Increasing Interest in Cover Crops

If you are a subscriber to any farm magazines, or have been in an SWCD office recently, you have most likely seen or heard the terms “soil health” or “cover crops.” Soil health describes the soil as a living ecosystem, full of organisms that sustain and enhance the soil’s resilience and overall productivity. Cover crops are a tool to achieve greater soil health by feeding and protecting the soil ecosystem. Some view soil health and cover crops as the next farming fads or buzz words of the day, however, the concepts of soil health and cover crops are nothing new to agriculture. According to the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education 2017 Cover Crop Survey, cover crop use in the United States has doubled since 2012. We often hear that cover crops aren’t practical given the short growing season, nevertheless, farmers are successfully incorporating cover crops into their operations throughout Minnesota. The Wright SWCD sees potential in cover crops to help achieve local water quality goals by reducing soil erosion and to enhance our local producers’ profitability through increased soil health.

The Wright SWCD continued to work with producers experimenting with cover crops in 2018. State cost share funds were used to incentivize cover crop use, with higher payment rates for producers willing to inter-seed the cover crop into the primary cash crop. A variety of strategies were used successfully, including: broadcast inter-seeding into corn and soybeans, drill seeding into standing corn, drill seeding after silage harvest, and drill seeding after soybean harvest. Above pictures are of broadcast inter-seeding in Wright County in 2018. The Wright SWCD commends the producers who have stepped well outside of “normal” farming practices to show that cover crops can be utilized in Wright County. The SWCD will continue to provide technical support, funding, and be an overall resource for anyone interested in experimenting with cover crops. The SWCD hopes to see continued growth in cover crop adoption and improved soil health throughout Wright County in 2019 and beyond!
The Wright Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) does not have taxing authority, and relies on support from Wright County, which enables the SWCD to leverage and secure additional technical assistance funds and financial assistance funds for Wright County landowners.

Wright SWCD Revenues

Total: $2,171,784.07

Projects, Easements, and AIS Expenditures

Total: $1,609,799.42
Every year, the Wright Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) honors an individual, family, or conservation organization with the “Outstanding Conservationist” award. Selected by the SWCD Board, this award recognizes the recipient for their work and accomplishments implementing conservation practices. This year, the Elsenpeter Family was selected to represent the Wright SWCD as their “Outstanding Conservationist.”

The Elsenpeter Family has been farming on their original Chatham Township homestead since 1869. Brothers, Dan and Luke, are fifth generation dairy farmers and the first to be certified organic twelve years ago. These innovative farmers operate 600 acres, 400 of which are cropped with the remaining acreage in pasture.

Currently, the brothers milk 150 cows twice a day, with an additional 37 dry cows. They chose to become a certified organic operation because they believe the less chemical application the better for the health of all concerned, whether it is their family, the consumer, the herd, and the environment. Additionally, for them, farming organic seems to have more sustainability in the future.

Also important to the Elsenpeter brothers is conservation on their farm, Valley View Dairy. In the past, Dan and Luke participated in conservation programs with the Wright SWCD and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which enabled them to build a free-stall barn and an agriculture waste storage facility. Their two basic long-range goals are to continue to improve their soil health, and ensure their soil stays on their fields so that future generations can continue to farm. To help obtain these goals, future farm plans include diversification to plant a wider variety of crops, with the incorporation of cover crops. Cover crops will help with weed suppression and the reduction of soil pests, while improving soil health, and increasing the soil organic matter. Cover crops will also have the added benefit of providing forage for the cattle.

The Wright SWCD is proud to have the Elsenpeter Family represent them this year with the title of “Outstanding Conservationists for 2018.”
Right: Each spring and fall the Wright SWCD and Wright County Parks, partner to host the 5th Grade Environmental Education Days at Ney Park. In 2018, over 1,000 students learned about macroinvertebrates, pheasant habitat, fisheries, bees, furs, skulls, mushrooms, water quality, aquatic invasive species, mosquitoes, and agriculture.

Left: Wright SWCD hosted a cover crop meeting on March 29th. Speaker Brad Schmidt, a SW MN farmer, talked about how cover crops have changed how he farms, success and failures, and how everyone can add cover crops into their farm management.

