Hands-on training equips NRCS, SWCD staff to work with farmers

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

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Right: *Ride-alongs are part of what make the On-Farm Communications trainings unique. The May sessions' focus included tillage. The remaining sessions are in July and October.*

STAPLES — Cultivating Career Success: On-Farm Communications Training, a hands-on introduction to agricultural practices and technology, drew conservation professionals from throughout the state to Central Lakes College's (CLC) Ag and Energy Center farm fields in early May.

From the seat of a tractor during individual ride-alongs, they saw high-speed tillage equipment in action in one field, and a corn planter in a second field. Throughout the day, they inspected the latest in precision planting equipment and technology, tracked real-time field progress and stats via GPS, deciphered a soil test report, and considered economic factors and real-life scenarios.

Forty-seven employees from county soil and water conservation districts and federal Natural Resource Conservation

Service (NRCS) offices attended one of the identical trainings May 8 and 9. The three-part series aligns with tillage and

Top to bottom:
From left: Ag technician Taylor Thompson explained the monitoring data available to farmers during a May 9 On-Farm Communications Training session at Central Lakes College's Ag and Energy Center in Staples as Fillmore County-based NRCS soil conservationists Stacy Every and Jess Stevens and Cottonwood SWCD program technician Breanna Wagner looked on. Lily Kingsley of Hennepin County watched high-speed disk monitors from the driver's seat. Isanti SWCD conservation technician Matthew Remer watched real-time corn planting data.
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Ann Wessel, BWSR

Stevens rode along with Todd Pollema, farm manager at Central Lakes College's Ag and Energy Center, as he planted corn May 9 at the college in Staples.

planting; irrigation, cover crops and livestock (July 18 and 19); and harvest equipment, technology and soil conditions (Oct. 16 and 17).

Led by AgCentric staff and developed by CLC and NRCS, Cultivating Career Success: On-Farm Communications Training helps to prepare those new to agriculture or new to their district to work with farmers.

"It's about communicating with the farmer. I call it 'farmer-speak,' but really we're just trying to scratch the surface of how to talk with farmers, understand some of what they're going through, as well as some of the equipment they're using," said Keith Olander, director of AgCentric.

CLC's Ag and Energy Center runs a 2,000-acre farm. The behind-the-wheel experience makes this training unique. Conservation workers listed that experience, plus insights into what influences farmers' decision-making, among the top take-aways.

"I was really hoping to come out here today and get some hands-on activities with agriculture and learn what goes through the farmer's head when we're talking to them about conservation practices ... the things that

> " **The farmer at their heart, they are not in it for this year. They are in it for a lifetime. When we approach the farmer, we've got to understand that they're thinking not just, 'How do I pay the bills today?' but 'How's this land going to be good for me and my next generation going forward?'** "
>
> — excerpt from a conversation with Keith Olander, director of AgCentric

they're thinking about that we wouldn't necessarily think about," said Matthew Remer, Isanti Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) conservation technician. "Today is a really good chance to take a look at that and see what we can come up with as far as the best way to help these landowners, because they're the ones adopting these practices."

NRCS District Conservationist Jess Stevens moved to Fillmore County after working for NRCS in Iowa.

"I learned a lot about different tillage implements, different planter setups, nutrients applied on fields and best ways to manage those," Stevens said after the training. "I think it'll help a lot with communication with farmers. ... It's good to speak their language and try to relate to

them as much as possible when working with them."

Breanna Wagner joined the Cottonwood SWCD staff two years ago as a program technician. She grew up on a farm, but said she wanted to learn more about how to initiate conversations about trying new practices such as strip-till or cover crops. While she'd driven a tractor before, it was nothing like the equipment used on the Ag and Energy Center farm.

"This was really fun," Wagner said after her turn on the tractor pulling the high-speed disk. "They have the auto-steering. You line it up and it goes for you, essentially. You don't have to touch the steering wheel. This is really incredible technology."

Stacy Every, a Fillmore County-based NRCS soil

conservationist, grew up on a Fillmore County livestock and crop farm.

"I am brand-new to the NRCS, so I am looking to learn more about the farming practices that I can help local farmers with," Every said as the May 9 training began. "I think it'll give me more information to work with farmers with, and a little bit more knowledge base to cover some of the things that they're new to, and let them know how it'll help them out."

A change in demographics — most NRCS and SWCD employees no longer come from a farming background — drove demand for the training.

"We have people entering the agencies — either soil and water districts or NRCS — that have very limited (ag) background, often in environmental science," Olander said. "That ability to have common knowledge and base talking points (may not) always be brought forth in their traditional education setting. We're trying to complement that in ... a customized training."

Previously, the training was offered to NRCS staff. This year, a collaboration among CLC, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts opened it to SWCDs.