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Growing Connections: New app creates soil health social network

By Janelle Atyeo

For the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – South Dakota farmers, ranchers and gardeners are making strides in improving soil health, and they're willing to share what works and what doesn't. A new app from the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition aims to make it easier to reach out to fellow farmers and soil health experts.

Growing Connections, accessible as a smart phone app and from a web browser, is like a social network focused on soil health. Users can post questions about no-till practices and cover crops, for example, and get feedback from those with experience. They can participate in group discussions or reach out directly to a mentor who has expertise in a certain practice or knowledge of a particular region of the state.

"It seems like anyone involved in soil health is more than willing to share their experiences with anyone that will listen," said Darin Michalski, who runs a cow-calf operation west of Willow Lake.

It was helpful for him to reach out to a friend when he started transitioning to no-till, he said, especially when resisting the temptation to till again.

"Is there any AA for no-tillers?" he said.

That's where Growing Connections can help. With a network of farmers, gardeners, agronomists and soil health experts, there's sure to be someone with suggestions for solving a problem. Growing Connections users can also post articles or learn about events related to soil health.

It's a time saver, as Caputa rancher Shawn Freeland sees it.

He and Michalski learned much of the soil health practices they use on their farms by attending tours and workshops, hearing talks by experts in the industry like Cronin Farms agronomy manager Dan Forgey from Gettysburg, and gathering opinions from others they met at conferences and events.

Not everyone can take time to get away, said Freeland, who serves as vice chairman of the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition board of directors.

Growing Connections can provide instant feedback.

“Our goal was to be able to connect producers in the palm of their hands,” said Cindy Zenk, coordinator for the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition.

If farmers out in their corn field notice the crop isn’t emerging, for example, they can take a photo or video, post it to Growing Connections and get a response immediately. They can connect with others and choose the best management decision to make their operation more sustainable, Zenk said. Professionals from South Dakota State University Extension, the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the South Dakota Grassland Coalition can give feedback, as well as other farmers and ranchers.

“It’s an opportunity to connect,” Zenk said.

Users can search for mentors by name, area or by project, such as cover crops, livestock, or no-till gardening. Questions can be posed to the entire group of registered mentors or users can interact one-on-one with a single mentor. Users can reach one another by messaging through the app or making a phone call.

Zenk hopes it will help people make connections more quickly and that those relationships will be long-lasting.

“The best people to learn from are the people who are doing it,” she said.

Michalski, the Willow Lake farmer, likes the concept. “I like that everybody is available to talk,” he said.

Freeland wishes he would have had a mentor readily available to answer questions as he started implementing soil health practices at his ranch on the edge of the Black Hills.

“It would have been a lot easier to get on and find someone to chat with,” he said. “There might have been somebody closer.”

Both men are more than willing to share what they’ve learned. They’ve hosted tours and regularly answer questions about rotational grazing and grazing cover crops, for example.

Freeland hopes that the app and the social network it creates will help speed the process of improving soil health across South Dakota.

“Soil health is bigger than just raising healthier crops or higher yielding crops,” he said. “It’s a lasting change for generations to come. If we can accelerate that process and get the word out quicker with this app, I think that’s what we’re after.”

The app is available for free in the Apple App Store and Google Play store, and the web version can be found at www.growingconnectionsapp.com. More information, including app usage instructions, can be found at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/growing-connections-app.

More information about the Growing Connections app will be presented in a session during the 2023 Soil Health Conference, Jan. 24-25 in Sioux Falls. Information about the conference can be found at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference.



USDA-NRCS South Dakota photo

The new Growing Connections app will allow users to find nearby mentors who are industry professionals and experienced producers who can help them find answers to their soil health questions and solutions for their land management challenges.

Download a high-resolution version of this photo at <https://bit.ly/3EFoNEk>



USDA-NRCS South Dakota photo

The Growing Connections app will help users form connections with other producers, landowners, and gardeners with valuable insight about soil health management practices.

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USDA-NRCS South Dakota photo

With the Growing Connections app, finding answers to soil health questions has never been more convenient. Experienced professionals and producers have volunteered to offer their advice as mentors on the app, making the process of finding trustworthy information quick and easy.

Download a high-resolution version of this photo at <https://bit.ly/3EDTwl5>

A screenshot of the Growing Connections app interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with an envelope icon, the 'GROWING CONNECTIONS' logo, a funnel icon, and a profile picture. Below the navigation bar are two green buttons: 'Articles & Resources' and 'News & Updates'. A search bar with a magnifying glass icon and a close 'X' icon is positioned below the buttons. The main content area shows a post by 'Stan Wise' dated 'Sep 27 02:04 PM'. The post text reads: 'What a difference residue makes! These two photos were taken on the same day, in the same field, with the same variety of soybeans less than 200 feet apart. The only difference is the residue coverage. It's clear from the plants that the area with higher residue coverage maintained more soil moisture!'. Below the text is a photograph of soybean plants in a field. At the bottom of the app interface is a navigation bar with icons for home, search, a plus sign, notifications, and profile.

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition photo

Users can post questions and observations publicly on the Growing Connections app, or they can post questions to individual mentors or to all registered mentors. Users will be able to search for mentors by area of expertise or geographic location.

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