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Pilot program draws new

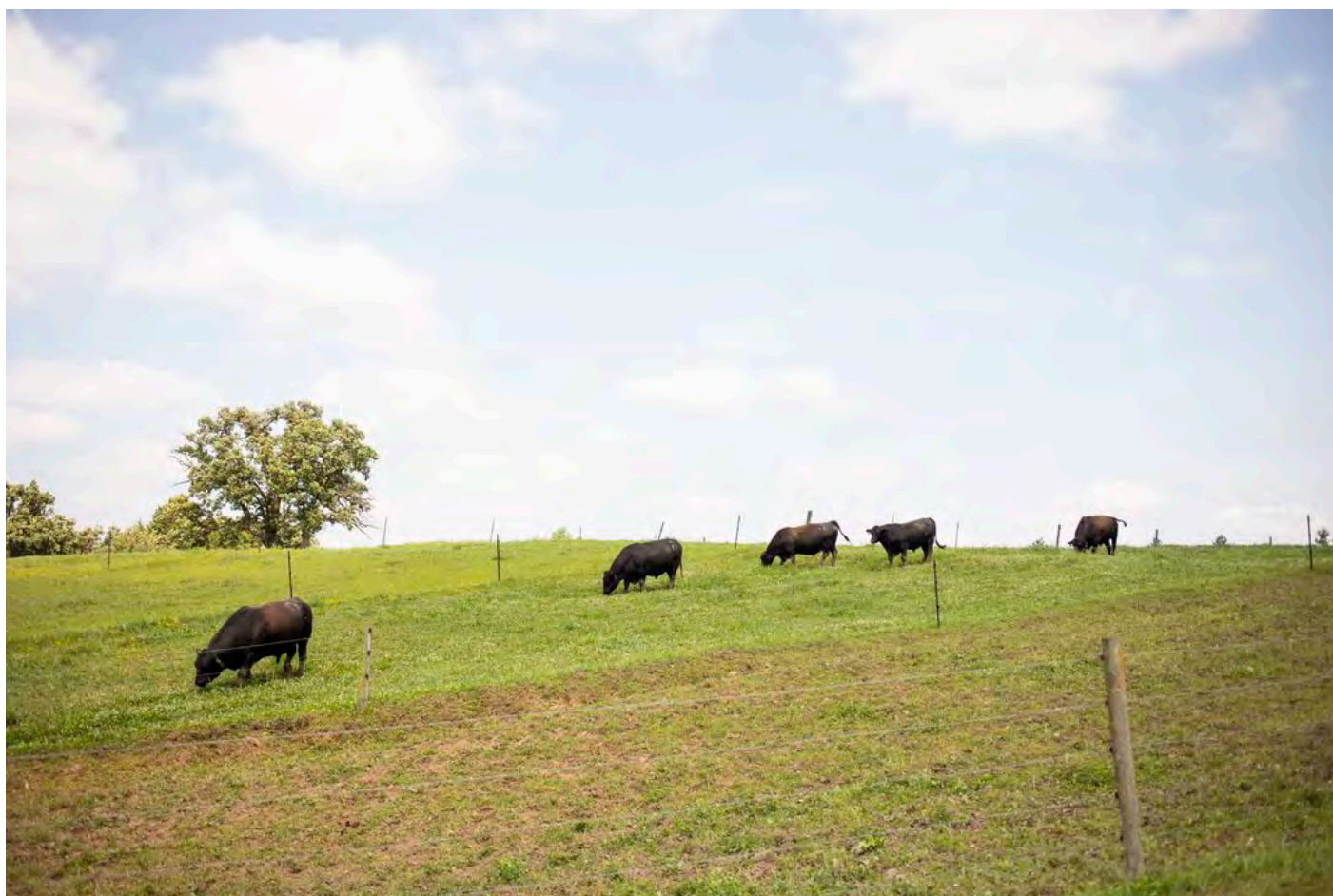
farmers to climate-smart
agriculture, reduces financial
risk

Pilot program draws new farmers to climate-smart agriculture, reduces financial risk

Between 2024 and 2026, over a thousand Minnesota farmers enrolled a total of 178,000 acres of farmland into climate-smart practices through the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture pilot program (<https://www.allianceforcsa.org/>). The program in turn offered \$100 per acre or animal unit to farmers implementing a selection of climate-smart practices approved by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>)

Farmer Bruce Tiffany in Redwood County was one farmer enrolled in the program, implementing both cover crops and nutrient management on his farm. He praised the program for its success.

