

connecting with lawmakers



Stearns County Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor Jerry Bechtold meets with U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson to discuss the 2007 Farm Bill.

Civic Leadership Training in Minnesota

The Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) knows that successful conservation begins with strong leadership; and strong leadership is developed through strong training programs.

Since 1996, approximately 200 conservation district board members, staff and partners from around the state have participated in the MASWCD Leadership Program – a partnership between the MASWCD Leadership Institute and the University of Minnesota Extension.

One of the highlights of the program is civic leadership training, which culminates with a trip to Washington, D.C., where participants are able to broaden their understanding from a local and state perspective to that of a national—and even global—perspective. According to MASWCD Past President Steve Sunderland, the program is designed “...to build and enhance leadership skills and capacity of local soil and water conservation districts so they can better serve the public.”

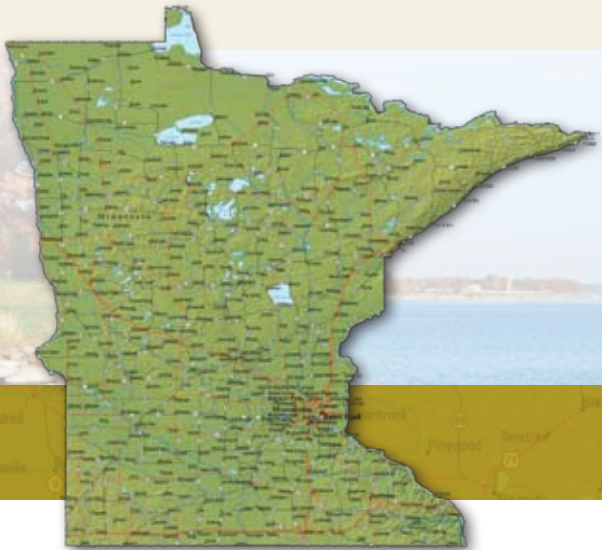
While in the nation’s capital, program participants have the opportunity to attend meetings with foreign ambassadors, federal legislators, agency staff, and leaders from national organizations headquartered in D.C., including Natural Resources Defense Council, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Association of Conservation districts, and National Association of Counties. Through the program, conservation leaders get an inside look at how conservation and natural resource issues are addressed at the national level, and how they can address those issues from their local conservation district.

The MASWCD Leadership Institute is funded through a variety of sources, including a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, tuition fees and private donations.

Did You Know?

Graduates of the MASWCD Leadership Institute include:

- Six out of 10 MASWCD board members
- Seven out of 10 of the local conservation district members serving on the state legislative committee
- The Minnesota delegate and alternate to the NACD board
- All three MASWCD staff members
- The past five out of six MASWCD Past Presidents



Washington State: Keeping it Simple, Local

Heading into the 2011 State Legislative Session, the state of Washington was facing drastic cuts—to the tune of more than 93%—to its Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and livestock programs. Compared to the previous biennium budget of \$6 million, the \$400,000 funding-level proposed in the governor's 2011-2013 budget would translate to severe reductions in staffing and technical assistance to ensure the installation of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to meet NRCS standards and specifications.

The response of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD) was this basic, but strategic, approach: “keep it simple and keep it local.” This idea builds on WACD's past slogan of “promises made, promises kept” by putting conservation on the ground.

WACD created a one-page briefing paper highlighting their two main issues of concern: funding for the livestock and CREP programs. Before-and-after pictures visually demonstrated the powerful impact of these programs on the local landscape, while facts and figures quantified the effects that the proposed cuts would have on the state's ability to maintain these programs and the conservation benefits they provide.

Armed with the one-pager, conservation district representatives took to the halls of the state capitol during WACD's Legislative Day, ready to deliver their message in a clear and unified voice to lawmakers. Altogether, conservation district members met with more than 108 of the 147 state legislators in formal meetings, and numerous informal discussions in offices and hallways.

Their efforts paid off in more ways than one. After the WACD Legislative Day, the majority of state lawmakers were not only familiar with conservation districts and their work in local communities, they were also able to put a face with local districts—setting up stage for future relationships.

And in the short term, WACD leadership was assured that their funding request would indeed be addressed in the House Budget.

Even though the final funding levels didn't match the entire WACD request, conservation programs were able to avoid the massive cuts proposed in the original budget, and secure the funding levels needed to allow districts to continue in their work across the state. During an extremely tight budgetary climate—with overall cuts in state programs in the billions of dollars—there is no doubt that WACD's efforts paid off in a major way.

As WACD Executive Director John Larson describes it, “those are real dollars, and a tremendous lift by the Association for districts Statewide utilizing the strength of the membership... success!”

WACD provided conservation districts with a clear, concise and consistent message to share with legislators ...and they remembered when hard budget choices had to be made.



“...A tremendous lift for districts statewide utilizing the strength of the membership.”

WACD Executive Director
John Larson



Hosting a Senate Tour in Rhode Island

According to Rhode Island Association of Conservation Districts (RIACD) President Dick Went, it all started when he requested an appointment with Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) to discuss conservation districts and their work in the state of Rhode Island. When Went received a response, he was pleasantly surprised. Not only did the Senator want to meet with him, he wanted to hold the meeting while touring a local farm. In addition, the Senator's conservation aide requested an opportunity to do a more in-depth tour beforehand, including a cross-section of Rhode Island conservation sites.

The tour was led by Went and included several members of Whitehouse's staff. The day began at Went's 50-acre woodland home, where he had just finished a Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) contract with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Next, the group went to Bally Duff Farm – a 100-acre sheep farm. Local conservationist Robin Meeks runs the farm, which produces wool for the Rhode Island Rhody Wool cooperative. The farm started as an RC&D project.



