# Request for Proposals - Status of Soil Health of BCI Licensed Farmers in India

**RFP n#:** 2026-2-MEL-INDSOIL

**Location:** India
**Start date**: 13 April 2026
**End date**: 15 October 2026
**Technical Team:** Global MEL

**Final submission deadline for bids is the 22 March 2026.**

All applications must be submitted via this **form**.

**Important Submission Process Information:**

After submitting your details through the **form**, you will receive a separate email to upload your supporting documents to a secure platform.

You may submit questions to tender@bettercotton.org **–** RFP n#2026-2-MEL-INDIASOIL until 12 March 2026.

Questions, requests and applications sent after the respective deadlines will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

**AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT, THERE IS A QUESTION AND ANSWER SECTION WHICH YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO GO THROUGH IN PREPARATION FOR SUBMITTING YOUR BIDS**

## Description

The Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) is the world's largest cotton sustainability programme. Our mission: to help cotton communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment. In difficult times, we are meeting the challenge head on. Through our network of field-level partners we have provided training on more sustainable farming practices to more than 2.9 million cotton farmers in 26 countries. More than a fifth of the world's cotton is now grown under the BCI Standard and our membership network includes more than 2,400 members.

More information about BCI can be found on our website: www.bettercotton.org

Since the first Better Cotton harvest in India in 2011, the country has been a pioneering force within the global Better Cotton Programme. The work responded to pressing challenges in India's cotton sector, including inefficient water use, over-reliance on harmful pesticides, soil degradation, low yields, poor labour conditions, and limited market access for smallholder farmers. Cotton is a critical crop for the country's economy and rural livelihoods, but production practices were often unsustainable and risky for both people and the environment.

To address these issues, Better Cotton focused on building farmer capacity through training on sustainable farming practices. This included integrated pest management, improved irrigation techniques, soil health improvement, and promotion of decent work—especially tackling child labour and gender inequality.

The programme also partnered with local organisations, research institutions, and later with government bodies, to expand its reach. Over time, Better Cotton's work in India has evolved to include traceability systems and regenerative agriculture approaches, aiming to embed sustainability across the entire cotton value chain.

# Background

BCI wishes to improve the soil health of BCI licensed farmers. BCI works with programme partners to support farmers to take up practices that will improve their soil health (composting, mulching, intercropping, crop rotation, use of farmyard manure etc). It is hoped this leads to improvements in their soil's health. Key indicators of soil health, such as soil organic carbon, require careful soil sample collection and laboratory analysis.

BCI India's farmers are located in multiple States and districts with distribution as below (based on 24/25 records):

| State | Number of Programme Partners | Number of Producer Units (PU) | Number Farmers |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andhra Pradesh | 1 | 4 | 15465 |
| Karnataka | 1 | 2 | 5477 |
| Gujarat | 10 | 83 | 344066 |
| Maharashtra | 7 | 95 | 379590 |
| Punjab | 1 | 10 | 41340 |
| Rajasthan | 2 | 12 | 47874 |
| Telangana | 3 | 24 | 88631 |

Programme Partners oversee Producer Units (PU) and coordinate a PU's training and certification. A Producer Unit is a collection of around 3500 (geographically linked) and is a coordination unit for farmer trainings and certification.

The main districts where Better Cotton projects are implemented in each State are:

**Andhra Pradesh:** Kurnool, Guntur and Palnadu

**Karnataka**: Belgavi

**Gujarat**: Surendranagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Botad, Morbi, Junagardh, Jamnagar, Vijapur, Vadnagar, Visnagar, Ahmedabad

**Maharashtra**: Yavatmal, Aurangabad, Wardha, Akola, Jalna, Jalgaon, Chandrapur, Nagpur, Sakri, Dhule, Shinkheda, Amravati, Buldhana, Washim, Parbhani, Taloda, Shirpur

**Punjab:** Bathinda, Mansa, Ludhiana

**Rajasthan** : Hanumangarh, Nagaur

**Telangana:** Ragareddy, Warangal Rural, Siddipet, Warangal, Nalgonda, Jangaon, Adilabad, Peddapalli, Mulugu, Narsampet, Jayashankar Bhupalpally

# Scope of Work

BCI are seeking proposals from skilled individuals or organisations that can conduct an India wide soil health assessment for BCI programme locations.

**The task would be to collect soil samples, any other complementary data (see below) and test the soil samples at reliable labs. The output will be current estimates (based on a sample) of key soil health indicators (see below) for (if necessary, the most populated) locations when BCI licensed farmers are active.**

**Sampling locations:** The soil should seek to produce good precision (given the budget) for key indicators per State (the precision is for applicants to propose in their application). Whilst BCI would like 95% confidence level with 5% margin of error for each State, we know that this might not be possible for the budget. Further, we are open to options for prioritising sample sizes for the most populated States – all options with their pros and cons should be clearly presented in the proposal.

