

Rice SWCD channels its message

Hands-on activities built for teachers, a blog featuring farmers, an event connecting ag and fish — all are new ways Rice County residents hear about conservation opportunities



As they work to ensure the right practices are installed in the right locations, conservation professionals strive to encourage participation from landowners whose property lies within prioritized and targeted areas.

When she approaches that challenge, Rice Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) Public Relations and Information Specialist Teresa DeMars considers how different messages affect different people.

DeMars had worked for Rice SWCD

18 years earlier. She returned in 2017 when the district funded her part-time position using Clean Water Fund local capacity dollars from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Her work in the interim — as a children’s book author, travel blog writer, social media producer — lent perspective about reaching varied audiences.

DeMars takes her social media and outreach efforts beyond the usual monthly newsletters and website updates.

Clockwise from top: Those who attended the Cover Crops, Tillage, & Trout event on Roger Helgeson’s farm near Dundas netted aquatic insects in Rice Creek. Dean Thomas of Fillmore SWCD used a rainfall simulator. Aquatic insect ID was part of the day. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service biologist Heidi Keuler explained how land use changes can affect streams. **Photo Credits:** Rice SWCD



DeMars' cover crop blog series "[Talking Cover Crops](#)" gained local attention. The series of posts resulted in more than 1,600 visits to the SWCD's website. DeMars realized the best stories featured people telling their own story, in their own words. The series was told from farmers' perspectives.

DeMars asked each farmer the same set of questions, and, with permission, taped the interviews to verify direct quotes. No matter if a story is about cover crops or an outstanding conservationist, DeMars said the key is in the storytelling, the journey — with eye-catching photographs to illustrate.

"It's gratifying to see a story come together, with words and pictures capturing the conservation experiences of the landowner," DeMars said.

An important part of conservation delivery is capitalizing on partnerships. DeMars said working with partners not only distributes the workload but also extends a project's promotional reach.

A mid-September event — Cover Crops, Tillage and Trout: How Are They Connected? — illustrated partnerships' many benefits. The field day explored the watershed connections among agriculture, conservation, water quality and habitat.

Partners augmented typical field day activities with an electro-fishing

demonstration, a panel discussion about farmer profitability, and conversations about water quality. The long list of partners included Rice SWCD, the Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP), the Fishers & Farmers Partnership, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), University of Minnesota Extension, St. Olaf College, and Compeer Financial.

When Rice SWCD supervisors challenged DeMars to improve the district's youth conservation educational outreach, she started by assessing area elementary and middle school teachers' needs. DeMars incorporated their feedback when she developed themed, educational trunks based on conservation topics such as soils, pollinators, watersheds and trees.

The trunk program will function as a lending library. Teachers can check out trunks that provide hands-on activities for students to use in class. A presentation by SWCD staff is optional. Materials correspond to Minnesota's academic standards.

"The addition of the lending library and hands-on conservation activities will be a great way to reach the next generation of landowners in Rice County. Education is a core value of our mission

as a conservation district," said SWCD Supervisor Richard Cook.

By mid-October, the trunks were nearly complete. DeMars planned to promote them to area teachers this winter.

Creating hands-on educational opportunities gave DeMars a chance to get outside. She and Myles Elsen, a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) soil scientist, had the opportunity to work with Rice SWCD Supervisor and farmer Tim Little. Little's efforts to promote soil health had earned him a Soil Health Champion title from the National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (NASWCD).

Little allowed soil cores to be collected from his farm. The resulting traveling soil horizon display will be used in the classroom, and by Minnesota Envirothon teams involved in that high school outdoor environmental learning competition. It also will be available to check out.

Sometimes DeMars' job involves collecting 10 beneficial insects found in cover crops. Sometimes it involves creating a butterfly display so teachers can include a hands-on element when they talk to students about metamorphosis.

"It's very creative and rewarding to promote conservation to the public," DeMars said.



“
It's very creative and rewarding to promote conservation to the public.

”

— Teresa DeMars, Rice SWCD public relations and information specialist