Northern Rhode Island Conservation District Manager Gina DeMarco teaches Senate staff about rain gardens

Meeks also grows vegetables, and offers both sheep and cattle for sale. She has had a number of NRCS practices done on her farm.

"...Costs in New England are very high... but farmers farm because they love it."

*RIACD President
Dick Went*

From there, the group continued on to see a rain garden installed by the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District. This particular rain garden was installed to filter runoff from buildings. District Manager Gina DeMarco explained that the district does the outreach and education for the agency that controls the Scituate reservoir – the main source of water for 60 percent of the state. DeMarco and Went then accompanied the Senator's aide to Scituate High School. Here, they met with the teacher and students who had worked with the district in developing a forest plan for the high school. As a result of this work, the school is now a member of the American Tree Farm system.

From there, it was off to a local dairy farm, where Senator Whitehouse met the group. During the hour-long visit, Went made a point to emphasize that Rhode Island farming is "for love, not money."



Senator Whitehouse (second from left) listens as dairy farm operator Scooter Leprise describes conservation practices on his farm

"Costs in New England are very high, which limits profit," Went said. "But, as we all know, farmers farm because they love it." According to Went, that's one of the most important messages his lawmakers need to hear.

Throughout the tour, Went and the other district leaders made a point to explain the importance of partnerships, grants—or in some cases, the lack

thereof—conservation technical assistance, clean water, forestry and the many other conservation issues of particular importance to the state.

Not only was the tour fun and educational, it was an important step in developing a strong, working relationship with the Senator and his staff — a relationship which Went hopes to continue to build upon in the years ahead.



perspectives from capitol hill

We asked U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R-OK) about conservation, the Farm Bill and how districts can play a role in policy decisions in Washington, D.C.



Senator Debbie Stabenow

This year, the Senate Agriculture Committee will begin work on our nation's next Farm Bill. In the 2008 Farm Bill, we improved the conservation title, giving our farmers and ranchers better tools to protect our soil, air, and water. And while the new Farm Bill will be written in a tough budget environment, we will continue to emphasize the important role conservation plays in being a good steward of the land and preserving the integrity of our precious natural resources. I am resolved to doing more with less and creating a strong conservation title by focusing on making programs more effective and more efficient. And I am asking for your input to help us do this.

Farmers in Michigan, like farmers across the country, understand the role conservation plays in agriculture. Whether it's filter strips to protect from runoff in the Saginaw Bay or conservation tillage practices in New Mexico, these practices conserve soil and water while maintaining or improving crop yields and profits.

We all know that we need to make some tough choices with our federal budget. As Chairwoman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, this means making sure we have the most efficient and effective farm programs possible. I will be evaluating programs to make sure that they are smart investments that strengthen American agriculture by improving the productivity and longevity of the industry.

It is up to all of us to make our voices heard. One of the best assets we have for improving our conservation programs is feedback and input from the folks who know best. Conservation is most effective when it is locally led and Conservation Districts members are our eyes and ears. I encourage you to contact me with your insights, and help us develop a conservation title that provides the best tools needed to address our nation's conservation challenges and leverage new opportunities.

The Farm Bill is going to consume much of the agriculture debate in Washington. My priorities are to ensure that farmers and ranchers have an effective safety net, that rural communities have the help they need to generate and sustain their economies, and to look at ways in which a new generation of farmers and ranchers can get involved in agriculture. These are important and tough issues, but I believe that there are common sense solutions.

Our nation's soil, air, water, and wildlife are such a crucial part of our economy and our way of life. This Farm Bill is an opportunity to strengthen that economy and build upon the lessons learned since the 2008 Farm Bill. I look forward to working together to make sure we have policies that protect our nation's natural resources for future generations.



Rep. Frank Lucas

Congress strengthened its commitment to conservation in the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills. We created new ways for producers and conservation organizations to achieve conservation initiatives

Congress increased conservation spending in the 2002 Farm Bill by 80 percent, which represented an increased commitment of \$17 billion over ten years. We increased our commitment to important programs like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) while also creating new programs like the Conservation Security Program (CSP) to increase participation in conserving practices.

In the 2008 Farm Bill we expanded on the conservation title with an additional commitment of \$4 billion over 10 years. The new conservation title included new regional and cooperative partnership programs, as well as the reauthorization and increased spending of current programs.

Farmers and ranchers, through the assistance and incentives of these programs, have voluntarily worked to help reduce soil erosion, increase wetlands, improve water quality, and preserve farmland and wildlife habitat. The environmental gains achieved are a testament to our producers who truly are the most dedicated conservationists.

This farm bill gives the Committee an opportunity to prioritize conservation programs that are working, change programs that are obviously broken, and look at the programs as a whole to see if there are any overlapping missions and goals. We, as a Committee, should take a serious look at streamlining the current conservation programs so that conservation dollars can be utilized more efficiently.

I urge you to work with me to show how important conservation programs are to other members of Congress on and off the committee, so that we can have a conservation title that we can all be proud of. During these tough fiscal times, writing the next farm bill will be a challenge. Every program will be on the table and every program must stand on its own merit.

The agriculture sector will have the responsibility to identify its priorities - what programs are important - and then relay these issues to their own representatives and other members of the Agriculture Committee. NACD was instrumental in this process during the last farm bill and the Committee will again be looking to your leadership as the next bill takes form.

Additionally, with nearly 100 new Members of Congress, who may be unfamiliar with the local benefits achieved through conservation programs, there will be a need to inform them about American agriculture.

Beyond preparing for the reauthorization of the 2012 Farm Bill, the Committee's top priority is aggressive oversight of federal agencies to protect production agriculture and rural economies from regulatory overreach.