In addition to the number of farmers, the selection of farmers should be decided to allow for representative and insightful findings. In most cases, this will require random selection of farmers from BCI's farmer list (all farmers in BCI programmes). There might also be consideration of farmer characteristics that are identified as suitable and also some clustering of sampling around selected villages. Also, there could be benefits in selecting farmers from the same population as those that provide annual practice adoption or fertiliser use data (see BCI internal data below). This would allow soil data to be connected to practice adoption and/or fertiliser use and/or irrigation type and water use.

**Key Indicators**: The key indicators are presented below in order of priority. It is noted that, due to costing, it might not be possible to test for all of these. Proposals should clearly state which indictors will be tested.

The testing of the samples should be at laboratories known to have sufficient accuracy and precision. The labs to be used should be stated in the application together with their credentials.

| Priority | Soil Indicators |
|---|---|
| **Top priority – must be tested** | • Soil Organic carbon<br>• pH<br>• Electrical Conductivity<br>• Nitrogen %<br>• Texture<br>• Phosphorus<br>• Potassium |
| **Secondary priority – desirable to test if possible** | • Bulk density<br>• Saturation |

**Soil collection methods:** The method for soil testing should be reliable and follow good practice. Applicants should clearly explain the approach they will take. An example of our expectation is provided below, however, this could be adapted based on the applicant's preference and experience for reliable soil testing.

- For each farmer in the sample, check the farmer has not applied fertiliser within the past 4 weeks, the soil was not ploughed/tilled and the soil is not water-logged.
- Collect soil from 3-5 different locations in the field – this should be random using a process such as a zig-zag walk from a random starting point.
- In each of the 3-5 locations in the field, soil should be collected from 0-30cm, with possible consideration for either a focus on 0-15cm, or two samples of 0-15cm and 15-30cm.
- If multiple samples > combine these samples to form a composite sample. Soil samples should be labelled with farmer code (provided by BCI), district and GPS of field sampled
- Hot spot areas such as around entry points/gates, areas where manure has previously been dumped and areas where any livestock gather such as water troughs, and field margins will be avoided during sampling.

**Soil Testing laboratories:** Soil tests should be done at reliable laboratories selected by the applicant based on criteria such as reliability, cost and ability to perform the key tests (note – no guidance on specific laboratories will be given during request for proposal stage). BCI Partners have used laboratories in their locality and can provide some guidance on their reliability once the contract starts.

**Complementary data:** In addition to soil health physical indicators, if possible, some complementary data should present soil physical indicators in relation to soil health practices, fertiliser use and other factors which influence soil health. Applicants should clearly state **what** complementary data they'd want to include in there study and the **source** of that data.

This complementary data could come from:

- Primary data collected from farmers

- BCI's own internal monitoring data.

BCI's own internal monitoring data consists of:

- Percentage of farmers per Producer Unit trained on a topic in each of the past 3-4 years.
- Percentage of farmers practicing a soil practice (for example, reduced tillage, cover crops, application of compost, application of farmyard manure etc).
    - This data is collected from around 380 randomly selected farmers per PU.
    - The first year of standardised data collection was 2025, but Programme partners collected data using their own surveys for multiple years beforehand.
- Average fertiliser, pesticide, irrigation type and water use per area and per KG of cotton produced.
    - This data is collected from around 380 randomly selected farmers per PU (note – this is a different group to the practice adoption sample)
    - This data is available for the past 3-4 years.

### Timing of data collection:

To ensure soil health findings are not distorted by soil health practices, the recommended timing for soil sampling per State is provided below. It is expected the service provider collects soil within these dates.

| State | Dates for soil sampling |
|---|---|
| **Punjab** | 15 April – 10 May |
| **Rajasthan** | 15 April – 10 May |
| **Gujarat** | 15 April – 31 May |
| **Maharashtra** | 15 April – 31 May |
| **Telangana** | 30 April – 5 June |

# Deliverables

- Inception Report – an update of the proposal with sample and data collection methodologies.
- Soil health report – key findings per indicator, additional complementary data and, where appropriate, recommendations.
- Soil health findings presentations:
    - Internal presentation to BCI staff on key findings and recommendations (Up to 1 hour presentation, at least 30 minutes discussion)
    - Partner presentation to Partner programme staff on key findings and recommendations (Up to 1 hour presentation, at least 30 minutes discussion)

