

BWSR Academy adapts to meet training needs in conservation



Nearly 500 conservation professionals gathered Oct. 29-31 for the 16th annual Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Academy, a training opportunity that offers sessions each year based on current trends and on the feedback participants provide.

BWSR Training Coordinator Barbara Radke, who coordinates BWSR Academy, said sessions filled fast this year. A total of 488 people registered for BWSR Academy sessions offered across all three days. Six sessions reached capacity within the first week of open registration. The training event reached its single-day capacity of 420 for Wednesday's sessions.

"We know we are staying relevant given that registration is always strong," Radke said.

Held at Cragun's Conference Center near Brainerd, this year BWSR Academy offered more than 60 sessions organized into seven tracks: Organizational Capacity, Fiscal & Programs, Emerging Topics, Outreach, Basic Technical, Advanced Technical and Workshops. The wide-ranging slate of topics included workload management, marketing conservation practices, invasive species removal, grant tracking, soil health, urban agriculture, project management and public engagement.

BWSR Academy's goal is to provide high-quality training that equips local government staff to maintain and improve conservation delivery in Minnesota and meet the shared expectations of BWSR and local government units (LGUs). It aims to provide relevant, cost-effective

*Design critiques were part of the "Graphic Design for Non-designers" session Oct. 30 at BWSR Academy. Barbara Heitkamp of the Washington Conservation District and BWSR Board Conservationist Michelle Jordan led the session, which was part of the Outreach track. Held at Cragun's Conference Center near Brainerd this year, the annual conference offered seven tracks and 63 sessions over the course of three days. **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR*



Group discussions in the “Strategies to Successfully Evaluate and Restore Drained Wetlands” workshop at BWSR Academy focused on applying strategies for assessing and evaluating potential restoration sites. Tom Wenzel, Josh Swanson and Mike Anderson of BWSR’s engineering section led the Oct. 30 session. BWSR Academy drew nearly 500 local government conservation workers from across the state.

training that local conservation partners can apply directly to their work.

“BWSR Academy continues to evolve to help support the needs and expectations of the BWSR-local government partnership. It’s special — in that this design supports us to learn from each other, share what works, and tackle issues that directly apply to conservation work and the people who show up every day to get this work done and done well,” said Angie Becker Kudelka, BWSR Academy trainer and deputy chapter director for The Nature Conservancy of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. She was the BWSR training coordinator during her tenure at the agency.

Becker Kudelka and BWSR Clean Water Specialist Jeff Hrubes led “Culture Club: Your Values Determine Your Delivery.” A session within the Organizational Capacity track, it explored how changes in staffing, programs, elected officials and relationships can influence conservation work. Participants learned to recognize when their organization’s culture needs to embrace change and how their

organization’s culture affects program delivery. Trainees identified strategies to improve their organizations’ culture.

“Local governments are in amazing transition right now with Legacy (Amendment) dollars and growth and change in terms of not only the work they’re trying to do, but the people that are doing it. Generations are changing, and how we approach the work continues to evolve,” Becker Kudelka said.

Since it began in 2008, BWSR Academy has expanded to fit the training needs of conservation professionals across Minnesota. That first training event saw about 90 registrants and offered three tracks.

Every February, the BWSR Academy team surveys the target audience to solicit session topic ideas and input. The input informs what tracks and topics will be offered that year.

“I think the fact that we build a new agenda every single year is what allows us to be relevant. There are a handful of popular topics we bring back every year, but for the most part we build new content based on what people

tell us they need,” said Julie Westerlund, BWSR One Watershed, One Plan coordinator. “We’re constantly creating new material, and I think that is one of the ways that we stay relevant.”

Westerlund has led trainings at BWSR Academy for several years and has served on the BWSR Academy planning team. This year, Westerlund and Hrubes led “New Thinking for New Times: Unleash Your Creativity!” The Emerging Topics track session explored ways to generate ideas and get people excited about participating in conservation.

New this year, the Emerging Topics track focused on new interest areas within the natural resources field as well as topics that continue to evolve in scope and understanding. Subjects covered under this track included climate-smart forestry, conservation opportunities in urban settings, using artificial intelligence as a tool, and changing Minnesota demographics.

The Workshops track, which offered in-depth training via two 90-minute back-to-back sessions, returned

this year, replacing last year’s Bonus & Repeat track. Workshops included sessions on visual storytelling, tribal relations and rain gardens.

Each year, BWSR Academy has updated tracks and sessions to meet the current training needs of BWSR’s LGU partners. For example, when an influx of new staff joined Minnesota’s conservation workforce, the BWSR Academy team responded in 2016 with the Basics track, which focused on staff development for recent hires. Those sessions provided a foundation for LGU staff new to the programs, policies and land uses that drive conservation in Minnesota.

In 2018, given the existing and expanding training being offered by BWSR wetlands staff outside of BWSR Academy, an Outreach track replaced the Wetlands track. Designating an Outreach track was based on continuing requests from BWSR’s LGU partners for training content focused on skills for communicating, educating and engaging with the public.

Over the past 16 years, sessions focused on

topics such as climate change and drone use were offered to meet the requests and needs of BWSR's LGU partners.

Additionally, the BWSR Academy team has placed more emphasis on watershed management. For example, last year the team offered a sub track under the Advanced Technical track to support LGUs in their transition to comprehensive watershed management plans.

"Given the continuing recognition that water quality be addressed at the watershed level and the One Watershed, One Plan, we're very intentional at Academy to have sessions that support this work," Radke said.

This year, Westerlund helped Pennington Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) Manager Peter Nelson and Olmsted



Isanti SWCD staff members checked in to BWSR Academy at Cragun's Conference Center near Brainerd. The BWSR Academy team surveys participants in February to solicit feedback and session topic ideas. The session lineup changes every year.

SWCD Water Resources Supervisor Caitlin Meyer deliver "1W1P Assess, Amend, Engage!" under the Fiscal & Programs track. LGU staff shared their perspective on the mid-point process and the importance of keeping local leaders engaged in maintaining the plan.

The session aimed to increase participants' understanding of the mid-point process and Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan amendments, and have them consider ideas for effective engagement and participation in plan maintenance.

"One thing that I see happen often in BWSR Academy sessions is that the trainers can be facilitators who can help the participants learn from each other. And that, to me, is one of the really powerful aspects of what Academy has to offer," Westerlund said.

BWSR Academy relies on volunteer trainers — practitioners and experts who have experience with real-world conservation work.

"I've been so impressed with BWSR staff and colleagues by the way they take feedback and incorporate that feedback into Academy," Becker Kudelka said. "Not being afraid to learn and adjust from year to year is part of what makes Academy relevant. I think that's part of the brilliance."