Caring for Our Soil Through Conservation

by Donna Rasmussen, Care for Creation Network

"You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth." — Psalms 104:14

Soil is vital to our survival. Without it, there would be no food. This thin layer covering only portions of the Earth provides the medium for plants to grow, sustaining them with nutrients and water stored in the soil.

Iowa is blessed with some of the richest soils in the world, once abundant with organic matter created by the verdant prairies that covered the landscape. The organic matter in those native soils measured 8-9 parts per million, but over time, with cultivation and erosion, the organic matter now averages closer to 2-3 parts per million. Less organic matter means that nutrients need to be added to the soil in the form of fertilizers.

Organic matter also helps the soil hold and infiltrate water; low organic matter means that rain is less likely to soak into the ground (creating runoff and erosion), and water is less likely to be held in the soil profile for plants to use during dry periods. Being good stewards of the land requires that soil is conserved by preventing erosion and building up the health of the soil so it remains productive. Plus, keeping soil healthy and preventing erosion keeps sediment and pollutants out of our rivers and streams improving water quality and recharging our groundwater.

90 YEARS OF SOIL CONSERVATION

Soil and Water Conservation Week is April 27 to May 5, and this year marks 90 years since the Soil Conservation Act was passed by Congress and signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt on April 27, 1935. The act established a permanent soil conservation agency, the Soil Conservation Service, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In 1935, the nation was in the grips of the Dust Bowl due to an extended drought in the Great Plains that started in 1932. Widespread crop failures and exposed soil resulted in blowing dust clouds, one of which blew over Washington, D. C. in 1934 continuing 300 miles into the Atlantic Ocean. In 1935, on March 6 and then on March 21, dust clouds again passed over Washington and darkened the sky just as Congress held hearings on a proposed soil conservation law. Hugh Hammond Bennett, later the head of the Soil Conservation Service, used this opportunity to explain the cause of the storms and to offer a solution which convinced Congress to act.

The success of soil conservation in the United States is credited to the establishment of democratically organized Soil Conservation Districts led by local farmers and landowners. To create a framework for cooperation, the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law was sent to the governors of all the states in 1937 by President Roosevelt. The first soil conservation district was organized in the Brown Creek watershed of North Carolina on Aug. 4, 1937. Today, there are over 3,000 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) across the country, of which 100 are in Iowa: one in each county with Pottawattamie County having two districts. Each district is managed by an elected board made up of five local SWCD Commissioners.

Of Iowa's 35.7 million acres of land, about 29 million acres (81%) are cropland. On those cropland acres, a variety of soil conservation practices are needed and have been implemented, including terraces, grassed waterways, water and sediment control basins, bioreactors, grade stabilization structures, reduced tillage, no till, cover crops, contour strips, crop rotations, field borders, and nutrient management. Most of these practices are used in some combination because no one practice can do everything to prevent erosion and build soil health.

As our climate changes and weather patterns become more extreme, our soil needs extra care to remain productive into the future. If you see these soil conservation practices on the landscape, thank those farmers and the staff in your local soil conservation office for being good stewards of God's creation.

SURVEY REMINDER

The **Care for Creation Network Survey** deadline has been extended to April 15!

Congregations should have received a request to complete the survey to share about their creation care activities. The Care for Creation Network will compile a summary of submitted responses for the Synod Assembly in June.

If your congregation or organization has not completed the Care for Creation survey, contact ***rdrasmussen@outlook.com*** for the survey link.

If completing the survey online is not your best option, print the survey and complete it on paper and send an email to the address above for further instructions to submit it. Thank you!