BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

2021 December Snapshots

Online format boosts BWSR Academy attendance



University of Minnesota Extension Educator Anne Sawyer performed a slump test during the session "Learning from Critters: Soil Biology and Interpreting Indicators: Part I," on Oct. 27 during BWSR Academy. Slump tests compare how the same type of soil under different management conditions behaves when saturated. **Photo Credits:** BWSR



BWSR Academy saw record attendance during the annual training event's second online run.

More than 500 people attended the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' BWSR Academy Oct. 26-28, an increase of nearly 100 people from the previous year. The number of sessions offered nearly doubled, increasing from 24 in 2020 to 40 this year. BWSR waived enrollment fees due to the online format.

"Online formats do reduce many of the traditional barriers to participation," said Rice Creek Watershed District Communication and Outreach Coordinator Beth Carreno, who led a session on communications planning.

BWSR Academy aims to provide local government staff with high-quality training that maintains and

improves their delivery of conservation work and meets the shared expectations of BWSR and local resource management boards. Trainers typically include BWSR staff, local government staff and conservation professionals from private industry and nonprofits.

BWSR Academy organizers scheduled trainings only in the mornings to reduce screen fatigue and allow attendees to work in the afternoons. Training sessions covered a wide range of topics such as budgeting, grants management, soil health practices, GIS software and communication.

"I think the diversity of training on the issues and topics is important because many of our local government partners are smaller organizations who lack to the ability to directly create training on their own," said BWSR Board Conservationist



This year's BWSR Academy offered 40 sessions on topics such as soil health, grants management, pollinators, budgeting and communications. The above screenshots offer a glimpse into a variety of training sessions.

Jason Weinerman, who co-hosted a session for new employees with BWSR Board Conservationist Jennifer Mocol-Johnson. "Having a larger event that brings in partners from across the state allows participants to explore the issues from many different perspectives."

Trainers used WebEx annotation tools, polls, games (including a conservation-themed rendition of "Jeopardy!"), live demonstrations and other strategies to make the virtual training sessions interactive. Annotation tools allow participants to write or draw on a community "whiteboard" to share ideas and respond to questions.

"As a presenter, I was able to use interactive strategies in my session," Carreno said. "These are good opportunities to connect with your audience, but it doesn't replace the realtime feedback a presenter gets from engagement, body language, and active discussion."

While the online format offers benefits, it also creates challenges.

"My preference is to offer field-based training sessions where participants can learn with all their senses and converse with one another, sharing their experiences. With the online format of BWSR Academy, I tried to curate a learning experience that felt like an intimate field training with lots of high-quality photos and pauses throughout to solicit discussion," said Karin Jokela, Farm Bill pollinator conservation planner with the Xerces Society, who cofacilitated a two-part training on pollinator diversity, habitat and restoration on conservation lands.

BWSR Academy first moved to a virtual format last year to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19. Minnesota case numbers and ongoing concerns about safety led organizers to opt for a second virtual year in 2021.

Mocol-Johnson agreed that the virtual format presents both opportunities and challenges.

"There's a lot of energy that occurs when you are in person and providing training. That style of energy has to change in the virtual world," Mocol-Johnson said. "I think the best thing about virtual training is it opens opportunity up to a whole new audience that previously did not attend Academy."

BWSR plans to resume BWSR Academy in-person next year.