

Empowering staff, fostering collaboration



Left: West Polk SWCD District Manager Nicole Bernd (center) participates in a panel discussion during the Oct. 31 BWSR Academy session "Beyond Planning: Watershed-based Funding." BWSR named Bernd the 2019 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee in December during MASWCD's annual convention in Minneapolis.
Photo Credit: Mary Juhl, BWSR

West Polk SWCD District Manager Nicole Bernd named 2019 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee



Twenty-five years ago, Nicole Bernd took a temporary office filing job with West Polk Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD). Right away, she knew she wanted to stay long term. Bernd followed the temporary job with an SWCD internship, then spent 12 years working as a district technician.

She became district manager in 2006, leading a staff of three full-time employees and shared regional USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff.

"Nicole has a very effective way of communicating with employees to get everyone on the same page, and then allowing us to set our own goals and formulate our own plans to get work done," said Morgan Torkelson, district technician. "Her default is to approach every situation as an opportunity to work with people and promote friendship and professional cooperation."

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) named Bernd the



Nicole Bernd

2019 Outstanding Soil and Water District Employee on Dec. 9 at the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts' (MASWCD) annual convention in Minneapolis.

Colleagues said Bernd has a knack for making people feel respected and heard. Her infectious laugh and natural charisma make her approachable and easy to work with, district staff said.

“When you put a little extra effort and time into getting to know the people, listening to people and creating that relationship, you can do extraordinary things,” Bernd said. “It’s all about kindness, consideration and being respectful to others.”

Bernd has played an essential role in two One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) efforts. She facilitated the Wild Rice/Marsh Watershed 1W1P and has been a major contributor to the Red Lake River 1W1P process as partners move toward plan implementation. Area conservation groups embarking on similar planning processes have invited Bernd to share her expertise.

“(SWCDs) used to compete against each other more than we might want to admit because of competitive grant processes,” Bernd said. “With One Watershed, One Plan, it’s pulling us together to work together rather than compete. There are growing pains that come with that, but once you face your fears, take what you learned and move forward, the progress from that is really amazing to watch.”



West Polk SWCD Manager Nicole Bernd discusses the benefits of Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easements with Governor Mark Dayton on Aug. 24, 2016, during a BWSR Board tour in northwestern Minnesota. **Photo Credit:** BWSR

In addition to her work on 1W1P, Bernd and the SWCD staff served as fiscal agent and project manager for a multi-million dollar water quality and habitat project in 2018 on the Sand Hill River. Staff said Bernd’s sound fiscal and project management was a factor in completing the project under budget.

“She excels at outreach, strengthening partnerships and building new partnerships,” said Aaron Habermehl, district technician. “She’s certainly supports the endeavors each technician wants to pursue. We provide a foundation that allows her to assist other counties and groups, and she is consistent in recognizing the work of her staff.”

Staff said she’s fostered partnerships both within and outside her SWCD to advance conservation efforts. Bernd also coordinated the Minnesota Geological Survey Polk County Atlas project and serves as president of the Northwest Association of Conservation District Employees (NACDE).

“Local conservation staff go above and beyond every day to preserve and protect our water and soil resources,” BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke said. “Nicole Bernd demonstrates professional excellence alongside a commitment to collaborative planning processes that benefit watersheds both within and beyond the district she leads.”

“In the natural resources realm, we as professionals are expected to manage these resources that are free to everybody,” Bernd said. “It’s our job to make sure they’re still available to generations to come.”

Each year, BWSR celebrates the excellent work accomplished by local government staff members who advance conservation efforts throughout the state. In addition to the award for Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee award, BWSR honors an Outstanding Soil and Watershed District Employee during the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts (MAWD) annual conference in December.