Left: On July 24th - 28th, Wright SWCD had a booth at the Wright County Fair. Nitrate testing of landowner’s well water, cover crop demonstration, AIS awareness giveaways, and a display of services available were all part of the experience this year.

Right: Wright SWCD staff attends several lake association meetings in the spring. This particular day we spoke with the Lake Francis group on the health of their lake and provided a list of potential water quality improvement projects that could be built.
Left: Wright SWCD Board Supervisors attended the MASWCD Legislator Briefing Day at the Capitol on March 12th. This event gives SWCDs a chance to sit down with legislators and discuss successes in conservation and important issues regarding soil and water.

Right: Wright SWCD/NRCS staff assists with the Metro Area Envirothon in early May. The Envirothon is a hands on environmental education program for both high school students, and junior high students. It combines classroom learning with outdoor activities.

Left: Wright SWCD hosted a tour of conservation practices on June 14th. One of the stops was at a recent waste storage facility project where Andy Thorson explains some of the improvements to their dairy operation. In all, twenty five people attended, including Legislators, County Commissioners, DNR, BWSR, SWCD Board Members, and Wright County Water Management Task Force members.

Left: Farmer Stan Vanderkooi demonstrated cover crop inter-seeding with his drill during the tour of conservation practices.
In 2008, the Wright CWMA was formed in Wright County to address threats to native wetland and terrestrial systems posed by invasive plant species. Currently, the Wright SWCD, in cooperation with Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT), Wright County’s Commissioners, Townships, Wright County Highway and Parks Departments, along with private landowners, have come together to control the spread of Wild Parsnip, Tansy, Oriental Bittersweet, and other invasive species. However, much more participation from private landowners and railroad companies is needed to increase control effort success in the future.

**Summary of 2018 Actions**

**Annual Meeting in April noted the following:**
- County Ag Inspector sent letters to private landowners
- SWCD was awarded a grant ($15,000)
- Priority Area to focus on for each group to manage
- Updated herbicide application record form
- Chemical reimbursement eligibility
- Update on new noxious weeds
- 100% cost reimbursement on herbicide for treating Wild Parsnip and Common Tansy for Wright County Townships, Wright County Parks and Highway Departments, and Private Landowners.

**Wright Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA)**

In 2008, the Wright CWMA was formed in Wright County to address threats to native wetland and terrestrial systems posed by invasive plant species. Currently, the Wright SWCD, in cooperation with Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR), Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT), Wright County’s Commissioners, Townships, Wright County Highway and Parks Departments, along with private landowners, have come together to control the spread of Wild Parsnip, Tansy, Oriental Bittersweet, and other invasive species. However, much more participation from private landowners and railroad companies is needed to increase control effort success in the future.

**Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program**

The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) is a voluntary opportunity for farmers and agricultural landowners to take the lead in implementing conservation practices that protect Minnesota’s waters. Those who implement and maintain approved farm management practices will be certified, and in turn obtain State regulatory certainty for a period of ten years.

This program certifies farmers for managing the land within their operation in a way that protects water quality. Agricultural operations and landowners seeking certification undergo a three step process. Local conservation professionals assist farmers throughout the certification process.

**Step 1: Application** - a self-verification by producers that they are meeting existing Minnesota laws and regulations regarding water quality.

**Step 2: Assessment** - evaluation of each field within an operation using the assessment tool.

**Step 3: Verification** - on-farm field verification by a MAWQCP certifier.

8
Certified Farms in Wright County since 2016

12
Signed Contracts to be Certified

**Flowering Wild Parsnip**

(Shown during summer months)
Cooperative Programs

One Watershed, One Plan, North Fork Crow River (1W1P)

In 2012, legislation was passed in Minnesota to help natural resource managers in the water planning process, improve the targeting efforts of priority areas and locate projects which will achieve water quality goals. In addition, it was felt this effort should create consistency in water planning and consolidate the over 200 Water Management Plans produced by a multitude of government entities to 81 plans based upon Minnesota’s major watersheds. This is an effort to increase management efficiency as well as help focus targeting while implementing efforts to increase water quality.

