

BWSR recognizes Cottonwood SWCD administrator's creative tactics

Kay Gross has dedicated nearly four decades to implementing conservation in southern Minnesota, taking on several leadership roles and sharing her experiences with others along the way.

The Cottonwood Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) administrator received the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) [2024 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Administrator](#) award Dec. 3 during the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) annual convention in Bloomington.

Gross grew up on a Cottonwood County farm and earned degrees in ag business and commercial economics from South Dakota State University in Brookings. She worked for her dad on the farm before joining the federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) — which eventually became the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). Gross joined the Cottonwood SWCD in 1988 as a part-time secretary. Within weeks, she was hired as a full-time administration/technical assistant. She became the district administrator in 2006.

Colleagues noted her ability



Cottonwood SWCD Administrator Kay Gross accepted BWSR's 2024 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Administrator award from BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson on Dec. 3 during the 2024 Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts convention in Bloomington. Gross has shared her knowledge with other conservation professionals by leading BWSR Academy sessions, speaking at TSA meetings and delivering online trainings. **Photo Credits:** Mary Juhl, BWSR

to recognize needs within the organizations to which she contributes.

Since 2006, Gross also has served as the administrative coordinator for the [Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance](#) (GBERBA), a joint powers organization composed of 10 member counties and SWCDs within the Blue Earth, Le Sueur and Watonwan River watersheds.

As the administrative coordinator for GBERBA,

Gross has overseen more than 40 grants from state and federal agencies totaling over \$9.7 million.

She became the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area's (TSA 5) administrator in 2015. In 2020, she became the administrative coordinator for the Watonwan River Watershed Network, and in 2024 she took on administrative financial services for the Des Moines River Watershed Partnership.

"She rarely, if ever, says

no to taking on more responsibility," said Dave Bucklin, a Cottonwood SWCD senior technician and GBERBA technical coordinator who has worked with Gross since 1990. "She is a fantastic person."

Throughout the years and with limited funds, Bucklin said Gross has taken on additional tasks (such as bookkeeping) and has looked for ways to retain and grow staff capacity and expand the district's funding. She has ensured

the office is fully trained and capable of handling its programs.

“I always like to surround myself with smart people. So I try to bring in as much as I can for staff, giving them the resources that they need,” Gross said.

Gross was instrumental in [hiring a training coordinator for TSA 5](#), which has resulted in more than 70 technicians receiving training.

By coordinating trainings for GBERBA and TSA 5, Cottonwood SWCD Farm Bill assistant and program technician Becky Buchholz wrote in the nomination, Gross addressed the need to collaborate and share resources.

“She’s extremely creative,” Buchholz said. “She has extremely creative ideas to come up with solutions to help these challenges we have. For example, how do we keep staff? How do we help our farmers with soil health?”

With part of a BWSR Clean Water Fund grant supporting soil health practices and outreach, she helped to [coordinate soil health-related outreach efforts](#) for GBERBA watersheds. That effort involves producing short videos and using QR codes



Gross addressed the audience during her acceptance speech at the MASWCD annual convention on Dec. 3. During an interview, Gross expressed gratitude to her board of supervisors stating that they have been supportive of the district staff throughout the years. She also thanked the Cottonwood SWCD staff for their hard work.

posted near fields to relay details about common soil health practices.

Gross then worked with the 10 SWCDs within TSA 5 to jointly apply for a Soil Health Staffing Grant from BWSR to [offer soil health mentoring to area producers](#). BWSR selected the group to receive that grant in April 2024.

By tapping that \$1.1 million grant, the SWCDs made mentors available — a mix of farmers with soil health experience and agricultural consultants such as crop specialists and agronomists — to work with farmers to offer advice and tailor projects to fit the specific needs of their operations.

“What we found is, if you have a peer to help you through this, who’s gone through it, that can help you with implementing it, they’re going to listen more than just to us,” Buchholz said. “She had come up with that idea, to have these farmer mentors in each county.”

Buchholz said Gross has always thought beyond Cottonwood County.

“She could just do her job. She could just stick to Cottonwood County and run our district well and make sure we have funds and staff and continue to help our own landowners. But she strongly believes in our mission of soil and

water conservation, and that our landowners, just like water, don’t stay within county boundaries,” Buchholz said during an interview.

Gross’ generosity and support extend beyond office hours, too, Bucklin said, including helping new hires find a place to live.

“She’s not afraid to help people on and off job hours,” Bucklin said. “She grew up in Windom, so she knows Windom and this town very well. And so, when we get staff and they say, ‘I don’t know if I can come, I just can’t find housing,’ she gets in there and makes a few phone calls to people that know what’s going on, and she has found housing for people. It’s just one of the little things she does that makes her who she is.”

Each year, BWSR celebrates the excellent work accomplished by local government staff to advance conservation efforts across the state. The [2024 Outstanding Watershed Organization Employee award](#) was presented to Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District Water Resources Project Manager Emily Dick on Dec. 5 during Minnesota Watersheds’ annual conference in Nisswa.