

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONSERVE SWITZERLAND COUNTY: Farmers help America keep soil healthy

Submitted by Shasta Woodard, District Conservationist

Our lives are dependent on healthy soil. While most people think of soil as just dirt, its functions are crucial to our very existence.

And while it may seem trivial at first glance, healthy soil gives us clean air and water, bountiful crops and forests, productive grazing lands, diverse wildlife and beautiful landscapes. It's the reason why USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service experts are in your community and across the nation.

Healthy soil contains nutrients necessary for supporting plants and animals. And just as plants and

animals depend on soil, the soil microbes depend on them, too. Soil is where the integration of living and non-living things takes place – part of a process that is millions of years old.

Soil is composed of air, water, organic matter and minerals. A community of organisms – functioning as a soil food web – lives all or parts of their lives in soil. More individual organisms are in a teaspoon of soil than there are people on earth.

Increasing soil organic matter typically improves soil health, since organic matter improves several critical functions of soil.

To improve the health of their soil, more and more farmers and ranchers are keeping soil covered, reducing disturbance activities such as tilling, keeping plants growing throughout the year, and diversifying

HEALTHY SOILS:

Learn more about the importance of soil health through NRCS's "Unlock the Secrets in the Soil" campaign:

http://go.usa.gov/ghgG.

Download a checklist on how you can help soil on your farm or in your home's garden: http://go.usa.gov/ghgz.

the crops they're planting in a rotation. Taking these steps allow farmers and ranchers to help reduce erosion while increasing the soil's ability to provide nutrients and water to the plant at critical times during the growing season.

When producers focus on improving soil health, they often have larger harvests, lower input costs, optimized nutrient use, and improved crop resilience during drought years like last year. In heavy rainfall years, healthy soil holds more water, reducing runoff that helps avert flooding downstream.

And because healthy soil allows for greater water infiltration and less erosion, nutrients and pesticides stay on the farm where they benefit crops, and are far less likely to be carried off the farm into streams and lakes where they can cause harm.

In addition, demographers tell us there will be 9 billion people on this planet by the year 2050. Farmers will need to produce as much food in the next 40 years as they have in the last 500. To do this, we need cropping systems that are sustainable and include conservation measures.

If soil is not cared for, fertile land may become worn out leading to less food and higher prices. It's important to remember the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s and the lessons of not taking care of soil. This

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ecological disaster, compounded by drought, led to windstorms and massive soil erosion for nearly a decade on our Great Plains as farms were rendered infertile.

The NRCS was born out of the Dust Bowl and continues to work with farmers and ranchers across the country to implement conservation practices that benefit the soil and other natural resources. NRCS helps farmers install conservation practices such as cover crops to maintain and improve soil health – all of which can lead to productive, profitable and sustainable farming and ranching operations for generations to come.

As world population and food production demands rise, healthy and productive soil is of paramount importance. So much so, that we believe improving the health of our nation's soil is one of the most important endeavors of our time.

So the next time someone uses the word "dirt," it would be good to take the opportunity to say how important it is to our survival.

To learn more about soil conservation, and how you can get help on your land, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov or your local service center at 105 East Pike Street in Vevay, or call us at 812-427-3126 ext 3.

About NRCS:

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service helps America's farmers and ranchers conserve the nation's soil, water, air and other natural resources. All programs are voluntary and offer science-based solutions that benefit both the landowner and the environment.