



NEWS RELEASE

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Early Signs Show Promising ‘Triple Win’ Possible for Farmers at Soil Health Summit

Links emerging between economics, productivity and environmental gains on the farm

(ST. LOUIS) – Building long-term data by its very nature takes time, but early indicators are promising on the relationship between soil health and economic, productivity and environmental gains in agriculture.

That was the message delivered from the Soil Health Partnership, a project to make agriculture more productive and sustainable through healthy soil, at its annual meeting last week. About 185 Ag scientists, industry leaders, environmentalists, water quality experts and enrolled farmers discussed their efforts at SHP’s third annual Soil Health Summit in Des Moines, Iowa Jan. 19-20.

“Through this program, we have powerful analytics underway providing early indicators of tangible links between soil health and enhanced farm performance,” said Nick Goeser, SHP director.

Working with their agronomists and trained field managers, SHP farmers have enrolled about 32,000 acres to provide data for the analytics. The three main areas of study are cover crops, reduced tillage and advanced nutrient management.

Doug Karlen, a USDA distinguished senior research scientist based in Iowa, provided a first look into the soil sample data collected across SHP farms. His team analyzed data from approximately 700 soil health assessment samples. These data provide a basis to guide soil health assessment interpretations.

For example, results indicate soil texture is extremely important for organic matter content, Goeser said.

“While dry lab studies and analyses have documented the patterns shown, this is the first time the relationship has been supported across an on-farm trial network as expansive as the Soil Health Partnership,” he said. “These early looks will help us better understand opportunities and limitations to interpreting soil health assessments based on different regions and soil types. SHP is revolutionary in this effort.”

One of the farmers enrolled is Roger Zylstra, a corn and soybean grower in Lynnville, Iowa. He practices no-till and grows cover crops like cereal rye.

“On our farm, early results show we’re making some progress. This year we noticed a definite suppression of weeds in our soybeans,” Zylstra said. “It’s too soon to say much about yield improvement, but that marked improvement in late season pigweed emergence made a difference and was obviously connected to cover crops.”

Zylstra presented at the summit alongside David Muth, one of the founders of the Ames-based company

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AgSolver. Farmers enrolled in SHP have access to the company's software tools to analyze a field's agronomic and economic performances side-by-side, and compare potential management scenarios.

Three years into the program, the SHP teams, with support from AgSolver, are developing a preliminary research summary to be released soon.

Other speakers included Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey, The Nature Conservancy's Director of Working Lands Michael Doane and Purdue Agricultural Economics Professor Wallace Tyner.

Tyner compared mining the data through SHP to Michelangelo "bringing David out of the marble."

As for his farm, Zylstra said he expects to see more concrete data coming in the next year, and has some advice for other farmers.

"Anybody thinking about doing cover crops – don't let the potential challenges at start-up stop you from trying them on the farm," he said. "There's going to be a lot of value to cover crops. Don't give up. Try, try again. We need to figure it out to improve our soil."

An initiative of the National Corn Growers Association, the SHP works closely with diverse organizations including commodity groups, industry groups, federal agencies and well-known environmental groups, including TNC, toward common goals. The Partnership is completing its third year with more than 65 partner farms across nine Midwestern states.

About the Soil Health Partnership

The Soil Health Partnership is a farmer-led initiative that fosters transformation in agriculture through improved soil health, benefiting both farmer profitability and the environment. The SHP tests, measures and advances progressive farm management practices that will enhance sustainability and farm economics for generations to come. SHP brings together diverse partners to work towards common goals. At least a ten-year scientific program led by the National Corn Growers Association, our vision is driven by initial and continuing funding and guidance from NCGA, Monsanto, the Walton Family Foundation, the Midwest Row Crop Collaborative and USDA, with technical support from The Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund. For more, visit soilhealthpartnership.org.

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