

Indiana NRCS leadership is updating the long-term strategy that will form the basis for our current and future soil health efforts with our partners and farmers.

Indiana's long-term soil health strategy will focus on the following 5 key elements:

1. Partnerships.
2. Technical excellence for Indiana NRCS employees and other conservation professionals.
3. Soil Health Management Systems implementation.
4. Education and outreach.
5. Quantifying soil health benefits.

Indiana NRCS will initiate, maintain, and update an annual Business Plan that will specifically address the fiscal year actions, responsible employees, and expected completion dates to move Indiana toward successful implementation of this long-term strategy.

- The State Resource Conservationist (SRC) and State Soil Health Specialist will prepare the draft annual business plan, obtain Leadership Team and Soil Health Team member input, and prepare the final draft by October 31 each fiscal year.

1. PARTNERSHIPS

Indiana's soil health successes are the direct result of the strong partnerships among all of the conservation and agriculture groups.

- a) Indiana NRCS will support the existing partnerships that focus on soil health such as the Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative (CCSI) and others within Indiana to the extent practical based on value to the resource, value to NRCS, staff availability, and budget.
- b) Indiana NRCS will develop new and additional partnering opportunities to the extent practical based on value to the resource, value to NRCS, staff availability, and budget.

2. TECHNICAL EXCELLENCE

Indiana's success with soil health management systems is a direct result of Indiana farmers' access to quality technical assistance from conservation professionals.

Indiana NRCS employees will provide quality technical assistance by establishing a system of technical support, training, and accountability.

- a) Technical Support.
 - i) The State Soil Health Specialist, State Agronomist, and State Conservation Agronomist positions on the SRC's staff will be priority positions for Indiana NRCS.
 - (1) These positions will:
 - (a) Provide technical leadership in their respective agronomic areas of focus.
 - (b) Establish, maintain, and improve partnerships with other technical experts in their respective agronomic areas of focus.
 - (c) Provide and coordinate training and guidance to the field in their respective agronomic areas of focus to assure statewide consistency and continuity.

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- ii) Area Soil Health Teams will be fully supported.
 - (1) The Area Conservationists will evaluate each Soil Health Team to determine the numbers of individuals, individual skill levels and effectiveness, and the inclusion of partners. Annual adjustments will be made as needed.
 - (2) Soil Health Team members will receive the training and support to assist other employees and partners in the area with quality technical assistance related to soil health.
 - (3) Team members will be given additional opportunities to attend high level outside training, conferences or workshops. Team members will be expected to report on this training to ensure the information is transferred to other employees.
 - (4) These individuals will be the first contact for assistance and will be capable of providing training and presentations within each respective area.
 - (5) State-level Soil Health Team meetings will be held at least twice per year to share information, successes, and prioritize training and other technical needs across Indiana.

- b) Training
 - i) Indiana's Leadership Team will make soil health a priority in training/travel decisions.
 - 1. Leadership Team members will ensure their employees communicate their training needs as early in the fiscal year as possible, and throughout the year as applicable, to be added to the state training plan
 - 2. The SRC and State Soil Scientist and their staff will work with the State Training Officer and CCSI to deliver training to field employees to address priority needs.
 - a. Efforts that establish partnerships to coordinate, deliver, and assess training will be pursued to the extent possible.
 - ii) Training is required for each NRCS planner to attend regularly to maintain continuity of message and remain in the forefront of advancing technologies. At a minimum, the following will be attended on the schedule identified below:
 - (1) **Soil Health Basics.**
 - (a) The following 4 basic courses are for newer Indiana NRCS employees and those working to become an NRCS conservation planner. All NRCS conservation planners are required to attend these courses within the first 3 years of their tenure in Indiana. The staff of the State Soil Scientist and State Resource Conservationist are also required to attend the 3-day soil health training at a minimum. The courses listed below will be offered at various locations around the state on a rotational basis to maximize the opportunity for all to obtain required training within the 3-year timeframe.
 - 1. Introduction to Soil Health
 - 2. Core Cover Crops
 - 3. Core Soil Health
 - 4. 3-Day Soil Health Training - Equivalent to National Employee Development Center (NEDC) *Soil Health and Sustainability for Field staff.*
 - (2) **Advanced Soil Health Management Systems** or related full-day operational topic.
 - (a) Will be held in 2 areas annually, on a rotational basis (e.g.- North to South in alternating years).
 - (b) Required for each NRCS planner and State Office Agronomist to attend every other year after the *Soil Health Basics* curricula, with *Advanced Cover Crops* attended in the off years.

