

Southwest Prairie TSA buoys training



Left: A Technical Service Area 5 (TSA 5) crew leads survey and construction training. Adding a TSA 5 employee made it possible to keep up with training demands brought on by a spate of recent soil and water conservation district hires.

Below: Native grass seed drills and establishment were the topics of a recent training.

Courtesy Photos

Technical Service Area 5 (TSA 5) has a long, successful history of providing conservation engineering services to its 11 member soil

and water conservation districts, helping them improve and protect southwestern Minnesota's natural resources.



Until 2015, the workload had been manageable. TSA 5 engineers kept up with projects in Rock, Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Nobles, Murray, Pipestone, Redwood and Yellow Medicine Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs).

That changed when staff turnover brought an increased demand for services.

Over the past two years, the 11 SWCDs within TSA 5 — AKA the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area — hired more than 20 new SWCD



technicians and four new district managers. The SWCDs increasingly relied on TSA staff to assist with project

design and survey for existing practices. At the same time, TSA engineers were attempting to train the new SWCD staff to

survey and design their own projects.

The 2014 flood brought a wave of funding for best management practices. The Yellow Medicine One Watershed, One Plan project brought more conservation dollars to the area, but the new SWCD technicians lacked experience. And projects were stacking up as weather delays pushed construction back.

To help handle the increased workload, TSA 5 hired Tom Foerster, a recent South Dakota State University engineering graduate. Adding an employee provided immediate benefits to the 11 member SWCDs. Stationing Foerster in the Lincoln County SWCD office near TSA 5's northern boundary provided a more even distribution of TSA services throughout the work area.

But a gap in dedicated trainings remained, especially in the area of soil health practices.

To help fill that void, the TSA moved forward with an agreement for services with a private individual — an arrangement familiar to SWCDs but a first for TSA 5. Former Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employee Dawn Madison agreed to a unique contract for services with TSA 5. Madison interviewed all new area SWCD staff to develop a working inventory of training needs.

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on working with TSA 5

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results in self-confidence, broadened knowledge and increased creativity and skills — all of which we have seen in the time since we have begun this journey. The talent, education and foundation in people resources (were) here. However, by the (SWCD) supervisors creating this position, I believe it showed (SWCD) staff they were valued as individuals," Madison said.

"Secondary results have included improved communication with TSA staff, better survey skills and greater use of GPS survey instruments, and more desire to attain planning or approval authority. These staff and their ability to better work with the resource challenges in their counties is the greatest benefit and now we

have to work to keep the knowledge here," Madison said.

Over the past year, TSA staff and others developed and completed nine soil health trainings, two native vegetation trainings, and four engineering trainings.

As a result, six SWCD staff have secured job approval authority for a variety of conservation practices. Many more are working toward job approval authority. But all SWCD staff members are better equipped to assist landowners with their conservation goals.

"The trainings that we have done for the SWCD technicians (have) given them more confidence in their technical skills. The technical resources are out there, and now they feel more comfortable in using them," Rock County-based TSA 5 engineer Russell Hoogendoorn said, referring to GPS, design software and practice standards.

"It has given them a better understanding of what a conservation practice is, why we use one conservation practices over another, and how a conservation practice is implemented. It has also created better communication with farmers as well as other staff throughout Area 5. These trainings give the technicians experiences that will help further their careers," Hoogendoorn said.