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**Award winners announced at Soil Health Conference**

PIERRE, SD – The Ninth Annual Soil Health Conference, Jan. 15-16 at the Ramkota Hotel and Event Center in Watertown, SD, saw approximately 500 attendees, including over a hundred students. The South Dakota Soil Health Coalition was thrilled to offer this opportunity for regenerative land management education and present its annual awards, including awards for student contest winners.

“I’m always amazed by how much this conference grows from year to year, but what really stood out this year was the audience participation,” SDSHC Board Chairman Shawn Freeland said. “So many exciting conversations among the attendees shows the growing appetite for soil health knowledge.”

The conference featured 22 land management presentations, panels, and discussion opportunities for attendees. Jared Luhman, host of the Ranching Returns podcast, and Tanse Herrmann, Natural Resources Conservation State Grazing Lands Soil Health Specialist, served as the masters of ceremonies. The Conference included many speakers including Keith Berns, co-owner of Green Cover Seed; Paul Jasa, noted Extension engineer at University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Dr. Jon Lundgren, Ecdysis Foundation executive director and CEO of Blue Dasher Farm; and Joe Breker, an award-winning North Dakota producer who has been using regenerative agriculture practices for over 40 years! Breakout sessions covered topics ranging from the economics of regenerative agriculture to gardening for soil health to rangeland management and many others.

“The 2025 Annual Conference was a great opportunity for anyone associated with agriculture to learn about the mindset of being a soil caretaker,” SDSHC Board Member Brian Johnson said. “Being conservation-minded stewards of the land has always been an educational focus of the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition, and the wide-ranging variety of speakers shared their experiences with eager listeners who wish to set up their own operations for future success.”

**Awards**

As part of the conference, SDSHC announced the winners of its two annual awards.

Rock Hills Ranch, founded in 1976 by Lyle and Garnet Perman, was named the 2025 Legacy Award winner. The Permans were joined by their son Luke and his wife Naomi Perman in 2006. Luke, Naomi, and their children Isaac, Ella, Micah and Noah are the fifth and sixth generations of the family to farm and ranch in the Lowry, SD, area. The family was honored to receive the 2014 SD Aldo Leopold

Conservation Award and the 2014 National Environmental Stewardship Award from the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. They are active proponents of conservation, especially as it relates to soil health and grassland.

Nathan Jones was named the 2025 Friend of Soil Health Award winner. He has been the Natural Resources Conservation Service South Dakota State Soil Scientist since 2014, and in that time, he has helped countless producers, gardeners, landowners, professionals, and students learn more about the life-sustaining soil under their feet and how to conserve it for our future generations. He works closely with partners across the sustainable agriculture world, and he presents at workshops, field schools, conferences, lectures, and classroom visits across the state and beyond.

Jones grew up in Pleasant Grove, Utah, and he graduated from the University of Georgia with a bachelor's degree in environmental soil science. He began his career with NRCS in 2006 – first mapping soils in Wyoming and then working as the MLRA soil survey project leader in Pierre beginning in 2010. He and his wife, Marva, have four children, ages 16-25.

Jones has a unique gift for explaining the deep complexities of soil science in ways that can be easily understood by everyone, regardless of their educational backgrounds. His dedication to helping others improve their understanding of soil health and their land management practices comes through in everything he does. His knowledge and experience have been invaluable in helping the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition provide scientifically accurate and up-to-date information to thousands of people across the state.

## **Student contests**

To spark an interest in soil health among young people in South Dakota, the SDSHC incorporated student essay and video contests into this year's Soil Health Conference.

In the essay contest, participants could address one of two questions: 1) Why does healthy soil start with soil biology? 2) Why is biodiversity important for rural landscapes? In the post-secondary division, Charles Koehl of South Dakota State University won \$400 for first place. In the high school division, Tevin Howder of Webster Area High School was awarded \$300 for first place, Maddy Oftedahl of Toronto, SD, won \$100 for second place, Kashe Skalla of Burke High School won \$75 for third place, and Julie Lesnar of Webster Area High School won \$50 for fourth place. In the middle school division, Kade Braaten of Rosholt School District won \$200 for first place, and Tayzi Herrmann of Whitewood, SD, won \$50 for second place.

The video contest consisted of one division open to all K-12 students in South Dakota, and participants could address one of two themes: 1) Clean water for future generations or 2) Healthy soil leads to healthy people. Izaac Richards of Scotland, SD, won \$750 for first place. A team from the Webster FFA Chapter consisting of Tevin Howder, Caleb Gaikowski, Alec Garrett, Blaise McGregor, and Dylan Carlson won \$500 for second place. Tayzi Herrmann of Whitewood, SD, won \$250 for third place. A team consisting of Katy Scott of Spearfish, SD, and Leela Bosworth of Whitewood, SD, won \$100 for fourth place.

The winning video and essays are available to view at [www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference/students/](http://www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference/students/).

## Board changes

During SDSHC's annual meeting which was held during the conference, board member David Kruger of Twin Brooks, SD, retired from the board of directors. The Coalition thanks Kruger for his dedication to sustainable agriculture education and helping to guide SDSHC's activities and growth.

During the meeting, Coalition members elected Barry Little to fill the vacant seat on the board of directors.

Little operates Blioux River Ranch near Castlewood, SD, with his son, Eli Little. They were the recipients of the 2024 South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award, and they are committed to regenerative agriculture education and have held multiple field days on their operation showcasing the benefits of diversity and soil health land management practices.

SDSHC welcomes Little to the board of directors and looks forward to his new ideas and efforts to help increase sustainable agriculture production in the state.

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.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org](http://www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org).

Next year's Soil Health Conference will be held January 13-14, 2026, at the Best Western Ramkota Hotel and Convention Center in Aberdeen, SD.



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

Natural Resources Conservation Service South Dakota State Soil Scientist (center) received the Friend of Soil Health Award from the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition board of directors at the 2025 Soil Health Conference in Watertown, SD.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/42MWK1Q>



SD Soil Health Coalition photo

The Perman Family received the Legacy Award for their Rock Hills Ranch near Lowry, SD, from the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition board of directors at the 2025 Soil Health Conference in Watertown, SD.

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