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Treating problems, not symptoms: Conference brings soil experts to Aberdeen

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

Soil health is the new hot topic in agriculture. It's showing up everywhere from government policy discussions to industry initiatives, from news articles to documentary films.

Why is it so important?

"Soil health is the foundation of the whole food production system and life itself. Everything comes from the soil and returns to the soil," South Dakota State University Extension Soils Field Specialist Anthony Bly said. "You may think that's a biblical thing, but it's reality. It's truth."

Bly, along with several other speakers, will bring his soil management expertise to the Sixth Annual Soil Health Conference, Jan. 18-19, at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel in Aberdeen, SD.

"We degrade our soil health, we degrade our soil, we degrade our food production system, and the scarcity of food increases, and it'll change society," Bly said. "If we want to maintain our free society and be able to make our own decisions, we need strong natural resources, and soil is probably the most important."

Burleigh County (North Dakota) Soil Conservation District Conservationist Jay Fuhrer agrees that the problem of degraded soils must be taken seriously.

"If we look at our present resource concerns in the Northern Plains, we all kind of know what they are. It's wind erosion. It's water erosion. It's salinity. It's carbon deficient soils. We know this," Fuhrer said. "It's very similar to resource concerns that have been identified since agricultural production was documented. These are a lot of things that brought down civilizations."

Fuhrer, who is an educator at the Menoken Research Farm near Bismarck, ND, worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service for 40 years.

"I think really what we're talking about here would be the difference between treating a symptom and treating a problem," he said.

Fuhrer said the first half of his career was spent treating the symptoms of degraded soils, and that frustration led him on “a quest for somewhat of a bigger picture in terms of what was happening and why.” As he learned more about soil health and how to improve it, he could begin to treat the real problem instead of just the symptoms.

“My goal is real simple,” Fuhrer said. “My goal is to farm forever. When I have that as my goal, it helps me put a lot of other things in perspective.”

Kris Nichols, senior soil scientist for the Food Water Wellness Foundation, said that unlike many other tools in agriculture that only address one issue, soil health management is “a consortia of activity that can have cascading impacts that could be beneficial.”

Those beneficial impacts address a variety of issues, she said.

“It isn’t just helping with nutrient cycling and nutrient availability,” Nichols said. “It can help with water infiltration rates and water holding capacity, can help with reducing compaction for better root growth, can help with aeration, being able to get good gas exchange between the soil and the surface.”

One exciting benefit of soil health is the nutritional value of food, Nichols said.

“I think one of the things that is really starting to occur is a lot of discussion around linking the soil microbiome to the gut microbiome of animals,” she said. “And so, as we start to gain more understanding of the soil functions to be able to provide all of those elements that we need for our own health as animals, we are really seeing how that soil microbiome is basically setting up what the gut microbiome needs.”

Another major benefit of improved soil health is resilience to weather extremes.

Steve Kenyon operates Greener Pastures Ranching, a custom grazing operation in Alberta, Canada. He uses regenerative grazing practices on roughly 3,500 acres which he uses to graze about 1,400 head of cattle. Those practices paid off this year.

“Our growing season here, precipitation averages 15 inches per season. This year we were under four,” Kenyon said. This severe drought had only a minor effect on the land he has managed for 20 years. “We barely noticed it. Cattle didn’t go home early. We didn’t destock. We still grazed until the middle of October at least,” he said. “The land we’ve only been managing for three years? Yeah, it was severely affected by the drought.”

While researchers and producers are increasing the agricultural industry’s understanding of soil health, most producers haven’t yet adopted soil health management practices.

“We’ve made some progress, but it’s never – I hate to sound like a dissatisfied conservationist – but it’s never enough,” Fuhrer said.

“Modern agriculture right now grows plants from the soil. They put inputs into the soil, they grow a plant, they harvest that plant, and they take those nutrients off the land,” Kenyon said. “We need to change how we think. My thought process right now is we need to grow the soil from the plant.”

The South Dakota Soil Health Coalition is working to educate more producers and landowners about the benefits of soil health practices and increase sustainable agriculture production with events like the Soil

Health Conference in Aberdeen. Kenyon, Fuhrer and Nichols will join Bly as keynote speakers at the conference. With discussion panels, breakout sessions, social events, award presentations, and student photo and essay contests, the event will offer useful information for attendees regardless of their level of soil health knowledge.

“I think you’ve got to have an open mind, no matter where you’re at. If you think you’re doing well with soil health, there’s another level,” Bly said. “Never close your mind to new ideas and new ways of trying things.”

Registration for the conference is \$50 per person, and there will be an option to view portions of the event online. Students may register for the conference at no cost, and they may enter photo and essay contests for a chance to win up to \$400. More information about the conference may be found at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference. Questions about the event may be directed to the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition at 605-280-4190 or sdsoilhealth@gmail.com.



Kris Nichols is the senior soil scientist for Food Water Wellness Foundation. *Courtesy photo.*

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Anthony Bly is a soils field specialist for South Dakota State University Extension. *Courtesy photo.*

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Jay Fuhrer is a conservationist for the Burleigh County (North Dakota) Soil Conservation District.
Courtesy photo.

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Steve Kenyon operates Greener Pastures Ranching, a custom grazing operation, in Alberta, Canada.
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Burleigh County (North Dakota) Soil Conservation District Conservationist Jay Fuhrer stands in a growing cover crop. Courtesy photo.

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The 2022 Soil Health Conference will be held Jan. 18-19 at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel in Aberdeen, SD. *SDSHC photo.*

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