



**National
Agricultural
Land
Network**

A PROJECT OF
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST

Soil Health Stewards

Helping the Agricultural Land Protection Community
Promote Soil Health on Working Lands

Healthy soils are the foundation of productive farmland and viable farms and ranches. They can improve on-farm productivity and profitability, building resilience to increasingly intense and erratic weather conditions. Healthy soils also provide wider community benefits—preventing the loss of soil and nutrients to our waterways, reducing downstream flood risks, sequestering carbon, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

AFT's *Soil Health Stewards* Program was an ambitious national effort to bring this message to the agricultural land protection community—a community with the reach but not necessarily the skills and training to effectively promote soil health with farmers, ranchers, and landowners,

especially those on whose land they hold easements.

Holding perpetual easements on more than 6 million acres of productive farm and ranch land, the agricultural land protection community was poised to step up. While some land trusts and public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) programs had programing around soil health, many more were in an exploratory phase, seeking knowledge, support, and resources to begin work in this arena. In five years' time, with the generous support of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, 126 land trusts and public PACE programs—holding easements on over 4 million acres of U.S. farm and ranch lands—are actively supporting and assisting producers and landowners to improve the health of their soils, their businesses, and their communities.

TRAINING AND SUPPORTING PRACTITIONERS

Launched during the pandemic in 2021, *Soil Health Stewards* used a cohort approach to engage six different groups of approximately 20 land trusts and public agencies in a program that combined an intensive multi-day virtual training with \$10,000 grants to participating entities to prepare and begin working on a Soil Health Action Plan. Participating staff

“I've built a lot more confidence to be able to go on a field walk with our landowners and have a more comprehensive toolset to talk with our landowners about. We never know what's going to get the landowners jazzed up—maybe it's the bird species, maybe it's tax credits. So, I feel I've had quite a revolution to think about the whole farm approach more holistically.”

— SOIL HEALTH STEWARD PARTICIPANT

“I really appreciate the toolkit...I can sit and take notes and I really went through some about the relationship between easements and soil health and how you work it in...you know, it's not an obvious thing of how you write an easement documentation that encourages soil health, and I thought there was some really good materials in there about that.”

— SOIL HEALTH STEWARD PARTICIPANT

from each cohort received technical support as they began their outreach to producers and landowners and met twice during the year following the training to compare notes and successes on engagement strategies. Participants were a diverse mix of practitioners, from staff involved in negotiating easement acquisitions and donations, to those involved in monitoring and stewardship, to managing directors and communications specialists. Each brought valuable insights to their cohort, helping each group brainstorm multiple ways that their agency or organization could support and encourage farmers, ranchers and landowners to improve soil health.

Since the beginning of the project, 239 participants from 126 entities in

36 states have graduated from the *Soil Health Stewards* program. Soil Health Stewards can now:

- Communicate effectively about the benefits of healthy soil and the conservation practices that enhance soil health.
- Understand basic challenges farmers experience with soil health practice adoption.
- Connect interested farmers with technical advisors, cost-share programs, and other resources to help them successfully implement soil health practices.
- Understand how easement deed terms, conservation and management plans, and easement stewardship can be layered and leveraged to encourage and support conservation practice adoption on protected land.

Specific support and resources included:

- A formal training program with a curriculum informed by a national advisory committee of soil scientists, educators, and conservation professionals.
- A \$10,000 grant to develop and begin work on an organizational or agency Soil Health Action Plan.
- Ongoing technical support from the National Agricultural Land Network and AFT's soil health and water teams, led by Dr. Bianca Moebius-Clune, former founding Director of USDA-NRCS' Soil Health Division, and Dr. Michelle Perez.
- A toolkit of resources land protection practitioners can use to assess soil health and to engage, educate, and connect producers and landowners

“ We’re no longer just looking for issues with compliance, we’re looking for opportunities. We’re not just trying to catch them doing something wrong, we’re looking for ways to support them, and that really changes the relationship dynamic.”

— SOIL HEALTH STEWARD PARTICIPANT

with soil health networks, technical support and providers, and financial assistance for practice adoption.

- Access to compelling, easy-to-read case studies featuring “soil health successful farmers” that document the impacts improved soil health can have on farm economics, water, and climate.
- Opportunities to be part of a supportive community of practitioners committed to exploring new ways to help farmers and ranchers achieve their goal of protecting their land and improving its productivity and resilience for future generations.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The *Soil Health Stewards* program offered through AFT's National Agricultural Land Network (NALN) engaged and attracted robust participation from agricultural land protection practitioners across the nation. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service generously provided financial support for the program.

The NALN is a national information and peer learning network focused on agricultural land retention and protection. The NALN currently hosts over 1,500



members, including representatives of state agriculture and conservation agencies, county and community planners, public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement programs, land trusts, farm and conservation organizations, land trust coalitions, agricultural lenders and service providers, trade associations, and farmers and ranchers interested in learning how to save the land that sustains us. Membership is free, and members can join as individuals or as an organization.

More information about the NALN can be found at farmland.org/NALN.

NALN CONTACTS

Cris Coffin, NALN Director
ccoffin@farmland.org

Beth Fraser, NALN Deputy Director
bfraser@farmland.org

Jaimee Harrison, NALN Manager
jharrison@farmland.org

Jessica Hall, NALN Coordinator
jehall@farmland.org



VISIT THE SOIL HEALTH STEWARDS ONLINE TOOLKIT

Find videos, factsheets, resources, and more

farmlandinfo.org/soil-health-toolkit