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- (3) **Advanced Cover Crops** or related full-day operational topic.
 - (a) Will be held in 2 areas annually, on a rotational basis (e.g.- North to South in alternating years).
 - (b) Required for each NRCS planner and State Office Agronomist to attend every other year after the *Soil Health Basics* curricula, with *Advanced Conservation Cropping Systems for Soil Health* attended in the off years.
- c) Accountability
 - i) NRCS employees will meet established Ability, Skill, or Knowledge (ASK) levels as an annual priority.
 - (1) **Supervisors will complete an internal skills evaluation of each employee as a reference to focus additional assistance and track training gaps for each of their employees to identify training needs.**
 - (2) Each employee will also assess their individual technical skills and **are responsible to request training.**
 - (3) Each employee will attain the following ASK levels within two years of acquiring the following roles:
 - (a) All NRCS Employees will be familiar with the key Principals and Indicators of soil health and what NRCS will accomplish as outlined in the latest *NRCS Indiana Soil Health Key Messaging for Continuity* guidance.
 - (b) Soil Health Team members, State Office Agronomists, Area Resource Management Specialists, Area Grazing Specialists, and Area Resource Soil Scientists will retain an ASK proficiency level of 5 (Proficient and Can Train Others) on soil health management systems and soil health concepts.
 - (i) Soil Health Team members will remain on the area team until it is determined that changes are needed.
 - (ii) Soil Health Team members will receive technical training related to soil health management systems, as well as training related to effective communications and presentations.
 - (c) GS-11 and GS-12 District Conservationists and Soil Conservationists will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 4 (Can Perform Independently) on planning soil health management systems and explaining/describing soil health concepts.
 - (d) GS-7/9 Soil Conservationists will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 3 (Can Perform with Assistance) on planning soil health management systems and explaining/describing soil health concepts.
 - (e) Leadership Team members, State Office Technology, Soils, and Programs Staff, GS-12 Area Staff, GS-5 Soil Conservationists, and all Conservation Delivery Team (CDT) members not previously identified will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 2 (Basic Understanding) on soil health management systems and soil health concepts.
 - (f) Supervisors will work to assess new employees as they come on board to incorporate soil health training into their Individual Development Plans and will work with their employees to maintain and/or improve their proficiency level as needed.

3. SOIL HEALTH MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IMPLEMENTATION

Indiana NRCS will prioritize the successful transitions to and implementation of soil health management systems with Indiana's farmers and landowners.

- a) Indiana NRCS will implement Ecological Sciences Job Approval Authority to ensure that all technical advice given to farmers will lead to successful implementation
- b) Financial, programmatic, and technical efforts that occur in the field office will be evaluated and efficiencies enabled to allow conservation planners and other employees to focus on getting soil health systems implemented on the land.
- c) Soil health will be integrated as a primary focus of all of Indiana's unique projects and pilot efforts.
- d) The SRC staff, with input from Area Soil Health Teams, will coordinate with partners such as the CCSI Technical Team, researchers, and others to analyze all of the latest soil health information, research, and technologies related to soil health management systems and incorporate this information into guidance and technical information to ensure that all conservation planning efforts address Indiana's priority resource concerns.

4. EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

- a) Indiana NRCS will support existing education, collaboration and outreach efforts, such as CCSI and others, as key mechanisms to educate farmers, conservationists, and the general public about soil health management systems in Indiana.
 - SRC staff will represent NRCS as members of committees and work teams.
 - SRC staff and Soil Health Team members will develop and present technical information at field days, workshops, training sessions, etc.
 - SRC staff will provide technical expertise to develop and review technical, media and written materials.
 - Indiana NRCS will provide local personnel to assist with data collection and management advice on soil health-related efforts.
 - Indiana NRCS will provide financial resources, as budget allows, that support partnership educational and outreach efforts.
- b) Field employees, Soil Health Team members, and State Office Technology employees will engage their local and state-level partners and farmers to ensure that they understand and fully support soil health as a priority in Indiana by giving soil health demonstrations and presentations as new partners or partner leaders become established, including but not limited to:
 - SWCD boards
 - State Soil Conservation Board
 - Indiana Conservation Partnership Leaders
 - Indiana State Technical Committee
 - Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Board
 - Indiana Farm Service Agency County Committees
 - Local Working Groups
 - State agency leaders and employees

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- Federal agency leaders and employees
 - Agriculture retailers
 - Agriculture consultants, CCAs and TSPs.
 - Agriculture advocacy groups
 - Agriculture media
 - Universities, colleges, and other institutes of learning
 - Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
 - Local High School and Vocational School Agriculture programs and FFA
 - Farmers
- c) Public Affairs (PA) staff will serve as members of CCSI communications teams and work with the SRC's staff and CCSI to coordinate promotion of soil health efforts.
- PA staff will assist with development of promotional products and educational materials as needed.
 - PA staff will utilize social media to leverage soil health messaging.
 - PA staff will maintain a soil health webpage for our partners and the public.
 - SRC staff and PA staff will work together to manage information on the Indiana NRCS SharePoint for employees and conservation partnership staff to provide the most current materials and resources to support promotion of soil health.
- d) Indiana NRCS has committed significant time and resources to national soil health leadership and will continue to support national and other states' soil health efforts, as time and resources permit.

5. QUANTIFYING BENEFITS

- a) NRCS will seek to quantify the benefits of soil health related to:
- i) Water quality across all land uses;
 - ii) Economics;
 - iii) Increased resilience to weather extremes such as droughts and excessive rainfall and flooding;
 - iv) Livestock integration into soil health management systems.
 - v) Indiana's pasturelands, forestlands, wildlife and reclaimed mine lands.
 - vi) Baseline conditions, during transition, and fully-functional systems.