



MILLION ACRE
CHALLENGE
Board of Soil Stewards

3-YEAR REPORT

2019-2022

millionacrechallenge.org

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A LETTER FROM THE MILLION ACRE CHALLENGE

When we founded the Million Acre Challenge in 2019, we did so with the conviction that local farmers have the power to make a difference and improve their farms, the environment, and their communities through regenerative agriculture — holistic farming systems that, among other benefits, improve water quality, enhance ecosystem biodiversity, produce nutrient-dense food, and store carbon to help mitigate the effects of climate change. The world has undergone enormous change in the past few years, but our values, mission, and work have remained consistent and strong.

We at the Million Acre Challenge strive to help regional farmers build soil health, increase farm profitability, and improve water quality — while making farms resilient in the face of extreme weather events. Our farmer-focused collaborative uses soil health science, economics, education, and incentives to achieve this mission. We inform farmers and policymakers about soil health research and developments, and we advocate for approaches that support regenerative farming.

We are proud of our progress. Our popular Soil Health to Go! lunch and learn webinars have welcomed more than 400 participants, with over a dozen presenters ranging from urban specialty crop growers to large scale grain producers. And to ensure we continue to be intentional about engaging BIPOC farmers throughout the region, we established a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Working Group. We have connected with over 200 government and nonprofit service providers through



interactive events, such as legislator farm tours and on-farm field days. We've supported local producers with Knowledge Cooperatives for advanced growers, as well as in-depth soil health testing and education for 30 farmers who collectively manage over 4,000 acres through the Pasa Soil Health Benchmark Study. In total more than 42,000 acres have been engaged in the project.

Recent industry developments indicate we are on the right track. In March, the United States Department of Agriculture announced an investment of over \$7 million in soil health research projects. In addition, the influential Soil Health Institute recently announced a slate of new strategic goals — addressing climate change, regenerative agriculture, water resources, farmer empowerment, and consumer demand and policy — all of which align with the boots-on-the-ground work of the Million Acre Challenge. It is both encouraging and affirming to witness our local vision embraced on a national scale.

As we reflect on the past three years, we are reminded both of what we have accomplished and what we know we can achieve. Moving forward, we plan to expand upon our robust programming by adding more services for farmers: networking, technical, and funding support, as well as additional on-farm research and demonstrations. A more sustainable Chesapeake region is not just a dream for the future — we are making it a reality today. Let's keep building this world together.

In Solidarity, The Million Acre Challenge



THE CONTEXT

“

MAC is on the cutting edge of restoring the environment while helping farmers make a profit. I'm proud to be a part of it.”

Keith Ohlinger,
Porch View Farm LLC

Over the last hundred years, soils across the country have lost as much as 60% of the organic matter that makes them fertile ground for growing crops. According to the United Nations, the world's soils may not be able to sustain harvests for the next century if degradation continues at current rates. Farmers also continue to face other challenges, including tightening profit margins and increasingly frequent extreme weather events due to climate change.

Research shows that regenerative agriculture has the power to restore our soils, strengthen environmental health, and enhance farm economics and resiliency. We seek solutions that benefit soils and climate in the context of production systems that meet our critical food and fiber needs.



THE REGION

The Chesapeake region has been a leader in agricultural conservation for the past 30 years.

The diversity of agricultural production across the area mirrors that of the country, including legacy dairy farms, diversified fruit and vegetable operations, large-scale row crop production, livestock farms, and a small and growing effort toward grain and legume production for human consumption. Agricultural practices now considered to be key to regeneration, including reduced tillage and cover cropping, are more widespread across the Chesapeake watershed than in other parts of the country. This is due not only to regulations and incentives designed to protect the health of the Chesapeake Bay, but also to the spirit and ingenuity of our region's farmers. National organizations have set their sights on the Chesapeake as one of the next frontiers for regenerative agriculture in the United States.

Initiatives aimed at soil health and regenerative agriculture emerged across the region in 2020. In Pennsylvania and Virginia, soil health collaboratives formed with the help of focused funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. In Maryland, the Department of Agriculture, directed by innovative 2017 soil health legislation, engaged in new programming and began to move toward incentivizing healthy soils practices via its newly seated Soil Health Advisory Committee. Staff of the Million Acre Challenge and its founding partners developed strong relationships with leaders of all these initiatives, recognizing the importance of building alignment across the region on goals, objectives, and methods of measuring progress. At the same time, our place outside the traditional agricultural establishment affords us the flexibility to blaze a trail for producers and service providers by demonstrating and resourcing regenerative innovation that best meets farmers' needs across major production systems.



ENTER THE MILLION ACRE CHALLENGE



The founding partner organizations of the Million Acre Challenge — the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Fair Farms (a project of Waterkeepers Chesapeake), Future Harvest, the Hatcher Group, the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), and the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) — have coalesced to build a transformative movement to advance regenerative agriculture for the future of the region's soils and food supply and to protect the Chesapeake Bay.

