



The Northeast Healthy Soil Network Symposium Action Plan

To Advance #SoilFarmerParity by 2050 in the Northeast

Background

The Northeast Healthy Soil Network's mission is to advance pathways of ensuring our farmers financial security, who were providing vital services to our environment and our bodies. This mission is marked by a pursuit of agrarian participatory governance: we all agree we need to connect the bioregional network of healthy soil management practitioners and advocates working throughout the Northeast, with the policymakers and government officers that fund and administer state government programs that interface directly with agriculture (markets, food law, conservation programs), or with the consequences of unsustainable agriculture (environmental resource law, water pollution, infrastructure, diet-related healthcare). We need to join the decision-making table to craft programming in our states that supports the land and food system we dream of.

During the February 2020 symposium of the Northeast Healthy Soil Network, at Tufts University, a multitude of yellow bricks in the road forward to a strong, resilient, healthy regional food system in the north east were uncovered. The disheartening array of challenges farmers in our region face; receiving fair pay for the environmental and social impacts they create while competing against international and subsidized industrial agricultural products, watershed quality, agrichemical use, access to land especially for diverse first generation farmers, labor wages and debt, bridging soil health, foodsheds, forests and suburban landscapes (see more in meeting notes on the website) were clearly laid out.

An array of resources and groups to build a stronger local foodshed was then laid out in response. The Northeast states have conservation district teams, university extension services, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices, chapters of the Farm Bureau, the Northeast Organic Farming Association, American Farmland Trust and even nonprofit farm centers to work with to build healthy soil farm support networks; farmer-to-farmer education programs, shared-equipment hubs, farm practice transition payments, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farmers market maps and beyond. The Living Soils Symposium in Quebec, and partnerships behind the Marin Carbon Project, Carbon Cycle Institute and California state Healthy Soils Program shone as case studies of the success we can find at the regional level when local groups forge partnerships towards regenerative land management.

NEHSN Northeast Top Farmer Led Agricultural Reform Pathways

Demand: We want a new regional food system, one that pays our farmers to build soil, not for crops. Reward our farmers for stewarding ecosystems, taking care of soils, watersheds, landscapes, and providing nutritious food in the process.

Priority Pathways (see working group notes documents for background information):



- 1. Foster Greater Regional Coordination:** How do we efficiently share information of healthy soil programs & progress happening at all levels of states in our region, to advance our demand?

Creating a federal-state level Green New Deal programming implementation pipeline through a Northeast Healthy Soil Network. If we do lay groundwork, *we will be innovating a pathway for all Green New Deal activity at the federal level to be channeled through*

- Can we work with “healthy soil hubs” to coordinate this activity? Firmly establish existing support groups as Northeast Healthy Soil Hubs. Would this have to be a state government led-idea? Could it be independently innovated?
 - **Partners:** Nonprofit farms act as hubs, Conservation districts (RCDs and SWCDs), Uni Extensions, NRCS (the holy trinity of state technical support groups), FSNE from UNH, the Northeast Healthy Soil Network, and Green America Soil Carbon Index, the Ecosystem Services Market Consortium
- 2. Data harmonization, grounding measurable indicators for soil health policy advancement (See WG Discussion Summary):** Setting definitions on measurement by network members may give leverage in relation to funders and provide communities with an avenue to set their own agendas.
 - **SoilFirst Discussion Threads**
 - i. Building new systems and structures, since the existing ones are not working - Scales included in healthy soils programs as they develop, thinking across the region, whole landscapes, not individual farms. System of farm-based research informing the stakeholder groups about what they’d like to see/need to see (farm level) so all move at landscape scale where we want to go. Instead of monitoring on individual farms. Can we apply tools regionally instead of farm by farm, region by region?
 - ii. Rewarding smallholder farmers for farming at good scale for the ecosystem. How do we reach Agreements between land owners, towns, at whatever scale is appropriate? How are outcomes measured, how are payments distributed to ensure this scale is incentivized?
 - **Partners:** OpenTEAM, NOFAs, University Extension offices, Bard Land Lab, Woods End Soil Laboratory, Woods Hole Laboratories
 - 3. Scaling up Funder Partnerships:** Network has the opportunity to define a clear framework of demands, objectives that can be used to access financial/investment opportunities from ESG funds and private equity
 - Gain more visibility by packaging and sharing “Healthy Soils Agriculture” stories through the SoilFirst platform, other social media. Create a compilation of case studies in order to substantiate claims associated with transition to regenerative agriculture. While the science may attract the accountants, stories will attract investors.



