

2025 WINTER CONFERENCE SPEAKER PROFILE MARK GUTIERREZ

What's the #1 Way to Boost Farm Profitability? Ask Mark Gutierrez

Sometimes you meet someone who makes such a big impression that your life is never the same. Mark Gutierrez, executive director for the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition, a conservation-focused farmer from southern Minnesota had that impact.

"I distinctly remember seeing how the water in his field was infiltrating well, even though the water was flowing down from neighboring fields onto his land," said Gutierrez, speaking of Mark Ditlevson, a corn and soybean grower from Owatonna, Minnesota.

Ditlevson, who had received an Outstanding Conservation Farmer award from the Steele County Soil and Water Conservation District, had a long history of implementing conservation practices, from ridge tilling to cover crops. His field contrasts dramatically with the surrounding landscape, where rainwater was ponding in a conventionally tilled field across the road.

"That was one of the most powerful examples of the benefits of cover crops and soil conservation practices I'd ever seen," Gutierrez said. "Experiences like this have convinced me that soil health is essential to improving farmers' profitability."

We recently caught up with Gutierrez, who will speak at ProfitProAG's 2025 Winter Conference in Albert Lea, Minnesota, sharing his soil health/regenerative Ag journey.

Q: What sparked your interest in agriculture?

A: I grew up on a hay and poultry farm in southern New Mexico. I also worked for a neighbor who had a huge hay operation. I went to college and earned degrees in Ag business and Ag economics (including a master's degree) from New Mexico State University. I wanted to stay in New Mexico and farm for a living, but my family's farm wasn't big enough. I did the next best thing, which was pursuing a career in agriculture.

Q: How did you grow your Ag career?

A: During college, I interned as a statistician with the U.S. Department of



"Tiny differences in management can lead to overwhelming differences in output and profitability."

- Dr. Jim Ladlie

Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). I knew a little bit about USDA, thanks to the neighbors who ran the large hay farm where I worked part-time in high school. They were descendants of Clinton P. Anderson, who served as the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture from 1945 to 1948. I would hear stories about his work with USDA.

I accepted a full-time job with NASS after graduating from college. For the next nine years, my work took me from New Mexico to the state of Washington then Washington, D.C. I saw many types of Ag production I'd never experienced before, from lentils and dry edible peas to fish and oysters. Also, the types of crop production I was familiar with in New Mexico required irrigation, since our area only got 7 inches of rain a year. It was eye-opening to work in states that got 60 inches of rain a year.

Q: How have these diverse experiences shaped your views of regenerative Ag, conservation, and soil health?

A: About 10 years into my career, I became a regional manager with USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) in 2012. I was based in Minnesota and worked with the federal crop insurance program, serving farmers in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. That's when I first started hearing about cover crops. Farmers were telling me that the federal crop insurance program created some barriers to using cover crops.

I began going to field days to learn more about cover crops. I saw how they offered a lot of benefits for soil health and more. I worked with my colleagues to streamline crop insurance so it wasn't a barrier to farmers who wanted to use cover crops. While we improved a lot of things, I decided to apply for a new job when the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition was seeking an executive director around 2021. I saw this as a way to advance soil health practices faster.

Q: What turning point or mentors guided your journey into regenerative Ag/soil health?

A: I was impressed with the soil health practices I saw on Mark Ditlevson's farm in southern Minnesota. I was curious to learn more and kept going to field days and other educational events. I met Gabe Brown (a North Dakota farmer, author, and one of the pioneers of the soil health movement) and was amazed at the size of his farm and his success with regenerative Ag practices. Then I heard Ray Archuleta ("The Soil Guy") speak. He's a soil scientist and a former Natural

Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employee. He is such an evangelist for soil health. As I started to connect the dots, it became clear that improving soil health is essential to improving farmers' profitability.

Q: When you speak at ProfitProAG's Winter 2025 Conference, what are some key points you'll share?

A: When I was growing up in the 1990s, there weren't many opportunities to work in agriculture in my home area. Unless you were a farmer or an Ag lender, you usually had to move to a city to get a good job.

During my career, however, I've seen that it doesn't have to be that way. Improving soil health through regenerative Ag practices is hands-down the best way to impact farm profitability. When farmers' profitability rises, they can spend more money in town and hire more employees. Creating opportunities for the younger generation to live and work in rural areas can help heal our rural communities. In addition, healthier soils benefit the environment by controlling soil erosion and keeping excess nutrients out of water supplies.

During my presentation at ProfitProAG, I'll share highlights from the Minnesota Soil Health Coalition, a non-profit that was formed in 2019 and now has 1,000 members. We coordinate a farmer-to-farmer mentor program, educational events for farmers and food companies, youth events, and more. I want to help people learn practical ways to connect soil health with nutrient-dense food production and improved farmer profitability.

Want to learn more? Join us for ProfitProAG's 2025 Winter Conference. Get all the details here: <https://profitproag.net/2025-winter-conference/>