



## Conservation Technology Information Center

HALL OF FAME INDUCTIONS  
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By Ryan Heiniger, Executive Director, Conservation Technology Information Center

The next part of our program might be my favorite part of the year. Our Hall of Fame Inductees are individuals and organizations that have made exceptional contributions to conservation agriculture and to CTIC.

And while it's rewarding to recognize their outstanding achievements, what I love most is that through this process, we all get to see what greatness looks like. And then, humbly, we get to hold our work up to the mirror of their accomplishments and get our own report cards.

Are we doing enough in our everyday work? Do we aspire to the greatness embodied in the careers of those who've come before us?

I hope you'll draw the same inspiration from our inductees that I have as we proudly present our CTIC Hall of Fame Class of 2026.

**Our first honoree provided the blueprint for the national network** of community-led organizations that identify local resource concerns and support farmers in voluntary efforts to conserve them.

In 1937, the Brown Creek Soil and Water Conservation District became the first governmental entity to provide technical, financial, and educational resources for conservation agriculture.

It's now the official soil and water conservation district of Anson County to mirror the more than 3,000-strong network of special-purpose divisions that grew out of its pioneering mandate. But it didn't start that way.

As its name suggests, the early intent for Brown Creek as a conservation district, was for local citizens to work together toward a shared goal.

The original district was a collaboration between Anson and Union Counties to restore about 120,000 acres of severely eroded farmland, a blight that was threatening farmers' livelihoods and the region's economy.

In fact, many of the early conservation districts were designed based on natural watershed lines rather than rigid county borders. In 1947, farmers in neighboring Montgomery, Stanly, and Richmond counties petitioned the Brown Creek Conservation District to join to address the shared crisis of severe soil erosion, depleted agricultural land, and escalating water-quality issues in and around the Pee Dee River and Hitchcock Creek.

The five-county collective and its local landowners recognized that individual farmers couldn't solve a systemic landscape level issue alone, and it proved that shared resource concerns transcended their political boundaries, parties, and politics. The success of farmers was paramount to the prosperity of the region, and if the natural resources couldn't support them, then nothing else really mattered.

The framework for local grassroots governance and for natural resources was modeled after the Standard State Soil Conservation Districts model law, a vision of its author, Hugh Hammond Bennett, who grew up on a plantation near Wadesboro in the Brown Creek watershed area. Though it was never ratified at the federal level, states adopted versions of it to create the framework that we know today, beginning with a petition of 30 landowners and the overwhelming approval of farmers in Union and Anson counties.

Of course, we know that the southern Piedmont was a microcosm of what was happening around the country: Decades of farming sent massive volumes of productive topsoil to the bottom of rivers, lakes, and streams. Rivers ran red with clay in North Carolina. The soil that remained had been mined of its nutrients, threatening not just the livelihoods of farmers, but a growing nation's ability to feed itself and clothe itself.

By the end of the Dust Bowl, an estimated 1.2 billion tons of topsoil was lost on 100 million acres, an average of 12 inches per acre. And while the work of SWCDs around the country has stemmed the massive loss of farmers' most precious resource, we still lose 5 tons an acre every year, and dust storms still erupt almost 100 years later during spring tillage, a reminder of the work still ahead of all of us in this room.

Brown Creek's living legacy lies in its origins, that organizations can cut through political divides to assemble with shared missions and common goals.

CTIC and many of the organizations in this room today, owe our existence to this legacy, and farmer-first, coalition-led, grassroots organizations that embrace the public-private partnerships that can fulfill the resource needs like no one of those sectors can do alone.

But we get our lead from those local voices and leaders. To this day, the hallmarks of their architect, the Father of Soil Conservation, still exist: Voluntary, Non-Regulatory, Locally Governed, Federally Supported, and Free Technical Assistance to Farmers in their Jurisdictions.

In the words of Bennett:

"I consider the soil conservation districts movement one of the most important developments in the whole history of agriculture ...

... Most farmers need some technical help in making the change to this more efficient, easier, and more productive type of farming, and they need also moral support and encouragement.”

Thank you to Brown Creek for leading the country in that moral support and technical assistance for nearly 90 years and for reminding all of us that conservation starts by listening to farmers, side by side with them, in their fields.

### **It's my honor now to induct Dr. Rob Myers into the CTIC Hall of Fame.**

You could call Rob "Dr. Cover Crop." It doesn't take long in a conversation with him to realize how passionate—and how deeply knowledgeable—Rob is about cover crops and conservation farming practices. And just as quickly, it becomes clear how practical he is about solutions that fit on real farms, for real people, to create real results.

That's because Rob doesn't just study cover crops and regenerative practices ... he thinks about them through a farmer's lens, and puts them to work on his own family's farm in Illinois.

Rob's commitment to harnessing the benefits of cover crops and other regenerative practices led to the creation of the University of Missouri's Center for Regenerative Agriculture in 2021 under his guidance. It has also led to some of the largest and highest-impact grants in the history of Mizzou's College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, including a current \$25 million USDA grant that was the largest ever awarded to a University of Missouri faculty member. In addition, Rob has headed the North Central Region of Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program for the past 16 years, advocating for regenerative practices and managing funding to put those practices on the ground across the Midwest. Through the Center for Regenerative Agriculture, SARE, and his faculty position at Mizzou, Rob has also inspired and mentored a generation of students to pursue, promote, and research regenerative agriculture practices.

