

February, 2012

Indiana NRCS leadership will make the relentless pursuit of functioning soil health a priority for all NRCS employees in Indiana. This decision is based on the positive resource benefits achieved from the promotion of soil health through conservation cropping systems across the state over the past several years.

Achieving functioning soil health is accomplished through conservation cropping systems by disturbing the soil as little as possible, growing as many different species of plants as practical, keeping living plants in the soil as much as possible and keeping the soil covered.

The conservation cropping systems prescription for soil health is to implement no-till, cover crops, advanced nutrient and pest management, crop rotations, and buffers and smart drainage where appropriate, together as a system. With new agricultural tools, technology, and genetics available today, achieving functioning soil health is a reality.

Since September 2011, Indiana NRCS leadership has supported several key actions:

- Secured sufficient funds to enter into a contribution agreement to expand the Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative (CCSI) with our partners. See *CPA – 2012 Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative Activities* memo issued on December 14, 2011 for more details.
- A group of 10 multi-disciplinary employees from across the state, along with Indiana farmers and agricultural service providers, travelled to North Dakota to observe their soil health strategy. This group submitted recommendations to the Leadership Team for an Indiana NRCS soil health strategy.
- Barry Fisher, Shannon Zezula, Ray Archuleta from the National Soil Health and Sustainability Team and I met with Chief Dave White and other NRCS leadership to encourage a national commitment to manage for soil health to address priority resource concerns.
- At the Chief's request, we returned to Washington, D.C., to meet with key leaders from the Office of Management and Budget, the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Agriculture, and White House staff to share Indiana's conservation cropping systems approach to soil health.
- We then shared the same demonstration on soil health given in Washington, D.C. to all the State Conservationists during the Chief's regularly scheduled video teleconference.

To ensure that NRCS can assist Indiana's farmers in their successful pursuit of soil health and the associated benefits, the Leadership Team will implement the following actions as an Indiana Soil Health Strategy:

- Establish a State Soil Health Specialist position on the State Resource Conservationist staff and directly reassign Barry Fisher to this position.
- Advertise the State Agronomist position vacancy.
- Establish Area Soil Health Teams to identify local training and technical needs of employees, agricultural service providers and farmers. The teams will meet regularly and work with the State Soil Health Specialist to provide training and organize field demonstrations. The team members will provide direct technical assistance to farmers and other planners as requested.
 - ◊ In most cases, each six-member Area Soil Health Team includes two planners from each Conservation Implementation Team (CIT) service area plus two area office staff.
 - ◊ The Indiana State Soil Health Team will include the members of the four Area Soil Health Teams, State Soil Health Specialist, State Agronomist, State Conservation Agronomist and a

representative of the State Office Soils Staff.

- ◊ In consultation with the Leadership Team, I selected the team members based on their understanding and interest in soil health; commitment to receiving and providing training and the associated travel; and their geographic location within Indiana. They include District Conservationists (DC), Soil Conservationists (SC), Resource Management Specialists (RMS), Resource Soil Scientists (RSS), and Grazing Specialists (GS):

- ◆ **NE:** Dan Davis (RMS), Scot Haley (RSS), Sam St. Clair (DC), Derek Thompson (DC), Joe Updike (DC), and Adam Jones (SC).
- ◆ **NW:** Mike Wigginton (RSS), Susannah Hinds (GS), Ben Lambeck (DC), Brandy Daggett (DC), Kerry Smith (DC), Andrew Brown (DC).
- ◆ **SE:** Brian Ingmire/Mike Hughes (RMS), Robert Zupancic (GS), Tim Schwipps (DC), Clint Harrison (DC), Ruth Hackman (DC), Adam Conklin (DC).
- ◆ **SW:** Victor Shelton (GS), Dan Luczynski (RMS), Tom Held (DC), Travis Gogel (DC), Doris Scully (DC), Don Donovan (DC).
- ◆ **State Office:** Barry Fisher (State Soil Health Specialist), Tony Bailey (State Conservation Agronomist), the State Agronomist (vacant), and Rick Neilson (State Office Soil Scientist).

