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Exploring Row Crop Soil Health Practices

The term 'soil health' gets used lots of ways, to the point it can be difficult to define. None of the uses are necessarily wrong, but they might add confusion if you are trying to take a broad look at soil health practices and whether they're right for your farm.

If you're trying to get a first look at different practices and how they might change soil health on your farm, consider the Soil Health Matrix Decision Tool. It's an evaluation spreadsheet put together by 12 regional University Extension partners as part of the North Central Region Water Network (with financial support from North Central SARE) and is designed to provide a way to compare current management practices to the addition of a new or improved soil health practices on your operation. It is *not* designed to provide an in-depth analysis of soil health measures, but instead a baseline snapshot as to how you might be able to improve soil health with the implementation of various practices.

The tool looks at four baseline management areas: tillage, manure, cover crops, and crop rotation, plus complementary practices like controlled traffic management and animal/grazing management. Drop down menus allow you to choose current practices, then see how a soil health score might change when other practices are implemented. It also allows you to consider things like equipment, time/labor, skill level, and potential costs for implementing new practices.

The scores from the tool are *not* designed to serve as quantitative values to use on the farm (those may be as varied as the definition of soil health...). Use them instead as 'directional scores' using university research information from across the north central region to think about different soil health practices and how they can affect your farm.

Access the tool online at <https://soilhealthnexus.org/soil-health-matrix-tool/>. Background information on the tool's development is outlined as are management practice definitions to help as you make selections from drop down menus. A downloadable version is available on the site as well.

Still have questions after you've seen what implementation of additional management practices might mean for soil health on your farm? There are a ton of resources available to assist. Local Conservation District and Natural Resource Conservation Service staff are well versed on soil health programs and practices, as are many of the partners they work with on a regular basis. University research information (some of which went into the building of the Soil Health Nexus Tool) and publications to help guide you are also available.