



April 2023

Spring Newsletter

Will/South Cook Soil & Water Conservation District

Conserving for the Future

Many of our readers may be wondering what the Will/South Cook Soil Water Conservation District (SWCD) has been up to. For new readers, you might be wondering what an SWCD is or what we do. A majority of our work revolves around helping local producers and cooperators implement conservation practices on their farms. The practices we carefully plan are site specific to issues farmers are facing. We believe in an approach that takes into consideration soil, water, people, plants, and animals to help mitigate or solve an issue. Our team, comprised of SWCD and NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) employees and staff, work in conjunction to complete work both in the field and in the office to develop a conservation plan best suitable for members of our community.

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Office Hours

8:00 – 4:30

Monday – Friday

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Cover Crop Workshop

On March 9th the District hosted a workshop on seeding to control soil erosion and improve soil structure. Several speakers from all over Illinois came to present helpful information.

Trenton Rader from NRCS and Jason Bleich from USFWS started off the workshop with a presentation on *The Basics of Successful Seeding for Conservation Projects*. Topics included habitat development for pollinators and common conservation projects that NRCS works with farmers to implement.

Russ Higgins from the University of Illinois spoke on a variety of topics regarding cover cropping and the different successes and challenges that he and his team have faced in developing sustainable cover crop mixes.

Local farmers Corey and Rick Johnson gave a presentation on their experiences in establishing a cover crop system for their farms and their recommendations for farmers in Will County.

Cover crops are a common practice for urban and suburban gardeners, but are seeing prominent attention from farmers in recent years as well. The practice revolves around the concept of always having something planted in your ground, regardless of what time of year it might be. There are benefits to having cover crops as well, such as soil retention, nutrient retention, increased water holding capacity and improved overall soil health.

The cover crops hold soil in place, keeping wind and water from substantially damaging the layer beneath them. The less amount the topsoil moves, the more the nutrients are retained in the soil. Some cover crops like radish, have large root systems that loosen the soil beneath them, preventing compaction while still protecting the topsoil. The large root systems allow for water to flow much easier than a barren field where the soil compacts after the crops are harvested. If cover cropping is a practice you would be interested in, contact our office to learn more about the cost-share opportunities we have available.

If you want to learn more about conservation practices, check out “Conserving for the Future” on Page 5



Pictured: Rob Ogalla, Chairman of the Board, introducing the SWCD and beginning the workshop.



Pictured: Trenton Rader from NRCS discussing conservation projects.



Pictured: Local rye cover crop here in Will County.

Envirothon

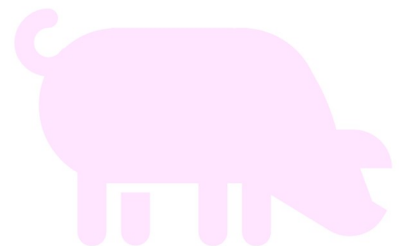
On March 14th, some of the brightest young minds from Illinois pooled their knowledge together for an environmental pow-wow known as Envirothon. Students from participating schools across northeastern Illinois showed up to put their wits to the test to try and solve different environmental situations and hands-on labs. Teams of students from each representing school handled issues in aquatics, forestry, soil and wildlife in exercises that challenge their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

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Agriculture Expo

In the same week, on March 16th, local educators, farmers and members from local government came together for the Agriculture Expo at the Joliet Junior College Weitendorf Agriculture Education Center. Several elementary schools from across the Joliet area came to learn about agriculture and the importance it plays in our society. The kids participated in hands on activities, such as learning how to grind wheat seeds into flour. They also observed farm animals brought in by local farmers. Volunteers from local high schools helped out as well, making the experience both connective and educational for all who attended.



Envirothon

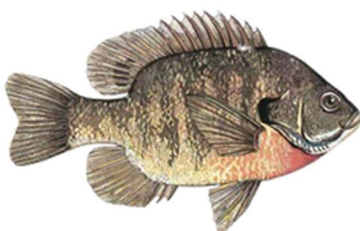
Adlai E. Stevenson High School, from Lake County Illinois, came away with the gold, achieving a score of 419 out of 540. Will and Cook County both had great participation as well. Our Will County representative - Plainfield Central High School, had 2 teams representing their school. They placed 15th and 16th respectively. Our southern Cook County representative - University of Chicago Laboratory School, also had 2 teams. The first team placed 3rd overall and 1st in all of Cook County, receiving the highest score in the competition for the soil station writing and lab. The second team from University of Chicago placed 19th overall and 5th for their county. We congratulate the efforts of all of these brilliant young environmentalists and wish the best of luck to Adlai E. Stevenson at the final state competition in Springfield in May.



