

'A credential that means something'



Conservation staff attended June 2019 trainings related to soil health in Blooming Prairie, top left, and in Mora, bottom left and right. Soil health trainings are one requirement for receiving the conservation planner certification. Training was offered by NRCS in partnership with BWSR's Technical Training and Certification Program. **Photo Credits:** BWSR

Conservation planner certification benefits landowners, enhances SWCD services



Three soil and water conservation district employees in Mower and Martin counties recently completed a rigorous process to become certified conservation planners.

Obtaining the conservation planner certification is no small task. The process involves roughly 250 hours of training that includes online and in-person sessions, exams, and the development of three conservation plans. Training is offered by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Technical Training and Certification Program (TTCP). Participation by soil and water conservation staff is voluntary.

"It's a credential that means something to folks," said James Fett, watershed technician for Mower

Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), who received his certification in June after working toward it for three years. "It demonstrates a level of competency that landowners see. They know we're able to get the job done."

Certified conservation planners can write conservation plans — either for a specific resource concern or to make recommendations across an entire farming operation — without supervision. They must demonstrate a strong knowledge of assessment tools, the ability to identify resource concerns and be equipped to write conservation plans for a variety of land uses. Conservation planners must have Job Approval Authority (JAA) for conservation practices commonly used to treat resource concerns in their work area.

Mower SWCD Manager Justin Hanson said that having certified conservation planners on his staff enhances the services the SWCD can offer landowners since a conservation planner can oversee every step in the process of identifying a resource concern and developing a plan to address it. In addition to Fett, Mower SWCD Watershed Conservationist Paul Hunter also received his certification in June.

“I know that when the guys are out working with a producer, they can go forward with a great deal of confidence in their abilities,” Hanson said. “If they have confidence in the field, that’s going to be a major selling point to producers they’re working with. It will hopefully help us gain additional practices and opportunities.”

Hunter received his certification after about a year and a half of training. Those pursuing certification can work at their own pace by completing a series of nine training modules. As part of his training, Hunter wrote conservation plans to implement cover crops and a grassed waterway on two separate properties. His final conservation plan took a whole-farm approach, recommending a variety of practices such as cover crops, brush management and reduced tillage to address resource concerns on a Mower County farm.

“The big thing is, it really helps our office to keep everything in house. It’s easier if we can complete an entire plan,” Hunter said. “We can move the whole process along more quickly if we are certified.”

Hanson said having multiple conservation planners on his staff helps build trust with the people the SWCD serves.

“All of our work comes back to trust, whether we’re working with the public, landowners, the community or partners,” Hanson said.



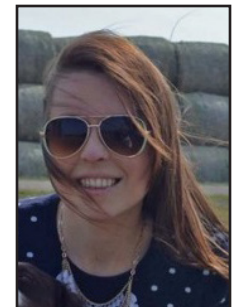
Fett



Hanson



Hunter



Neusch

Hanson said he values creating a supportive work environment that will help staff members feel confident in pursuing conservation planner certifications.

“The secret sauce is all about our staff and their ability to selflessly work together,” Hanson said. “It picks the whole organization up. Everyone benefits.”

Certification is offered at three levels: apprentice conservation planner, certified conservation planner and master conservation planner. Those seeking to obtain conservation planner certification must first be certified as apprentice conservation planners. In Minnesota, 14 people have received their apprentice conservation planner certification, 187 have become certified conservation planners, and two have achieved their master conservation planner certificate.

In Martin County, Blue Earth River Watershed Conservation Planner Hannah Neusch received her conservation planner certification in January after working toward it for a little more than a year. Neusch said her training prepared her to help landowners compare conservation programs such as the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the state-federal Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) to find the best fit for their operation.

“It takes a lot of time, energy, and training to understand the nuances of planning holistically over the entire



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operation, how to actively listen to a landowner, then how to take their ideas and goals and fit them within the framework of the living document — which is the plan,” Neusch said. “Being a certified planner shows that you are dedicated to always learning and understanding new ways of thinking, but also comprehending and utilizing the basic aspects of agriculture in the best interest of our landowners.”

BWSR Technical Training and Certification Program Coordinator Jon Sellnow said that the training goes beyond equipping conservation staff to write conservation plans — they must also develop relationship building and customer service skills that help put conservation on the ground. Conservation planners must be able to discuss concerns with clients to determine their objectives, explain the benefits of conservation, and aid in the decision making process that will improve natural resources and allow the farming operation to endure.

“You have to have meaningful dialogue with private landowners to complete the conservation planning process,” Sellnow said. “Becoming a conservation planner is an intense process, but when technical staff finally get certified it is truly something to celebrate.”