- NRCS staff will be required to meet the Ability, Skill, or Knowledge (ASK) level as outlined below. Achieving the necessary soil health ASK proficiency level is a joint responsibility between the supervisor and employee. Supervisors will work with each of their employees to identify training needs. Each employee will also need to assess their individual technical skills and request training.
 - ◊ Soil Health Team members will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 5 (Proficient and Can Train Others) on conservation cropping systems and soil health concepts by September 30, 2012.
 - ◊ GS-11 and GS-12 District Conservationists and Soil Conservationists will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 4 (Can Perform Independently) on conservation cropping systems and soil health concepts by September 30, 2013.
 - ◊ GS-7/9 Soil Conservationists will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 3 (Can Perform with Assistance) on conservation cropping systems and soil health concepts by September 30, 2013.
 - ◊ Leadership Team members, State Office Technology, Soils, and Programs Staff, GS-12 Area Staff, GS-5 Soil Conservationists, and all CIT members not previously identified will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 2 (Basic Understanding) on conservation cropping systems and soil health concepts by September 30, 2013.
 - ◊ All other NRCS Indiana employees will achieve an ASK proficiency level of 1 (Awareness) on conservation cropping systems and soil health concepts by September 30, 2012.
- NRCS Indiana Leadership will encourage and support soil health as a training priority for all employees in Indiana.
 - ◊ All employees will have soil health included in their Individual Development Plan (IDP).
 - ◊ At a minimum, 50 percent of the NRCS Indiana approved training budget will be targeted toward soil health education activities.
 - ◊ A Soil Health Team member will provide awareness-level training by September 30, 2012 for

- those who need to achieve ASK proficiency level 1.
 - ◊ Employees who need to achieve ASK proficiency level 2 or 3 will attend at least one CCSI or other soil health-related event by September 30, 2012. The CCSI schedule of events is updated regularly at <http://www.in.gov/isda/ccsi/>.
 - ◊ Employees who need to achieve ASK proficiency level 4 or 5 will attend all CCSI and other soil health-related workshops and field days held in their duty station county and neighboring counties by September 30, 2012.
 - ◊ Soil Health Team members are expected to attend all identified Indiana State Soil Health Team functions including training sessions, workshops, topical field visits, meetings, etc.
 - ◊ Leadership Team members and other identified individuals will attend the first day of the scheduled Soil Health Training on June 26, 2012.
- NRCS Indiana employees will ensure that local and state partners and leaders are aware of the positive effect of conservation cropping systems on soil health and the associated resource benefits.
 - ◊ At a minimum, each DC will coordinate the demonstration of the Aggregate Stability Tests and Water Infiltration Tests and discuss their importance to natural resources by September 30, 2012 for members of their Soil and Water Conservation Districts Board.
 - ◊ At a minimum, the State Soil Health Specialist will coordinate the demonstration of the Aggregate Stability Tests and Water Infiltration Tests and discuss their importance to natural resources by December 30, 2011 at the following meetings:
 - ◆ State Soil Conservation Board meeting.
 - ◆ Indiana Conservation Partnership Leaders meeting.
 - ◆ Indiana State Technical Committee meeting.
 - ◆ Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Board meeting.
 - Each NRCS Indiana employee will promote soil health in every planning effort and producer and partner contact opportunity possible.
 - ◊ All employees have measurable soil health items included in their performance plan.
 - ◊ Contribution agreements, staffing decisions, development of tools, alternative work situations, and mobile planning concepts related to administration, operational, and technical efficiencies will be prioritized to allow planners and other employees to focus on getting soil health concepts implemented on the land.
 - ◊ Soil health is a priority in the Indiana NRCS communications plan.

Additional information about training opportunities, requirements for ASK levels, communication materials, etc. will be issued in the near future.