- Phrase deliverables in “Environment and Social Governance” (ESG) format in order to attract investment interest. Clearly define the Key Progress Indicators (KPIs) of our movement
- **Partners:** Neesha Mirchandani of Impact Stars, the ICV Group Earth Regeneration Fund

Action Items to become OnGoing Discussion Threads: Building Farmer Financial Security, Farm Parity for Ecosystem Stewardship

- General partners to reach out to for consultation: Impact Stars, Croatan Institute, Carrot Project
- **Keep farmers in business:** Expand markets for local, healthy soil-farmed products. Gain them consumer connection, price support. Help them compete with industrial agricultural products
 - **Urgent Action:** Mass court rulings on farm labor, farm laborer who packs produce isn't doing farm labor, could work overtime. This law if it isn't fixed could put other farms out of business. Rise in minimum wage also squeezes bottom lines.
 - Generate more funding for farmers who are using soil building ag, farmers have to pay transition costs before getting reimbursed. Large sources of funding cannot come from state funding.
 - **Action:** Statewide conservation groups to get together, pursue new source of funding. Program where the RCDs sponsor that
 - *To increase state funding. **Regional GRP (Gross Regenerative Product) not GDP.*** Food grown to the benefit of soil health should be valued for its environmental and human health impacts - internalize positive externalities. By penalizing negative externalities of conventional food?
 - **Action:** Wisely placed fees, on transportation, synthetic fertilizers, pesticides - revenue generated invested in farm networks & districts to increase their income as a way to advance healthy soil management objectives
 - **Action:** Support the Payment for Ecosystem Services working group results
 - **Action:** Organize consortium to meet with the Green Bank, funding source for energy, conservation and emissions reduction - associated with powerplant and solar, could be used for emission reduction in ag.
 - Work with institutions to ensure they build sourcing partnerships regionally
 - **Action:** Food Vision Grant, serving food to Tufts via this grant, halfway through growing season Tufts decided price was too high and cut off the program. Red FF left with a major surplus. Meet with Tufts to discuss how this can change
- **Making healthy soil inherently valuable to farmers, Productivity Index conversion** to a Soil Health Index: instead of using historic yields to assess land value, productivity index, use a health index? Land evaluated by its overall health. Perverse incentives to use land, deplete its value, flip the land.
 - Generate a draft Soil Health Index to replace the Productivity Index (PI) for judging land value
 - Appraisers don't give value to soil quality of land

- **Action:** Making sure incentives for solar development on parking lots and abandoned lots make it more appealing than existing farmland
- **Action:** Ensure farmers are included in solar development conversations so they can use their land if they wish. State APR program Mass, Farmers in Mass not allowed to use marginal land (under APR) for solar energy.
 - **Resource:** See AFT publication on Agriculture and Solar Siting dual use.
 - ◆ There is little science on dual use but grazing is most compatible with soils vs. marginal unproductive soils. If soils are good for grazing like in NY, we need demand for livestock

Aid for groups interested in launching Payment for Ecosystem Services Pilot programs (PES):

❖ Case Study, PES Pilot in Geneva, NY.

