmers considering cover crops as a grazing opportunity. He reminds farmers that understanding what time of year you want to use the additional grazing will help determine the variety of cover crops to seed.

In “Experimental Grazing: Tripling Hay Production,” SHP Senior Director John Mesko shares his personal experience launching an experiment in his own corn field during a particularly wet and muddy fall. Using the field to nurture his cattle, never planting, tilling, or fertilizing the ground, after five years, he describes the field as completely transformed.

“Soil is a living thing, so you can’t solely think your way into changing how your field performs. As I look back on my grazing experiment, I am reminded of the importance of testing different practices and methods. Don’t be afraid to give your idea a try!”

“Along with tripling hay production, I was able to get more pasture productivity without adding acres, which allowed me to put more cattle in the same space. What started out as a mistake, per se, actually became my greatest lesson,” said Mesko.

“Soil is a living thing, so you can’t solely think your way into changing how your field performs. As I look back on my grazing experiment, I am reminded of the importance of testing different practices and methods. Don’t be afraid to give your idea a try!” said Mesko.

Learn more about grazing and other soil health practices at SHP’s Digging In blog.
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✓ Soil health leaders honored at Commodity Classic
✓ Is grazing right for your operation?
✓ SHP farmer featured in business case highlighting wheat as a cover crop
✓ The People of Soil Health Podcast launches in April

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@nnga.com

Spring Calendar

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

Webinars:
March 31: Soil Health Indicators
May 26: Pest Management, hosted by Abigail Peterson and Jim Isermann

Soil Health Partnership – a data-driven, on-farm effort to support more productive and sustainable agriculture through soil health
soilhealth@ncga.com
636-733-9004
soilhealthpartnership.org

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

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