

# Increase in TTCP funds supports cohorts, local training delivery



TTCP funding is evenly split between state Clean Water Funds and federal dollars available through a contribution agreement with NRCS.

**R**enewed funding for the Technical Training and Certification Program (TTCP) will help the state-federal partnership deliver conservation training and credentialing to more local government staff throughout Minnesota over the next five years. In September, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) signed a contribution agreement which provides nearly \$9.5 million in continued funding for the TTCP — nearly twice the amount awarded during the previous four-year funding round.

This is the third round of funding for the program, which is a partnership among BWSR, NRCS, the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) and the Minnesota Association of

Conservation District Employees (MACDE). This funding will support local training and cohorts and will increase staffing capacity in anticipation of program growth.

Each year, the TTCP offers 55 to 60 formal trainings, which provide between 13,000 and 16,000 total training hours. The program includes collaborations with partner organizations such as Pheasants Forever, the University of Minnesota Extension, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and The Xerces Society.

Program development began in 2014 with an overarching goal: to develop and maintain a highly trained, technically skilled workforce of natural resource professionals to meet Minnesota's conservation delivery needs.

During the 2014 MASWCD

*The Area Technical Training Team 8 led a tree-planting activity at the Beltrami County Fairgrounds in May 2021 as part of a tree and shrub establishment training. The TTCP-supported training covered site evaluation, site preparation, equipment and tools, and tree protection.*

**Photos courtesy of Jon Sellnow**



Minnesota NRCS website: [www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov)



**Left:** Stephanie McLain, NRCS state soil health specialist, completed a slake test as part of a TTCP-supported conservation planning course in August 2023 at the University of Minnesota's West Central Research & Outreach Center in Morris. **Middle:** McLain (left) and NRCS Soil Conservationist Chris Engh examined a shovel of soil while completing an in-field soil health assessment. **Right:** Meeker SWCD conservation technician Jaden Hunter practiced using a clinometer to measure tree height.

Convention, the partner organizations signed a memorandum of understanding that established an interagency team to develop a comprehensive strategy for joint technical training and certification. The [Technical Training and Certification Strategy for Conservation Delivery in Minnesota](#) was completed in September 2015 and established a framework for the program, which led to the TTCP launching in 2016.

Half of the \$9.5 million secured by the latest agreement comes from the U.S. Farm Bill; half comes from Minnesota's Clean Water Fund.

The TTCP relies on [Area Technical Training Teams](#) (ATTTs) to help prioritize and deliver local training. Approximately \$250,000 is available to the ATTTs to provide local training during the next five years. The previous agreement was for four years and provided \$100,000.

ATTTs bring together TTCP training engineers, TTCP training conservationists, and representatives from the Technical Service Area (TSA), soil and water conservation districts, BWSR and NRCS to

### TTCP 2023 training delivery summary

- 55 trainings provided
- 4,757 training attendees
- 15,780 hours of training provided:
  - 1,844 hours in [Minnesota Core Competency Conservation](#) training
  - 6,606 hours in virtual training
  - 7,330 hours in-person training

coordinate communication and local training. This diverse group ensures that a wide range of local perspectives and training needs are considered. Team boundaries are based on the eight TSA boundaries.

“Together we serve on that Area Technical Training Team and help make sure the local training priorities are heard up to the statewide level. We also work to coordinate local priority trainings that maybe aren't a priority beyond that area or beyond that region, but are nonetheless important,” said Aaron Peter, BWSR southern regional training engineer.

While ATTTs help deliver hands-on learning opportunities, the TTCP funds training events. TTCP dollars cover expenses such as hiring trainers, renting

classrooms and providing special equipment or materials.

The TTCP also regularly pulls information from the [Individual Development Plan](#) tool in BWSR's conservation tracking system, eLINK, which captures local training needs and priorities. The program also uses this information to establish its annual training plan.

Another major element of the TTCP includes a series of [core competency](#) modules intended for all staff within the partnership to develop a foundation for soil and water conservation and conservation planning in Minnesota.

The TTCP recently introduced conservation cohorts — groups of experienced trainees who work together on real-world projects to gain confidence in their conservation skills. The

third round of funding adds two additional BWSR TTCP trainers to support these cohorts.

“You don't just show up to these cohorts, you bring a project with you, and we're going to work on those projects together as a small group, and you're going to gain that confidence in what you're doing going forward. Then hopefully at the end of it, people get [Job Approval Authority](#), and they exit those cohorts able to perform that work independently,” said BWSR TTCP Coordinator Jon Sellnow.

Cohort attendees meet virtually or in person over several weeks or months. Cohorts are created based on geographic areas, levels of experience and desired outcomes. Meetings focus on planning, designing and installing conservation practices. They are led by local area resource conservationists, TTCP training conservationists, specialists or other subject matter experts.

The TTCP piloted conservation cohorts last year. The first cohort focused on cover crops.

“The cohort (members)

meet to work on actual projects and to ask each other questions,” said Kelly Voigt, BWSR northern regional training conservationist. “They’re able to work through a project and work out all those questions, bugs and things that you maybe don’t understand how to do right away. They’re able to get from beginning to end on a project or two. They’re able to see what other people are working on, and look at their projects, and think about the variables that need to be addressed in a project.”

In March, the TTCP announced more cohorts covering prescribed grazing, soil health and seeding practices. Practices highlighted within the cohorts include conservation crop rotation, reduced tillage, no-till, wetland restoration and wildlife habitat plantings. Voigt said the expansion is part of the TTCP’s goal to continuously improve.

“We’re constantly trying



*ATTT 1 and 2 presented an irrigation water management field training in June 2021. Attendees learned about the field verification techniques, different soil moisture sensors and variable rate irrigation technology. Training instructors included Cassie Ahmed, NRCS area engineer, Nathan Weise, former East Otter Tail SWCD irrigation and nutrient management specialist, and Vasudha Sharma, University of Minnesota assistant extension professor and irrigation specialist.*

new things to see if they’ll be helpful. We have to try, we have to analyze, and readjust,” Voigt said. “It’s just part of the progression, just trying to give people all different (types of) training because everybody learns differently.”

The next round of cohorts is expected to start in March 2025.

Initial feedback on the cohorts has been positive, according to Voigt. Participants have shared resources and built connections with others working on similar projects.

Over the past year, more conservation professionals in Minnesota have been hired, leading to a need for more training, Sellnow said.

“There’s a lot of BWSR funding available right now for LGUs (local government units) to do projects and train and hire new staff,” Sellnow said. “It’s one thing to throw money at problems, but to make sure that we’re using those funds in the best way that we can to correct those problems and find long-term solutions that not only fix the problem, but also work for the landowner.”

Beyond in-person training, the TTCP offers live online learning sessions plus a searchable library of recorded modules, webinars, videos and other resources.

“There’s a ton out there, and it looks like there’s just a lot to bite off as new staff are hired, but one thing we’re trying to emphasize to folks is make sure you gain the experience. Take training as necessary, but gain that hands-on experience. Be patient. It takes a while to become an expert at so many of these things,” Peter said.