In 2018, the North Fork Crow River 1W1P process continued with Wright SWCD staff working with the Crow River Organization of Water (CROW), 5 other counties, 5 other SWCDs, and 2 watershed districts to complete a pollutant modeling and budget estimations. The model estimated loads of sediment, phosphorus and nitrogen leaving each sub-watershed. It also identified locations for best management practices to reduce nutrient loading and improve water quality.

The North Fork Crow River One Watershed One Plan was accepted by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in June of 2018 and adopted by the SWCD and the Wright County Board in October.

Following plan approval, SWCD staff have been organizing the implementation of the plan. Priority areas have been identified and work will focus on those areas (left).

There are currently two grants available to fund projects in the watershed: BWSR’s watershed based funding ($642,377) and USDA’s Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) ($412,540).

Discovery Farms Minnesota

Discovery Farms Minnesota (DFM) is a farmer-led water quality research and educational program administered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). The mission of this program is to collect water quality information under real world conditions to provide credible and practical information that supports better farm management decisions. There are currently 12 core Discovery Farms located in Minnesota.

The farm in Wright County, Minkota Holsteins LLC, (Victor Township) was selected in 2012 as a “Discovery Farm” because the dairy herd, manure management, and soils are representative of the region and the field site is capable of generating a robust dataset.

Water samples are collected at the edge of the field (surface and tile). The graph on the right notes the dramatic difference in phosphorus loss after a crop rotation from corn to alfalfa in 2015. Also showing how a crop rotation can help rebuild soil nutrients and health, but how the amount of rainfall also plays a vital role in runoff.

WR1 – Total Phosphorus Yield

- 48% of the subsurface total phosphorus loss occurred during the month of April
- Seven year avg = 0.2 lbs/acre (62% NF)
- 46% of TP loss occurred during the month of March
- Seven year avg = 1.5 lbs/acre (67% NF)
Food Plot Seed

In 2018, the Wright SWCD partnered with Wright County Pheasants Forever (WCPF) and Dahlco Seeds to provide corn, soybeans and grain seed mixes to establish 449.5 acres of food plots.

Seed Donated in 2018 included:
- 150 bags of corn
- 200 bags of soybeans
- 6 bags of Blizzard Mix
- 10 bags of Winter Shield Mix
- 10 bags of Dove/Quail Mix
- 10 bags of Quick Food Cover Mix
- 5 bags of Whitetail/Gamebird

Local volunteers of the WCPF have completed 1,171 habitat projects and planted over 15,000 trees impacting 8,222 acres for wildlife. Since 1985, the WCPF has spent over $6 million in the local community to benefit youth education and wildlife habitat conservation efforts, including 11 land acquisitions which permanently protect 1,310 acres. WCPF also participated in the SWCD’s 5th Grade Environmental Educational Field Days at Robert Ney Memorial Park Reserve in Maple Lake.

Conservation Corps

Beginning in the summer of 2018, the Wright SWCD welcomed Ethan Hosey from Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa as the District’s summer intern. The Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa allows young individuals to gain experience in the field prior to entering the job market. During his summer with the Wright SWCD and Crow River Organization of Water, Ethan measured and recorded data for the DNR observation wells and helped develop educational and promotional materials. Ethan worked with the Wright County Parks Department to conduct water sampling on five county beaches, to test for bacteria. In addition, he got to sample several lakes and streams throughout the North Fork Crow River Watershed. He also got the chance to assist with wetland delineations and conduct site visits to investigate potential WCA violations. Wrapping up the summer, Ethan met and engaged with Wright County residents at the County Fair.
Crow River Monitoring at Rockford

Met Council and the Wright SWCD partner on collecting water quality data. Every two weeks (since 1998), year-round, the Wright SWCD takes a grab sample at the Hwy 55 bridge over the Crow River in Rockford. Observations on the river’s current conditions such as flow level, vegetation or recent weather are recorded. The parameters that are sampled for are; chloride, total suspended solids, phosphorus, and bacteria. The samples are then sent to the Met Council’s lab in St. Paul for analysis.