Tackling the agricultural challenges of the future requires intentional and coordinated action. Farmers play a vital role, but recent economic and extreme weather crises put them in a vulnerable position. The Million Acre Challenge connects stakeholders from across the region to share knowledge and work toward the common goals of productive soils, strong farm economies, and ecological health.

In the coming years, we seek energetic engagement from a broad spectrum of regional stakeholders who continue the critical work with farmers to enhance soil and water quality, increase profitability, and ultimately transform agriculture in the Chesapeake region to a resilient, regenerative model for the country. We have taken steps toward this ambitious goal by engaging farmers in on-the-ground soil health assessments that drive informed, adaptive management decisions; enrolling them in our unique, farmer-driven network for catalyzing and sustaining progress; connecting them to resources, including critical peer-to-peer learning and financial and technical assistance; working with them to realize and share the financial rewards of regenerative management; and enlisting regional and national partners to build capacity and ensure lasting change.



Our Mission and Vision

The Million Acre Challenge helps regional farmers build soil health, increase farm profitability, and improve water quality – while making farms resilient and active in the face of climate change. Our farmer-focused collaborative uses soil health science, economics, education, and incentives to achieve our mission.

Our vision is enhanced soil and ecosystem health and increased farm profitability on at least one million agricultural acres in Maryland, with significant progress and partnerships in the Chesapeake region, by 2030.

How We Work

Core Team: Members of our six founding organizations steer the project, involving external partners and service providers who ensure progress toward healthier soil is well-resourced throughout the state.

Working Groups: Cohorts of issue area experts deliver focused, strategic tools and resources that facilitate regenerative production through five discrete areas of influence – Business Case, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice; Farmer Engagement; Policy; Public Outreach; and Science.

Board of Soil Stewards (BOSS): The farmer advisors on this team from across Maryland, who represent a variety of production methods and farm sizes, apply deep knowledge and experience to ensure soil health resources are practical, effective, and successful.

Partners: Nonprofit organizations, governments, farm service providers, and academics from across region work alongside us to ensure producers can access the tools, resources, and information needed to initiate and sustain change on their farms.

2019-2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS: BY THE NUMBERS

365 FARMER PARTICIPANTS



30 COLLABORATORS
IN THE PASA SOIL HEALTH
BENCHMARK STUDY

SOIL HEALTH TO GO! SERIES



400 ATTENDEES

42,365

ACRES MANAGED BY
PRODUCERS INVOLVED IN THE
MILLION ACRE CHALLENGE



228 SERVICE PROVIDER PARTNERS

36 KNOWLEDGE
COOPERATIVE
PARTICIPANTS

1,300
NON-FARMING
PROGRAM
PARTICIPANTS

Through diverse and strategic engagement of farmers and agriculture supporters, the Million Acre Challenge is positioned to accelerate efforts that result in healthier soils on Maryland farms and across the Chesapeake Bay region.



MAC provides the support, resources and community for all farmers to think about their farm from the perspective of improving soil health, which in turn can reduce inputs, mitigate soil compaction, suppress weeds and ultimately increase profits”

Judy Gifford,
St. Brigid’s Farm

Business Case

The Business Case working group researches and reports how regenerative agriculture increases farm profitability.

Key outcomes:

- Analyzed the costs and benefits** of transitioning from conventional to regenerative and organic commodity crop production
- Published a report** documenting how dual use of land used for ground-mounted solar energy systems and farming can increase farm profitability, economic resilience, and soil health
- Created a framework for helping specialty crop growers** predict the economic benefits of regenerative production

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

The DEIJ working group advances racial equity in agriculture and acknowledges that many regenerative farming practices are deeply rooted in traditional methods across cultures, classes, and history. This working group supports BIPOC farmers with tools, resources, and wisdom from the communities practicing regenerative agriculture past and present.

Key outcomes:

- Established funding partnership** through USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide financial support to historically underserved producers including BIPOC, veterans, and women
- Provided free multi-modal training** with partners through the Agricultural Leadership Development Initiative that deepens BIPOC and veteran engagement in Chesapeake Bay area agriculture
- Hosted educational events featuring BIPOC producers**, including the Origins of Regenerative Agriculture Webinar
- Established DEIJ commitments** that prioritize partner engagement in the collective struggle for equity and justice

“

I appreciate the opportunities to connect with other farmers. Although we might use different practices, we're all working toward the common goal of improved soil health. I've learned so much by participating in MAC”

Trey Hill,
Harborview Farms

Farmer Engagement

The Farmer Engagement working group advances the essential work of connecting farmers with the resources they need – from funding, to technical assistance, to the growing community of regenerative agriculture practitioners. These resources help growers farm in ways that result in healthier soil.

