

October 16, 2014

A COMMON VISION FOR COVER CROPS AND SOIL HEALTH

Cover crops and soil health have been capturing the attention and involvement of farmers and organizations all across the U.S. These practices represent a systems-based approach to enhancing crop production and profitability, protection of soil and water resources, and land stewardship. Cover crops benefit our livestock sector by providing grazing and haying opportunities, and soil health is as applicable to pastures and rangeland as it is to row crop production. Cover crops also provide habitat and forage for wild pollinators and honeybees. Through use of cover crops, farmers are capturing sunlight and retaining nutrients at times of the year when commodity crops are not in the field, covering the soil and creating living roots that help build healthier soils.

Many initiatives and projects are underway across the country addressing cover crops and soil health, and momentum is strong. The recent National Conference on Cover Crops and Soil Health (sponsored by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and USDA-SARE program) involved 300 agricultural leaders and innovators from across the country, joined by over 6000 participants in a virtual forum at 200 plus sites across the U.S. That action-oriented conference developed many ideas on catalyzing progress with cover crops and soil health, ideas that are being pursued by the National Working Group on Cover Crops and Soil Health.¹

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has a national soil health campaign underway, involving education and training, technical assistance, and practice implementation. The National Association of Conservation Districts is working closely with NRCS in implementing the campaign and recently teamed up with the Indiana Department of Agriculture and Dow AgroSciences to hold a national Soil Health Forum. Two other major efforts on soil health include the Soil Renaissance and the Soil Health Partnership. The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation and the Farm Foundation, joined by additional organizations, lead the Soil Renaissance. Likewise, the Soil Health Partnership also involves several key partners, including the National Corn Growers Association, Monsanto, and as science advisors The Nature Conservancy. The Conservation Technology Information Center has conducted national surveys on cover crop use, supported by SARE, documenting yield benefits of cover crops and growing adoption of this practice. A number of other organizations have also been very active in the cover crops and soil health area, including many of the organizations co-signing this letter.

The numerous organizations and individuals involved in this effort are very hopeful that the momentum around cover crops and soil health can be maintained and even strengthened. We have the opportunity to go much further with adoption of cover crops and soil health practices. For example, in Maryland more than two-thirds of corn and soybean farmers now use cover crops. Nationwide, the 2012 Ag Census reported 10.3 million acres of cover crops, but that figure can and should increase considerably, perhaps reaching 20 million acres or more by 2020.

Implementation of these conservation practices is paying off for thousands of farmers and for our country, in the form of increased crop yields, better resilience to weather extremes, less soil erosion, improved nutrient management, greater carbon sequestration, and enhanced cropping system diversity. Ultimately, support and innovation from decision makers in both the public and private sector is needed to ensure that this great opportunity to transform American farming reaches its full potential, benefiting as many farmers, communities, and families as possible. To this end, **we recommend that USDA seek to broadly support cover crops and soil health, including through a comprehensive strategic plan with clear, outcome-based goals for research, education, extension, data collection, financial and technical assistance, credit, risk management, and other relevant policies and programs.**

¹ *The National Working Group on Cover Crops and Soil Health held a roundtable discussion with representatives of a dozen national agriculture and conservation organizations in Washington, DC, on July 10, 2014. During the roundtable discussion there was strong interest in development of a joint statement on cover crops and soil health, leading to development of the above statement with input from many of these groups, for co-signature support by relevant organizations.*

**List of national organizations that have agreed to be listed as co-signers of the
Common Vision Statement on Cover Crops and Soil Health**

Agriculture Retailers Association
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Farmland Trust
American Grassfed Association
American Seed Trade Association
American Society of Agronomy
American Soybean Association
Audubon
Case IH
Conservation Technology Information Center
Crop Science Society of America
Dupont-Pioneer
Environmental Defense Fund
Farm Foundation
Holistic Management International
Howard G. Buffett Foundation
National Association of Conservation Districts
National Association of State Conservation Agencies
National Barley Growers Association
National Bison Association
National Center for Appropriate Technology
National Corn Growers Association
National Farmers Union
National Milk Producers Federation
National Sunflower Association
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
National Wheat Growers Association
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Rural and Agricultural Council of America
Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation
Society for Range Management
Soil and Water Conservation Society
Soil Science Society of America
Syngenta
The Nature Conservancy
U.S. Canola Association
U.S. Dry Bean Council
U.S.A. Dry Pea and Lentil Council
World Wildlife Fund
25 x '25 Alliance