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Coalition plans additional Soil Health School for West River

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – Since 2016, the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition has held an annual Soil Health School to offer an intensive educational experience that combines classroom instruction with hands-on field exercises.

However, those schools have been held east of the Missouri River, and producers west of the river face a different set of agricultural challenges due to the drier climate and the predominance of livestock operations. To help address issues important to West River producers, this year the Coalition is holding an additional school.

The West River Soil Health School will be held June 26-27 at Shawn and Kristy Freeland’s Dry Creek Farm and Ranch near Caputa, SD.

Western South Dakota features a drier climate that is poorly suited for the kind of row crop operations that dominate the eastern portion of the state. As a result, West River producers focus on forage crops and the livestock industry.

“We are forage croppers more than cereal grain croppers,” SDSHC Soil Health Specialist Dave Ollila said. “Everything we raise, or a high percentage of it, we make into either silage or hay. That means we remove everything, and there’s no residue left.”

Leaving plant residue on the soil is the first principle of soil health, so the constant removal of hay and silage can have a negative effect on soil health.

“We don’t have consideration for returning nutrients to the soil, and so we deplete our soils that way because we remove so much residue,” Ollila said. As the soils become degraded, water infiltration rates and storage capacities decrease.

“We have 15 inches of annual rainfall, so we run into issues of holding moisture or keeping what we got,” Ollila said. “This school is going to provide a lot of ideas on how to increase production in a low rainfall area while reducing input costs. We know that soil health is the way to do that.”

The West River Soil Health School will feature multi-species livestock grazing, cover crop grazing, soil health practices in both irrigation and dryland situations, and much more. Classroom instruction will include the basics of how soil functions and how to improve its health. Instructors will include noted conservationists, university researchers, industry professionals, and producers who are experienced in regenerative agriculture practices.

New Underwood, SD, producer Casey Knuppe is a Soil Health School graduate and knows that such learning opportunities can change the way producers view their operations.

“After learning about the regenerative practices and going to some of these schools and other events, I’m just way more observant, way more thoughtful about what we do and how it does affect our land and operation,” Knuppe said. “Anytime you can go to those events is good.”

Another important aspect of the school is the chance to network with like-minded professionals, researchers, and conservation professionals. The connections made at the school can prove fruitful as attendees return to their operations and implement new sustainable agriculture practices.

“You’re just around a positive people,” Knuppe said. “There’s always a lot of positivity, and people want to learn and try practices.”

The school’s class size is limited to 30 people so that participants can have more contact with instructors and Soil Dakota Soil Health Coalition board members.

The cost to attend the West River Soil Health School is \$100 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 \$159 at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel in Rapid City. Participants can learn more and register at www.sdsolhealthcoalition.org.

A second Soil Health School will be held Aug. 26-28 in Huron, SD.



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

SDSHC Board Chairman Shawn Freeland leads a cover crop grazing exercise during the 2023 Soil Health School. Freeland will host the 2024 West River Soil Health School, June 26-27, at his Dry Creek Beef Farm and Ranch near Caputa, SD.

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SD Soil Health Coalition photo

Attendees of the 2024 West River Soil Health School will learn about many different regenerative agriculture practices, including the use of cover crops in a multi-species livestock operation.

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