



Opening the door to conservation

March 2014 Snapshots

There are those that say that managing the landscape for pollutant control and reduction is just a matter of citizen education, as has been used for recycling programs. After all, both initiatives require changing long-time habits and taking positive individual action to make a difference, whether that is conservation of resources and energy or reductions in water pollution.

Staff at Crow Wing Soil and Water Conservation District appreciate the similarities but understand there are crucial differences as well. A typical recycling program involves a minimal investment of time and effort at home or work in sorting materials and preparing them for collection. Most of the real work is done behind the scenes between staff, facilities and contractors. Installation and management of pollution reduction practices, however, require landowner contact and assistance from the concept development stage through installation and most importantly, following up after installation to ensure success.

Installing Best Management Practices (BMPs), especially using grant funds, is much more interactive. Many folks installing BMPs haven't had much experience receiving assistance from a government agency to help manage their land. Design standards, signing a contract that includes a minimum 10-year commitment, and agreeing to inspections and maintenance all require explanations and coaching to make sure that taxpayer funding is transparent and accountable and the BMP implementation is successful. It can seem pretty daunting if you're unfamiliar with the process. There are a host of management decisions that can be quite complex - differentiating between a native plant and a weed, for instance, or deciding whether the mulch is sufficient and of the right material - which is why staff contact is so important.

Since 2010, the availability of Clean Water Land and Legacy funding from the Board of Water and Soil Resources to Crow Wing SWCD has led to a variety of projects aimed at shoreland management and runoff control. SWCD staff work with landowners from the very beginning, making connections, explaining options and answering questions. Beth Hippert, SWCD technician says: "The initial contact is extremely important. There are a lot of steps that must be followed and letting the landowner know that we'll be there to assist all the way through the project and beyond is critical to success"

Follow-up after installation has occurred is just as important. Grant assistance contracts to landowners generally have an inspection schedule that allows staff access to the property to see how things are going. It's more than just a requirement. It's also an opportunity to answer questions, make minor adjustments and reinforce the value of the project installation. It's not always possible to arrange a time when both landowner and staff can be present so the SWCD has begun using a new process to make sure this vital step is not neglected.

If the landowner is not present for an inspection, the SWCD leaves a door hanger to let the landowner know they were there, provide a few observations about what they found and contact information for any follow-up questions. Melissa Barrick, SWCD manager says that, "These door hangers have become an important method of communication with our landowners. We need to be respectful of their property and still accomplish the inspection requirements. This simple tool really helps us with landowner feedback and project success."

