

An Evaluation of Soil Health Case Study Effectiveness

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Executive Summary

Soil Health Case Study Progress

In the fall of 2022, and continuing into late winter of 2023, a study was carried out to determine the progress and effectiveness of case studies on soil health practices conducted over four years from 2018-2021 with farmers from across the state of Minnesota and leading organizations who work in soil health and were involved in promotion and distribution of the case studies. The farmers were initially identified due to their implementation of soil health practices and were well on their way to living by these practices. The organizations were instrumental in leading and encouraging study involvement and continuing to support soil practices. The study consisted of two sets of interview questions, one for farmers and the other for organizations and this report is the outcome of the data gathered in those interviews.

The farmers and organization representatives both made recommendations for how to more effectively utilize the FarmMaps.umn.edu website and the printed case studies, such as suggesting partnerships, channels, and formats for making the information more available. They also suggested expanded content to include and connect with when developing future case studies.

The focus of the study was to examine how effective the case studies were in helping farmers to share their stories in soil health with other farmers and any impact that being involved in the case study may have had on their soil health practices. Many of the farmers said participating in the case study interview process helped them refine their story and feel more confident in telling their story. Farmers frequently indicated that they were in contact with other farmers about their soil health practices and that they would get questions about getting started with soil health. This group of farmers was one of optimism, hope and innovation. They believe in what they are doing and despite frequent challenges and the complex management that is

needed, continue to learn and adapt soil health practices to the needs of their individual farms. In multiple cases, the neighbors are noticing, and these farmers are seeing slow uptake of adoption for reduced/no tillage and cover cropping in their communities in some parts of the state.

The organizations involved in this work have been at the front of the line bringing farmers and soil health together through their workshops and programming, guiding, and consulting, providing help and providing a listening ear and timely support. A frequently heard statement from farmers was their reliance on the soil health organizations for sharing ideas, bringing farmers together and being a resource for the group. One of the most effective ways to reach farmers and get the word out is through Field Days where farmers can come and see demonstrations such as a soil pit in person and interact with both professionals from the organizations and their fellow farmers. This was cited frequently by farmers as something they looked forward to and could learn a lot from. These are a collaboration between the organization and the farmer who hosts the event.

Organizations serve the farmers in a host of ways and the pride they experience in seeing farmers collaborate and help to drive each other is an example of the kind of work they do on a daily basis. Each member of the organizations who was interviewed spoke to the power of providing opportunities for farmers to grow in their soil health practices. Partnership between the organizations and the farmers is a strong connection which has brought farmers to where they are and will continue to help expand soil health practices.

Moving forward, the motivation to continue with soil practices is strong among this group of farmers. They do worry about reaching further and getting higher rates of adoption among the farmers who have yet to consider building their soil health. They see a shift gradually coming from the public sphere in demanding more soil health practices and they hope this will be powerful enough to encourage current conventional farmers to start small and begin with one or two of the soil health principles. They are very proud to be doing this work independently and voluntarily. They do not wish for it to become regulated. Their demonstration of good stewardship on the land is a model they hope will stand for generations.