

Howard Buffett, USDA Want Farmers to Protect Soil

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press



Philanthropist Howard G. Buffett, son of investor Warren Buffett, participates in a panel discussion at the conference on cover crops and soil health, in Omaha, Neb., Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2014. Buffett is sponsoring a national invitation-only conference on the benefits of cover crops in Omaha to get American farmers interested in keeping their soil healthy. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik)

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Seeing the challenges farmers in the developing world face made philanthropist Howard Buffett realize how important conservation practices are for all farmers.

Buffett changed habits on farms he owns in Illinois, Nebraska, Arizona and South Africa after that, and this week's invitation-only conference in Omaha that Buffett co-sponsored with the U.S. Department of Agriculture is the latest outgrowth of that realization.

"People look to countries like the United States and how they are doing it. And we aren't getting done what we need to get done," said Buffett, whose father, investor Warren Buffett, funds his philanthropy.

The conference is focusing on the benefits of cover crops, which are planted between growing seasons to limit erosion and replenish nutrients in the soil. Buffett and the USDA hope to expand the current 2 million to 3 million acres of cover crops planted each year to about 20 million acres by 2020.

Planting cover crops can produce tangible benefits for farmers by reducing the need for fertilizer while improving crop yields.

Farmer Gabe Brown said using cover crops and other practices on his farm in North

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Dakota had made a significant difference in his soil and he hasn't used chemical fertilizer since 2008.

"Nature has the template for regenerating the soil," Brown said.

The current restrictions on cover crops in crop insurance rules could make it hard to dramatically expand their use, said Brown and other farmers participating in panel discussions Tuesday.

Buffett said getting American farmers to improve their practices would help change practices worldwide and help preserve resources. But he said changing human behavior is difficult even when the evidence is convincing, like with getting people to quit smoking.

Farmers in places such as Africa can't afford to use many of the tools U.S. farmers use, but concepts like cover crops can apply. And farmers can set a strong example with their practices.

"You can't talk about global food security and take the big elements out of the picture. You can't say the United States doesn't count. You can't say Brazil doesn't count. You can't say Europe doesn't count," Buffett said. "I started to realize that it takes a whole combination of success. Everybody has to participate."

Buffett said he's already thinking about planning another conference focused on conservation next year.

Generally in his giving, Buffett tries to focus on programs that can be continued after the initial grant ends, so he doesn't support introducing expensive hybrid seeds and irrigation in places where farmers can't afford them.

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Online:

Howard G. Buffett Foundation: <http://www.thehowardgbuffettfoundation.org> [1]

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov> [2]

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