Key outcomes:

Facilitated peer-to-peer learning through regional Knowledge Cooperatives and training that reveal and uplift the wisdom and experience of fellow growers and build confidence in adopting new techniques

Delivered online learning experiences including the popular monthly Soil Health to Go! lunch and learn series, the Million Acre Challenge Soil Series and winter webinars, and the six-part On-Farm Composting & Compost Use series

Reached thousands of producers with cutting edge regenerative agriculture research and farmer-informed discussions through leadership roles with the Delmarva Soil Summit and Future Harvest Conference

Directed program offerings with farmer input from the 13-member Board of Soil Stewards that represents the diverse farming systems and experience across Maryland

Engaged Collaborators in the Pasa Soil Health Benchmark Study, in partnership with Pasa Sustainable Agriculture, through Community Cohort Learning calls, Pasa and Future Harvest conference sessions, and online events





Policy

The Policy working group educates decision-makers and stakeholders and coordinates with partners to advocate for effective regenerative agriculture policy in Maryland. Our farmer-informed policy engagement is focused on legislative action that can result in equitable support for farmers of all scales and production systems, in soil health and agricultural water quality gains, and in meaningful reductions in overall greenhouse gas emissions.

Key outcomes:

Advocated and testified for regenerative agriculture

funding and programs, financial support for markets, expanded on-farm composting, a grant fund for local government and farmers (for waste reduction, recycling, and on-farm composting), and increased supply of local foods to Maryland schools and food banks

Served on the Maryland Soil Health Advisory Committee

that supplies policy and program recommendations and facilitates delivery of new funding and assistance for farmers

Led farm tours to educate legislators and the public on regenerative farming practices and their benefits

Explored leading-edge ideas with regional and national leaders in the National Healthy Soils Policy Network that promotes soil health and regenerative agriculture through policy reform

Successfully advocated for \$500,000 annually for the Maryland Healthy Soils Program through 2028, as part of the Climate Solutions Now legislation

Engaged farmers to guide and participate in advocacy efforts through the MAC Board of Soil Stewards and Fair Farms Farmer Advisory Committee



Public Outreach

The Public Outreach working group communicates the benefits and opportunities of regenerative agriculture and how the Million Acre Challenge supports farmer efforts to improve soil health.

Key outcomes:

- Launched a project website and social media channels**

- Produced a regenerative agriculture benefits video** that amplifies the value of regenerative production to farmers and consumers

- Communicated about regenerative agriculture in the press** including the Baltimore Sun, Lancaster Farming, WYPR, Civil Eats, and more

- Increased the project's exposure**, through monthly newsletters, fact sheets, and branded informational materials.

Science

The Science working group uses research and innovative data analysis to validate the benefits of regenerative systems and track progress toward the million-acre goal.

Key outcomes:

- Conducted review of soil health practices and indicators** guided by our region's foremost soil health experts

- Created the Tiers for Regeneration tracking tool** that promotes participation in the Million Acre Challenge and helps enrolled growers measure progress

- Partnered on the Pasa Soil Health Benchmarking Study research initiative** that enables farmers to evaluate responses to operational changes and compare performance with other farms

- Applied cutting edge soil health measurement science** in collaboration with academic institutions and partners

- Delivered technical assistance to farmers** through clinics, one-on-one consultations, and farm-specific soil health management plans written by Million Acre Challenge staff



The Million Acre Challenge is working one-on-one with farmers to help them understand the benefits of improving their soil health and connecting them with critical resources.

Kristen Hughes
Evans, Sustainable
Chesapeake

Established metrics for assessing progress toward Million Acre Challenge regenerative agriculture acreage and practice targets

Received NFWF funding to conduct on-farm demonstration of advanced cover cropping strategies and social network analysis, in collaboration with extension and regional nongovernmental organizations

Vision for the Future

Going forward, the Million Acre Challenge will accelerate the progress being made to regenerate Maryland's agricultural landscape. We will supply the tools farmers say they need, from direct financial investment in practices — now possible with major funding from USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation - to management planning and on-farm research that help farmers take, with confidence, the next step on their journey to soil health. Our advanced producer Knowledge Cooperatives, located throughout the state, will continue to supply peer-to-peer learning to ground farmer decision-making in experience from trusted professionals. We will also continue to educate new farmers on the practices and systems that will contribute to long-term resiliency and profitability.

As the movement grows, our team and partners will advocate for policy solutions that advance the most effective tools for increasing regenerative practice adoption on farms. To streamline and enhance service to growers, the American Farmland Trust is joining the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Future Harvest in shepherding the collaborative going forward. The remaining founding partners will continue as close supporters of the work, spearheading projects that are strategically prioritized to increase effectiveness of the overall effort.

The Million Acre Challenge is continuing to work with farmers to build healthy soils, which benefits the people and environment of the region — and we hope you'll join us.





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