

# Soil and Water Conservation Districts In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## VOLUNTARY CONSERVATION

Across any part of Minnesota one can see conservation practices on the land — both on the farm and in the city. SWCDs provide voluntary, incentive driven approaches to landowners for better soil and cleaner water in the State of Minnesota. Private landowners with financial and technical assistance from local Soil & Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are implementing a wide variety of conservation practices including restoring wetlands, planting shelterbelts and buffers, and preventing soil erosion.



## HISTORY

Legislation authorizing the formation of soil and water conservation districts as special purpose subdivisions of state government was approved in response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The Burns-Homer-Pleasant Soil and Water Conservation District, later consolidated into Winona Soil and Water Conservation District, became Minnesota's first soil and water conservation district in 1938. Originally, districts worked primarily with farmers to help fight soil erosion.

## MEETING LOCAL NEEDS

Today, districts work with landowners in both rural and urban settings to manage and conserve natural resources. Because Minnesota has a wide variety of landscapes and conservation needs, each district operates at the direction of five locally elected supervisors or board members. These local work plans allow SWCDs to specifically manage the resources and serve the needs of users in their district.

Because they are locally focused, resource management and protection occurs in good times and bad.

## PRIVATE LANDS FOCUS

SWCDs fill the crucial niche of providing soil and water conservation services to owners of private lands. Privately owned lands make up 78 percent of the land surface in Minnesota. Managing private lands, whether agricultural, forest, lakes or urban, in a way that promotes a sound economy and enhances natural resources is key to Minnesota's environmental health.



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## EFFECTIVE PROGRAM DELIVERY

Another way SWCDs address local needs is by serving as an efficient and effective delivery provider of state programs. These programs include Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve, Wetland Conservation Act, Comprehensive Local Water Planning, Clean Water Partnership grants and Feedlot Water Quality Cost-Share, among others.

**Private landowners trust districts to provide needed technology, funding, and educational services because SWCDs are established in each community, are governed by local leaders, and are focused on conservation of local soil and water resources.**

## GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Minnesota's 89 SWCDs are political subdivisions of the state established under Minnesota Statute, Chapter 103C. Each SWCD is governed by a board of five elected supervisors. State funding appropriations for SWCDs and their programs are administered through the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). In addition, Counties may appropriate funds from property tax

levies to an SWCD, and that amount varies greatly from county to county. Some counties also pass-through some state grant monies to SWCDs for administering the comprehensive local water plan, Wetland Conservation Act, feedlots or shoreland laws. Revenue sources for districts generally breakdown as: county (37 percent); state (35 percent); federal (2 percent); local (5 percent); fees for services (17 percent); and other sources (3 percent).

## MAINTAINING ACCOUNTABILITY

SWCDs must report annually to BWSR about the state funds provided to districts. BWSR staff members maintain a close working relationship with all districts to ensure that state grants are spent properly. Districts are subject to audits under the oversight of the Office of the State Auditor. Most districts are audited every one to two years; the districts with smaller budgets are usually audited every four years.

**For more than 70 years, SWCDs have been working to meet the needs of Minnesota's landowners and landscapes.**

**Please help support soil and water conservation districts so they can continue to provide these services throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

