

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2025**

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SENATE BILL 574

Short Title: Soil Health Task Force. (Public)

Sponsors: Senator Murdock (Primary Sponsor).

Referred to: Rules and Operations of the Senate

March 26, 2025

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT TO CREATE THE HEALTHY SOILS TASK FORCE.

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1.(a) Findings. – The General Assembly finds that healthy soils are a limited natural resource and fundamental for healthy and sustainable food production. Improving soil health means increasing soil's organic matter and diversifying its microbial activity to enhance agricultural productivity and environmental resilience.

SECTION 1.(b) Additional findings. – The General Assembly finds further all of the following:

- (1) That North Carolina is a leading agricultural state with productive soils and abundant water supplies, and therefore a commitment to maintain healthy and productive soils and clean water is critical as population and food production demands rise. However, much of the State's soil has been depleted of organic matter and trace minerals, making the soil less fertile, requiring more inputs, and resulting in a degradation of the soil structure that builds resilience and helps to maintain clean water.
- (2) There is a real and pressing opportunity for the state's farmers to capitalize on the economic and production benefits of improved soil health, while simultaneously improving surface and ground water quality. Improving the health of the state's soil is the most effective way for agricultural producers to increase crop and forage productivity and profitability while also protecting the environment.
- (3) Appropriate planning and coordination is needed to accelerate and coordinate the adoption of conservation practices that: (i) rebuild and protect soil carbon to increase water holding capacity and enhance the vitality of the subsurface microbiome for landowners to capitalize on the economic and production benefits of soil health; (ii) enhance water quality; (iii) capture carbon; (iv) build resilience to drought and pests; (v) reduce greenhouse gas emissions; (vi) expand pollinator and other wildlife habitats; and (vii) protect fragile ecosystems for a more sustainable future.

SECTION 2. Chapter 139 of the General Statutes is amended by adding a new Article to read:

"Article 7.

"Healthy Soils Task Force.

"§ 139-70. North Carolina Healthy Soils Task Force.



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(a) Task Force Established. – The North Carolina Healthy Soils Task Force (Task Force) is established within the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for budgetary purposes only.

(b) Membership. – The Task Force shall consist of the chairs of the House and Senate standing committees with responsibility for agriculture issues as nonvoting members and the following 11 voting members:

(1) The Commissioner of Agriculture or the Commissioner's designee.

(2) The Chair of the Soil and Water Conservation Commission, or the Chair's designee.

(3) The Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University, or the Dean's designee.

(4) The Dean of the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, or the Dean's designee.

(5) The President and Chief Executive Officer of the Soil Health Institute, or the President's designee.

(6) The President of the North Carolina Farm Bureau or the President's designee.

(7) The Executive Director of the North Carolina Composting Council or the Executive Director's designee.

(8) Two members appointed by the Governor who are farmers primarily engaged in the production of row crops.

(9) Two members appointed by the Governor who are farmers primarily engaged in the production of specialty crops.

(c) Additional Requirements for Governor's Appointments. – Of the four members appointed by the Governor under subsection (b) of this section, one shall be a farmer farming less than 180 acres, and one a farmer farming between 180 and 500 acres. The Governor shall also make best efforts to appoint members engaged in healthy soils practices, as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture.

(d) Meetings and Quorum. – The Task Force shall meet quarterly and at other times at the call of the chair. A majority of voting members of the Task Force shall constitute a quorum.

(e) Terms and Vacancies. – Terms shall be for a period of two years. The members shall elect a chair, who shall preside for the duration of the chair's term as a member. In the event a vacancy occurs in the chair before the expiration of the chair's term, the members shall elect an acting chair to serve for the remainder of the unexpired term. Vacancies in appointed members will be filled by the Governor to serve for the remainder of the unexpired term.

(f) Staff; Funding. – The Department of Agriculture shall provide staff to assist the Task Force in its work. The Task Force may use funds allocated to it to contract with consultants and other professionals to assist the Task Force in the completion of its duties, and may request additional assistance from appropriate federal and state agencies or programs.

(g) Compensation. – Members of the Task Force, staff, and consultants shall receive necessary travel and subsistence expenses while on official business of the Task Force in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 138-5 or G.S. 138-6, as applicable, paid from funds allocated to support the work of the Task Force and within the limits of those funds.

"§ 139.71. Healthy Soils Task Force – duties.

The Task Force shall have the following duties:

(1) Develop a comprehensive healthy soils initiative for the State that will be implemented in a manner that supports local economic growth.

(2) Develop a comprehensive action plan to coordinate efforts to carry out healthy soils initiatives using standards for organic matter, biological activity, biological diversity, and soil structure as measures to assess improved soil health. The action plan shall include goals, timelines for task completion, and a comprehensive assessment and listing of resources required and available

resources. In developing the action plan, the Task Force shall examine all of the following:

- a. Issues related to providing farmers and ranchers with research, education, technical assistance, and demonstration projects.
 - b. Options for financial incentives to improve soil health.
 - c. The contribution of livestock to soil health.
- (3) Develop recommendations for the use of plants that preserve soil health.
- (4) Identify realistic and achievable goals and timelines for improvement of soil health in the State through voluntary partnerships among agricultural producers and relevant state and local agencies and other public and private entities.
- (5) Identify actions and activities to increase the generation and use of compost to increase soil health.
- (6) Review provisions of the federal "Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018," Pub. L. No. 115-334, and any implementing rules, regulations, and guidelines of the United States Department of Agriculture and identify opportunities to leverage state, local, or private funds under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program of the United States Department of Agriculture and other conservation programs for the purposes of the healthy soils initiative. The Task Force shall include information obtained from the review in the report required by G.S. 139-72(b).

"§ 139-72. Healthy Soils Task Force – Consultation; Report; Expiration.

(a) Consultation. –In carrying out the duties set forth in G.S.139-71, the Task Force may consult with other agencies or organizations, including all of the following:

- (1) The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University, the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, NC State Extension, and North Carolina A&T Cooperative Extension.
- (2) The Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, and the Agricultural Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture.
- (3) The Soil Health Institute.
- (4) The Soil Health Partnership
- (5) Any other state and federal agencies or public or private entities with responsibility or expertise in research, demonstration, education, advising, funding, or promotion relating to agronomic and other agricultural land management practices consistent with the purpose of the Task Force.

(b) Report. – or before January 31, 2027, the Task Force shall submit the comprehensive action plan and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and to the committees of the North Carolina House of Representatives and the North Carolina Senate responsible for agricultural issues."

SECTION 3. This act is effective when it becomes law, and expires on the earlier of December 31, 2029 or the date of submission of final report of the Healthy Soils Task Force, as created in G.S. 139-70, as enacted in Section 2 of this act.