South Dakota Soil Health Coalition
10 Years & Growing

Soil Visions

Volume: 11 Issue 3

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Coalition Makes Education a Mission

By Stan Wise

There's a powerful moment that happens when young students watch a table-top rainfall simulation for the first time.

This simple demonstration compares what happens when rain falls on healthy soil and on damaged soil. As the water infiltrates through the healthy soil and runs off the damaged soil, the students' eyes grow larger. They begin to comprehend what a big deal it is, what it means for our farms and ranches, for our rivers and streams, for our landscape, and for our communities. They begin to glimpse something that some adults either never learn or don't think about: Regenerative land management is vital for our future.



Students play a soil health knowledge game on an interactive display at the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition booth at the 2026 State FFA Convention. SDSHC photo.

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition board members and staff get to witness this moment often. They visit classrooms throughout the state and attend dozens of educational events every year. At the recent Ag Fair on April 29th in Aberdeen, over 500 area fourth graders spent time at a Coalition booth, learning the importance of soil health and good land stewardship. More than 6,000 students, advisors, and guests attended the 2026 State FFA Convention in Brookings on April 22nd where the Coalition manned another booth featuring interactive games, prizes, and the chance to interact with several staff members. The Coalition can be found at water festivals, field trips, ag education days, and other youth events across the state every year.

"If we want to make regenerative agriculture culturally accepted and the new normal, we must start with educating our youth and consumers," SDSHC Soil Health Technician Courtney Geppert said. "I feel very blessed to have the opportunity to connect with our youth and consumers as they are so excited to learn and are curious about agriculture."

Of course, youth and consumer education is just one aspect of the Coalition's education efforts. SDSHC also has a presence at dozens of events each year designed to help landowners and producers learn

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The 2026 West River Soil Health School is set for June 24-25 in Caputa, SD!
Sign up today!
Learn more on Page 5

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more about regenerative agriculture and find the help they need to improve their land. These events include conservation district meetings, workshops hosted by partner organizations, and field days at research institutions and regeneratively managed farms and ranches.

The Coalition also hosts workshops and field days in addition to a legislative day, two intensive annual Soil Health Schools and an annual conference that averages 400 attendees. SDSHC works to not only provide knowledgeable speakers at these events but also to facilitate networking for the attendees.

Online Resources

Networking is also the focus of several Coalition websites and mobile apps. It's important to help producers and landowners connect with others who might have knowledge or resources that can help them.

"Producers in rural South Dakota can feel isolated and challenged to be the expert in every part of their farm operation. This is why networking at our events or through resources such as Growing Connections, the South Dakota Grazing Exchange or South Dakota Fresh Connect can be so important," Geppert said. "Sharing experiences helps producers advance practices at a quicker rate for everyone!"

Growing Connections is a mobile app and a website designed to help users get their questions answered directly from trusted mentors as well as connect with other users of the app and share what they are experiencing in their operations.

The South Dakota Grazing Exchange is a website designed to help livestock producers connect with landowners who have cover crops, pasture or other forage resources available for grazing. Users can contact each other privately to form grazing agreements. The Grazing Exchange has expanded to include several other states and Canadian provinces.

South Dakota Fresh Connect is a website designed to help local food producers connect with consumers, schools, and other organizations to help increase the consumption of locally grown food.

The Coalition also administers the Soil Health Improvement and Planning Project, which offers financial and technical assistance to producers who want to adopt certain regenerative practices for the first time. SDSHC staff can help plan the implementation of those practices. Staff members can also conduct farm visits and offer ideas to help producers achieve their soil health goals.



Renowned soil health advocate Ray Archuleta is a featured guest in the first season of the new Soil Strategies podcast launched by the Coalition this year. SDSHC photo.



Fourth grade students learn about soil health from SDSHC Soil Health Technician Chris Goldade during the Ag Fair on April 29th in Aberdeen. SDSHC photo.

"The Soil Health Coalition is a unique team that genuinely wants to help others out and provide personalized experiences and insight," Geppert said. "Whether you're at a school, tour or conference, we do our best to meet the producer or attendees where they are at to help them succeed. Having this personalized approach seems to work well as we do not push a product but work directly to find an individual fit for each producer's scenario."

