

# Over a decade of building Minnesota's conservation workforce



Since 2015, three contribution agreements have provided support for the TTCP. The most recent agreement, covering 2024-2029, provides about \$9.5 million. Each agreement is funded through a 50-50 split between Minnesota's Clean Water Fund from BWSR and federal USDA NRCS Farm Bill funds.



Minnesota NRCS  
website: [www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov)



**Left:** In August 2023, NRCS Soil Conservationist Chris Engh performed a soil health assessment during a conservation planning course at the "homework farm" operated by Dan Griffith, south of Morris, to determine whether water-stable aggregates were present in the field. **Top right:** Conservation professionals took pasture clippings to estimate forage production during an advanced grazing management training in August 2022 at the University of Minnesota's North Central Research and Outreach Center in Grand Rapids. **Bottom right:** In August 2023, (from left) NRCS Soil Conservationist Geoff Popken, Mower SWCD conservation technician Jessica Bulman and Meeker SWCD conservation technician Jaden Hunter attended a conservation planning course at the University of Minnesota's West Central Research and Outreach Center in Morris. Popken practiced using a clinometer to measure tree height. **Photo Credits:** Jon Sellnow, BWSR

What began as a grassroots partnership forged to better prepare conservation professionals to work with landowners has, over the past decade, become a nationally recognized training program. From 2016 through 2025, the Technical Training and Certification Program (TTCP) delivered nearly 86,700 hours

of training to about 5,000 conservation professionals.

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff — along with university, agency and nonprofit partners — offered that training in 553 sessions.

TTCP is a shared statewide training effort that develops technical knowledge, supports professional development and ensures conservation staff across the state are working from the same knowledge base.

BWSR provides training staff and coordination, while NRCS



**Left:** Presenter Jeff Duchene, NRCS state grazing specialist, led a conservation planning course in July 2024 in Morris. **Middle:** Karin Jokela of the Xerces Society and Jeff Kalin, former NRCS state wildlife biologist led a conservation planning course in July 2024 in Morris. **Right:** Conservation professionals gathered in a field in Morris in July 2024 as part of a conservation planning course led by Stephanie McLain, NRCS state soil health specialist. **Photo Credits:** Ryan Galbreath, NRCS

contributes technical expertise and helps coordinate training with its staff. BWSR has five TTCP trainers: three specialize in engineering and two in resource conservation.

The program was created to fill a need for a more organized approach to training. In about 2013, a group including representatives from BWSR, NRCS, the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) and the Minnesota Association of Conservation District Employees (MACDE) discussed how to better prepare the conservation workforce.

“We had about 30 to 40 individuals from different levels and different agencies come together and talk about what is needed in a training program and an employee development program,” said Ryan Galbreath, NRCS state resource conservationist. “It wasn’t developed from the top down. It was actually from all of us putting our input together.”

Those conversations revealed that training opportunities varied between organizations and regions, making it difficult

to ensure conservation professionals were getting consistent training. At the same time, Galbreath said many experienced staff were retiring, creating a need to prepare the next generation of professionals.

The partners responded by creating the TTCP.

The program has grown over the past decade from a program led by a single coordinator into a statewide training network supported by an extensive online learning library and strong partnerships. Training topics have included conservation planning, engineering, soil health, habitat management, pollinator conservation and nutrient management.

A key part of the program is the [Minnesota Core Competency Conservation Training \(MNC3\)](#) online learning space, [which offers Minnesota-specific training modules](#) that participants can complete at their own pace.

In addition to training, the program supports professional certification and [Job Approval Authority](#) by helping conservation professionals build the technical knowledge needed to design and

approve conservation practices.

Training has resulted in around 130 individuals receiving new or increased Job Approval Authority each year since 2023.

The program has also supported growth in [planner certification](#) at multiple levels. For example, the number of level 1 certifications earned increased from 79 in August 2024 to 129 in January 2026, driven in part by local government units preparing for programs such as the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

The TTCP has become an important part of training new employees.

“The point of our program is to help new conservation professionals build the technical knowledge and the practical skills they need to succeed,” said Jon Sellnow, BWSR TTCP coordinator. “They’re often coming from college and stepping into positions where they need to understand how soil and water conservation districts and NRCS work, how to work with private landowners, identify problems, develop alternative treatments

and apply the appropriate conservation practices.”

Andy Albertsen, Swift County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) manager, said every new employee completes the program’s core competency modules.

“It provides that good baseline and background information in terms of the roles that SWCDs play in the conservation world,” Albertsen said.

The TTCP has evolved as conservation work has evolved. Specialized learning tracks now support staff working in areas such as wildlife habitat and other emerging topics. Employees can follow recommended learning pathways tailored to their position.

Albertsen said that approach accelerates new hires’ productivity.

“It definitely allowed things to move along quite a bit faster,” Albertsen said.

Minnesota landowners benefit, too.

Well-trained staff are better prepared to answer technical questions, recommend appropriate

conservation practices and connect landowners with additional resources.

The TTCP has attracted attention beyond Minnesota. Sellnow said the program has earned a strong reputation nationally.

“The training program we have in Minnesota is the premier technical training program for the local conservation staff

for districts and NRCS employees in the nation. It’s a well-respected, well-known program,” Sellnow said.

Galbreath said he and Sellnow have outlined the program to groups in other states. In January 2021, they gave a virtual presentation to a national NRCS audience. In April 2022, they presented at a national conference attended by about 400

people, and in October 2024, the program, was presented at a National Association of State Conservation Agencies (NASCA) meeting in Duluth.

Looking into the future, TTCP leaders expect training to continue to evolve as technologies, agricultural practices and resource concerns change.

“The next phase is to take

what we’ve done, improve on it, to better meet the needs of our seasoned staff as well,” Galbreath said. “What I hope in the future is to continue what we have, but also make continual improvements to meet the changing needs of conservation professionals.”

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BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.