



From novice to professional:

Conservation Corps apprenticeship leads to career position



Widner takes water quality samples during her summer apprenticeship at Carlton SWCD.

The summer of 2011 was one that Neva Widner will never forget.

As a conservation apprentice at the Carlton County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Widner performed water quality monitoring and surveyed wetlands, streams and runoff on farms. One of her biggest challenges occurred when a torrential rainstorm in the Nemadji Watershed required immediate response.

“The rain event really tested my monitoring skills,” Widner said. “Within a matter of hours, 5.5 inches of rain fell, and rivers were the highest recorded in the 37 years of historical flow records. I could truly take inventory of my knowledge and skills.”

Her apprentice experience at Carlton SWCD directly led to her to a full-time job as a Water Resources Technician in 2012.

As the most experienced conservation leaders are nearing retirement age and walking out the door with the knowledge and experience they’ve built over decades, university graduates are subsequently walking in the door, knowledgeable in theory, research methods and emerging technologies, but lacking practical on-the-job skills important for success. The Minnesota Conservation Apprentice Academy allows youth and mentors to

work side by side to build a solid foundation for the future management of the state’s natural resources.

Applications for 2013 Conservation Apprentice Academy are being accepted now through March 29. Apprentices will be placed with SWCDs to conduct water quality monitoring, install conservation practices, conduct site inspections, recruit landowners for conservation projects, assist landowners and SWCD staff with management plans, and much more.

Applicants must be ages 18-25 and be available to work full-time from May 20 – August 23. Statewide positions are available. Detailed program information can be found at the [Conservation Corps website](#).

Reflecting on her apprenticeship, Widner said, “The Apprenticeship Academy provided me the opportunity to develop a set of professional skills and network to become competitive in my pursuit of acquiring a conservation position. I view the Apprenticeship Academy as a vital component to the long-term effectiveness of Minnesota SWCD functionality, by providing the apprentice the means to transition from the classroom to the field, and the SWCD the additional affordable staff support.”

Widner’s experience with the Minnesota Conservation Apprentice Academy will come full circle in the summer of 2013 – she will host an apprentice at the Carlton SWCD, passing her knowledge and expertise to the next generation of student conservationists.

The Board of Water and Soil Resources manages the Minnesota Conservation Apprentice Academy project with funds appropriated through the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. The Conservation Corps serves as the employer and uses these funds to match apprentices with mentor SWCDs, provide a monthly apprentice stipend, check in with mentors and apprentices throughout the summer, and track long-term results.

