

118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 3023

To require the Secretary of Agriculture to establish and maintain a training program for Department of Agriculture personnel and third-party providers on the rapidly evolving methodologies, science, and practices of biological soil health management systems on agricultural land, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER 4, 2023

Mr. MERKLEY (for himself and Mr. WYDEN) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

A BILL

To require the Secretary of Agriculture to establish and maintain a training program for Department of Agriculture personnel and third-party providers on the rapidly evolving methodologies, science, and practices of biological soil health management systems on agricultural land, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

1 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

2 This Act may be cited as the “Soil Conservation And
3 Regeneration Education Act of 2023” or the “Soil CARE
4 Act of 2023”.

5 **SEC. 2. TRAINING FOR REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE IN**
6 **NRCS PROGRAMS.**

7 (a) ESTABLISHMENT OF TRAINING PROGRAM.—Sec-
8 tion 1242 of the Food Security Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C.
9 3842) is amended—

10 (1) in subsection (a)—

11 (A) by redesignating paragraphs (1) and
12 (2) as paragraphs (3) and (5), respectively;

13 (B) by inserting before paragraph (3) (as
14 so redesignated) the following:

15 “(1) BIOLOGICAL SOIL HEALTH MANAGE-
16 MENT.—The term ‘biological soil health manage-
17 ment’ means land management methods that are
18 employed to increase and balance soil biology, such
19 as microbial biomass and macrofauna, for the pur-
20 pose of improving biological functions, including
21 forming and stabilizing soil structure, cycling nutri-
22 ents, controlling pests and disease, and degrading or
23 detoxifying contaminants.

24 “(2) DEPARTMENT.—The term ‘Department’
25 means the Department of Agriculture.”; and

1 (C) by inserting after paragraph (3) (as so
2 redesignated) the following:

3 “(4) SOIL BIOLOGY.—The term ‘soil biology’ in-
4 cludes the collective biomass and activities of soil-
5 dwelling organisms from an array of trophic levels.”;
6 and

7 (2) by adding at the end the following:

8 “(j) TRAINING FOR BIOLOGICAL SOIL HEALTH MAN-
9 AGEMENT IN NRCS PROGRAMS.—

10 “(1) ESTABLISHMENT OF TRAINING PRO-
11 GRAM.—Not later than 1 year after the date of en-
12 actment of the Soil CARE Act of 2023, the Sec-
13 retary shall establish a training program (referred to
14 in this subsection as the ‘training program’)—

15 “(A) to provide education, resources, and
16 technical support to Department personnel and
17 third-party providers on the rapidly evolving
18 methodologies, science, and practices for im-
19 proving soil health; and

20 “(B) to assist Department personnel and
21 third-party providers in supporting agricultural
22 producers in understanding and implementing
23 biological soil health management systems that
24 regenerate farmland.

1 “(2) PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND DELIV-
2 ERY.—

3 “(A) IN GENERAL.—The training program
4 shall—

5 “(i) be made available in each Natural
6 Resources Conservation Service region
7 twice every 2 years; and

8 “(ii) include—

9 “(I) a nationally available online
10 curriculum on biological soil health
11 management systems that is—

12 “(aa) developed through co-
13 operative agreements with enti-
14 ties described in subparagraph
15 (B); and

16 “(bb) delivered by the Nat-
17 ural Resources Conservation
18 Service; and

19 “(II) in-person training work-
20 shops on biological soil health man-
21 agement systems that regenerate
22 farmland, that—

23 “(aa) include coverage
24 across regions and geography
25 types;

1 “(bb) are developed through
 2 cooperative agreements with enti-
 3 ties described in subparagraph
 4 (B); and

5 “(cc) are delivered by the
 6 Natural Resources Conservation
 7 Service.

8 “(B) COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS.—

9 “(i) IN GENERAL.—The training pro-
 10 gram shall be developed and delivered
 11 through cooperative agreements with enti-
 12 ties with biological soil health management
 13 systems expertise and experience working
 14 with and training producers, including—

15 “(I) farming consultants, includ-
 16 ing producers and producer coopera-
 17 tives;

18 “(II) nonprofit organizations
 19 serving organic, agroecological, and
 20 other regenerative producers;

21 “(III) conservation districts;

22 “(IV) land-grant colleges and
 23 universities (as defined in section
 24 1404 of the National Agricultural Re-

search, Extension, and Teaching Policy Act of 1977 (7 U.S.C. 3103));

“(V) Long-Term Agroecosystem Research sites; and

“(VI) other entities with adequate expertise in biological soil health management systems, as determined by the Secretary.

