

Clay SWCD builds urban conservation



Left: Rain barrel-making workshops are among the ways the Clay Soil & Water Conservation District is reaching an audience through its Urban Conservation Program.

Below: Amanda Lewis is the Clay SWCD's district coordinator. She helps with the Urban Conservation Program.

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Clay SWCD



When you think of northwest Minnesota, sprawling urban landscapes might not spring to mind.

But in the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area, an urban center for northwest Minnesota and eastern North Dakota, the population increased nearly 30 percent between 2000 and 2017.

Census data for the Fargo-Moorhead Adjusted Urbanized Area show the population grew from 150,566 in 2010 to 195,430 in 2017. During the same period, the metro grew from 70 square miles to 122 square miles.

Fargo-Moorhead is still growing. Rapidly.

While much of the conservation efforts throughout the northwest appropriately focus on agricultural practices, the Clay Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD)



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— Amanda Lewis, Clay Soil & Water Conservation District

discovered an opportunity to engage a wider audience with its Urban Conservation Program.

To reach urban residents and recognize the importance of all water resources in the region, the SWCD staff has teamed up with local partners ranging from breweries to counties.

About 300 people attended Pollinator Pint Night in April, where they planted native species in peat pots and sampled a beer developed for the occasion. Clay SWCD partnered with Pheasants Forever, Moorhead's Junkyard Brewing Co., and Three Bears Honey Co. Part of the proceeds from the event will pay for signs marking an 8-acre, \$15,000 pollinator project that involves Clay County and Pheasants Forever.

Clay County acquired the 8-acre site on the Red River just south of Moorhead as part of a flood buyout. By late May, the overgrown yards were tilled and ready for planting. SWCD staff provided labor for tree removal and other prep work.

"It's an area that's sloughing really badly into the river," said Amanda Lewis, Clay SWCD district coordinator.

Tony Nelson, Clay SWCD-based Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist, said the 8-acre project helped raise awareness about pollinators.

"Pollinators are an important aspect of conservation that often go overlooked," Nelson said. "There has been a push not just in rural landscapes but to incorporate pollinator-friendly habitat in urban areas as well, which may not offer much value otherwise."

Pollinator Pint Night was the Urban Conservation Program's largest single event.

A second was planned for June at Legends Sports Bar & Grill, sponsored by Pheasants Forever and Clay SWCD, and featuring Fargo Brewing Co. offerings. Families can plant pollinator-friendly seeds to take home or to donate.

From January through May,



A Pollinator Pint Night raised funds for signs that will mark an 8-acre pollinator project on the Red River. The site just south of Moorhead city limits was tilled and ready for planting this spring.



Nelson

the SWCD reached 200 more people through hands-on workshops for urban residents to finish rain barrels and compost bins, and to get started with pollinator plantings. Clay SWCD and Cass County (North Dakota) Soil Conservation District staff and the local Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist led those community education classes with staff from River Keepers.

The SWCD's outreach grew out of a partnership with River Keepers, a Fargo-Moorhead nonprofit focused on awareness, appreciation and stewardship of the Red River. Other partners include Clay County; Moorhead and Hawley community education departments; the Fargo, Moorhead and West Fargo park districts; and the Minnesota Association of

Soil & Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD).

For the past three years, the SWCD local capacity initiative — with Clean Water Funds from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) — has supported the Urban Conservation Program. That funding — \$12,000 this year, \$10,000 each of the previous two years — covers materials and staff time devoted to workshops.

"The program has really taken off," Lewis said. "The interest has been phenomenal."

In 2017, the partners offered four workshops in Fargo-Moorhead — one rain barrel workshop and one compost bin workshop in each city. This year, interest jumped after the workshops were featured on the cover of the community education booklet (mailed in the dead of winter), and after SWCD staff appeared on a local TV segment about rain barrels.

The SWCD added more workshops for June and

July, which soon filled. Next season's workshops will appear in community education listings and on the Clay SWCD website and Facebook page.

This year the Urban Conservation Program expanded to Hawley, which offered its first compost, rain barrel and pollinator workshops. Lewis said she would like to see the program spread to more small towns.

Rain barrel-building workshops relay the benefits of reusing stormwater and lightening the load on sanitary sewer systems. Composting workshops highlight the value of reducing nutrient-loading from residential fertilizers. Two-day pollinator workshops encourage the use of native plants.

"We're targeting that urban area to reduce stormwater with our rain barrels," Lewis said, adding that the compost tumblers are meant to reduce the amount of food scraps sent to the landfill.