

2016 Soil Health Workshop

By, Sandy Hatley

More than two dozen farmers and guests gathered for a Friday morning breakfast meeting to hear Stanly Soil and Water Conservation speaker, Will Mann of Fishing Creek SWCD in Halifax County, discuss soil health topics such as the advantage of cover crops, defining healthy soil, increasing crop yields while decreasing input costs, the rate of economic returns on healthy soil, and strategies and methods for developing a soil improvement plan.

Matthew Swain, attendee and Mount Pleasant HS Ag teacher, stated, "I'm here to support the farmers and to support the next generation of farmers."

Using a power point on "Cover Crops and Their Uses," Mann opened by explaining that 70% of Halifax County farmers use cover crops on their 110,00 acres of crop land. Cover crops reduce tillage and improve the soil.

The Resource Conservation Specialist stressed the success of no-till farming. This process has eliminated erosion and compaction of their crops' soil. He emphasized keeping crops canopied. Fungal species are harmed most by tillage. "Naturally, our soils have a lot of fertility in it. Our goal is to unlock that fertility."

Mann stated all farmers have many factors to keep in mind when setting their goals such as dealing with parasitic nematodes, fertility, and soil borne pathogens. "Get the biology working correctly. We've got to understand populations. How many pounds of species per acre. I'm interested in farmers making a living and using the right products." "Watch the fertilizers and what kind of pesticides we're using. Insects have an antenna that can tune into weak plants."

The guest speaker informed attendees that there are over 21 herbicide resistant weeds in NC. "We've all seen the barren pit where top soil is stripped off. Weeds form trying to improve the condition. Weeds are our best indicator. Weeds tells us what's in the soil. Weeds are a great consumer of nitrates," Mann related.

He explained that the only way plants are affected by nematodes is by lack of water or high salts. He also accentuated that soybeans require as much nitration as corn. Mann then discussed transpiration, how the plant moves water. Carbon holds ten times its weight in water.

The Halifax native's presentation also included the topic of brix, a unit of measure of sugar content of a plant.

"The higher the brix, the better the plant. Keep the glucose system going to keep blooms going."

Mann also discussed the economic returns in cool and warm season grasses and legumes. One cool season broadleaf, phacelia, is one of the top 10 pollinating plants in the world with a blooming period of 145 days.

Furr has grown phacelia, but points out, "It's hard to get established."

Mann concluded his presentation by stating, "Implementing cover crops will assist to diversify soil health and improve crop quality."

Chester Lowder, attendee and SWCD advisor, observed. "Profits on row crops in Stanly County can be improved by using cover crops through improved organic matter and storage of carbon."

"Agricultural success starts with soil health. Without living soil, we cannot expect to have living crops and living farms," Shawn Hatley, attendee and proprietor of the Naked Pig Meat Co. in Oakboro, agreed.

