BWSR Academy: Sharing conservation knowledge, strengthening partnerships







At BWSR Academy, expert trainers guide the learning experience — but some of the most valuable takeaways are exchanged among peers sitting across the table from one another.

"The peer learning and network-building is what makes BWSR Academy so valuable," said Ann Lewandowski, research and outreach coordinator for the University of Minnesota's Water Resources Center, who led the training session "Understanding Farmers to Improve Your Soil Health Outreach" at this year's BWSR Academy. "So much of the important content is not simple facts. It's about developing problem-solving skills. A lot of the skills and knowledge are already in the room — but it takes a well-designed session to help participants ask the right questions, find the resources and practice getting the information they need."

The annual training event organized by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) for local government staff aims to provide relevant, cost-effective training that conservation professionals can apply directly to their work.


Radke

"Our priority with BWSR Academy is to offer training sessions that improve technical skills and administrative expertise that are useful in implementing BWSR-sponsored programs, or activities directly tied to BWSR's work," said BWSR Training Coordinator Barbara Radke, who leads the effort to organize BWSR Academy.

This year's BWSR Academy took place Oct. 20-22 at Cragun's Conference Center near Brainerd. More than 420 conservation professionals from across Minnesota attended more than 60 sessions over the course of three days. Sessions were organized into seven categories, or tracks: fiscal management, organizational capacity, outreach, programs, technical, wetland and soils, and workshops. Topics included soil health, forestry, BWSR grants, pollinator protection, biodiversity, professional networking and photography. BWSR staff also held office hours throughout the event for

From left: *More than 420 conservation professionals from across Minnesota attended BWSR Academy Oct. 20-22 near Brainerd. Jared House, BWSR soils programming coordinator, discussed programs where flat-rate payments apply, and how they should be structured and used during the Oct. 20 session "SWCD Flat-rate Payment Policies," co-presented with Jacquelynn Olson of the Chisago SWCD. Jodi DeJong-Hughes of the University of Minnesota Extension and Andrew Johnson of the Middle Fork Crow River Watershed District hefted examples of machinery used in various tillage systems Oct. 21 during "Mastering Soil Health Equipment." DeJong-Hughes and Craig Kesteloot of Sterling Equipment & Repair led the session.* **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR







Left: *During "The Very Basics of Nutrient Management," an Oct. 20 BWSR Academy session, Tyler Knutson, second from right, BWSR resource training conservationist, discussed nutrients in pastures with (from left) Jeremiah Timm of the Yellow Medicine River Watershed District, Savanna Anderson of the Wadena SWCD and Mark Koep, Douglas County feedlot officer.* **Middle:** *From left: BJ Werk of West Otter Tail SWCD, Alyssa Schill of Clay SWCD and Ariel Arno of Becker County SWCD explained how nitrogen and potassium are used in corn fields.* **Right:** *From left: Jim McKay of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Kali Lawver of the Beltrami SWCD and Jake Cleys of the Stearns Conservation District responded to a comment.*

local government staff to stop in and ask questions.

"The reason people go to BWSR Academy is to talk to each other, not necessarily just to hear from one person or expert," said Crow Wing Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Manager Melissa Barrick, who attended this year's Academy and has served as a trainer in the past. "I think it's a great opportunity to hear from and meet different partners that we work with across the spectrum. It connects you to new resources, new ideas and new perspectives for looking at the issues you're facing."

Waseca SWCD Manager Mark Schaetzke has attended BWSR Academy every year since it began in 2008. He said the longer breaks and mealtimes also offer ample opportunities to connect with colleagues and continue conversations that began around the training table.

"It puts you in a room with other people who want to learn about the same thing, people you maybe would never interact with outside of BWSR Academy," Schaetzke said. "In general, our field does not have trade secrets, and you can learn from others and trust what they have to say at face value. It's good to have a chance to interact with some of the people you work with, especially when it doesn't need to be 100% about work."

Planning will soon begin for next year's BWSR Academy. Each February, the BWSR Academy team surveys past attendees to solicit ideas and input to help develop tracks and topics. Radke said the goal is to offer training sessions targeting local government staff's highest priority training needs.

Lewandowski said the emphasis on attendee-contributed ideas and topics helps promote a more engaged audience.

"I love how attentive the participants are," Lewandowski said. "It's rare to see people straggling in late, skipping sessions, or dividing their attention. Clearly, this is worth their while."



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> — Melissa Barrick, Crow Wing SWCD manager

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