“(ii) INITIAL AGREEMENTS.—Not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of the Soil CARE Act of 2023, the Secretary shall enter into cooperative agreements under clause (i) for the initial development and delivery of the training program.

“(C) PARTICIPATION.—

“(i) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary shall encourage relevant Department personnel and third-party providers—

“(I) to complete the online curriculum described in subparagraph (A)(ii)(I); and

“(II) to the extent practicable, to attend at least 1 in-person training

workshop described in subparagraph
(A)(ii)(II).

“(ii) RELEVANT DEPARTMENT PERSONNEL.—For purposes of clause (i), relevant Department personnel shall include, at a minimum, Department personnel involved in conservation planning activities with, and the delivery of technical assistance to, producers, including field office staff of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“(iii) COMPLETION SCHEDULES FOR THIRD-PARTY PROVIDERS.—

“(I) ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHEDULES.—The Secretary shall establish—

“(aa) a schedule for the completion by third-party providers of the online curriculum described in subparagraph (A)(ii)(I); and

“(bb) a schedule of in-person training workshops that will be provided in accordance with subparagraph (A)(ii)(II).

1 “(II) USE OF SCHEDULES.—The
2 Secretary shall encourage each third-
3 party provider—

4 “(aa) to complete the online
5 curriculum in accordance with
6 the schedule established under
7 subclause (I)(aa); and

8 “(bb) to the extent prac-
9 ticable, to attend at least 1 train-
10 ing workshop identified on the
11 schedule established under sub-
12 clause (I)(bb).

13 “(D) CONTINUING EDUCATION.—The Sec-
14 retary shall provide continuing education for
15 relevant Department personnel and third-party
16 providers, with a focus on the use of new con-
17 servation practice standards related to soil
18 health.

19 “(E) MATERIALS FOR PRODUCERS.—The
20 Secretary shall require relevant Department
21 personnel and third-party providers to provide
22 soil health education materials to producers
23 through the programs and conservation activi-
24 ties of the Natural Resources Conservation
25 Service, including materials relating to the top-

ics covered by the curriculum described in paragraph (3).

“(3) CURRICULUM.—

“(A) IN GENERAL.—The training program shall include the following minimum curriculum components:

“(i) A unit on the principles of soil health published by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, with a focus on biological function and regional context.

“(ii) A unit on—

“(I) the transition to agriculture management systems that build soil health, including operations, infrastructure, regulations, finance, and marketing needs; and

“(II) associated risks and opportunities, including reducing input costs by building on-farm and ranch fertility.

“(iii) A unit on organic production and soil health systems.

“(iv) A unit on diversified production systems, including—

“(I) perennial cropping systems;

1 “(II) agroforestry or silvopasture
2 systems;

3 “(III) livestock integration into
4 cropping systems; and

5 “(IV) prescribed grazing.

6 “(v) A unit on the body of research on
7 soil biology and agriculture that regen-
8 erates farmland, including potential im-
9 pacts on soil health, water quality and se-
10 curity, biodiversity, ecosystem function, re-
11 silience to extreme weather, carbon seques-
12 tration, and agricultural profitability.

13 “(vi) A unit on key conservation prac-
14 tices that maximize soil health and miti-
15 gate climate impacts by implementing soil
16 health principles.

17 “(vii) A unit on—

18 “(I) issues specific to Indian
19 Tribes; and

20 “(II) traditional ecological knowl-
21 edge.

22 “(viii) A unit on—

23 “(I) the special needs of new,
24 small scale, and underserved pro-
25 ducers; and

1 “(II) how best to meet those
2 needs.

3 “(ix) A unit on approaches, tools, and
4 skills to support farmers in performing soil
5 health tests.

6 “(x) A unit on all conservation pro-
7 grams available to producers that improve
8 soil health, reduce production inputs, and
9 regenerate soil, farmland, and nearby eco-
10 systems.

11 “(B) UPDATES.—The Secretary shall re-
12 view and update the curriculum of the training
13 program every 2 years based on the latest—

14 “(i) biological soil health management
15 innovations; and

16 “(ii) scientific and technological ad-
17 vancements.

18 “(4) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—
19 There is authorized to be appropriated to the Sec-
20 retary to carry out this subsection \$10,000,000 for
21 the period of fiscal years 2024 through 2028.”.

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