



February 9, 2023

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Stan Wise, Communications Coordinator

PHONE: 605-368-4091

EMAIL: stan.soilhealth@sdconservation.net

Finding the pieces: Soil Health Conference offers education, networking opportunities

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – Hughes County producer Terry Ness knows the value of South Dakota’s annual Soil Health Conference.

“I compare this whole soil health journey to a 10,000-piece puzzle, and we’ve got maybe a thousand pieces in place,” he said. “Every time you go to an event like this, you figure out where a few more puzzle pieces will fit.”

Ness, a member of South Dakota Soil Health Coalition Board of Directors, joined approximately 400 other attendees January 24-25 at the Best Western Plus Ramkota Hotel in Sioux Falls for the 2023 Soil Health Conference. Keynote speakers Dr. Kris Nichols, Rick Clark, Mitchell Hora, and Roy Thompson joined 13 other presenters to offer insights on a variety of sustainable land management topics.

“There were a lot of cutting-edge topics that had really comprehensive information,” Ness said. “My head was about ready to explode by the time it got done. I hope that meant I absorbed it all.”

Fellow SDSHC Board Member and McLaughlin, SD, producer Candice Mizera said that while she enjoyed Dr. Nichols’s presentation on soil biology, Roy Thompson delivered her main takeaway message from the conference with the story of how he addressed both personal health challenges and operational challenges on his land with sustainable agriculture.

“Healthier soil, healthier operation, healthier animals, healthier people,” Mizera said. “Just the resilience of it – being able to combat drought and floods. That’s so much of what we do. It enables us to deal with the uncontrollable.”

This year the conference was held in conjunction with the Midwest Cover Crops Council Annual Meeting, which held a poster competition for graduate students. The informational posters were available for viewing throughout the conference.

New this year to the conference was the Seeing Opportunity, Improving the Land (SOIL) Session in which attendees broke into smaller groups to discuss one of ten soil health topics.

“That was fun to participate in. I just sat in on one of them, and it never wanted to end. We just kept going and going and going and going,” Ness said. “A lot of good conversations there.”

Mizera said those conversations are important.

“Talking with other producers who are there, who have done it or are thinking of doing it and just bouncing ideas off each other,” she said. “And hopefully meeting a friend or two or getting to know someone either in your neighborhood or a long way away. Just striking up a conversation and finding out what everybody’s up to. The big value is education, whether it’s from people one-on-one out in the hallways or listening to the speakers.”

“I’ve been saying it for two or three years now that the Soil Health Conference and the Soil Health School – the way I see it, each one is worth about a semester of college to me,” Ness said. “I get that much good out of it, so I don’t plan on ever missing one again.”

Awards

During the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition’s Annual Meeting, the Coalition presented Dan Forgey with the 2023 Friend of Soil Health Award. Forgey was an active member of the SDSHC Board from 2015-2021. He was also the longtime agronomy manager for Cronin Farms where he helped to run a cow/calf livestock operation as well as low-disturbance, no-till management of crop ground since 1993. He also used diversified cropping rotations and cover crops. Forgey was also a member of the Dakota Lakes Research Farm Board of Directors for many years. He travels across the state and the nation to share his knowledge and experience with others who are working to improve the land. Forgey’s vision for the future of soil health is “to see more interest in soil health so that one day it is as common in farmers’ conversations as no-till.”

“I was tremendously touched that the peers, the people all in soil health gave me that award,” Forgey said. “It means a lot to me, especially coming from the people that live and preach soil health. I really appreciate that.”

The Coalition presented Cronin Farms with the 2023 Legacy Award for their dedication to conservation and willingness to share their knowledge with others. The farm transitioned to no-till in 1993, and the fragile perennial pastures were transformed from season-long grazing to a rotational grazing system. Forage and cover crops have been integrated into the diverse crop rotations and are either swath or bale grazed during the fall and winter. The Cronins partner with other organizations to conduct research on their land and have hosted people from around the world who want to learn how they maintain excellent soil health. In 2016 Cronin Farms won the South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award.

Forgey said that the Legacy Award spotlighted the soil that has been built on the land managed by Cronin Farms. “The soil is what brought that award on,” he said. “It’s all about the soil and the soil health and our road down the soil health journey.”

Essay contest

As part of the conference, the Coalition held a student essay contest. Caleb McGregor of Webster, SD, is a freshman at South Dakota State University, and he won the \$400 top prize in the post-secondary category. Riley Ash, a senior at Webster Area High School, won the \$200 top prize in the high school

category. Londyn Groneberg, an 8th grade student at Black Hills Christian Academy in Spearfish, won the \$200 top prize in the middle school category.

By-laws amendment

During the Coalition's annual meeting, members voted to amend the organizations by-laws. The amendment adds a sixth item within "ARTICLE VI - BOARD OF DIRECTORS Section 1. The role of the Board of Directors" of the by-laws regarding a conflict-of-interest statement:

6. Disclose any conflict of interest when considering taking an action or entering a transaction that might benefit the private interests of a director or otherwise violate state and federal laws governing conflicts of interest applicable to nonprofit, charitable organizations.

Also during the annual meeting, SDSHC Board Members Candice Mizera, Levi Neuharth, and Brian Johnson were each elected to serve another term on the board of directors.

The South Dakota Soil Health Coalition thanks all speakers, panelists, attendees, and viewers for making this year's conference a success. Recordings of the presentations will be made available online at www.sdsolhealthcoalition.org.

The Coalition thanks the following sponsors for their generous support of the 2023 Soil Health Conference: South Dakota Wheat Commission, Green Cover Seed, North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, Mustang Seeds, Exapta Solutions Inc., South Dakota No-Till Association, SDSU Extension, Albert Lea Seed, South Dakota Grassland Coalition, Every Acre Counts, Ducks Unlimited, Dakota's Best Seed, South Dakota Specialty Producers Association, Grain Millers, Agassiz Seed & Supply, Range Ward, Millborn Seeds, Grossenburg Implement Inc., South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts Employees, Presentation Sisters, Pheasants Forever, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, La Crosse Seed, Organic Crop Improvement Association - SD Chapter 1, East Dakota Water Development District, C & B Operations, South Dakota Center for Farm/Ranch Management, Ward Laboratories Inc., Midwest Cover Crops Council, South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, and South Dakota Discovery Center.

The 2024 Soil Health Conference will be held Jan. 23-24 at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel in Rapid City, SD.



South Dakota Soil Health Coalition photo

Dan Forgey, right, receives the 2023 Friend of Soil Health Award from SDSHC Board Member Doug Sieck, center, while SDSHC Board member Dennis Hoyle, left, looks on at the 2023 Soil Health Conference, Jan. 24-25 in Sioux Falls.

Download this photo at <https://bit.ly/3Ylhed5>



South Dakota Soil Health Coalition photo

SDSHC Board Members Candice Mizera, left, and Terry Ness, right, participate in a small group discussion on cover crops at the 2023 Soil Health Conference.

Download this photo at <https://bit.ly/3DVlo3h>



South Dakota Soil Health Coalition photo

Members of the Cronin Family accept the 2023 Legacy Award at the 2023 Soil Health Conference.

Download this photo at <https://bit.ly/3xeiBhX>