GROW MONTANA

Food Policy Coalition

Credit: USDA NRCS

The Soil Health Subcommittee Bill: A Strong Montana from the Ground Up

The Montana Soil Health Subcommittee Bill will appoint a soil health task force to explore how the state can promote and support farming and ranching methods that improve the health of our soils, and the yield and profitability of our agricultural lands. By establishing a task force, Montana can identify soil health priorities and ensure limited federal, state, and private resources are most effectively directed to help farmers and ranchers strengthen Montana's soil foundation. Key components of the bill include:

- Diverse Task Force: A 15-member task force will make recommendations on the role of a state soil health program, its objectives, and how it would function so that Montana's farmers and ranchers, Tribes, communities, and other stakeholders can reap the benefits of healthy soil.
- **Public Involvement:** The task force will invite broad public input from stakeholders across the state to solicit feedback on local needs and how best to address them.
- Research and Assessment: The task force will explore the status of soil health conditions and

programming in Montana, identify the practices best positioned to build healthy soils, and report on the ability of soil health investments to contribute to strong rural communities and a healthy environment. The task force will assess barriers to adopting soil health practices and opportunities to address the most pressing needs identified by Montana stakeholders.

• **Reporting:** The task force will share findings and recommendations for a state soil health program by September 2022.

SOIL HEALTH REQUIRES COORDINATED STATEWIDE ACTION

Keeping soil healthy is especially important to Montana, where agriculture is the leading industry, generating over \$3.5 billion in 2019. Montana statute recognizes the importance of soil health to the resiliency of its economy and working lands. Montana even has a state soil, the Scobey Series, designated by the Montana State Legislature in 2015.¹ Some farmers and ranchers are employing practices to increase soil organic matter and protect the long-term functionality of their soil, which also helps reduce erosion, increase crop yields, and protect against floods and drought. While federal programs support the adoption of soil-building practices and some conservation districts have built soil health programs, state leadership can address existing gaps to increase the pace and scale of practice adoption. The task force established through this bill will identify ways to help farmers and ranchers already employing soil health practices and develop guidance for scaling up the adoption of soil-building practices in Montana.

OTHER STATE-BASED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE SOIL HEALTH

States across the country have identified specific steps they can take to increase local adoption of soil health practices, which the task force could explore adapting to Montana's unique circumstances. For example:

- New Mexico allocated \$375,000 to implement a new soil health program to provide outreach, education, and grants to producers and land managers to increase soil health stewardship (2019).²
- Illinois amended its Soil and Water Conservation Districts Act to include the conservation of soil health, giving conservation districts the power to research and determine local solutions and to make agricultural equipment available to landowners (2019).³
- Nebraska created a Healthy Soils Task Force, made up of representatives from the state, farmers and ranchers, and agribusiness to develop a soil health action plan, examine incentives to farmers and ranchers for soil health, and increase understanding of the role of livestock in soil health (2019).⁴
- Iowa launched a pilot program to provide farmers who plant cover crops a \$5 per acre discount on their crop insurance premium payments (2017); Illinois has since followed suit (2019).⁵
- North Dakota designated \$2.1 million to support three extension staff and three researchers, who are overseen by an advisory board to guide and support soil health research and education (2012).⁶

BENEFITS OF SOIL HEALTH FOR ALL MONTANANS

Healthy soils increase farmer and rancher profitability, build resilient farms and food systems, and protect water quantity and quality. As we learn more about the importance of soil health, the reasons for supporting farmers and ranchers who are investing in their soil are clear. While building soil health is not a one-size-fits-all solution—a rancher in the Big Hole will need different solutions than wheat growers in the Golden Triangle—there are compelling reasons for Montana to explore state-wide soil health strategies.

• Economic Benefits

Improving soil health is key to long-term, sustainable agricultural production and the economic resiliency of rural and tribal communities and economies. The adoption of soil health practices can increase crop yields, improve net income, and lead to greater return on investment.⁷

An NRCS conservationist looks at the soil in Rosebud County, MT. Fibrous roots can improve water movement through the soil and increase soil organic matter. Credit: USDA NRCS Montana



 Investing in soil health can reduce expenses for farmers and ranchers by decreasing the need for additional inputs, such as nitrogen fertilizers, and protecting farmers and ranchers from large yield losses in bad weather years.⁸

Risk Mitigation Benefits

- Healthy soils act like a sponge and improve agriculture's resilience against more frequent droughts and the risk of water shortages.⁹
 Recently, Montana has been ranked the second most vulnerable state to drought in the nation.¹⁰
- Healthy soils have increased water-holding capacity and improved structure that can help capture more rain where it falls and reduce the risk and impacts of flooding.¹¹

• Water Conservation Benefits

- Healthy soils can reduce reliance on irrigation, keeping more water in Montana's rivers and aquifers.¹²
- Soil health management practices reduce disturbance so fewer nutrients and sediments run off into surface and groundwater sources.¹³



About Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition

Grow Montana Food Policy Coalition advocates for changes in state policies that would strengthen Montana's food and agriculture economies. Grow Montana formed in 2005 to promotes policies that support sustainable Montana-owned food production, processing, and distribution, and that improve all our citizens' access to healthy Montana foods.

Endnotes

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- 13 United States Department of Agriculture, *Healthy Soil = Clean Water*, https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/PA_NRCSConsumption/download?cid= nrcseprd1297288&ext=pdf (accessed November 18, 2020).