

10 REASONS TO SAY YES TO ILLINOIS' SOIL and WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Illinois's 98 soil conservation districts face a tremendous challenge as they work to keep our farmland productive and our water supplies clean and healthy for all citizens to enjoy. Established over half a century ago in response to the devastating soil erosion conditions brought on by the Dust Bowl, Illinois's soil and water conservation districts (SWCD's) are part of a nationwide network numbering more than 3,000. As independent, local units of government, districts involve citizens in soil conservation and water quality programs, both in rural areas as well as in our towns and cities. In Illinois, this local leadership has proven invaluable in helping to preserve our precious soil and water resources.

In Illinois, local soil and water conservation districts have been called upon to play an ever greater role in protecting our natural resources by working with farmers, business and local governments. This new emphasis comes at a time when districts are struggling to keep existing pollution prevention programs afloat in the face of dwindling federal, state and local resources. Now more than ever, soil and water conservation districts need your support to help carry out these important programs-everyone benefits from clean water and protecting productive farmland.

Here are ten more reasons to support Illinois's soil and water conservation districts.

1. Citizen-Oriented

Illinois's 98 soil and water conservation districts were created by state law in the 1930s to involve local citizens in conservation planning and erosion and sediment control programs. Districts function independently through a five-member Board of Directors. As a political subdivision of state government, they exercise public powers and receive guidance and assistance from the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Although districts occupy the same boundaries as counties, they are not part of county government, nor do districts have local taxing authority. Thus, their staff and operating budgets are funded through a combination of state, federal and local assistance. It is this unique three-way partnership that enables districts to carry out their mission.

2. Proven Track Record

Illinois' soil and water conservation districts have a proven track record in addressing the needs of the counties they serve. Supported in part by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Illinois Department of Agriculture and local governments, districts provide information and technical assistance to farmers and other landowners, developers, businesses and local governments to help correct and avoid natural resource-related problems. They oversee a range of water quality protection efforts to enhance farming operations, prevent flooding, safeguard streams and reservoirs,

foster wildlife habitat, and address natural resource impacts from urban growth. A casual glance within your own community will attest to the work quietly being performed by Illinois' 98 soil and water conservation districts. Farm fields and streams protected from erosion and nutrient pollution, new developments and shopping centers outfitted with appropriate sediment and stormwater controls, and a strong, conservation minded agricultural industry are among the accomplishments of Illinois' soil and water conservation districts.

3. Cost Effective Tool

The widespread crop damage caused by the Dust Bowl brought national attention to the effects of soil erosion and led to the creation of soil and water conservation districts. Eroding soil not only decreases farm productivity, but contributes to flooding and pollution of our streams and drinking water supplies. More recently it has been discovered that eroding soil can also transport nutrients contained in fertilizers and animal wastes off the land and into our waterways, where they can cause additional water quality problems. By preventing soil, nutrients and other pollutants from entering waterways, soil and water conservation districts reduce the need for costly remedial actions. And, by encouraging sound management practices, districts often improve farm productivity and bottom line results for agriculture producers, while ensuring an uninterrupted food supply for citizens.

4. One Stop Access to Government

Soil and water conservation districts carry out many federal and state mandates at the local level. The 1985 and 1990 Federal Food Security Acts mandated conservation plans be developed with assistance by the local SWCD's for all highly erodible lands as a provision for certain federal benefits. Conservation plans are also required for certain state programs. On the financial front, SWCD staff help producers determine costs for installing individual best management practices (BMPs) and eligibility for both state and federal cost share assistance. Assistance with applications, project design and layout, construction reviews and payment claims is also provided. In most counties, districts serve as a one-stop shop for farmers seeking a range of financial and technical assistance services to meet both production and environmental stewardship needs.

5. Technical Know-How

In rural areas, soil and water conservation district staff help landowners develop comprehensive farm plans featuring a range of best management practices to prevent soil erosion, manage animal wastes, control runoff from farm fields, and protect water quality. Districts are at the heart of Illinois' conservation partnership, drawing on the technical expertise of USDA and county staff to assure that plans and practices are designed to meet the standards and specifications necessary to be effective. SWCD's also develop comprehensive soil surveys to assist local governments with growth and development issues.

6. Not Just For Farmers Anymore

Early conservation efforts were aimed chiefly at farmers, the principle stewards of the land. Today we realize that development activities in our cities and suburbs- not just farmlands-can contribute to erosion and sedimentation problems in our waterways. Unmanaged rainwater runoff can carry sediment, fertilizers, pesticides, debris, and oil into our streams and rivers across Illinois. Today's soil and water conservation districts serve a variety of "non-traditional" audiences, including municipal officials, developers and a whole new client group-suburban homeowners.

7. Local Presence Statewide

Soil and water conservation districts are the only conservation and natural resource agency with a local presence statewide. This widespread geographic coverage helps to promote the broadest possible impact in terms of natural resources protection, while at the same time, retaining the ability to work on-on-one with local producers and citizens. More recently, the benefits of statewide coverage has allowed SWCD's to work collaboratively on watershed or other related issues which crossover geographic or political boundaries.

8. A Trusted Source For Consumers

Farmers believe in soil and water conservation districts, viewing them as a trusted source for governmental assistance. Perhaps one reason for this perception is the fact that many of the men and women who serve on the governing bodies of districts are farmers themselves. They understand the issues and concerns facing small business owners, as well as local natural resource issues, farming methods and county priorities. Most are familiar with the nuts and bolts of operating a profitable business. They know that for agriculture to remain a viable industry, environmental sensitivity and economic considerations must go hand in hand.

9. Voluntary Solutions to Environmental Issues

Nobody wants more regulations or more government. Most people want to be good environmental stewards and will practice conservation if they know that effective, affordable techniques are available. Illinois' soil and water conservation districts help to educate farmers, as well as other landowners through the use of field days, farm tours, demonstration projects and workshops which show how agriculture affects our natural resources and the long-term health of the land. And, Illinois' farming community has responded by signing up for voluntary programs in record numbers. A strong research, information and education program is the key to a permanent, voluntary conservation program.

10. Educating for the Future.

Educating our youth on the importance of conservation is vital to protecting the future of Illinois' natural resources. In addition to working with farmers to protect our natural resources, soil and water conservation districts sponsor a number of programs to educate young people on the critical role that soil and water play in our lives. Soil judging contests, Envirothon competitions for high school students and visits to local elementary and high schools are among the ways SWCD's work to help instill a sense of environmental stewardship.

Now more than ever, Illinois' soil and water conservation districts need your support as they carry out the important responsibilities of keeping our farmland productive and our waterways clean and healthy. Districts operate diverse programs of natural resource management throughout every county in Illinois. Although in recent years they have taken on additional responsibilities, annual budgets have not kept pace.

There are many areas where your support is needed. Staffing is a chief concern. While new responsibilities, like those embodied under the most recent federal farm bill, or duties included under the new state law regarding filter strips have been added to the local district's workload, little or no additional technical staff has been provided to meet this increased need. This all at a time when demand for service is on the rise and additional best management practices are needed to meet water quality requirements.

In other areas, the demand for new office technology, data management tracking systems, and educational materials are needed to keep Illinois's soil and water conservation districts up-to-date, efficient and effective. Remember, to carry out their mission of protecting our natural resources, soil and water conservation districts must reach millions of Illinois citizens. *When asked for your support, please say yes to Illinois' soil and water conservation districts!*