In addition to events, the Coalition also works to educate the public through informative videos which are available on YouTube, public service announcements broadcast on radio stations across the state, an ever-growing library of printed educational materials, social media messaging, and even a new podcast called Soil Strategies.

The Soil Strategies podcast is hosted by SDSHC Board Member Roy Thompson and features interviews with experienced producers, popular regenerative ag advocates, and conservation professionals. The podcast can be found on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and YouTube.

The Coalition is constantly looking for new venues and new ways to spread soil health information and awareness to help farms, ranches, and communities remain sustainable and vibrant for years to come.

"Looking at the future of agriculture, we are going to have to think outside of the box and be regenerative minded," Geppert said. "Regenerative agriculture can be a bit different for producers, so this education is so important for the next generation to thrive."

To learn more about soil health and the Coalition's activities, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org.

Membership Minute: Kurt Stiefvater

Kurt and Kathy Stiefvater farm 1,800 acres and raise 140 head of cattle on pasture in southeastern South Dakota with their three daughters: Lauren, Megan and Karlie.

Kurt began farming with his father, John, in the 1980s, and they adopted no-till practices decades ago to cut costs and improve their soil. Kurt continues to focus on improving his soil to reach his goals of conserving moisture, limiting erosion from wind and water, reducing inputs, and increasing biodiversity.



Kurt and Kathy Stiefvater with their three daughters, Lauren, Megan and Karlie. Courtesy photo

Key to achieving those goals is diversity. Even when the markets don't put a high dollar on crops such as sorghum and oats, Kurt knows their value in a rotation with the standard corn and soybeans. Rather than chasing the biggest yields, he looks at how the rotation complements next season's crop. As he calculates the return per acre, he considers the cost savings on seed and inputs. For example, he's able to grow sorghum for about 40% of the cost of growing corn. He also considers the benefits a diverse crop rotation brings: Breaking the cycle of weed and pests, creating a dense, soil-protecting cover, and leaving residue to feed both cattle above ground and the community of living organisms below ground that make for a thriving, healthy soil.

Kurt sets rotations two or more years ahead, and the strategy helps spread out his workload. He manages a busy harvest season by moving from oats that mature first to soybeans, corn, and then sorghum. The crops and cattle are enterprises that can each stand on their own, giving the farm financial stability at a time when margins are thin, but each enterprise also compliments the other.

Kurt also uses cover crops to achieve his soil health goals. He aims to keep a living root in the soil for as many months out of the year as the growing season allows. Cover crops catch morning dew and draw moisture to the soil. They keep soil temperatures cooler when otherwise scorching sun on bare, black earth would let moisture evaporate. In this way, Kurt is making the best use of the moisture he receives.

Cattle are moved to the fields to graze crop residue or cover crops, giving pastures time to rest and rejuvenate during a season when grasses are starting to dry up. Kurt's rotational grazing system has helped native, warm-season grasses return to the landscape. Between grasslands and his small grain crops, Kurt's landscape is a haven for nesting ducks and pheasants in the spring, providing them with habitat and an early-season food source. Tall sorghum stubble left in the fields in the fall becomes a place for wildlife to take cover from predators.



Kurt Stiefvater uses diversity in his operation to achieve his soil health goals. Courtesy photo

The diversity Kurt has built into his operation also plays into financial resiliency. By raising cattle and planting a variety of crops, the farm is protected when one market falters. "The whole farm isn't banking on that one gold medal to carry the farm," he said.

Kurt often shares his time and knowledge with other producers, and he has been recognized for those efforts. He was presented with the regional Conservation Legacy Award from the American Soybean Association in 2025, the South Dakota Soil Health Legacy Award in 2020, and he's been named to the Farm Credit Services of America's list of 100 Fresh Perspectives.

