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Soil Health School offers life-changing networking opportunities

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – In 2019, Mitchell, SD, producer Mike Balaalid found like-minded producers and experts at the South Dakota Soil Health School, and meeting them helped him make some big changes in his operation.

“I just had specific ideas I wanted to see what they thought of,” Balaalid said. “I feel like conventional people – even talking to crop insurance people and the seed guy – they don’t quite understand what I’m trying to do and why I’m trying to do it different, but having people like the Board members of the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition, who have very open minds and are willing to listen and kick around ideas and maybe think about stuff a little bit different, that’s huge for me.”

At the time, Balaalid was managing the grazing operation on a ranch, but he had concerns about how the property’s cropland was being managed. The support and knowledge he received at the school helped him take the next step. “It just solidified how I feel, and having their positive reinforcement and networking with them, it was really big for me. It really inspired me to do better and eventually rent the whole ranch so I could implement these changes I learned about at the school,” Balaalid said.

After Soil Health School, Balaalid took over the ranch’s cropland and changed how it was managed, introducing no-till practices, cover crops, and integrating livestock on cropland. He is a custom grazer, and he is using cover crops to improve his soil structure and produce more forage for livestock. “I really try to implement all five of the soil health principles on all my acres when I can,” he said.

Meeting other producers, SDSHC Board members, and experts at Soil Health School opened Balaalid up to a network of supportive people who still help him today. “I work with guys like (SDSHC Soil Health Technician) Austin Carlson. He helped me with a cover crop mix, and he visits me occasionally,” Balaalid said. “I feel like it’s not as taboo anymore to be talking about this stuff. Nobody is doing exactly what I’m doing in my area, but I’m not as much of an outlier now. There are people in the state doing cool stuff all over the place.”

People who want to learn more about sustainable agriculture and network with experienced soil health producers and industry experts can register for the 2022 Soil Health School, Aug. 31-Sept. 2, hosted on the Bruce Carlson and Anthony Bly farms near Garretson, SD.

South Dakota State University Extension Soils Field Specialist Anthony Bly said this year's school will include a focus on the importance of erosion control and that attendees would get to experience all of the elements of a diverse rotation. His farm uses a five-year rotation, and the Carlsons use a three-way rotation.

"We're going to show exactly why we do what we do," Bly said. "It will be made clear."

Soil Health School includes classroom presentations and discussions as well as field tours and exercises. Various cash crop and cover crop rotations will be demonstrated in the working fields of the host farms, and cover crop grazing exercises and information will focus on both cattle and sheep. Class size is limited to 30 people so that participants can have more contact with instructors and SDSHC Board members.

The cost to attend Soil Health School is \$150 for the first person from an operation and \$75 for each additional person from that operation. A block of rooms has been reserved for a nightly rate of \$98.10 at the Quality Inn in Brandon, SD. Participants can learn more and register at

www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/event-calendar/soil-health-school/.



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

Instructor Lee Briese, center, leads a discussion from a soil pit at the 2021 Soil Health School.

Download high-resolution photo at <https://bit.ly/3PnLsZ3>.



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

Participants at the 2021 Soil Health School learned to calculate the available forage in a cover crop.

Download high-resolution photo at <https://bit.ly/3wDL6F5>.



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

Participants at the 2021 Soil Health School learned about grazing sheep in a cover crop.

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