

Successful debut for Regenerating Soil and Community Project!

By Jodi Enos-Berlage, Regenerating Soil and Community Project Lead

2024 was the inaugural year for Regenerating Soil and Community (RSC), a four-year, \$471,450 project designed to address soil degradation and accelerate regenerative agriculture practices in Northeast Iowa. Recent research indicates that Midwest soils are being lost at 10-1000 times the rate they are formed and one-third of the U.S. corn belt has lost its topsoil completely, impacting agricultural productivity, input costs, water quality, flooding, and weather resilience.

Enabled by a unique partnership between the Winneshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District, Northeast Iowa RC&D, area watershed coordinators, and Luther College, RSC is funded by an Iowa DNR subaward from the U.S. EPA. The project aims not only to enhance soil health but also to foster community resilience and inclusivity by engaging farmers and landowners that have been historically underserved by federal programs and policies, including women owners/co-owners/operators, beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged, veterans, or those with limited resources.



RSC team members break up soil samples after returning from a field trip, spreading out soil to dry in preparation for laboratory analysis.

With goals to grow knowledge, confidence, community, and conservation plans, RSC team members and students provided the following to the 2024 cohort:

- Free soil sampling and testing
- In-depth interviews to learn interests and needs
- Educational sessions and strengths-based workshops
- Opportunity to experience student-led, hands-on soil testing at Luther College Laboratories
- Connection and community with small cohort of project participants
- Networking with dedicated soil health professionals
- Technical expertise and financial support for conservation plans

The RSC team learned a great deal about the deep connection landowners and farmers have to their farms, their strong interest in improving soil health, barriers that they experience, gaps that need to be filled, stressors associated with farm succession planning, and the strong need for a close, supportive community to engage with as they manage their farms through change.

The most powerful outcomes, however, have been voiced by the cohort members themselves:

"I have learned so much about my land from the soil testing and understanding the results, as well as the many new conservation practices I knew nothing about before the project. Farming has changed in many ways since my husband and I farmed the land from the 1960's through the 90's when we began to rent the land out. There are new opportunities to increase the health of the soil."

"My experience with this project has been immensely positive. Before starting this journey, my desire to protect and improve my family's farm felt impossible to achieve. However, through the soil testing experience, learning opportunities, gatherings with other women landowners and making connections within the local community, I have gained so much more confidence. I now know my land better. I have a better understanding of farming practices and the way they affect our soil and water. I see other women landowners driving change on their farms—making it feel more attainable for me."

"I have enjoyed being a part of the RSC team. This has been a great learning experience in so many ways. This group has created opportunities to connect with a variety of helpful resources and new friendships!"

"This was an amazing experience. Our group of landowners, Luther students and faculty, and NRCS and NE Iowa RC&D staff members bonded, as we learned from and with each other, in a common goal to protect our precious Iowa lands. I enjoyed the variety of experiences including hands-on soil analysis on my family farm and in the lab at Luther. It was a great day being out on the farm with this group! The Luther students were so enthused about soil biology and it was astounding to participate in all the research they shared with us in the lab. Each of the women landowners in this cohort came with a variety of farm experiences. We explored our strengths with the Clifton's Strength's Assessment in a fun and non-threatening way. I would recommend participating in RSC to any landowner. This group helped me gain confidence in making decisions about what happens on my farm."



Members of the Regenerating Soil and Community Project team, on a landowner visit. **From L to R:** Gwen Strand, Rachel Jorgenson, Jenna Woodsmall, Jodi Enos-Berlage, Rachel Brummel, Sophia Campbell, landowner Susan Kuennen, Olivia Gustafson, Tina Ngakeni, Sophia Chadima, Laura Peterson. (Not pictured: Ross Evelsizer, Miriam Skrade, Jane Hawley)

"This has been a wonderful opportunity to learn about our Winneshiek County farmland. I learned so much about the glue that holds the soil. As landowners we need to change ways to save the land, for example, what used to be plowed, and then chisel plowed can now be no till to keep the land healthy. We can make money without spending money."

The RSC team is currently recruiting participants for the 2025 landowner cohort!

If interested, please contact Jodi Enos-Berlage (enosbejo@luther.edu) or Sophia Campbell (sophia.campbell@dnr.iowa.gov).

More information can be found on the SWCD website: <https://winneshiekswcd.org/regenerating-soil-communities-initiative/>