



Soil Health and Sunshine Cover Crops in Southwest Manitoba
*Regenerative Agriculture-based Project in three Manitoba Watershed Districts Seeks
Landowners interested in Cover Crops*

Winnipeg, MB – (May 28, 2020)— Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association will lead a one-year Manitoba Conservation Trust project partnership of three southwest Manitoba Watershed Districts to support landowners’ Regenerative Agriculture practices that benefit their farms and the soils of their operations by keeping roots in the ground for as many days of annual sunlight as possible.

Soil Health and Cover Crops: Strength from the Soil: Building on the Biological foundation for Producers and Wildlife will work with interested producers from the Central Assiniboine, Assiniboine West and Souris River Watershed Districts to target 2000 acres over the one year project to improve the ecological health of the soil, increase profit at the farm gate and advance continued improvement in ecological services being delivered from the farming landscape. The Conservation Trust, a Manitoba Climate and Green Plan Initiative, will provide \$90,000 for the project with the remaining approximately \$180,000 of the project funding made up in-kind and by matching funding by the project partners. Besides helping producers, the project represents many potential conservation benefits via ecological goods and services outcomes including increased soil health, enhanced carbon sequestration and increased biodiversity among others.

The project’s main focus, says Ryan Canart, manager at Assiniboine West Watershed District, is maximizing the length of growing season and boosting total annual photosynthetic activity in a growing season via cover crops, a foundation of Regenerative Agriculture farming principles.

“Increased energy from photosynthetic activity results in increased production of simple sugars, the building blocks for biological activity in the soil,” he says. “Biological activity is the foundation for almost all of the ecological services.”

The Project is fully signed-up with producers and the necessary new acres secured by each Watershed District. The project will provide seed costs to a maximum of \$45/acre- for the one year project. Watershed district staff will work with landowners as well as handle monitoring and recording data and metrics. MFGA will lead data management and aggregate the Project Advisory Team.

“Producers will select seeding methods, species and dates individually but as agreed upon with project partners and the project advisory committee,” says Yasemin Keeler, regional manager, Souris River Watershed District in Deloraine, MB. “This project aims to be flexible, non-prescriptive and in support of landowner ingenuity.”

Respecting the producer's ingenuity is a key focus for Neil Zalluski, manager of the Central Assiniboine Watershed District in the Brandon-area. Zalluski feels producers know their lands and crops best and believes the project's focus on facilitating their actions will resonate with producers.

“Some producers will **choose** companion cropping where a legume is often under-seeded with a cereal crop and left to flourish once the cereal is removed, adding potential months of growing season and natural, stable, soil fertility as a benefit,” says Zalluski. “Others may choose to plant a post-cash crop cover such as annual rye to gain growing days, cover the ground and accrue mobile nutrients in the soil. “

Regenerative agriculture is a fast-evolving, producer-led interest in Manitoba. Many different organizations are currently pursuing and promoting regenerative agriculture. Manitoba Forage and Grassland Association's (MFGA) interests in regenerative agriculture lie squarely in producing high-quality food while improving the natural ecosystem. The ultimate goal for MFGA is producer profitability resulting from healthy agricultural lands being managed with wise land-use practices that vastly improve soil, water and air quality.

For Dean Brooker, the project's goal to implement, document and communicate practices and results arising from activities taken, to extend the days of planned active photosynthesis occurring by seeded crops in given project sites made it a win-win-win as far as he was concerned.

“These metrics will be compared to non- cover crop fields,” says Brooker, regional manager, Souris Watershed District, Reston MB. “This project helps MFGA promote regenerative agriculture practices and inform their network with results around improved soil health and increased biodiversity that also meet the objectives of the Conservation Trust. Meanwhile, more biologically-active soils can be a major factor in successfully addressing 90 per cent of the issues identified in our respective Watershed Districts' Integrated Watershed Management Plans.”

Interested producers, groups or researchers are asked to contact the following project leads for more information;

Ryan Canart, Assiniboine West Watershed District,
Neil Zalluski, Central Assiniboine Watershed District
Yasemin Keeler, Deloraine, Souris River Watershed District,
Dean Brooker, Reston, Souris River Watershed District,