

MASWCD institute cohort develops leadership skills, forges connections

Members of the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation District (MASWCD) [Leadership Institute's](#) 13th cohort are on pace to join the ranks of 300-some past participants from across the state who have expanded their professional networks and honed their collective skills to support each other in conservation work statewide. The last session of the yearlong institute is slated for this month.

The training is tailored to conservation professionals. Designed for soil and water conservation district staff and board supervisors, the training is also open to Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) staff and federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees.

"For me, it has been really perspective-bringing to get a deeper understanding of how conservation work is done across the state, and not just in my work area," said BWSR Board Conservationist Michelle Jordan, a member of the current cohort. "Now there are 28 other people statewide I would be completely comfortable calling with a question or to get their input on something."

Training includes



The 2022-23 MASWCD Leadership Institute cohort visited the Minnesota State Capitol in mid-March to meet with legislators. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, cohort members would also travel to the U.S. Capitol.

Photo Credit: Lisa Hinz, University of Minnesota Extension

assessments, interactive exercises, peer-to-peer sharing and networking. Guest speakers from other organizations share their experiences in leadership development. The institute

encourages participants to consider how they can contribute as leaders, regardless of where they fit in their organization's hierarchy, and encourages them to imagine how they



would like to grow their leadership skills.

MASWCD has partnered with the University of Minnesota Extension to offer the institute since 1996. The institute integrates local, state and federal agencies that work with conservation programs.

"What we garner from (the institute), is that the members build proficiency in such critical areas as communication, team-building and visionary leadership that provide them with the skills to do effective conservation work across Minnesota," MASWCD Executive Director LeAnn Buck said. "It has also been making for stronger soil and water districts including in the areas of healthier governance and leadership roles not only in (each SWCD's) community but also in the association."

The current cohort's 29 participants have met in person for several two- or three-day sessions at sites across the state. By late July, the group had completed one online session and six in-person

sessions. The seventh and final session is slated for Aug. 8-9 in Baxter.

“It’s just been a really good opportunity for me to see where other soil and water district folks are at,” said Pine County SWCD District Manager Paul Swanson, a member of the current cohort. “This has really provided me with a new perspective. ... We work so much better as a team, no matter if it’s a neighboring district or a district halfway across the state. Working together is so much more productive for us and we can be so much more successful.”

Trainers took on challenging topics such as dealing with conflict. Jordan said discussing that topic required participants to trust each other enough to share — an exercise that deepened their connection.

Other topics trainers addressed included beginning the leadership journey, the relationship between leading and following, understanding leadership style and the purpose of having a vision, and practicing effective communication and ethical decision-making. The training team consisted of University of Minnesota Extension staff. Additional speakers and panelists included staff from BWSR and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, state representatives, and other local, state and national leaders.

Shelly Binsfeld, a Sherburn SWCD Board supervisor and current cohort member, praised the organizers.



Participant Heather Donoho (left) and trainer Lisa Hinz paused for a photo during a high ropes course near Lanesboro.

Photo Credit: Shelly Binsfeld

“ It brought in my awareness of the different aspects of leadership and helped me build my confidence in who I am as a leader. ”

— Shelly Binsfeld, Sherburn SWCD Board supervisor

“They’re able to adapt to that cohort every year,” Binsfeld said. “They definitely have it all very planned out, but they’re so responsive to that group.”

Participants completed Myers-Briggs assessments to identify their leadership style and the styles of others, and then learned how to build upon each other’s strengths to best accomplish projects. Kaitlyn Miller, Minnesota NRCS easements program manager and a current cohort member, said the exercise challenged the

assumption that most people think alike.

“It’s been a really good experience and I’ve really enjoyed getting to meet all the people across the state,” Miller said. “I would highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in doing the program, not just for the leadership qualities that you get out of it, which I think are really valuable, but also the connections that you are making across the state.”

One memorable session for Miller and other

cohort members included a trip to the Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center near Lanesboro, where the group completed a high ropes course — an activity that built on the institute’s curriculum of courage, decision-making and leading.

Another highlight included a mid-March visit to the state capitol to observe a committee meeting about a bill related to BWSR’s work. Afterward, legislators spoke to the cohort about their work and the legislative process.

Feedback from attendees indicates that no matter their level of leadership, the experience gives them a better understanding of their personal leadership skills and how they work in team environments.

“I felt, too, that everybody is empowered to be a leader in whatever situation they are, and sometimes, even that leader is to be a great follower,” Binsfeld said. “So even to be the first follower is actually to be a leader, because they’re choosing who is a good leader.”

Part of the cohort experience involves understanding Minnesota’s varied natural resource issues, which range from urban settings to croplands, from groundwater issues in the southeast to forestry in the northeast.

The training underscored the importance of building and maintaining relationships and trust. One recurring theme: A person’s ability to impact positive outcomes is



Left: Class of 2023 participants, from left, Kittson SWCD District Outreach Specialist Heather Donoho, Clay SWCD Coordinator Amanda Lewis, Minnesota NRCS soil conservationist Teddy Moreno-Santos, Douglas SWCD Project Coordinator Andy Rice and Pine County SWCD Manager Paul Swanson discussed conflict case studies. **Middle:** From left: Cohort participants Yellow Medicine SWCD conservation technician Brayden Anderson, Lewis and Scott SWCD administrative assistant Kristin Weinandt participated in a session about facilitation skills and strategies. **Right:** Cohort members broke into small groups to participate in a cooperative activity. **Photo Credits:** Lisa Hinz, University of Minnesota Extension

often only as strong as the communities they've nurtured. Buck said some alumni have attained leadership positions, ranging from volunteering for a state association workgroup to serving on a

board of directors. "This is geared towards professional development for staff and districts, but really, this can be applied to every part of a person's life, whether it's your role

in your community, role in your family or role in any volunteer groups," Swanson said. "To see the growth in individuals has been an amazing thing, to see people become more confident in discussing

things that maybe would have been difficult at the beginning of these sessions ... and just the friendships that were developed amongst everybody in that group."