# High-level Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| **12 March 2026** | Questions deadline<br><br>All questions must be sent only to tender@bettercotton.org with the RFP Reference in the Subject line. |
| **22 March 2026** | **Applications deadline**<br><br>All applications must be submitted via this **form**. |
| **23 March to 3 April 2026** | Applications review & shortlisting / Interviews |
| **By 6 April 2026** | The successful applicant will be notified<br><br>Unsuccessful shortlisted applicants will also be notified |
| **13 April 2026** | **Start of the consultancy** |
| **19 April 2026** | Inception Report – including approach for Punjab and Rajasthan (sample and method) |
| **10 May 2026** | Approach (sample, methods) for other States |
| **31 August 2026** | Draft Report |
| **15 October 2026** | Final Report, presentations, data |

# Required Skills & Knowledge

| Skills, Knowledge and Experience |
|---|
| ***Essential*** |
| 10+ Years of experience of soil health testing related to agriculture |
| Masters degree (or BA with 10 years experience) related to soil health or agriculture |
| Strong understanding of soil health parameter interpretation |
| Expert experience in soil sample collection and testing in India |
| Ability to deploy and ensure reliable soil collection and testing on large scale as required by RFP – including access to reliable soil sample collectors and soil sample testing labs. |
| Experience with training and oversight of teams collecting soil health farmer surveys and related data collection methods |
| Experience and skills in survey analysis and qualitative data analysis |

| |
|---|
| Fluent English: BCI's language of operation is English |
| Ability to present findings on soil health in clear, understandable and engaging way that is suitable for non-soil health experts |
| ***Optional*** |
| PhD in soil health or agriculture |

# Application Requirements

**Please note that we have changed our RFP submission protocol, and this is now in two phases;**

- **Phase 1: Initial details will be submitted on the form found in this link.**
- **Phase 2: You will receive an email with live links to upload relevant documents (please check your Spam and Junk folders)**

Proposals responding to this Request for Proposals should budgeted up to **20,000 Euros** (applicants can present proposals with higher budgets providing it is clear what is possible for 20,000 Euros and what the additional budget will bring in terms of scale/quality of findings).

They should include the following:

- Narrative proposal of maximum of 12 pages (excluding CVs), including:
  - Overview of team members' relevant experience on soil health assessments in India (what projects involved in, locations and soil indicators assessed, research/academic credentials)
  - Methodology, including:
    - Which soil indicators to test (and how to agree these)
    - The proposed or process to agree sample locations
    - Process to collect soil samples
    - Which additional data to be collected from farmers and/or BCI data to use
    - Clarity and explanation of where soil will be tested
  - Timeline
- Financial proposal with a detailed and transparent budget, in EUROS, including cost per material/service cost (lab testing for example) and time allocation per staff and day rates
- CVs with relevant work clearly shown, ideally with date and role of individuals.
- Example of work done on soil health to demonstrate how soil health findings can be clearly presented.

We thank all applicants for their interest; however, only shortlisted applicants will be contacted.

BCI is committed to good practice and transparency in the management of natural, human and financial resources. All applications will be reviewed under the principles and subject to BCI's policies on equal opportunity, non-discrimination, anti-bribery & corruption and conflict of interest.

# Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

## Technical Evaluation Criteria

- Demonstrated understanding of this RFP
- Quality and clarity of the proposed approach and methodology
- Feasibility of the proposed activity plan and timeline, and appropriateness of time allocated to delivering each task
- Relevant professional experience of the proposed consultant(s)
- Quality and relevance of the sample work submitted

## Financial Evaluation Criteria

- Quality and clarity of budget provided, and level of detail included
- Alignment of the budget to the activity timeline detailed in the technical proposal
- Value for money
- Adherence to the available budget

# Questions & Answers for RFP 2026-2-MEL-INDIASOIL

1. **Question 1**

   Can we choose one or two state like Andra Pradesh and Telangana?

   **Answer**

   We expect the States chosen to be influenced by farmer numbers. At a minimum we expect Gujarat, Maharashtra and Telangana to be covered, and would like more to be covered if feasible. We request applicants to provide suggestions for which States to cover and the sample size and selection (how many PUs, districts and/or villages to sample from per State).

2. **Question 2**

   Can I get exact number of samples (district wise) -required for expenses calculation?

   **Answer**

   We request that applicants provide a proposal for the sample sizes and locations of the samples in their application. Please refer to Scope of Work section of RFP for guidance on options to consider. We expect multiple locations per State to be sampled. The number of locations and the number of farmers sampled per location should be explained and justified in the application. The desire is to have representative results whilst also considering budget limit.

### 3. Question 3

Is the budget (20,000 euros) for whole project or any portion?

**Answer**

This is for the entire project – Status of key soil indicators for farmers representative of BCI India's programme.