

# Eight SWCDs expand reach via 4-state climate-smart ag pilot



**A** pilot program aiming to boost implementation of climate-smart agricultural practices in four states provided incentives to nearly 400 Minnesota producers during its first application round this summer. A second round slated to open Jan. 2 will extend incentive opportunities to more farmers in participating counties.

Climate-smart practices are those that sequester carbon, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase soil health and improve water quality.

The [Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture](#) is funded by the USDA's [Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities](#). Four states — Minnesota, Virginia, Arkansas and North Dakota — are participating in

the three-year pilot program, which is led by the Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

The Alliance program is based on a simple premise: conservation practices that create public benefit must be economically viable for producers, who therefore should be compensated above the cost of implementation. Participating farmers and ranchers are paid \$100 per acre or [animal unit](#) for adopting climate-smart practices such as cover crops, no-till, nutrient management and prescribed grazing.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) facilitates the pilot program for Minnesota. Eight soil and water conservation districts

*A cereal rye cover crop was planted into standing corn stubble on a Fillmore County farm. Cover crops are an eligible practice for producers participating in the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program. Photo Credit: Fillmore SWCD*

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— Suzanne Rhees, BWSR special projects coordinator

(SWCDs) are participating in Minnesota’s program: East Otter Tail, partnering with Wadena; Fillmore, partnering with the Root River SWCD (which serves Houston County); and Kandiyohi, Redwood, Renville County and Stevens. Minnesota producers are in line to receive up to \$15 million under the program.

“The simplicity of this approach, as well as offering payment rates higher than many other conservation programs, has attracted many new applicants to the program,” said Suzanne Rhees, BWSR special projects coordinator, who contributes to Alliance program rollout and oversight. “These practices can help increase crop yields, support farm families and build landscape resiliency against the impacts of climate change.”

The first application round ran from mid-July through mid-August and attracted 455 applicants across the eight districts. From that number, 392 producers were chosen to participate through a random selection process developed by Virginia Tech researchers.

Each applicant was asked to select one or more conservation practices for their land or livestock. The most popular practices

were cover crops, nutrient management, no-till and reduced till.

The second application round opens Jan. 2 and closes Feb. 14.

Another principle of the Alliance effort is that conservation practices must work for underserved producers including small and limited-resource producers; those who are Black, indigenous or people of color; women; and operators who are veterans. Producers in these groups are eligible to receive a higher payment of \$125 per acre or animal unit. Several Minnesota organizations have played a role in contacting and recruiting underserved producers, including the Sustainable Farming Association, Renewing the Countryside and the Minnesota Farmers Union. The Minnesota State Cattlemen’s Association and the Soil Health Coalition have also worked closely with their members to raise awareness about the program.

The Fillmore SWCD partnered with the Root River SWCD in nearby Houston County to reach producers during the initial application period this summer. To help the program gain momentum, both SWCDs took out

advertisements in local newspapers. The Fillmore SWCD also sent more than 4,400 postcards to landowners with 3 or more acres in the county. Both SWCDs held a joint landowner meeting to discuss the program in person and answer producers’ questions.

“The Climate-Smart Alliance Program provided an excellent way for districts to connect with new producers in both counties,” said Fillmore SWCD Administrator Riley Buley. “Both efforts (in Fillmore and Houston counties) were successful in bringing in local producers whom districts had never worked with, and provided staff an opportunity to showcase all of the other programs our SWCDs have to offer.”

The partnership between the Fillmore and Root River SWCDs is expected to result in 12,814 acres of cover crops planted in both counties, development of nutrient management plans for 10,366 acres, 732 acres of no-till, 2,212 acres of reduced till, 10 acres of pasture and hay planting, and 258 acres of conservation crop rotation. Buley said these practices are estimated to reduce nitrogen by a total of 163,159 pounds annually in

both counties.

“Cover crops allow me to feed the soil and helps keep the soil in place,” said a Fillmore County producer who is participating in the Alliance Program. “I’m happy the district chose to be involved with a program that’s so farmer-friendly and encourages modern farming practices.”

Rhees said that while program benefits are numerous, launching the program has come with its own set of challenges. Navigating a new program from scratch involves a learning curve for both state and district staff, districts are at capacity in terms of staffing, and district staff need to prepare to discuss a wide range of practices with interested producers. But overall, Rhees said the challenges have been minor compared with the anticipated outcomes.

“By proving the value of climate-smart practices, this pilot program has the potential to serve as a national model,” Rhees said. “Participating SWCDs will have an opportunity to lead the state and the nation in implementing this one-of-a-kind pilot to compensate producers based on the multiple benefits of their stewardship practices.”