**Op-Ed: Celebrating Hoosier Farmers Who Are Protecting an Irreplaceable Resource**

*By Jerry Raynor, Indiana NRCS State Conservationist*

Now more than ever, as we see empty grocery shelves in response to the current pandemic, we realize how important food and fiber is to the American population. Farmers are the backbone of Indiana, shouldering the tremendous responsibility of feeding a rapidly growing nation. Their critical work also provides economic stability across the state — supporting rural economies and creating jobs in local communities. This March 24th, we celebrate National Ag Day – a day to reflect on the amazing work of our Indiana farmers.

This year’s Ag Day theme is "Food Brings Everyone to the Table.” Those who live and work in the agricultural community are keenly aware production will need to increase sharply over the next few decades in order to feed the world. And the key to Indiana’s vitality is rooted in the soil. As world population and food production demands rise, keeping our soil healthy and productive is of paramount importance.

Private landowners across Indiana are partnering with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to put soil health practices to work. Through one-on-one, personalized advice, NRCS works voluntarily with producers and communities to find the best solutions to meet their unique conservation and business goals. When incorporating soil health principles and systems that include no-till, cover cropping, nutrient management planning, and diverse rotations, more and more producers are increasing their soil’s organic matter, reducing the need for expensive inputs, and improving microbial activity — all while growing profitable farms, vibrant rural economies, and healthy food and fiber to fuel our nation today and into the future.

Over the past several years NRCS has worked with hundreds of farmers in Indiana to improve the health of their soil. From every corner of the state we are hearing stories of increased production, improved bottom lines, and healthier soils. That’s good news for all us at a time when we are faced with many challenges.

NRCS has a proud history of supporting Indiana’s farmers. For more than 80 years, we have helped people make investments in their operations and local communities to keep working lands working, boost rural economies, increase the competitiveness of American agriculture, and improve the quality of our air, water, soil, and habitat. As we celebrate Ag Day throughout this week, I want to thank Indiana’s farm families for all you do to care for the land, improve the environment, and provide us safe and affordable food. I look forward to continuing to work together to safeguard this irreplaceable resource—our soil!

You are invited to learn more about soil health and conservation practices. Visit with one of our district conservationists or visit our website [www.in.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.in.nrcs.usda.gov). To locate the office nearest you, visit: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/contact/local/>.

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