

SWCD outreach cultivates stewardship

A North St. Louis County community conservationist promotes environmental education via workshops, presentations, contests

VIRGINIA — North St. Louis Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) has re-energized its long history of promoting land stewardship and providing environmental education.



Grants from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) have led to outreach including education in six towns and 10 schools. Subsequent partnerships will

promote composting and create urban food plots. Engagement extends to student contests and volunteer water quality monitors.



Rantala

North St. Louis SWCD Board Supervisor Gary Rantala, a lifetime Embarrass resident, remembers an SWCD classroom presence nearly 50 years ago when he taught agriculture and was a Future Farmers of

America (FFA) student advisor in the Cherry area. Back then, SWCD staff participated in soil judging promoted by the FFA program.

“Taking in knowledge and building on it through experience is more important than learning itself,” Rantala said. “If you can make the individual understand why it is important to learn about soil and water management,



In the first 13 months after North St. Louis SWCD launched its Community Conservationist Program, outreach efforts had involved 800 people, from kindergartners through adults. In April, judges selected finalists in a poster contest made possible by the SWCD. Judges included, from left: Emily Nelson, North St. Louis SWCD Board Chair Peggy Pearson, Roger Marks and Phil Norvitch.

Photo Credit: North St. Louis SWCD



Phil Norvitch, a resource conservationist with North St. Louis SWCD, led a class of Virginia fifth-graders in making an edible soil profile with ingredients including cookies and candy.

Photo Credit: Amanda Faulkner

you will help save the world, as it is the only one we have to live in.”

In February 2018, North St. Louis SWCD staff began a strategic planning process to focus on the SWCD’s mission, vision and direction. Providing services, strengthening capacity and

spreading the message emerged as priorities. Many of the vision statements from SWCD staff and board members reflected the board’s desire to continue providing education to constituents. The education component involved identifying the intended audience, increasing public

awareness of conservation and the SWCD, and expanding community outreach.

In summer 2017, the MPCA awarded North St. Louis SWCD a civic engagement contract to help involve citizens in the Rainy River, Vermillion River and Cloquet River watersheds through the Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) program. This Clean Water Fund contract provided dollars to support staff efforts.



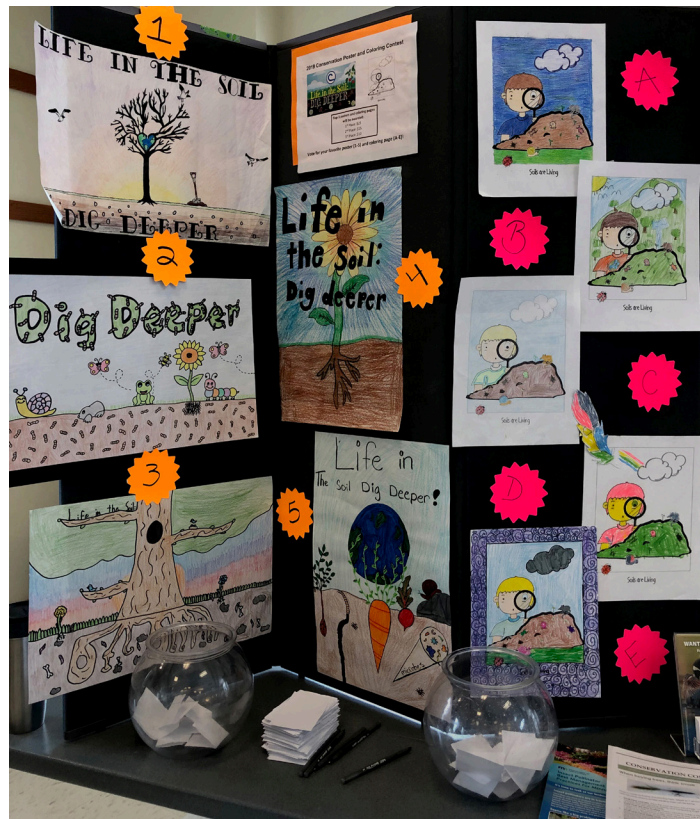
Reiss

Additional support came from a BWSR local capacity grant. That infusion allowed the SWCD

board to hire Community Conservationist Becca Reiss and create a Community Conservationist Program to promote the SWCD's work with erosion control, forestry, invasive species, water quality monitoring and wetland conservation.

The Community Conservationist Program has reached nearly 800 individuals in 13 months. That includes about 170 adults who participated in workshops, classes and public meetings. About 600 students from 10 area schools took part in classroom and field presentations. The SWCD has increased outreach at events such as the county fair, too.

The SWCD organized the Area 3 Minnesota



North St. Louis SWCD staff produced and executed a local version of the National Association of Conservation Districts' poster contest. When SWCD staff realized they weren't reaching kindergarten through third-grade students, they developed a contest for that group. Finalists were voted on April 13 during the Iron Range Earth Fest hosted by the Iron Range Partnership for Sustainability. **Photo Credit:** North St. Louis SWCD

Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts' (MASWCD) Envirothon. Staff produced and executed a local version of the National Association of Conservation Districts' (NACD) themed poster contest. When SWCD staff realized they weren't reaching kindergarten through third-grade students, they developed an NACD-themed coloring contest for that group.

The 2019 theme: Life in the Soil: Dig Deeper.

To promote this muddy topic, SWCD staff in March presented soil profile information in a "tasty" way to 120 Virginia fifth-graders

by creating edible soil profiles.

"Being in the classroom promotes our district's long-range goal of getting students involved in conservation," said Anita Provinzino, North St. Louis SWCD district administrator.

The SWCD offered nine community education classes in six communities, focused on water, soil and forestry.

Since the Community Conservation Program launched, the SWCD also has become much more visible outside the classroom, too. It's increased its social media

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presence, contacted constituents via direct mailings, and produced more handouts and brochures. It's recruited more volunteers for citizen water quality monitoring.

The district is developing a partnership with the St. Louis County Environmental Services Department to promote and develop a composting bin program.

North St. Louis SWCD received a \$50,000 NACD competitive Urban Agriculture Conservation grant to focus on urban agriculture, forestry and food deserts. Partners including civic groups and 4-H'ers planted raised-bed gardens and orchards in public places such as Olcott Park Greenhouse in Virginia and the Minnesota Discovery Center in Chisholm.

The excitement and awareness are bringing people together to promote land stewardship and environmental education through North St. Louis SWCD.