

The Coon Creek Watershed Project 90th Anniversary Celebration Bill Simshauser Remarks

I'd like to thank you for inviting the National Association of Conservation Districts to be here with you today as we celebrate the 90th Anniversary of the Coon Creek Watershed Project.

Wisconsin's Land Conservation Departments and conservation districts across the country can trace their beginnings to this pivotal moment for conservation ninety years ago. The principles of conservation that emerged from this moment—voluntary, locally led, incentive-based, and nonpartisan—conservation remain foundational to the work we do today.

In the early 1900s, as the nation headed towards both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, Wisconsin would emerge as a leader in the conservation movement on a national stage.

This was a time when there was no national conservation agency and infrastructure for the work to be administered. But states like Wisconsin saw passionate leaders emerge, partnerships form, papers persuasively written, and funding sources come together.

Wisconsin had identified erosion as one of the most widespread sources of injury to soil – reducing fertility and cutting through fields, making them impossible to cultivate. Wisconsin’s early conservation leaders were also persuasive in gaining broad support from the general public, explaining that soil erosion was not just an agricultural problem but also a problem for the general public with dust storms and flooded and washed-out bridges and roadways.

It was Wisconsin’s early identification and attention to the devastation caused by soil erosion that helped launch the state’s erosion control program into the national demonstration program we are here in the Upper Mississippi River Basin to celebrate today.

The early work in Wisconsin was a selling point when trying to shift the national attention to northern states for research and demonstration of conservation practices and their impacts. Such a national investment would not only be a continuation of the erosion control work already undertaken in Wisconsin but an expansion of the work. This would leverage the local knowledge of the landscape and relationships with the landowners – utilizing the groundwork already laid.

Through this project, we see the beginnings of federal, state, and local partnerships. We see locally led conservation through the input and guidance of state and local leaders and landowners. We see the beginnings of a system that relies on voluntary and incentive-based participation with the beginnings of a cost-share system that assists landowners. And we also see a non-partisan effort to repair the land and prevent future soil erosion events with a balance of reforestation, vegetation and the building of flood control structures where needed, as well as changes in land use or adaptation with conservation practices.

It's an honor to be with you celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Coon Creek Watershed Project and its significance in laying the foundation for the principles of conservation we hold dear today. NACD thanks Wisconsin's conservation leaders—past and present—for leading by example with partnerships that continue to guide today's conservation leaders and initiatives.