Pictured: University of Chicago Lab School with their 3rd place trophy



Pictured: Autumn Blaze Maple



Pictured: Bluegill



Pictured: Triploid Grass Carp

Fish and Tree Sale 2023

The District's Spring Fish and Tree Sale has already come and gone. We had a wide variety of fish and trees available for sale this year. Our most popular orders for fish were Bluegill, Channel Catfish, Fathead Minnows and Triploid Grass Carp. Our most popular orders for trees were Eastern White Pine, Bailey's Red Osier Dogwood, Autumn Blaze Maple, Purple Salvia and American Hazelnut. Don't worry if you missed out on the sale this spring, we will have another in the fall with a wide variety of fish and trees to choose from. Whether you're looking to order something new or some familiar favorites, we always appreciate the support we receive from our community.

Conserving for the Future

So, you're looking to become familiar with some common conservation practices? Where do you start? Let's talk about some common practices and what they accomplish. A majority of the conservation practices we implement are not relatively new ideas, but have been lost over time as the landscape of farming has changed throughout the years. One of the most common environmental problems we face in northern Illinois is soil erosion. Soil erosion can occur from numerous avenues. It mostly occurs due to runoff from heavy rainfall and concentrated flow into an area.

In different areas of the state, such as central and southern Illinois, the warmer climate and flatter farmland allow for longer planting windows and better drainage. In Northern Illinois, the undulating hilly landscape and sporadic cold weather can lead to some rather challenging conditions. The slopes present throughout a number of farms in Will and South Cook counties create erosive conditions. Exposure to heavy rains allures water to erode loose soil, especially in a heavily tilled field. The erosion of this loose soil can develop significantly and lead to gullies seen in the pictures on this page. Gullies can substantially damage farmland and make it very difficult to navigate equipment through them. Sediment is commonly left at the bottoms of these gullies removing nutrients from crops that could have remained in the field with better drainage practices.

This is why the local SWCD assistance is important. There are cost share programs available to subsidize the cost of implementing solutions that tackle environmental issues like these. Examples of some common solutions include grassed waterways and terraces. The NRCS defines a grassed waterway as a shaped or graded channel that is established with suitable vegetation to convey surface water at a non-erosive velocity using a broad and shallow cross section to a stable outlet. The grass channel acts as a route for redirecting water to a stable outlet. This was already a common practice of farmers in the past when crops like oats or wheat were grown for livestock.

The NRCS defines a terrace as an earth embankment or a combination ridge and channel, constructed across the field slope. The purpose of a terrace is to manage runoff and trap sediment areas of a field eroded by excessive water and slope length. Terraces are placed in a contour along the slope of the hill to reduce the overall power as the water flows downhill. According to the University of Iowa, terraces can reduce phosphorus loss on average by 77%. The SWCD will offer free survey and design for any farm looking to treat a soil erosion problem regardless of whether or not they actually decide to go through with the construction of a conservation practice.



Pictured: Gully Found in Will County



Pictured: Image of an installed terrace

Scholarship Opportunities

The Will-South Cook SWCD prides itself on looking for ways to get involved in education and promoting sustainability to the next generation. We offer (3) \$1000.00 scholarships to high school seniors in the Will/South Cook area (see our website for information regarding South Cook boundary cut off) expecting to major in areas of study such as agriculture, natural resources or a related field. The period for this year's applications has already closed and the winners have been selected. Stay tuned for updates as to when the application period will open for next year. Feel free to contact us for more information at (815) 462-3106 x 3.



