

Conservation Workforce Development in Great Lakes States

NEEDS & OPPORTUNITIES

SINCE THE LATE 1930S, PRIVATE LANDOWNERS in the United States have been served by a nationwide system of local conservation agencies known variously as conservation districts, land conservation departments, and soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs).

SWCDs play an essential role in protecting water quality in the Great Lakes region. In addition to other work, SWCDs work with agricultural producers and communities to implement conservation practices that stop nutrients from entering waterways.

Students learn from a local conservation technician. Photo by the Ohio Federation of Soil & Water Conservation Districts



Conservation district staff meet with landowners. Photo by the Ohio Federation of Soil & Water Conservation Districts



SWCDs operate with varying access to resources such as staff, equipment, funding, and training. This can make it challenging to promote broad adoption of the practices needed to reduce nutrient pollution and build a resilient Great Lakes basin.

To understand these opportunities and challenges for SWCDs, a study is being conducted by the Great Lakes Commission with researchers from the Ohio State University and bolstered by the expertise of state conservation district associations for each of the eight Great Lakes states. This study will identify the obstacles that most significantly limit the effectiveness of SWCDs and document how these obstacles vary among SWCDs in the region. The project will further highlight the conditions under which SWCDs overcome these obstacles, with a particular focus on the recruitment and retention of talented conservation professionals.



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Specific research questions that the team seeks to answer include:

- What brings people to work with local districts and what encourages them to stay?
- As duties evolve, what education, training, and other experiences best support meaningful relationships with private landowners and other customers?
- How can Great Lakes states, counties, and municipalities support this work, to protect and restore the Great Lakes and grow resilience in the regional agricultural economy?

STATE	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS IN STATE	NUMBER OF DISTRICTS IN GREAT LAKES BASIN	CONSERVATION DISTRICT ASSOCIATION
Illinois	97	3	Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Indiana	92	10	Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Michigan	75	75	Michigan Association of Conservation Districts
Minnesota	88	5	Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
New York	58	26	New York Association of Conservation Districts
Ohio	88	33	Ohio Federation of Soil & Water Conservation Districts
Pennsylvania	66	1	Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts
Wisconsin	72	29	WI Land+Water



Becker SWCD staff, an NRCS partner, and a landowner out in the field after no-tilling a field of corn. Photo by Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources



Dakota SWCD technicians installing a lakeshore stabilization project. Photo by Dakota SWCD (Minnesota)

Additional information including a list of team members, historical reports, and publications are available at www.glc.org/work/cwd

