



Soil Stewards: Promoting Soil Health on Protected Agricultural Lands

Healthy soils are the foundation of productive farmland and farm viability. Healthy soils can improve both on-farm productivity and environmental health by preventing the loss of soil and nutrients to our waterways, protecting water quality and water quantity, and restoring soil biology and function. They are also critical to enabling farms and ranches to sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and be more resilient to increasingly intense and erratic weather conditions.

AFT's *Soil Stewards* Program is an ambitious national effort to engage and support agricultural land protection practitioners in promoting soil health practices with the farmers, ranchers, and others who own and manage permanently protected agricultural land – and on the agricultural land their agency or organization itself owns.

The program's focus is on the more than 6 million acres of permanently protected farms and ranches across the United States, recognizing the lasting impact that soil health improvements on this land will provide. The program seeks to serve the needs of land trusts and public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) programs, both those already engaged in this work and those just starting out, to enable them to grow their efforts to support and incentivize producers and landowners of protected land to address soil health.

TRAINING AGRICULTURAL LAND PROTECTION PRACTITIONERS

Beginning in 2021, AFT will provide unique learning opportunities and support for staff of land conservation organizations and public PACE programs across the nation. Participants will be offered an opportunity to learn about the economic and environmental benefits of soil health practices while building skills to support farmers, ranchers, and landowners in adopting these practices.

When completed, participants will be able to:

- Communicate effectively about the primary 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 use soil health practices.
- Understand options and alternatives for addressing environmental resource concerns and promoting soil health practices through agricultural conservation easement language and other agreements and contracts.

Specific support and resources will include:

- A formal training program with a curriculum created by nationally recognized scientists and conservation professionals with direct experience working with farmers, ranchers, and landowners to promote soil health. Training will occur through a series of virtual and in-person educational events.
- A toolkit of resources land protection practitioners can use to educate, engage, and evaluate soil health practice implementation on protected agricultural land.
- Access to compelling, easy-to-read case studies featuring already “soil health successful farmers” that document the impacts improved soil health can have on farm economics, water, and climate.
- Small grants to enable practitioners to attend trainings and engage producers and landowners.
- Opportunities to be part of a supportive community of practitioners that is broadening efforts to increase soil health practice adoption across the country.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is generously providing financial support for the *Soil Stewards* Program. The program will be implemented through AFT's National Agricultural Land Network (NALN) to engage and attract robust participation from agricultural land protection practitioners across the nation.

The NALN is comprised of more than 250 members from public Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement programs, private land trusts, and state and county government or quasi-governmental agencies with jurisdiction over agriculture, conservation, and/or planning. Farm and conservation organizations, coalitions, trade associations, and service providers also participate.

The NALN is free to qualifying individuals and entities; more information can be found [here](#). An Advisory Committee composed of practitioners with active soil health programming will assist with development of the *Soil Stewards* Program curriculum and associated trainings.

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