"If the goal of the program was to get more people to try conservation practices, then it worked out well because a lot of people in Redwood County made use of it. For me and my son I know it was beneficial," Tiffany said.



Beef cattle graze on a pasture in Fillmore County enrolled in a nutrient management plan with the Virginia Tech Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program, August 2026.

Financial reimbursement helps farmers reduce risks, compensates for ecosystem services

Higher than average reimbursement payments of \$100/acre or animal unit from the pilot program helped compensate farmers for expanding or trying a new climate-smart practice on their land. Those payments reduced the risk of financial loss that comes with management changes on farms, and that risk reduction was a major reason the program was favorable for participating producers, according to a report by Renewing the Countryside (<https://www.renewingthecountryside.org/>).

“Many producers were motivated by the \$100/acre incentive, and largely felt that it was a significant enough payment to not only cover the cost of seed, equipment, and time, but also to help offset the risk of experimenting with new practices,” the report concluded.

Tiffany’s experience implementing new practices on his farm echoes the sentiment that programs offering financial support help ease the risk of adopting new management practices.

“With any technique there is a learning curve, and you can only learn and get better outcomes when you have some experience. I think that’s why these programs are kind of important if we want to shift the way people are producing crops,” Tiffany said.

The higher reimbursement rate also helped compensate farmers for wider ecosystem benefits that climate-smart practices may provide, such as improved water quality, according to Jennifer Hahn, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (<https://bwsr.state.mn.us/>) (BWSR) Federal Conservation Programs Coordinator.

“We like the idea of the increased payment so we are covering things like ecosystem services, in addition to the implementation cost,” Hahn said.

New farmers drawn to conservation

High reimbursement payments also helped draw what are called “middle adopters” to participate in the program. These were producers that did not already have experience with the climate-smart practices, and many of those also had no prior relationship with their local Soil and Water Conservation District.

Sara West, an eight-year employee and Nutrient Management Specialist at Fillmore Soil and Water Conservation District (<https://www.fillmoreswcd.org/>) (SWCD), estimated that about 75% of

the producers enrolled in the program in Fillmore County had not engaged with the SWCD in the past. When asked if she thinks those farmers will continue their climate-smart practices without a payment once their contract is complete, her response was positive.



Nutrient Management Specialist Sara West, right, speaks to a farmer enrolled in the Virginia Tech Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program in Fillmore County, August 2026.

“I’d say probably ninety percent of the new producers would be open to doing some kind of conservation practice again without the same payment to coax them through the door,” West said.

According to Hahn, engaging with farmers that are new to conservation is an important first step to getting more acres enrolled in climate-smart practices. She said that while program

administrators can't be sure every producer will continue their climate-smart practice after the program ends, they're hopeful their experiences will lead to increased adoption of practices in the future.

"Working with producers is all about relationships," Hahn said. "You can plant a seed in their mind and it could be five years before that comes to fruition because of markets, timing, and risk comfort. That said, it is super helpful knowing we reached a new customer base and we hope to continue those relationships to encourage adopting conservation practices in the future."

SWCD staff is vital for program delivery and relationship building

The Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program is administered by Virginia Tech and offered in three states in addition to Minnesota; Virginia, North Dakota, and Arkansas. In Minnesota, BWSR partnered with Virginia Tech to provide administration for the program, but local SWCDs ultimately delivered funding and technical assistance to farmers on the ground.

The partnership between BWSR and SWCDs was critical for program success— especially early on when funding from the federal government was temporarily suspended and the future of the program remained unclear. According to Hahn, the staff at SWCD offices proved to be a key liaison between program administrators and farmers.

"With the hiccups that happened early on, there were a lot of producers that were not happy, but we have amazing SWCD staff that were able to keep those relationships with producers," said Hahn. "I hope through overcoming those struggles producers were able to see how committed state and local staff are to working with them and making things right."

Eight SWCDs offered the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program to producers in their county; Wadena, East Otter Tail, Stevens, Kandiyohi, Renville, Redwood, Fillmore and Houston. At Fillmore SWCD, West played a key role in providing technical assistance and helping farmers turn in the required materials to Virginia Tech. She says that the program required more paperwork than their usual programming, and for this reason staff were very involved in ensuring each contract with a farmer was executed successfully.