Upcoming Events

June 3-4
SD Bird Watching Tour
Veblen, SD

June 4
Managing and Planning for a Drought on Rangelands
Mission, SD

June 4
Women's Ag Network Hub Event
Brookings, SD

June 9-10
2026 Rangeland and Soils Days
Belle Fourche, SD

June 10
Agricultural Women's Day
Onida, SD

June 16-18
SD Grazing School
Wall, SD

June 24-25
West River Soil Health School
Caputa, SD

July 7
SE Research Farm Field Day and Family Evening
Beresford, SD

July 8
Eastern SD Soil and Water Research Farm Field Day
Brookings, SD

Aug. 17
No-till High Tunnel Workshop
Westport, SD

Aug. 20
South Dakota Leopold Conservation Award Tour
Meadow, SD

Aug. 28
Small Scale Ag Soil Health School
Huron, SD

Sept. 9-11
South Dakota Grazing School
Chamberlain, SD

Sept. 15-17
Soil Health School
Twin Brooks, SD

Watch for more events HERE.

SDSHC Raises Membership Rates to Meet Rising Costs

By Stan Wise

In a recent interview, renowned regenerative agriculture advocate Gabe Brown referred to the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition as the "gold standard" for partnership with other organizations and individuals to facilitate soil health education.

"The wealth of information that the Coalition has access to and can share with its membership, I think that is one of our strong points as a Coalition – just the ability to provide knowledge to those that are seeking it," SDSHC Board Chairman Brian Johnson said.

Since its inception in 2015, the Coalition has worked to raise awareness of the benefits of healthy soil, has offered regenerative agriculture education opportunities, and has promoted the adoption of soil health management practices. SDSHC hosts schools, workshops, field days, and conferences. Its staff members make regular visits to classrooms across the state and participate in dozens of events hosted by partner organizations and agencies each year. The Coalition publishes articles, educational materials, informational videos, and public service announcements. It also manages several websites and mobile applications designed to make it easy for producers and landowners to find answers and solutions to their questions and challenges.

None of this work would be possible without the support of the Coalition's members, who show up to events, share their knowledge with others, and volunteer their time and resources to help fellow land stewards on their regenerative ag journeys.

The members also contribute their dues, which are vital funds necessary for the Coalition's continued operation.

For the first time since its founding, the Coalition has raised its membership dues from $25 per year to $35 per year. The cost of a lifetime membership has also increased to $1,000 for individuals or couples and $1,500 for other entities. This increase is necessary to face rising operational costs.

"Obviously, the cost of doing business has gone up in life, and the value of the content we're providing has increased. It's more expensive to get speakers to our sessions," Johnson said. "We felt that, based on the value of the content the Coalition provides, that we needed to cover some of those cost increases we are seeing just like every other entity around."



Colome, SD, producer Van Mansheim serves on the SDSHC board of directors. Courtesy photo.



Frankfort, SD, producer Brian Johnson is the current chairman of the SDSHC board of directors. USDA-NRCS photo.

Board member Van Mansheim pointed out that membership has its perks. "Being a member grants free admittance to all the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition events – other than the annual Soil Health Schools and the annual conference – which includes field days, workshops, and speaker events," he said.

Members also receive a bi-monthly newsletter with informative articles and regular updates via email.

For people who are considering membership, Johnson emphasized the high quality of the Coalition's events. "I would say come to one of our local events and then come to our annual conference, and then after that, ask yourself if it was worth your time or not," he said, "because there's not a single person I've talked to that has walked away from one of our meetings or our annual conference and not felt that it was just an amazing experience. The conference is probably one of the best conferences that I've ever been to, and I'm not just saying that as a board member."

Mansheim noted the meaningful networking opportunities that membership offers. "It puts you around like-minded people, other producers and farmers and ranchers who are trying to obtain the same goals," he said.

The lifetime membership option offers people a way to contribute more significantly to the Coalition's mission.

"It's an opportunity to help the Coalition share information with others and advance its goals and the vision," Johnson said. "Most lifetime members are believers in the mission of the Coalition and have been impacted positively in some fashion by the content that the Coalition provides. By becoming a lifetime member, you're helping us continue sharing that information with others."

Johnson said that all membership dues are used to provide content, learning opportunities, and assistance for the Coalition's members. "We're not in it to make money. We're simply here to help each other," he said.

The Coalition is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. To become a member or make a donation, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org, call 605-280-4190, or email sdsoilhealth@gmail.com.

Sign up for the West River Soil Health School, June 24-25

By Stan Wise

Stated simply, you don't want to miss the West River Soil Health School, June 24-25 near Caputa, SD. Hosted by Shawn and Kristy Freeland on their Dry Creek Farm and Ranch, this school brings participants together with researchers, experienced producers, and conservation experts on an operation that has been employing all five soil health principles for several years.

