Minnesota Office for Soil Health receives USDA funding

The University of Minnesota Water Resources Center was recently awarded a Conservation Innovation Grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to expand soil health research and outreach at Minnesota’s Office for Soil Health.

Farmers and other land managers are becoming more and more interested in practices that improve soil health. Soil health practices, such as reduced tillage and cover crops, have the potential to improve agricultural profitability by reducing input costs and increasing productivity. At the same time, they may help protect water resources by increasing the water holding capacity of soil and reducing the transport of pollutants to streams and lakes.

However, soil health practices and measurements of soil health have not been studied adequately in our colder Minnesota soils. With the new CIG funding, the Office for Soil Health will boost our understanding of which soil properties provide useful information to managers, how to incorporate cover crops and other practices into cropping systems, and what are the business implications of soil health practices.

The 885,000 grant will support several activities. Soil health properties will be monitored on sites across the state to see how the properties relate to management practices and farming goals. A database will be created to collect, analyze, and share soil health measurements from many sources. This data will help land managers interpret the measurements they are making on their own land. An online portal and field events will help farmers and agricultural advisors meet and learn from other farmers who have experience with soil health practices.

Partners on the project include the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources; University of Minnesota Departments of Soil, Water, and Climate, Forest Resources, and Bioproducts and Biosystems Engineering; Minnesota Supercomputing Institute; Sustainable Farming Association; Stearns Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Mower SWCD, Sauk Watershed District; and the University of Wisconsin - River Falls.

The Minnesota Office for Soil Health is a collaborative of the Board of Water and Soil Resources and the Water Resources Center.

Details of all CIG awards are available on the USDA website.