



# Bringing conservation to the next generation

## February 2016 Snapshots

When it comes to learning new things, hands-on experience is often the perfect way to bringing education to life. For the Southwest Minnesota Association of Conservation Districts, this means giving students the opportunity to get their hands dirty: seeing, touching, and even tasting what they're learning about. Since 1992, the 11-county coalition has provided a unique, interactive experience for the region's students to learn about and better understand the importance of our natural resources and make connections between themselves and the world in which they live.

Students from Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Rock, and Yellow Medicine counties gather annually in September for the Environmental Fair. The conservation districts who lead the event have provided environmental education to groups ranging in size from 1,000 to 2,700 students, and the fair has grown into a two-day event. To minimize the amount of travel districts have to make to attend, the Fair alternates between Lyon and Murray counties, and is open to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders so students don't miss out on the opportunity to attend.

The majority of the schools in the area participate – they're always eager to get it on the calendar. Yellow Medicine Soil and Water Conservation District Manager Lou Ann Nagel, part of the planning committee, says they work closely with districts to be as accommodating as possible. They provide the schools with pre-tests and post-tests so that districts can track what students learn. Some years they even survey teachers, trying to match up Fair sessions with what's in their curriculum when possible.

Educators and conservation professionals from the districts, state and federal conservation agencies, the University of Minnesota and more lead classroom-size groups through lessons about trees, soil, water quality, wetlands, recycling, native plants, watersheds, and the animals with whom we share our environment. The kids who attend get to experience both small-group, interactive sessions as well as large group presentations, the best of both worlds.

The partnerships between the organizing soil and water conservation districts, supporting agencies, and local businesses and organizations have brought award-winning experiential learning and environmental education



*Pictured, top: Eager students arrive for a day of environmental learning.*

*Bottom: Hands-on sessions make the subject matter come to life.*

to rural schools in southwestern Minnesota. The students leave the fair with a better understanding of their local environment and the importance of conservation. Those are lessons that will serve them for a lifetime.

“It’s a lot of time and commitment to organize every year but it’s absolutely worth it,” Nagel says. “It’s such a good hands-on experience for the kids – and their teachers – and it’s wonderful to see them get immersed in the experience and really enjoy themselves while learning more about the natural world.”