- Carbon Farming working group Jacob is asking to transition it to general PES.
 - Hudson Valley, Upstate, Central NY. A legislative body needs to establish that. VT has agency behind them, TMDLs stormwater calculations
 - Southern Chesapeake watershed has TMDLs too
 - Central New York, Champlain Valley, Fingerlakes and Hudson valley could all be hubs. Adirondacks lower priority.
 - **PES pilot component:** Channel all activity and secure more funding for Uni Extension, RCDs and NRCS as implementation unit for policy. Include them in all healthy soil language
 - **PES pilot component:** Build a framework. What are basic questions you need to answer. Template for anyone interested in a county level pilot would be interesting - WG Report had answers to questions. What management etc needs to be paid for who can help pay for it etc. Which funders to talk to?
 - **PES pilot component:** Outline the PES funding streams, who to approach: Municipalities with infrastructure costs. Or RGGI etc. Data or info to bring to those sources of funds. Can we invest in natural capital and infrastructure? Not the same as services that flow, invest upstream
 - **PES pilot component:** Eventually link this to regional Green New Deal Implementation legislation from Washington
- **Partners:** Cornell Extension, Closed Loop Systems, Slope Farms, Sustainable Tompkins, Food Forest Farm, Stonewall Farm (NH is interested in working in parallel)
 - SWCD knows Hudson is different from central and upstate - 2 groups? Need to allow districts to use PES pilot structure, then establish hubs of conversation in each region.
- **Outreach:**
 - **Potential Partners:** Greg Landua Regen Network. Hudson Carbon Abby Rock, Barrett 200,000 matched by Rock foundation doing a measurement program for the past 3 years - baseline for farm will sell credits in 2020. Terraton price of 15\$ per ton? Carbon farming grants, GA SCI, SEI in the Fingerlakes.
- Ask Ryan and Ali to help us structure protocol for establishing PES pilot



- i. Draft list of partners, agencies involved, legislation needed
 - o **Calla Rose & Jeffe Creque** for CA policy transfer insights
 - o **Liz Henderson** for New York policy insights

- **Launching a NY Fingerlakes Payment for Ecosystem Services pilot**
- Bring PES pilot to a district in NY via carbon fund & cooperative extension. Based on TMDLs like in VT, look at Graham's Fingerlake District specifically
- **VT PES - Framework for how to establish a PES Pilot.**
 - Reports from VT needed to read for background?
 - Create a working group, lead with objective you'd like to help the state achieve
 - Collect data to verify outcomes of those steps, demonstrate public benefit of funding
 - Then apply for state funding
- **Partners**
 - Cooperative Extension
 - NRCDs
 - Identify farms in district as hubs to partner with RCDs and extension. Hubs would be an exciting way to keep rural-revitalizing healthy soil action local
 - Establishing hubs, meeting equipment needs, Savory Hub model would work for coalescing points for meetings
- Fund stream:
 - public-private. Grant programs to look for in your state
 - Tap into private equity (Neesha-style), if its willing to be channeled locally? Once a localized PES pilot structure is set up, we can work with Neesha to take pilot to private funders
 - Ecosystem Services Market Consortium needs a concrete "supply chain" to invest in regionally

Necessary Education Pathways

- Education standards to include food and environmental systems! In elementary and middle schools
- Elementary School Gardens. Campus community Gardens as learning sites
 - o **Case:** Local BoAg school going to build aquaponics, put these in lower and middle schools
 - o **Partner:** Food Corps has done garden work, nutrition education
- College campuses as sites of landscape policy change
 - o **Partner:** Herbicide Free Campus

- Convince all public schools and universities to source from soil building farms, especially in cities. Farm to Institution in cities
 - o **Partner:** CPS/CCRSD Itorri Foods

- Farmer to Farmer Education - ask farmers using practices the teacher, on their farm, demonstrating to others



- **Partner:** NOFAs

Additional Northeast Stakeholder Partners to Strengthen outreach

See region map:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1R0oXe-nKj1I6oY9gf6KZIBTNXZ1dYQtiMZs8fRcYm4U/edit?usp=sharing>