

# Southern Cover Crops

## 2016 CONFERENCE FACT SHEET

### NRCS Campaign Overview: ‘Unlocks’ Secrets in the Soil

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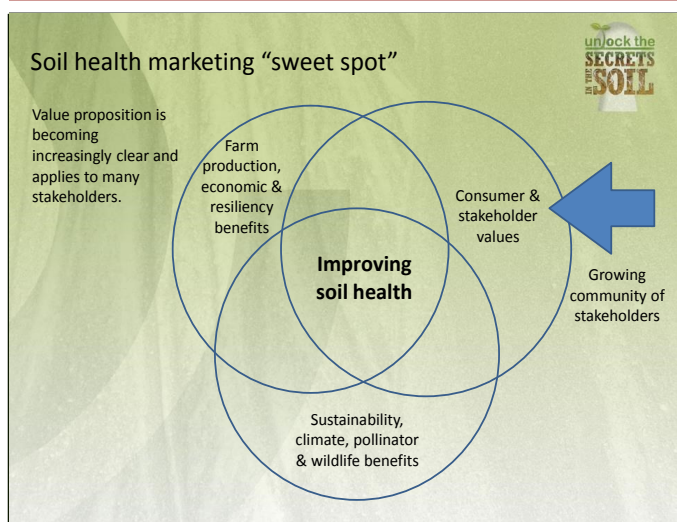


Fig. 1. Global, regional and local drivers for change are providing a historic conservation opportunity through soil health. Courtesy USDA

#### Background

Soil is the factory of our food. It is the key to our survival—the foundation of life. To meet the projected needs of the world’s burgeoning population in a sustainable way, improving the health and productivity of our soil is essential. Moreover, improving the health of the soil will also lead to continental-scale improvements in water, air, and wildlife—all while enhancing long-term agricultural production. It is not unrealistic to suggest that improving the nation’s soil health is one of the most important conservation endeavors of our time.

Since the official launch of the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s (NRCS) “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil Campaign” in October of 2012, the soil health movement has continued to grow, with cover crop and soil health management system adoption rates climbing and stakeholder interest increasing throughout the nation. Over the past four years, NRCS has developed a suite of educational materials leveraged through a coordinated social media campaign to increase awareness and adoption of soil health management systems.

Thanks in large part to this sustained awareness and education effort across the U.S., an increasing number of farmers, researchers, business leaders, NGOs and other conservationists are making clear that improving the health and function of the nation’s soil isn’t a thing to do—it is *THE* thing to do.

A recent [Iowa Farm Poll](#), conducted by J. Arbuckle at Iowa State University, indicated that key messages from the campaign are, indeed, resonating with the primary target audience of farmers.

Asked to respond to a suite of soil health-related questions...

- 92% of farmers agreed or strongly agreed that healthy soils can increase yields;
- 77% of farmers agreed or strongly agreed that healthy soils can increase drought resilience;
- 75% of farmers agreed or strongly agreed that healthy soils can reduce input needs;
- 69% of farmers agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to learn more about how to improve soil health;
- 72% of farmers have paid more attention to soil health in the last two years; and
- 76% of farmers have taken steps to improve the health of the soils they farm.

While the aforementioned poll is specific to Iowa farmers, the results are consistent with other national indicators of the growing interest in soil health (including increasing USDA-NRCS requests for training and assistance, field days, demonstrations, etc.) and suggests that demand for soil health technical, financial and educational assistance will only continue to grow in the coming months and years ahead.

USDA-NRCS has researched, planned and executed a multi-year, comprehensive marketing communications campaign to meet the needs of customers, consumers, stakeholders and shareholders in the coming years—and to ensure that the agency maintains its soil health leadership position in the marketplace.

As the soil health community of stakeholders expands, and as more farmers seek to unlock the secrets in the soil by adopting soil health management systems, additional creative marketing communications products will be developed and/or adapted to meet the needs of these new audiences—and to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of this growing soil health community.

