

# BWSR Academy marks 15 years of tailored conservation training



*During the "Nurturing Successful Partnerships" session on Oct. 25, attendees worked in small groups to piece together the International Association for Public Participation's spectrum of public participation. Trainer Jody Horntvedt from the University of Minnesota discussed the importance of creating and maintaining successful partnerships and communicating effectively, and offered suggestions for working with partners to further shared goals.*

**Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR



BWSR Academy marked its 15th year in October. The annual conference is designed to improve the delivery of conservation work throughout Minnesota by offering high-quality training tailored to local government staff.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Oct. 24-26 event drew more than 440 participants from across Minnesota to Cragun's Conference Center in Brainerd — more than quadruple the number that attended the first regional event and double the number that turned out for the first statewide conference the following year.

Held in 2008 in the northern region

of the state, the first conference was aimed at local government units (LGUs).

The idea for a one-stop training academy emerged when BWSR's northern region staff met to discuss work and training opportunities. At the time, BWSR board conservationists would host trainings throughout the state. LGU staff would travel to those individual training opportunities.

"It really wasn't a particularly efficient system, because there was a lot of repetition and a lot of overlap with training opportunities," said BWSR Board Conservationist Jason Weirnerman, who has been involved in planning BWSR Academy since its inception.



**Left:** “Pollinator Plants! Ecology and Identification” session participants used a dichotomous key to identify pollinator plant samples. Trainers Brett Stolpestad and Tara Kelly of the Washington Conservation District provided an overview of the characteristics of pollinator plant families, the ecology of common pollinator species and their use in native plantings. **Middle:** Trainer Stephanie McLain, state soil health specialist with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, demonstrated a slake test as part of the “Effectively Communicating Soil Health Through Interactive Demonstrations” session. **Right:** Building houses out of Froot Loops was among the small-group activities in “You Can Choose Your Friends, But Not Your Colleagues.” Jenny Gieseke, BWSR organizational effectiveness manager, led the session, which applied the Myers-Briggs personality test to workplace dynamics. **Photo Credits:** Jenny Gieseke, BWSR

At that northern regional operations meeting, Weinerman said, someone suggested creating an opportunity to offer the trainings in one place, which would make it more efficient for both LGU and BWSR staff.

As he continued to pursue the idea, a few weeks later Weinerman sat down with Donna Caughey, a Brainerd-based office and BWSR administrative specialist, to figure out the logistics. A survey was sent to LGU partners asking if they would be interested in a training conference.

“In a matter of days, we had like 30 people saying, ‘Yes, how do we sign up?’” Weinerman said.

The planning team expanded along with the idea. Planners started working on what types of training to offer throughout the three-day conference. Word spread. Soon, about 60 people indicated they would be interested in the training conference.

In late October 2008, about 90 people attended the first conference, which offered three training tracks.

That success propelled the

conference to expand to a statewide endeavor in 2009, offering 36 different training sessions to about 210 attendees from across the state.

This year’s three-day BWSR Academy included seven tracks offering 63 concurrent sessions with more than 125 trainers. Session tracks included organizational capacity, fiscal and programs, fundamentals, outreach, basic technical, advanced technical — plus a slate of bonus and repeat sessions. Topics ranged from conflict management to grant tracking, plant identification to new technology and public engagement.

Offering an outreach track and adding sessions focused on topics such as climate change and drone use are among the adjustments made over the past 15 years to meet the requests and needs of BWSR’s LGU partners.

“We’ve gone from 90 (people) to we are now capped at 420 people per day. We’ve gone from three tracks to seven. Each year, we talk about what the session focus areas should be. So, we have changed

session focus areas over time,” Weinerman said.

Throughout the years, the BWSR Academy team has gathered feedback and solicited ideas for future session topics from LGU staffers. BWSR Academy evaluations and session surveys sent out in February netted about 600 submissions for training topics leading up to the 2023 Academy. These suggestions help inform decisions about future session topics.

The conference was designed to provide LGU staff with high-quality training that allows them to maintain and improve the delivery of conservation work. The goal is to provide relevant, cost-effective training that local conservation partners can apply directly to their work.

Its focus on interactive training to build skills distinguishes BWSR Academy from other conferences and conventions, said BWSR Training Coordinator Barbara Radke, who coordinates BWSR Academy. At the end of each session, all attendees are asked to complete a brief action plan,

which is meant to capture key points and ideas about how to apply the skills on the job.

Planning for BWSR Academy starts in February, when an 18-member program team made up of BWSR staff is selected to identify and recruit trainers. Each year, the team aims to create a schedule that meets the training needs identified by LGUs, and highlights new and emerging topics.

Sessions are tailored to a variety of positions, including managers, technicians and administrative staff. Session content relevant to BWSR programs and conservation work is developed and delivered by staff from LGUs, BWSR, other state agencies, private companies and nonprofit organizations.

“The focus on peer-to-peer learning continues to be an important factor after all these years,” Radke said. “It enables participants to make direct connections between the content being presented and their experience as conservation professionals in Minnesota.”