



Maximizing your natural resources

Soil and water conservation districts are here to help landowners, not regulate them

BY AARON GUFFEY

WHAT IS AN SWCD — and what can it do for you?

Let's start with the acronym. SWCD stands for "Soil and Water Conservation District." The goal of conservation is to use resources efficiently, not prohibit their use. SWCDs help you make informed management decisions to ensure that soil and water will continue to be viable resources for the use of generations to come.

SWCDs are not environmental advocacy groups and certainly won't tell you that agriculture is bad for the environment. They do not enforce regulations or issue permits. Working with them is always voluntary and they offer their services at no charge.

You decide to what extent you want to take advantage of the services offered. They exist solely to provide benefits to the public.

SWCDs work with a variety of agricultural landowners, including nurseries, to plan and design solutions and

help put those solutions into action. In the case of nurseries, this could include anything from converting to drip irrigation to preventing soil erosion from fields. They even have access to funding pools that help pay for projects.

For topics that are outside of their area of expertise, they work closely with partner organizations to find the information you need.

It's worth noting that farmers aren't the only ones who can benefit. Although they were traditionally established to provide services to rural farmers, SWCDs with city centers can provide similar services to urban residents.

For example, they may offer workshops on topics that apply to urban spaces, such as management of stormwater, rainwater catchment and low maintenance landscapes.

How do SWCDs help conserve water?

SWCDs can help nurseries save

water while saving money. For example, the conversion of sprinkler irrigation to drip irrigation uses less water by delivering it only to the root zone of the crop. Drip irrigation discourages the growth of weeds between rows, as little water is delivered there. Additionally, less of the irrigation water is lost to evaporation.

In the end, the nursery saves on pumping and labor costs, while helping the SWCD in their mission to conserve water. Everybody wins!

Last year, the Clackamas SWCD and the East Multnomah SWCD partnered with J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. on a 75-acre site that spans the county line. The nursery wanted to convert the site to a drip irrigation system. In coordination with the nursery's field staff, the SWCD staff assisted with the technical aspects of the irrigation system design, which included soil moisture monitoring equipment. Due to the significant water and energy savings, funding was secured to cover 65 percent of the project costs.

(Opposite page) This grassy strip along a waterway in Harford County, Maryland, helps prevent erosion, soil loss and pollution. PHOTO BY EDWIN REMSBERG. COURTESY OF USDA SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION.

How do SWCDs help conserve soil?

Preventing soil erosion keeps farmland productive. Also, keeping soil out of waterways is important because fertilizers and pesticides bind to soil and can negatively impact nearby streams and rivers.

There are several methods to address soil erosion:

- **Cover crops** prevent erosion by intercepting rain, filtering runoff, and anchoring soil.
- **Grassed waterways** are a type of designed drainage ditch that ensures the conveyance of concentrated runoff in a non-erosive manner.
- **Filter strips** are bands of perennial grass that run perpendicular to the slope of a field to intercept and filter surface runoff.
- **Improving dirt farm roads** by grading them to a crown, laying a geotextile fabric, and capping them with gravel not only prevents erosion, but also ensures that roads are drivable in wet winter months.

If done correctly, these practices and others like them can be effective in keeping topsoil in the field where it belongs. SWCDs can help nurseries design and implement all of these solutions.

A number of years ago, Surface Nursery Inc. contacted the East Multnomah SWCD for recommendations to control erosion. While they were on site, the nursery manager pointed out that they were unable to drive on a steep, dirt farm road in the winter to access their fields.

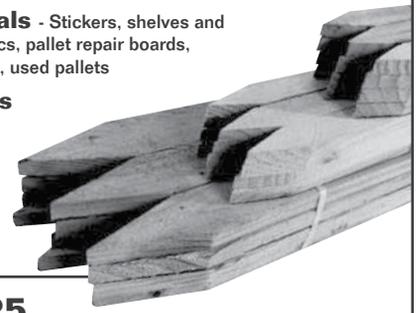
It turned out that the road was a significant part of the erosion problem. SWCD staff surveyed the site and developed a design for the road that included vegetated ditches along each side. The nursery was able to do the roadwork with their crews and equipment, which counted as a contribution to the whole project, allowing the SWCD to fund a greater share of the materials.

Crowning the road helped to guide runoff into the vegetated ditches and prevented gullies forming in the road. The use of geotextile fabric under the ➤

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Getting the most from your resources

East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District was experiencing erosion along a roadway on its property due to runoff (left), until the district installed a grassed waterway. The result was a significant reduction in erosion (right).

PHOTO BY EAST MULTNOMAH SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT



gravel improved the road's longevity. Ten years later the road is holding up well and the nursery is able to use it year round.

Beyond soil and water

Many SWCDs are involved in efforts to remove invasive weeds. Some SWCDs help restore streambanks, wetlands, or rare habitats such as oak savannas. The promotion of natural areas increases the abundance of wildlife, which if managed properly adds resilience to a farm system. For example, predatory birds can help to keep populations of field mice and voles in check. Native pollinating insects are vital for the productivity of certain crops.

Some SWCDs also assist farmers in protecting the future of their land through agricultural easements and farm succession programs. By keeping land in production, they are working to pro-

tect our rich agricultural heritage.

SWCDs rose out of the Dust Bowl era. In the 1930s the combination of aggressive tillage practices and persistent droughts in the Great Plains left the soil susceptible to wind erosion. With no moisture or plant roots to hold the soil, it blew away in billowing clouds. This severely degraded farm land, leading to forced migrations of families who could no longer make a living off of the land.

In the wake of these events, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Soil Conservation Service to prevent such tragedies in the future. They quickly discovered that the best approach was to partner with the farmers themselves. As a result, SWCDs began forming on the local level, forging working relationships with farmers to promote conservation farming.

It's your call

Each SWCD offers programs that best fit the needs of the county in which they reside. So, how do you find out what your SWCD can do for you?

Most have websites that describe their services. All SWCDs welcome phone calls, emails, and visitors to their office. The best way to find out what your local SWCD can offer you is to contact them. They'll be happy to hear from you. They'll listen to your interests and concerns, and they'll work with you to figure out how they can best be of service. ☺

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