BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

BWSR strives to increase diversity in conservation





Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) staff this summer worked with 16 student fellows pursuing environment and natural resources careers in an effort to increase diversity in the state's workforce and combat challenges faced by women and people of color.

The Increasing Diversity in Environmental Careers (IDEC) program is a strategic partnership among BWSR, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa. The collaboration aims to reduce and eliminate barriers inhibiting underrepresented students from completing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) degrees and getting jobs in the field. The **Environment and Natural Resources** Trust Fund paid for the project; a total of \$1.28 million was allocated to the DNR to execute three separate cohorts serving a total of 43 students.

The program is one strategy to tap into a diverse labor market. But IDEC goes beyond simply developing a pipeline of potential employees — it's also about mentoring the next generation of environment and natural resources professionals.

"Research has long shown the benefits of a more diverse and inclusive workforce: increased range of ideas, broader spectrum of creativity, a wider talent pool and better understanding and reflection of the entire population that the state of Minnesota serves," said BWSR Assistant Director Angie Becker Kudelka. "The conservation workforce does not reflect the diversity of the state, and BWSR's participation in the IDEC program is one way we're trying to address inequities and increase access to opportunities."

During the first summer internship in 2020, IDEC fellows spent time with

The first cohort of Increasing Diversity in Environmental Careers student fellows gathered with two program staff members for a group photo in fall 2019. BWSR staff worked with these students for eight days in August, giving them a glimpse into the day-to-day work involved with conservation careers. **Photo Credit: Conservation Corps** Minnesota & Iowa

BWSR, DNR and MPCA staff. Fellows learned about each agency and could explore different career paths. The internship was moved online to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19. Fellows spent eight days learning from BWSR staff in August.

Many BWSR staff members developed and delivered remote internship activities this year by leading sessions and organizing the internship experience.

"Our guiding principle in designing the internship activities was to provide a realistic and engaging work experience," said BWSR Legislative Coordinator Megan Lennon, who leads the IDEC initiative at BWSR.

BWSR staff covered topics including conservation funding in Minnesota, Clean Water Fund grant application writing and review, wetland restoration and design, and communicating conservation outcomes on social media.

"Because BWSR is much smaller than the other (participating) agencies, I felt there was a deeper connection between the presenters as most knew each other, and I appreciated the sense of community," one student said in a post-internship evaluation.

Other students said they appreciated the passion

How do you feel about the virtual internship so far?

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Student fellows created the above word cloud during a meet-and-greet event with BWSR staff on Aug. 13. **Graphic Credit:** Megan Lennon, BWSR

displayed by BWSR staff, and the opportunities for handson learning. Most BWSR sessions included interactive activities and assignments.

"BWSR bumped engagement up to a 100 since we had assignments to turn in. It gave me a really insightful look into some of their work and what a normal day would look like," another student said in the survey.

BWSR Wetland Specialist Ben Meyer sought out conservation professionals from diverse backgrounds to interact with students during his introduction to wetland conservation session. Guest speakers included a first-generation American, a Mexican-American woman who works as an environmental consultant for a private engineering company, a Hmong-American conservation officer and an African American man who works for a watershed district. Each guest speaker had 15 minutes to talk about their backgrounds and career paths. A candid and lively Q&A session followed.

"I was surprised by the obstacles that they each had to overcome, which is something, as a white male, that I had never experienced," Meyer said. "It felt disingenuous for me to lecture to the fellows without this shared experience from the guest speakers."

The response from fellows was overwhelmingly positive, Meyer said.

"I learned not only from the fellows, but from the



diversity of the guest speakers that they bring interesting backgrounds and challenges that had to be overcome, which brings different perspectives when communicating with the public, landowners, contractors and coworkers," Meyer said. "It definitely made me more conscious and aware when I communicate with others."

BWSR plans to host another cohort of students next year. Students from the 2020 cohort will be placed with one of the partner agencies for a full-time summer internship.