“For us staff, it was a lot of phone calls and correspondence to keep track of the paperwork farmers needed to complete to receive payments,” said West.

Because of this additional collaboration, SWCD staff were able to reinforce and build upon their relationships with producers, an important outcome of the program.

“Even though they could’ve done it themselves, we had half the participating producers come into the office for support with filling out their exit surveys. That speaks to the amount of trust they have in us,” West said.

Climate-smart practices bring environmental benefits

Minnesota enrolled more acres of land into climate-smart practices through the Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture program than any other participating state. Of the 178,000 acres (<https://www.allianceforcsa.org/2026-annual-report/>) enrolled in Minnesota, 60,000 of those acres were planted with cover crops, 30,000 acres were enrolled in a nutrient management plan, and the remaining acres were enrolled in practices including reduced tillage and prescribed grazing, for a total of ten practices. The eligible

practices were selected by Virginia Tech based on the potential to sequester carbon, improve soil and water quality, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. On the ground, farmers saw these positive impacts.

Farmer Bruce Tiffany emphasized that practices such as planting cover crops can improve soil health, and because of that improvement on his own farm he's been able to see reduced soil erosion.

"It definitely cuts down on wind erosion, particularly in spring and in the winter. With an open winter like last year, the neighboring fields without cover crops had soil moving around and we were happy to see that ours was not," he said.

In their report informed by listening sessions with 90 participating producers, Renewing the Countryside also found that farmers saw soil health benefits from implementing climate-smart practices.

"Many [participating farmers] did report seeing reduced erosion, improved water infiltration, and better soil structure," the report concluded.

Soil and Water Conservation District staff noticed soil improvements on farms in addition to other positive changes, including weed suppression.

"I noticed one farmer that planted a winter rye cover crop who didn't have nearly as much volunteer corn and weed pressure during the following growing season," said West. "Compared to the field across the road from it that was left fallow in the winter, it was a very noticeable difference."

In terms of lasting benefits from climate-smart practices, West says soil health takes time to improve, but with continued implementation farms will see better soil quality through increased organic matter, microbial activity, and nutrient uptake.

Looking ahead at conservation programs for Minnesota farmers

The Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture completed four sign-up rounds for producers in Minnesota since 2024, and producers who signed up during the last round have contracts concluding in January 2027. Moving forward, Virginia Tech shared in their 2026 annual report (<https://www.allianceforcsa.org/2026-annual-report/>) that they hope to refine the program to smooth out the administration process for future delivery of programming.

For Minnesota's Board of Water and Soil Resources, Hahn shared that local staff learned a lot and are planning to replicate elements of the program into other state programs, including a greenhouse gas data tool for estimating emissions from farming practices.

"With the Virginia Tech pilot program we have been using COMET-Planner, a tool from USDA and Colorado State University with data for greenhouse gas emissions reductions, which proved to be a really useful resource. We are proposing to utilize COMET-Planner alongside data from Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) for the rest of our statewide programs moving forward," said Hahn.

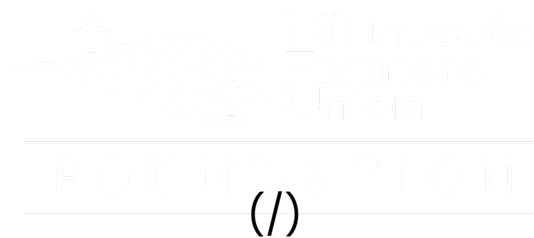
West says that the Fillmore SWCD would enthusiastically offer a program like this again to give financial support to farmers implementing climate-smart practices. In fact, she says her office is actively seeking funding to support farmers that are calling and asking about cost-share dollars to plant over two thousand acres of cover crops this fall.

"Farmers would for sure participate in a program like this again. Right now without the Virginia Tech program we don't have any financial support for practices like cover crops, so we've just applied to a grant

with the state to keep the practices going, and we see all kinds of future for climate-smart agriculture programming in our county,” West said.

While it can’t be predicted what programs will be funded and offered to Minnesota farmers in the future, it seems likely that climate-smart incentive programming would be favorable to farmers, given the dedication of local staff and appreciation of participating farmers. For his part, farmer Bruce Tiffany shared support.

“I think ultimately if the general public is asking for changes in the way farming happens, there is a place for these types of programs,” Tiffany said.



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