Possibly as important as his research, Rob's ability to communicate to different audiences creates impact for all us working in conservation agriculture. He conceived of the 60-minute documentary *Living Soil*, which was produced by the Soil Health Institute. In 2023 he published *Cover Crops, Improving Life on the Land*. And he is the invisible architect of the 8 National Cover Crop Survey Reports, which has teamed CTIC, SARE, and the American Seed Trade Association in ongoing efforts to understand cover crop adoption across the country.

Often times, Rob is influential in projects behind the scenes but subdued with the credit he takes. It's through the National Cover Crop Survey that CTIC has had the pleasure of working with Rob most directly since 2012.

Data from that series of surveys has been read by countless farmers, crop advisors, policy makers, agribusiness executives, researchers, and other stakeholders seeking to understand not only how farmers use cover crops across the country, but how they think about them—how they see the opportunities, the challenges, the incentives, and their own needs for knowledge. Portions of the Cover Crop Survey Report have even been read into Congressional testimony to support cover cropping programs.

Of course, our paths cross with Rob regularly: You can't seem to talk about cover crops or regenerative agriculture without him being in the room, sharing his insight.

Well, Rob, it's CTIC's pleasure tonight to induct you into our Hall of Fame, so you—or your picture—will always be in the room when we are talking about cover crops and regenerative agriculture. Congratulations, Dr. Rob Myers.

**Our final inductee spent his career dedicated to public service**, and our Natural Resources Conservation Service, the culture he instilled in the organization, and American agriculture is in a better place because of it.

The greatest conservation leaders rarely begin by talking about conservation.

They begin by listening to people.

Listening to farmers trying to leave the land better than they found it.

Terry Cosby honed that skill in small towns in Iowa when he was starting out at the Soil Conservation Service as a student trainee in Keokuk County. Terry served under Don Borts, whom he credits with shaping him as a conservationist and a leader. He refined how to work with different producers -- how to meet them where they are -- which culturally and geographically, was a long way from his home on a multi-generational cotton farm in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi.

Terry earned their trust one farmer at a time. He went on to work for Borts as a soil conservationist in Sigourney, Iowa, before stints with NRCS in Oskaloosa, Burlington – where I'm proud to farm on the banks of the Mississippi River -- and as the Area Resource Conservationist in Council Bluffs. Eventually, Cosby became the State Conservationist for NRCS in Ohio for 16 years before being named the 17th Chief of the agency in 2021.

The credibility he earned with farmers carried over to researchers, policymakers, conservation organizations, industry leaders, and rural communities, and just about any other room he walked into, including this one.

Because he had lived the work, and his perspective never left the field, he knew that conservation only succeeds when producers see themselves in it.

Anyone who has spent time in conservation knows that if you want producers to trust you, you had better know the difference between talking about agriculture and actually understanding it.

Terry understands it because he's lived it. And he has spent a 45 year career proving that conservation people can, in fact, speak fluent farmer.

Hugh Hammond Bennett knew that was important, too, and he lived it with his hands-on and anti-bureaucratic approach, prioritizing building trust with landowners over imposing rigid, top-down mandates. He believed in a blend of scientific leadership, public education, and grassroots diplomacy.

Terry mirrored that original vision.

Bennett said, “National action may be led and aided by government, but the soil must be conserved ultimately by those who till the land and live by its product.”

Terry said, to save the land, you need to save the livelihood of the person managing it. That getting more acres on the ground meant getting boots on the ground to be a supportive partner, because conservation can only succeed when leadership is rooted in trust, practicality, and belief in producers.

Terry never forgot that conservation is a people business.

Bennett established the Soil Conservation Service amid a great ideological transition, and he encouraged some of it. He stood before a skeptical nation and warned that the loss of our soil was the loss of our future. He understood something revolutionary for his time: conservation was not simply about protecting land — it was about protecting people, communities, and the future of American agriculture itself.

Terry Cosby’s leadership also came at a defining moment for American agriculture.

Producers were being asked to meet extraordinary challenges: more volatile weather, increased pressure on water resources, rising expectations around climate resilience, and the need to remain economically competitive in a rapidly changing world.

Terry remained grounded in a guiding principle: Conservation works best when it works for farmers and ranchers. And he reframed NRCS programs as opportunities for healthier soils, stronger operations, better profitability, more resilient communities, and a more sustainable future.

Bennett believed America’s farmers could restore the land if given the tools, trust, and opportunity. Terry carried forward that same faith in producers, in their ingenuity, and in their stewardship ethic.

Terry’s career has never simply been about programs, policies, or practices. It has been about helping people succeed while protecting the resources that sustain us all.

Lasting conservation is regenerated through relationships, grounded in practical experience, and carried forward by producers who believe they are part of something bigger than themselves,

In every generation, conservation needs translators — leaders who can connect science to stewardship and policy to people. Bennett was one. Terry Cosby became another.