

Soil & Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs)

There are 97 soil and water conservation districts making a difference in your community. No matter how big or small, each of the 102 counties has the services of an SWCD. From educating homeowners on practical utilization of water to helping rural landowners save soil and improve water quality; it takes everyone working together to protect our soil and water! Without these vital resources our communities cannot thrive!



The Senate version of the 2013 State Budget sent to the House reduced funds for SWCDs below what was recommended by the Governor, an amount that was sure to see many SWCDs falter and cease service during the 2013 fiscal year. With the House failing to alter those numbers. It is likely that 31 SWCDs will cease to function by January 1, 2013.



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The 2012 Legislative Spring Session is Nearly Over!

The General Assembly has nearly concluded its work for the spring of 2012 and members await adjournment to depart Springfield until the fall. In a less than "normal" session, lawmakers revamped Medicare and the pension system for teachers, university employees, legislators and state employees, increased taxes and added new fees.

The changes made to these and other funding lines are intended to free up about \$2.7 billion to help keep Medicaid and the state's pension systems solvent.

It is also hoped that the savings from these funding reductions along with the increase in cigarette taxes and the expansion of gaming facilities will allow the state to pay down the huge backlog of past due bills from vendors.

All of these efforts were accomplished through much debate and some difficult decisions. Unfortunately one of those difficult decisions was to accept the funding levels proposed in the Senate's budget bills for soil and water conservation districts. The overall numbers reflect a 10% reduction from 2012. That amount of lost funding on top of nearly a 70% reduction from 2008 will simply be too much for many SWCDs to bear.

Districts have done what they can to absorb past cuts. Many are sharing the services of one employee with one or two other SWCDs in an effort to keep the doors open and provide some level of service. With the

possible loss of an additional \$739,500, individual district funding levels will be below 1997 levels and sharing services may not be sufficient to maintain any level of service.

These severe reductions for Soil and Water Conservation District funding are coming at a time when the USEPA is gearing up to add more regulatory oversight to agriculture.

In an effort to expand the federal government's reach into the agricultural sector, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has added 1,472 plant species to its existing database of plants used by the Corps, EPA, and other agencies to identify wetlands areas. The added species boost the list by 22 percent.

The list is designed primarily to guide federal and state agencies, scientific and academic groups, and the private sector in planning and monitoring of wetland mitigation/restoration efforts according to the US Army Corps of Engineers.

It has also been suggested that the number of marginal wetlands that may require EPA Clean Water Act permits for drainage or other activities could be on the rise.

There are concerns the expanded list could provide USEPA another way to expand its regulatory reach. If that is the case, development areas will be affected as much or more than agricultural lands.



Soil and Water Conservation Districts Provide Many Kinds of Services and Assistance.

- The 97 SWCDs are continually involved in educating and assisting students and adults to maximize use of available resources while also protecting these essential environmental resources.
- SWCDs provide needed information for urban and rural decision makers so that they can make wise choices that will protect people and property in the future
- Through the various programs they administer, SWCD's encourage the protection, conservation and wise use of our natural resources to assure sustainability for future generations.



NOTE: SWCDs DO NOT have taxing authority and must rely on state source funding to employ staff to administer programs.

Gaming expansion legislation being considered by the 97th General Assembly has the potential to create thousands of jobs and fund SWCDs at a sustainable level.

PROTECT & CONSERVE

The additions to the list of wetland species include several maple as well as pecan and hickory trees; velvetleaf; brome grasses and fescues found in pasture areas; and common pawpaw found in timber areas.

With Soil and Water Conservation Districts facing continued cutbacks in funding, who will work with agricultural producers and developers to help them comply with nutrient reduction strategies and other conservation application measures to help forestall USEPA's intervention into Illinois' agricultural production and urban development sectors.

Agriculture is this state's largest industry and a major contributor to the state's revenue stream and subsequently, to its economy. If producers are prevented from performing normal crop production activities because they are determined to be out of compliance with USEPA or Corps of Engineers permits, what will we do to replace the lost revenue from the sale of the materials to produce the crop and the value of the crop itself?

These are potentially serious and far reaching issues that can be addressed by soil and water conservation districts but without funding they will not be able to address these or any other issues.

SB1849 will do much for SWCDs but the relief promised by the bill's \$12.5 million for the SWCDs will not come for at least a year and maybe two. In the meantime Illinois' SWCDs are likely to lose additional trained employees. Added to the 134 employees and the more than 600 years of experience already lost, conservation efforts will be set back at least 7 and possibly 8 years.

We can't afford to postpone conservation activities for seven or eight years. The USEPA is determined to act now! The Chesapeake Bay area is one example of where the USEPA has set nutrient reduction standards that are, for all practical purposes, unattainable unless production agriculture is stopped altogether.

The standards are so onerous that Congress has stepped in and prevented USEPA from implementing their regulator program for the time being.

We can prevent something similar from happening in Illinois but the state must be willing to invest a small amount of capital now!

Soil and Water Conservation Districts use minimal financial resources to leverage tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government, local governments and organizations, and organizations with a national scope. The SWCDs have, since their inception, returned more money to the state than they have ever used for administration.

The SWCDs are unique among all local governmental units. They do not have the ability to tax for their administrative expenses. They have a five member board of directors with responsibility for all natural resources within their jurisdiction including soil, water, air, wildlife, plants, animals and humans. They can accept assistance from anyone and provide assistance to anyone. They don't strike or protest. They simply and quietly do the best they can with the limited financial resources that are made available to them, and they do much for the State.

Please appropriate more funds for the SWCDs so they can continue to do what they do best. They are the local entity that carries the load for the rest of us that we may enjoy clean water, healthy air, productive soils, bountiful wildlife and a sustainable future.