



# Preparing the next generation of conservation professionals

March 2016 Snapshots



As baby boomers across the nation continue to retire, the transfer of knowledge from today's conservation leaders to tomorrow's conservation work force becomes increasingly important. Colleges and universities provide excellent opportunities for learning, but hands-on experience is vital to creating the next generation of conservation professionals. The Minnesota Conservation Apprentice Academy provides opportunities for hands on learning by pairing undergraduate and graduate students with mentors in Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in order to build a solid foundation for the future management of the state's natural resources. Funding for the Apprentice Academy was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

For Dan Wermager who worked with the Root River SWCD, "the Apprentice Academy has really prepared me for starting a career in soil and water conservation. I feel that I am a competitive candidate for an entry level position. Working in my home county has also gotten me more involved in my community, and I have gotten to know the people and the land much better."

Since 2011 139 individuals have successfully completed apprenticeships, and 120 more are anticipated to complete the program between now and 2018. The deliberate selection and pairing of SWCDs and apprentices makes this more than a typical internship program. It provides opportunities for true mentorship and skills training, and the benefit extends from the apprentices to the districts they serve.

For 2014 Apprentice Jacquelynn Olson these benefits included practical hands-on experience conducting water quality monitoring and surveying wetlands, streams, and runoff on farms. "Prior to my service with the Apprenticeship Academy I had no agricultural background in school or growing up, but this exposed me to not only the programs available for funding projects but also how a farm works and how crops work. I spent the summer trying to soak everything in. It was a great stepping stone into this profession."

The results of the Minnesota Conservation Apprentice Academy have been positive. Apprentice knowledge of skills such as surveying, land-use planning, water quality management, and understanding the roles and functions of SWCDs all showed marked improvement after their apprenticeships were completed. In addition, a 2014 survey of past apprentices indicated 96% of the



*Jacquelynn Olson was part of the 2014 Apprentice Academy program, placed with the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District. Here she places temperature meters into test plots as part of her summer apprenticeship.*

program participants were either employed in the natural resources field or continuing their education in natural resources.

The SWCDs partnering with this program have benefitted from working with undergraduate and graduate students as well.

“We were satisfied with the Apprentice so much, that we hired her on as an employee,” said Ann White Eagle, the District Manager for the Ramsey County Conservation District. SWCD offices also benefit from their Apprentice’s knowledge of emerging technologies and other innovations that can improve the quality and productivity of current conservation efforts.

As for Apprentice Jacquelyn Olson, her experience at Benton SWCD led to a full-time job as a Water and Soil Resources Technician in 2015. She will also assist in hosting an apprentice at the Pine SWCD, passing her knowledge and expertise on to the next cohort of student conservationists.