Reinvest in Minnesota

Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) is a BWSR administered program that restores wetlands and grasslands through permanent conservation easements on privately owned lands. This program is funded through the Outdoor Heritage Fund of the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. RIM keeps private lands in private ownership and on local tax rolls while contributing to the State’s conservation and water quality goals. In 2018, the Wright SWCD participated in the implementation of 3 RIM conservation easement that enrolled 181.9 acres in this program. These marginal cropland acres will be restored permanently to wetlands, forests and grassland cover, providing ideal wildlife habitat and riparian buffers. Currently, RIM funds are being paired with federal funds in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) sign-up, where applications can be submitted for wetland restorations and buffers.

Groundwater Level Monitoring Program

Since 1944, the DNR has managed a statewide network of water level observation wells (obwells). Data from these wells are used to assess groundwater resources, determine long term trends, interpret impacts of pumping and climate, plan for water conservation, evaluate water conflicts, and otherwise manage the water resource. The Wright Soil and Water Conservation District, under contract with the DNR, measures 24 wells every 3 months, collects data from electronic loggers, and reports the data to the DNR.
Citizen Volunteer Lake Monitoring Program

This program gets lakeshore owners more involved with their lake water quality. The samples taken each year could be considered the lake’s annual “physical” and they help build a long-term trend to better illustrate if water quality is improving or declining.

More importantly, to be able to prevent and address problems in our lakes we need good information about the status of our water resource, potential and actual threats, and options for addressing the threats.

By the Numbers

1
the number of hours each sample takes to collect

2002
the year most lakes started monitoring

30
the number of lakes participating in 2018

5
the number of samples taken at each lake per year

$250
Cost for a lake to participate in 2018
Limestone Filter

A new limestone filter was installed at an inlet to Mink Lake in September 2017. This filter is designed to remove phosphorus from water entering Mink Lake.

Sampling results since 2017 have shown as much as 99% reduction in dissolved phosphorus concentrations. Wright SWCD intends to place automated sampling equipment at the site to collect storm event samples in addition to regularly scheduled baseflow samples in 2019.

Sand-Iron Filter

A filter was installed near Martha Lake and Charlotte Lake in Wright County, Minnesota in the fall of 2012. It receives runoff from approximately 19 acres of farmland used for crops and livestock via a drain tile. The filter is located on land that is currently used to pasture cattle. As water passes through the filter, phosphorus is removed.

Average Dissolved Phosphorus Reduction: 40.9%

Average Total Phosphorus Reduction: 46.4%
Aquatic Invasive Species

Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) are plants and animals that have come to Minnesota’s lakes and rivers from other places. They can take over a waterbody and disrupt the ecosystem. In an effort to combat the spread of AIS, Wright County receives funds from the state and has delegated authority to Wright SWCD to help enforce the AIS statute.

At-the-ramp inspections check boats going in and out of Wright County waters. In 2018, Wright County inspectors covered 25 accesses, performed 11,579 inspections and 242 decontaminations.

The educational campaign helps remind waterbody users of the AIS statue requirements. Material was posted at 14 different gas stations throughout the county. The SWCD handed out cell phone wallets and sunglasses embossed with the pledge “I will Clean. Drain. Dry.”

Aquatic Invasive Species By the Numbers

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<tr>
<th>11,579</th>
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<tr>
<td>At-the-ramp boat inspections in Wright County</td>
<td>Gas stations with AIS prevention message material</td>
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<th>$48,586.12</th>
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<td>State funds to AIS treatment grants in Wright County lakes</td>
<td>Public accesses that had inspectors</td>
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10 Wright County lakes checked for new AIS during Starry Trek

Three new infestations were discovered in Wright County lakes in 2018.