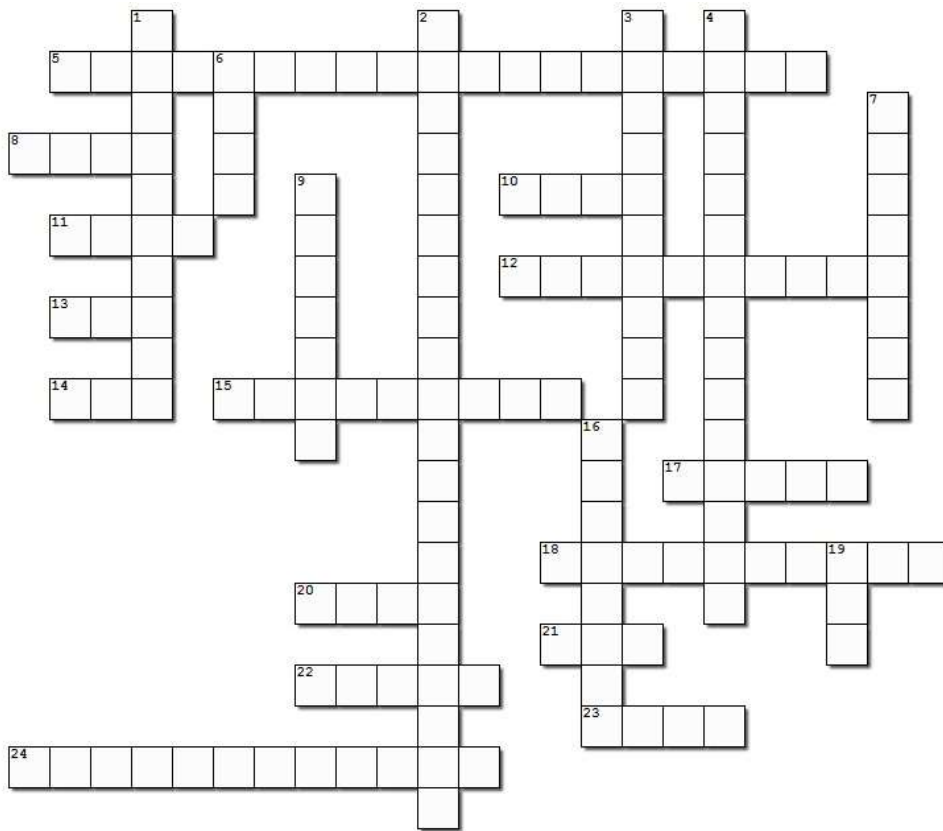
Urban Agriculture Updates

There have been several prominent developments in urban agriculture across the country. The Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Advisory Committee (UAIPAC) is a federal advisory committee designed to aid the USDA in developing resources and solutions for urban farmers. The committee regularly holds public hearings to discuss any updates or developments regarding urban agriculture issues and makes them available for the public to watch at any time. Their next public forum is April 18th at 2:00 PM Central Time, with the recording and notes available usually a couple days later. If you're an urban farmer looking to stay informed or discuss issues openly with the committee, this is an opportunity you won't want to miss out on.

The USDA is also accepting new applications for projects that aim to improve outreach to underserved urban communities and expand their access to conservation programs and services. They have set aside \$70 million for the NRCS to develop cooperative agreements with applicants for funding. Through these projects the USDA hopes to provide new opportunities for urban students and provide a new avenue for them to pursue careers in agriculture and conservation related sciences. Applications for these projects are due April 27th, and information for the form can be found on the USDA's website.

Upcoming Events

On Saturday April 22, the Village of New Lenox will be holding its annual Earth Day celebration. Vendors from across the area, including the Will/South Cook SWCD, will be there to help spread information on how we can help out our planet. Fun activities will be available for kids free of charge. The booths will offer a wide variety of information on current environmental issues including water conservation, food waste, coral reefs, and electric vehicles. With many hands-on demonstrations, this event will be a great educational opportunity for kids and adults.



Down

- 1. Trees planted to block strong breezes
- 2. State soil of Illinois
- 3. Happens after years of pressure placed on soil
- 4. Water, soil and trees are all considered to be a
- 6. A farmer's form of cash
- 7. Important ecological zone of rivers
- 9. decay of soil from wind, rain and heat
- 16. Important ground cover for gardens and farms
- 19. A type of report available from SWCD

Across

- 5. Legislation that founded the SWCD
- 8. A duck's bath and grocery store
- 10. Method that SWCD uses to evaluate sites
- 11. Measurement of farmland
- 12. Soil additive like nitrogen that can be a major threat to wetlands
- 13. Neighboring office across from SWCD
- 14. A geographer's favorite program
- 15. Byproduct of sewer discharge
- 17. Important ground cover for gardens and farms
- 18. Stretches from Channahon to Crete
- 20. The head of ag issues in the USA
- 21. Common enemy of the chicken
- 22. A go-to snack of horses
- 23. common sediment of beaches and rivers
- 24. Body of water in the North Midwest