



Hampden-Hampshire Conservation District

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Mr. Thomas Anderson
Executive Secretary
Commission for Conservation of Soil, Water & Related Resources
Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs
100 Cambridge St., 10th
Boston, MA 02114

Challenge Grant Round 1 Report, Ref #149

Progress on deliverables and objectives

The second year of HHCD's Healthy Soils Program, supported by EEA's Challenge Grant, saw significant growth. We met or exceeded all of the expected outcomes and deliverables related to the Healthy Soils Program that were outlined in our Round 1 Challenge Grant proposal. Our equipment was rented 21 times by 15 different farmers, and used on 260 acres of land, which far exceeded our goal of 100 acres. We coordinated with 11 partners to host 6 agricultural outreach events with over 200 total participants, including service providers, hosts, presenters, and farmers. We conducted 74 total soil samples (52 agricultural and 22 residential) for 38 participants (16 farms and 22 community members). We saw increased demand for soil sampling in the late summer and early fall, which can be largely attributed to NRCS promoting our soil analysis service and connecting us directly with producers. We anticipate that increased awareness of our programs and services will result in significant growth in year 3 of our Healthy Soils Program.

Delays and changes to the implementation schedule

Due to the delays in the Challenge Grant Round 1 process, we were unable to purchase the Checchi & Magli Unitrium no-till vegetable transplanter in time for the 2024 growing season. We have since ordered the Unitrium transplanter through Brookdale Farm supply (Hollis, NH), and are expecting to receive the equipment in time for it to be available for rent in spring of 2025. After conducting additional research on the best methods for transporting the C&M Unitrium transplanter, we are no longer planning to purchase the Car-Mate trailer. Instead, we are considering two options for self-loading trailers that will make it easier for a farmer or HHCD staff member to single-handedly load the transplanter.

We included money in our Round 1 budget to cover the cost of Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health (CASH) analysis, without the knowledge that American Farmland Trust would be

offering free CASH analysis to farmers in New England. Since AFT is offering this service for free, and they have much greater capacity and resources to operate with, we decided it was not worthwhile to duplicate their efforts. Instead, we are focused on providing and promoting free UMass soil analysis. This has been very popular - many farmers and service providers prefer UMass over Cornell University's CASH procedure, because the samples are much easier to collect and process, the tests are significantly more affordable, the results are ready within 2-3 weeks compared to 3 months, and the recommendations are easier to understand.

The public outreach programs in our proposal that were planned with Regenerative Design Group have been delayed, due to a major health issue with the staff member contracted for the project. At this time, we are unsure when this component will commence and what changes will be made to the work plan. We expect to have an update on this component in the coming months.

Outreach

Earlier this year, a group gathered for the first time at the office of American Farmland Trust in Northampton to review our separate plans for farmer outreach events in 2024. The goal was to avoid scheduling conflicts, reduce duplicated efforts, and explore opportunities for collaboration. Staff from UMass, CISA, AFT, NOFA/Mass, BCD, MACD, HHCD, and Momentum Ag, sat together and compiled a spreadsheet that amounted to over 60 planned outreach events for farmers in Massachusetts! We started to meet on a monthly basis to better organize and coordinate our outreach events, which allows us to pool resources and expand our reach. During the 2024 growing season, HHCD partnered with 11 different organizations to host 6 agricultural outreach events with over 200 total participants. This has been a very effective approach, and we will continue to collaborate with these organizations moving forward and expect to form new partnerships in 2025.

Surprises

The extent that the Healthy Soils Program grew in the second year came as a bit of a surprise, and the increased participation in the program made it hard for HHCD's Conservation Program Manager (Matthew) to manage all of the logistics, admin, programming, and outreach. For this reason, we have recently recruited a part-time Program Assistant, who will provide assistance for all program and outreach activities, and help us continue to grow the program at a sustainable pace. We currently have enough funding for this position to be a six-month paid internship at 0.25 FTE, but we hope to extend the position with additional grant funds. Likewise, the incredible demand for our Native Plant Program services came as a great surprise!

Budget

To date, we have spent \$12,022.87. We have ordered the Checchi & Magli Unitrium transplanter and will be processing a payment in the amount of \$25,393.00 by the end of Q3, March 2025. Once the transplanter is received, we will select and purchase a trailer for transportation. We will also need to purchase more UMass soil kits.