1. Granite Lake: Flowering Rush
2. Pleasant Lake: Starry Stonewort (pictured right)
3. Sugar Lake: Zebra Mussels

Early detection is imperative when it comes to AIS. Lake users are encouraged to report any suspicious plants or animals:

1. Note your location (address or GPS point)
2. Take pictures
3. Call our office and ask for Alicia O’Hare, Water Management Specialist

Above: Starry stonewort bulbil
Wright Regional Inspection Program (WRIP)

Wright SWCD, in partnership with Wright County, MN DNR, and several lake associations, piloted a new AIS inspection program in 2018, a regional based inspection program. In lieu of inspectors at the boat accesses, the inspectors are located at a regional inspection station. The program goal is to provide greater inspection coverage for Wright County Lakes.

The pilot program covered three lakes; Sylvia, John and Pleasant from May 10th—October 31st. During this time 5,268 inspections and 242 decontaminations were performed.

For more information about the regional inspection program find the full 2018 Report on our website.

www.wrightswcd.org/water_management/wrip.html
Completed Conservation Projects

Water & Sediment Control Basins

- Stockholm Township
- Marysville Township
- Albion Township

Grade Stabilization Structure

- Stockholm Township
- Marysville Township

Rock Chute

- Stockholm Township

Total Project Funds
$440,576.25

Number of Projects
13 - Water & Sediment Control Basins
3 - Grade Stabilization Structures
1 - Ag Waste Storage Facility
1 - Rock Chute
1 - Wetland Restoration
In 2008, Minnesota’s voters passed the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment to the Minnesota Constitution to: protect drinking water sources; to protect, enhance, and restore wetlands, prairie, forests, and fish, game, and wildlife habitat; to preserve arts and cultural heritage; to support parks and trails; and protect enhance, and restore lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater. This Legacy Amendment began on July 1, 2009 and will continue until 2034.
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program is a federal program administered by the NRCS and assisted by the Wright Soil and Water Conservation District. EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to assist crop, livestock and other agricultural producers with environmental and conservation improvements to their operations.

In 2018, EQIP paid Wright County agricultural producers $399,995 to implement conservation practices on the land, and $176,561 in EQIP funds were committed toward 14 new contracts for Wright County agricultural producers to implement conservation practices.

Summary of Practices Implemented through EQIP in 2018

- 1 Waste Storage Facility Project
- 1 Vegetated Treatment Area
- 1 Waste Facility Closure
- 1 Grade Stabilization Structure
- 10 Water & Sediment Control Basins
- 0.5 acres Pollinator Habitat Planting
- 162 acres Nutrient Management
- 38.6 acres Prescribed Grazing
- 290 feet Livestock Pipeline for Grazing Systems
- 1 Livestock Watering Tank
- 8,540 feet Fence for Grazing Systems
- 30.4 acres Pasture Planting for Grazing Systems

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

The Conservation Stewardship Program is a voluntary program that encourages producers to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner by undertaking additional conservation activities and improving, maintaining and managing existing conservation activities.

In 2018, $99,658 was paid to Wright County agricultural producers through CSP.

- Establish pollinator habitat
- Extend filter strips for water quality protection
- Harvest hay in such a way to allow wildlife to flush and escape
- Use drift reducing nozzles to reduce pesticide drift
- Use GPS and targeted spray application technology
- Use grazing management to improve wildlife habitat
- Use of cover crop mixes
The MN Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) is administered locally by Local Governmental Units (LGU’s) such as the Wright SWCD and some cities within Wright County. The primary goal of WCA is to achieve no net loss in the quantity and quality of wetlands in Wright County and throughout MN. Regulated activities under WCA include draining, filling, and in some cases excavation. Contact us if you have any questions about wetland regulation or who is the current LGU in your area. Wetland services provided by the District include but are not limited to:

- Assist landowners in determining where wetlands may exist on their property and regulatory implications of proposed projects
- Review and issue decisions on wetland delineations
- Review and issue decisions on exemption/no-loss applications
- Review and issue decisions on wetland replacement plan applications
- Review and issue decisions on wetland bank applications
- Investigate and assist with the enforcement of WCA violations
- Serve as a member of the Technical Evaluation Panel (TEP)
- Speak at educational events
- Assist landowners interested in enrolling lands into various wetland conservation programs
- Provide technical assistance for completing wetland delineations and WCA applications for cities and townships
- Assist landowners with any questions they may have regarding wetlands in general