## Awareness and Education

While the International Year of Soils concluded in December of 2015, the need to focus on our living and life-giving soil continues. The following narrative outlines the campaign's goals and objectives, as well as key messages, copy points and linkages that will be leveraged to maximize the efficacy of the overall soil health marketing communications effort for 2016 and beyond. While adoption of soil health management systems has been robust throughout the life of the campaign, the number of farmers implementing soil health management systems lags significantly behind conventional farmers. Even among no-till farmers, the use of cover crops and diverse rotations is an exception, rather than the rule.

As a result, the primary target audiences for the third year of the communications campaign will be:

- Agricultural producers (especially no-till farmers);
- Non-operator landowners (absentee landowners) who lease their land to agricultural managers/farmers;
- Agricultural producer groups, ag retailers, sustainability consortia;
- Marketplace stakeholders interested in product life cycle sustainability gains;
- Engaged consumer/citizen audiences and influencers who are especially interested in sustainability and environmental issues relative to food production and climate change.

The campaign will continue to focus on key strategic objectives among the ag producer/non-operator landowner audiences (including women landowners and producers), and will seek to increase (over the entire campaign lifecycle):

- The number of producers using cover crops (acreage);
- Awareness among farm operators regarding the overall importance of soil health;
- Awareness of how soil health affects other natural resources;
- Participation in the evaluation of soil health conditions on their land;
- Peer-to-peer communication and encouragement among farmers/landowners about the importance and benefits of soil health.

## Key Messages

The campaign and its associated tactics will continue to focus on four simple, but important messages:

- Healthy soils are high-performing, productive, resilient soils;
- Healthy soils save money and improve land conditions and preserve income-generation potential for landowners;
- NRCS can help farmers adopt practices that improve soil health; and
- There are a wide range of on- and off-the-farm environmental and wildlife benefits associated with improving soil health including carbon sequestration, wildlife and pollinator habitat, water quality and quantity.

## The Campaign Continues

To achieve the campaign's goals of continuing to increase the adoption of soil health management systems on the nation's cropland, the following tactical objectives include:

- Supporting state/local-level marketing communications activities;
- Continuing to support customer interest by providing additional customer-centric, decision support materials to states;
- Expanding soil health farmers success stories at the state level;
- Developing female landowner/producer success stories;



Fig. 2. In October, 2012, the NRCS launched its “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil” awareness and education campaign. Courtesy USDA

- Encouraging/assisting states to develop local-level success stories, videos and other ancillary soil health marketing materials and connect to the national map on soil health website;
- Developing additional video profiles and video news releases (focusing on rangeland soil health, in particular) but assist other states attempting to add specific content to their outreach efforts;
- Expanding non-operator landowner direct-mail pilot project and provide report/recommendation for targeting non-operator landowners, women, minority landowners with soil health messaging; modify plan and expand to additional states, incorporating report recommendations;
- Expanding stakeholder relations activities;
- Expanding media relations and traditional mass media activities;
- Generating new web content and other ancillary marketing tactics to support overall national outreach efforts; and
- Continuing direct-mail campaign targeting non-operator landowners in targeted states.

## Strategic Evaluation

The estimated three-fold increase in soil health system adoption (now exceeding 10 million acres according to USDA-NASS) during the first two years of the campaign, is clearly remarkable. In some areas of the country, demand for cover crop seed (a key indicator in the adoption of soil health management practices)



Fig. 3. “The Hope in Healthy Soil” video series is one of the outreach components used in the integrated marketing campaign. Courtesy USDA



Fig. 4. The campaign’s use of out-of-home/outdoor ads like the one shown here and other integrated marketing communications vehicles, will help reach a number of targeted groups including non-operator landowners. Courtesy USDA

has exceeded supply. The [2015 Cover Crop Survey](#) conducted by Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE) indicates that farmers are naming “soil health” as the most important reason to use cover crops in their organization indicating a significant increase in the awareness and benefits of soil health as a result of the campaign.

As a result of the campaign’s success in achieving on-the-ground results, the on-going “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil” communications campaign garnered the highest public relations industry award from the Public Relations Society of America (2014 Silver Anvil Award). In addition, the campaign has been honored with environmental education awards from the Conference on Environmental and Ecosystem Restoration (2015) and the National Association of Environmental Professionals (2016). More importantly, however, the campaign is positioned to help harvest even more results (and associated benefits) in the months and years ahead.



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