Unilever – Soy Cover Cropping In Iowa

Since 2015 Unilever has worked to grow the adoption of cover cropping in Iowa for its soy value chain. This process initially started with 25 farmers and has since grown to include more than 520 farmers in the program. Unilever aims to reach 1,200 farms and enable over 600,000 acres of farmland to adopt cover cropping.

The Impetus

A core component of Unilever's compass is focused on improving the planet's health, and inherent within that is the need to protect and regenerate nature. Unilever understands the tremendously important role that healthy soils play in developing and maintaining healthy ecosystems and ensuring the long-term food security for future generations. As such, they sought to develop a program that would enable farmers to integrate some regenerative practices in a way that would build soil health without over burdening farmers with significant expenses or complicate new practices. This investment not only yields environmental benefits like increased biodiversity, increased soil health and green-house gas emission reductions; but also helps ensure a resilient and consistent supply of crops for Unilever in the future.

The Solution

In 2018, Unilever launched the Soy Cover Crop Project in Iowa, focusing on increasing soil health in the soybean oil supply chain for the Hellmann's brand. The project has three components that are intended to support farmers in the adoption of some regenerative agriculture practices and track the environmental benefits realized.

Cost Sharing – Implementing cover cropping brings additional expenses to farmers including seed, fuel, and termination. As the benefits of cover cropping are realized over a longer time horizon through input reduction rather than seen immediately through a marketable crop, the additional expense of cover cropping can be viewed as a sunk cost for many farmers. Unilever helps farmers overcome this burden by paying farmers USD $10/ acre to take up the practice. This covers, on average, 1/3 of the farmer's expenses.

Technical and Peer Support Network – Adopting cover cropping significantly farming practices, from how you harvest in the fall to when and how you plant in the spring. To support farmers in this piece, Unilever has partnered with Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) to assist with landscape-specific knowledge that will support farmers with specific guidance on their journey. Additionally, the program leverages the experience of farmers who have previously adopted the practice to serve as ambassadors to neighbors who may be considering it. Through rainy day social gatherings, PFI will facilitate discussions on regenerative practices among farmers.

Monitoring and Evaluating Outcomes – Unilever tracks data on an annual basis measuring greenhouse gas reductions, water quality, and reduction in nitrogen runoff through Field to Market's Fieldprint calculator.

Key Learnings

Transitioning is a process. It is not something that is going to be achieved overnight, as seemingly small adjustments to long-held practices have significant consequences on a farm's operations. In order to successfully shift agricultural practices you need to create a supportive environment, both from an economic and knowledge perspective, and listen to the needs and concerns of the farmers you are engaging with. Unilever leverages local expertise and facilitates discussion among farmers to provide trusted resources for farmers. Simultaneously, Unilever provides the economic support farmers need to help ease the initial financial burden that would initially prevent farmers from adopting the practice.

What's Next?

Unilever is continuing to organically grow the Soy Cover Crop project in Iowa by recruiting new farmers each year to transition to cover cropping practices. The goal is to reach a total of 600,000 acres practicing cover cropping.

Impacts

- **Over 520 farmers currently engaged in the program**
- **170,000 acres transitioned to cover cropping**
- **92% GHG reduction recorded through Fieldprint calculator, compared to not planting cover crops**