**2018 Accomplishments**

- Responded to approximately 300 landowner contacts regarding wetlands
- Participated in 64 Technical Evaluation Panel (TEP) meetings
- Reviewed 11 wetland delineation reports
- Reviewed 3 exemption and 1 no-loss applications
- Reviewed 3 replacement plan applications proposing to permanently impact 40,580 square feet of wetlands
- Investigated 15 potential WCA violations, resolved 2 informally, and 1 formal Restoration Order was drafted.
State Buffer Law

The 2015 Buffer Legislation applies to agricultural land. All perennial crops qualify as a compliant buffer. Deadlines for compliance were November 1, 2017, for public water courses, and November 1, 2018, for public ditches.

Correspondence with landowners continued in 2018 with approximately 220 letters sent out to landowners who had agricultural land within or near the deemed buffer areas that had not been in contact with the SWCD. A response was required to document contact information, and potential compliance. Most of these landowners responded. The Wright SWCD conducted more than 40 site visits to evaluate buffer compliance. Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR) BuffCAT was updated with current compliance status and progress was recorded.

Public waters: 10,706 parcels
- 55 landowners received waivers to extend public waters compliance date to July 1, 2018.
- A “Last Chance” letter was sent out August 17, 2018 in a last effort to contact those that had not responded.

Public Ditches: 820 parcels
- Compliance date was November 1, 2018.
- 72 letters were sent out September 26, 2018 reminding landowners of the compliance date.

Total parcels: 11,337
- 60 parcels not in compliance
- 87 needing review
- Compliance rate of 98.7%

Tree Program

The Wright SWCD distributed an informational packet which included a program letter, 2018 order form, 2018 new species description sheet and spacing guide for windbreak plantings. All orders were filled on a first come, first served basis. In 2018, the Wright SWCD sold and distributed 39,355 trees, at our new location north of Wright County Parks Department.

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Wright SWCD Board of Supervisors

(left to right) Duane Dahlman (District 5), Christopher Uecker (District 4), Jeff Burns (District 2), Mary Wetter (District 3), and Mike Zieska (District 1)

Wright SWCD Staff

(left to right) Alicia O’Hare - Water Management Specialist
Pam Kuhn - Administrative Assistant
Kerry Saxton - Resource Conservationist
Dan Nadeau - Resource Conservationist
Luke Johnson - District Manager
Eric Mattson - Conservation Technician
Andrew Grean - Wetland Resource Conservationist
Sandra Hessdal - Office Assistant
Michael Candler - Natural Resources Engineer (not pictured)

CROW

(left to right) Diane Sander and Nicole Erickson

2018 Wright County Board of Commissioners

(left to right) Darek Vetsch, Mark Daleiden, Charles Borrell, Michael Potter, and Christine Husom

NRCS

(left to right) Katie Evans and Julie Reberg
Hello Wright County, my name is Mike Candler and I’m the new Natural Resource Engineer for the Wright Soil and Water Conservation District. I was hired in October 2018 to aid in the design of conservation practices, working primarily to ensure that farming can be done in a manner that works well, not only for producers, but with a minimal impact to the environment. I am grateful to be a part of the community and to do my part to help our land and water.

I received my Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Environmental Engineering from Michigan Technological University. I focused my studies on improving water resources and watershed health. My education hasn’t stopped there. I spent three years in the world of private consulting, working on water resources projects, but also on large earthworks projects and environmental remediation projects as well. I developed skills and knowledge that I believe will serve Wright County well. In my new role with Wright SWCD I have continued to learn and grow over the last few months.

I have met only a few Wright County landowners and producers since I’ve started, but look forward to meeting more. Please feel free to stop by the SWCD office to discuss any conservation questions, comments, concerns or even to just say “hi”! I am truly privileged to be a part of this SWCD family and I am excited for what the future brings.

**Our Mission:**

“The Wright Soil and Water Conservation District shall provide local leadership in the conservation and wise use of soil, water and related resources through a balanced program that protects, restores and improves those resources by utilizing education, regulation and incentive programs.”

**Follow Us**

www.wrightswcd.org

Wright Soil and Water Conservation District