

**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 a 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 2013 State Budget contains funding levels for the 97 SWCDs that are \$739,500 (more than 10%) below 2012 levels, an amount that is sure to see many SWCDs falter and cease providing services during the 2013 fiscal year. Without further action by the General Assembly it is likely that 31 SWCDs will be unable to function by January 1, 2013.

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Illinois has suffered through one of the worst dry periods in recent memory. Though the remnants of Hurricane Isaac did much to alleviate problems brought on by the drought, the rain was too late for much of Illinois' crop land.

Last year's warmer than normal winter provided little in the way of snowfall or rain so there was little soil moisture in reserve when crops were planted in the Spring. The lack of soil moisture and the extremely hot dry weather that began in March and really didn't abate until the second week of September has had a devastating impact on crops but also on other vegetation such as trees and grasses.

Agricultural crops, especially corn, suffered significant yield reductions throughout the state but most severely in the southern 26 counties where many farmers will experience zero yields. Even so, as bad as it is, crop insurance will help most farmers recover their production costs for the grain crops that failed.

Unfortunately, that can't be said for producers of specialty crops and forests. Yes, forests are a crop just like corn or soybeans, the difference is that trees take many years to reach maturity.

It is not unusual to see large numbers of dead or dying trees that were killed by the drought either because they may have already been in a weakened state due to disease or some other stressor or simply because their root system was not

developed sufficiently to make use of what moisture was available. In some cases the trees died because the soil in which they were growing was too shallow for their roots to reach deeper subsurface water supplies.

Grasses also suffered and dieout is common in many pastures and fields. Though it is not common to find a pasture or field with complete dieout, dead areas are of sufficient size to cause concern for soil erosion.

Once the crop harvest is completed this fall, the soil and water conservation districts will be working with landowners to assess damages to trees and grass and will help landowners determine the best way to deal with those damages.

In many cases dead trees will be harvested for firewood or cut and burned to reduce the potential for them to become host to diseases and insects that can damage other trees.

Areas of dead grass will likely be worked to prepare a seed bed and reseeded.

In all cases, landowners will require the assistance of the soil and water conservation district to help repair damages. With limited funding and the resulting reductions in staff, it will likely take a long time for Illinois to recover from the 2012 drought

Is the drought over? No one really knows the answer to that but we do know that even if it is, its negative effects will linger and without the assistance from the SWCDs, it will linger much longer.



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

- The 97 SWCDs are continually involved in implementing conservation practices 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 and the technical assistance they provide, 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



This no-till corn field has been planted into last year's crop residue without performing additional "traditional" tillage.

Conservation tillage systems have at least 30 percent of last year's crop residue on the soil at planting. Residue adequately controls erosion by both wind and water, among other conservation benefits.

A producer can save at least 3.5 gallons of fuel per acre by going from conventional tillage methods to no-till. At November 2005 diesel prices, this amounts to \$13.48* per acre in production cost savings. On a farm with 1,000 acres of cropland, these savings add up to 3,500 gallons of diesel fuel per year valued at \$13,475.

Currently, no-till is practiced on over 6.1 million acres in Illinois. If the amount of no-till acreage doubled, farmers could save an additional 21.4

million gallons of fuel, valued at over \$82.5 million.

No-till is a conservation practice that leaves the crop residue undisturbed from harvest through planting except for narrow strips that cause minimal soil disturbance. Crop residues are materials left in an agricultural field after the crop has been harvested. These residues include stalks and stubble (stems), leaves and seed pods. Good management of field residues can increase efficiency of irrigation and control of erosion. No-till can be used for almost any crop in almost any soil and can save producers labor costs and fuel. It's a sound investment for the environment and the farm.

In addition to energy efficiencies and cost savings, no-till has several environmental benefits. No-till increases the organic matter in the soil, making it more stable and helping prevent soil erosion. No-till reduces greenhouse gases because it requires less fuel and sequesters (stores) carbon in the soil. Other benefits of using no-till as part of a resource management system include:

- Increased earthworm populations that improve soil quality—an average of 540,000 earthworms per acre versus 285,000 in conventional tillage;
- Increased water infiltration—cutting evaporation and runoff by at least 70 percent;
- Reduced tilling time per acre—by as much as two-thirds; and
- Improved wildlife habitat.

Illinois' soil and water conservation districts are in the business of helping farmers adopt no-till practices along with other conservation measures that save soil and help maintain soil moisture levels. The SWCDs work with agricultural and urban landowners to install conservation measures that catch water from rainfall and snowmelt and hold it for a period of time allowing it to be absorbed into the soil. The infiltration action helps clean the water, maintain subsurface soil moisture levels and recharge groundwater supplies used for drinking and industrial purposes. Maintaining soil moisture levels was especially important this past year because of the drought. In areas where conservation practices including no-till, pasture land improvement, grass filter strips, buffer strips, grass waterways, wildlife habitat plantings, forest plantings, rain gardens, bioswales and other such practices were used, the surface vegetation including trees, grasses and crops didn't fair as badly as in areas where conservation practices were absent. Even though there were areas of the state where even these conservation practices didn't help, there were more areas of the state where there is little doubt the use of such practices made a difference.

Soil and water conservation districts are an important asset to the state and local economy and to the long term protection of our natural and economic resources. They need your support.

* Fuel cost is calculated using a value of \$3.85 per gallon.

(No-till information provided by the USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service)

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YOUR LAND, YOUR WATER, YOUR ILLINOIS

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SOIL &
WATER

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