The class size is limited, so each participant will have ample opportunity to interact with instructors. This is a rare opportunity to network with mentors and like-minded individuals who can help you find ways to improve your operation's resilience, sustainability, and profitability.

"I view this school as an opportunity to learn some of the most critical farm management skills for long-term success in business," South Dakota Soil Health Coalition Soil Health Technician Austin Carlson said. "Participants will experience a mix of classroom instruction and hands-on exercises in the field led by leading professionals in the industry. Topics covered at the school are applicable to any farming operation, meeting participants right where they are today, equipping them with skills they can use in the future."

Carlson said his favorite part of the school is the inviting atmosphere and networking opportunities. "When my dad and I first attended, we felt genuinely welcomed by Coalition board members and instructors who went out of their way to greet us and helped us make sense of how we could practically implement soil health practices," he said. "Personally, I enjoyed the school so much that I decided to pursue a career helping others improve the management of their soils."

Participants can expect to learn about soil function, soil health economics, interpreting soil tests, virtual fencing, no-till planting, drought resilience, confident grazing, long-term productivity, beneficial insects, cost-share programs, and much more. Small-scale agriculture and gardening information will be made available to participants who request it.

Individual registration costs $100, and additional registrations from the same operation cost $75. Meals and materials are included. Participants are responsible for their own lodging. A block of rooms has been reserved at the Baymont by Wyndham Rapid City for $125 per night.

To learn more and register, visit https://bit.ly/2026-WRSHS.



The West River Soil Health School is set for June 24-25. SDSHC photo

Mulch: A Time Saving Technique for Better Soil Health

By Chris Goldade
SDSHC Soil Health Technician

As the garden wakes up in spring, adding mulch is one of the easiest and most effective steps you can take to build healthier soil and help control weeds. Mulch acts as a protective blanket, shielding the soil surface while supporting the biological activity beneath it. A good layer of mulch can help reduce the ability of annual weeds, like common lambsquarters, foxtail and kochia, to germinate and therefore reduce the amount of time you spend weeding throughout the summer.

Mulch helps minimize soil disturbance, a key soil health practice. By covering the soil surface, mulch reduces erosion, suppresses weed growth, retains moisture, and reduces soil borne diseases. Organic mulches like straw, shredded leaves, or grass clipping gradually decompose, increasing organic matter in the soil. Even a modest increase in organic matter can significantly improve water holding capacity and support microorganisms that cycle nutrients in the soil.

Applying mulch in spring helps retain moisture as temperatures rise during the summer. This reduces the need for frequent watering and decreases evaporation that can lead to increases in salinity in the soil. Mulch also buffers soil temperatures, keeping root zones cooler and creating a more resilient environment for garden plants.

Here are a few tips to consider when using mulch in the garden.

- Do not apply mulch until soil temperatures rise to at least 50 degrees. Mulch will keep the soil cool longer and delay growth in warm season plants like tomatoes and peppers.
- Pull back any existing mulch to direct seed into the soil or install transplants.
- Apply a 2- to 4-inch layer around transplants but wait for direct seeded crops to reach true leaf stage before applying mulch.
- Keep mulch slightly away from stems to prevent disease and pest concerns.
- Choose clean, weed-free materials like straw, shredded leaves, grass clippings, shredded paper, and hay.
- Replenish mulch as it decomposes to maintain soil cover through the growing season.

Whether you're growing in a raised bed or a large garden, spring mulching is a simple practice that aligns with soil health principles including reduced disturbance and keeping the soil covered. By following the five principles of soil health you can keep your soil and yourself healthy and happy.

To request the new *Living Soil Handbook for Small Scale Farmers*, contact the Coalition at 605-280-4190 or sdsoilhealth@gmail.com.



USDA-NRCS photo

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SAVE THE DATE!

SD Leopold Conservation Award Tour – Aug. 20

Darling Creek Ranch

Meadow, South Dakota

More details will be forthcoming. Direct any questions to Alex Erickson at AErickson@sandcountyfoundation.org or 507-829-3467.



South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

Sand County Foundation

South Dakota Grassland Coalition