

Alliance for the Great Lakes • Michigan Agriculture Advancement
Michigan Agribusiness Association • Michigan Environmental Council
National Wildlife Federation

February 15, 2024

Director Dr. Tim Boring
Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD)
Constitution Hall, 6th Floor
525 W. Allegan Street
P.O. Box 30017
Lansing, MI 48909

Subject: Soil Health Task Force Reactivation

Dear Director Dr. Boring,

We appreciate the Department's previous efforts to institute a Soil Health Task Force at the request of the undersigned organizations. The Task Force has not convened since April 2022 and we write today to request this effort become a priority for the Department once again.

The goal of improving soil health remains a loosely defined component of efforts across Michigan's state-level agencies to combat nutrient pollution, as discussed most recently at the State of the Western Lake Erie Basin Science conference. Similarly, there remains an absence of a clear, defined understanding of what soil health is, how to improve it, and how to track progress.

A reinvigorated Soil Health Task Force could play an instrumental role in developing a shared definition of soil health and vision for how soil health can improve water quality outcomes in the state. Additionally, given recent and potential upcoming appropriations dedicated to regenerative agriculture, the Task Force can provide valuable insight and recommendations for how to allocate these resources.

Please note the purpose of a Soil Health Task Force, as we see it, is not to simply provide a forum for discussion on these topics and no action. A reactivated Soil Health Task Force should develop an accepted definition of soil health and a shared vision of the protection of our agricultural and natural resources of the state through improved soil health. Then, it should develop a plan to achieve it. Specifically, we suggest that the Task Force work toward the following:

1. Set measurable goals for organic matter, biological activity, and soil structure as metrics to assess relative soil health of a given area;
2. Set goals for the implementation of soil health practices and determine the necessary resources and resource availability to achieve those goals;
3. Identify barriers to providing farmers and land managers with necessary research, education, technical assistance, and demonstration projects to improve soil health and ongoing management;
4. Develop a toolkit for implementing soil health practices in agricultural systems tailored to unique cropping systems, soil types, water quality concerns, and soil health outcomes; and
5. Develop programs to foster community building amongst farmers.

MDARD is uniquely positioned to benefit from operationalizing the existing Soil Health Task Force, as an active and robust Task Force could lay the groundwork for additional soil health funding, capacity, and programming.

While many other states have launched their Soil Health Task Forces through policy, Michigan is in a unique position where a Soil Health Task Force has previously been called to action. Instead of enacting legislation, we simply need your support to activate this initiative once again and incorporate soil health planning into MDARD's priorities. Once revived, the Task Force has the prospect of emulating soil health legislation that other states have previously adopted.

Other states that have invested in soil health initiatives, such as Minnesota and Utah, provide a range of example approaches and lessons learned. For example, Minnesota launched a pilot soil health initiative that later developed into a financial assistance program within the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. The program offers grants to any project on Minnesota agricultural land that has implemented certain soil health best practices. Projects eligible for this funding include: increasing the quantity of organic carbon in soils through reduced tillage, cover cropping, manure management, etc. Utah has adopted soil health legislation that includes a conservation program that encourages, educates, and supports producer adoption of soil health conservation practices. Along with the Utah Soil Health Advisory Committee, the Conservation Commission is also responsible for establishing a grant program and a platform to survey, assess, and track state soil health progress.

An active Task Force in Michigan opens the door to many other possibilities, including potential federal funding opportunities. For example, in 2021 Colorado launched its "STAR soil health program", which led to a USDA investment of \$25 million to expand the program, helping farmers to assess their needs and document and share their progress toward improved soil health. An active Task Force offers even more upward potential to leverage the state's investments to provide meaningful assistance to farmers, their fields, and to the environment.

Finally, in order to avoid lapses in convening and a lack of direction, we recommend that MDARD dedicate a staff person to serve as an organizer, convener, and a main point of contact for the Task Force. Similarly, it would be beneficial for the Task Force to convene at regular intervals to create consistency and avoid repeating discussions from the previous meetings. By re-prioritizing a Soil Health Task Force, MDARD can provide the forum for collective expertise and experience to advance the goal of expanding the application of soil health principles for the benefit of both agriculture and the environment. This will complement MDARD's efforts related to advancing regenerative agriculture and help Michigan reach its climate goals.

We welcome the opportunity for any further discussion related to reinstating and convening the Soil Health Task Force.

Sincerely,

Julie Doll

Michigan Agriculture Advancement

julie@miagadvance.org

Chuck Lippstreu

Michigan Agribusiness Association

chuck@miagbiz.org

Megan Tinsley

Michigan Environmental Council

megan@environmentalcouncil.org

Tom Zimnicki

Alliance for the Great Lakes

tzimnicki@greatlakes.org

Adam Reimer

National Wildlife Federation

ReimerA@nwf.org