

BWSR Academy: Virtual, compressed, with record attendance



State Soil Health Specialist Anna Cates performed a live soil stability demonstration on video during her Oct. 27 BWSR Academy presentation titled "Can Soil Organic Matter both Drain and Hold Water?"
Screenshot Credit: Kelly Voigt, BWSR



BWSR Academy attendees traded conference rooms for webinars in October as the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) annual training event moved online to reduce risks associated with COVID-19.

The goal of BWSR Academy is to provide local government staff with high-quality training that maintains and improves their delivery of conservation work and meets the shared expectations of BWSR and local resource management boards. Trainers typically include BWSR staff, local government staff and conservation professionals from private industry and nonprofits.

"BWSR Academy strives to highlight the importance of

peer-to-peer learning and relies on external partners and agency staff to provide interactive training designed for learner retention," said Barbara Radke, BWSR training coordinator.

Training was delivered Oct. 27-29 via the online webinar platform WebEx. Topics ranged from grant reporting and management to field photography, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), communications, and soil health. Session topics were based on feedback from local government staff, agency partners, state agencies and BWSR staff.

BWSR Academy typically offers daylong slates of training. The number of sessions was reduced this year. Trainings were scheduled only in the mornings

to reduce screen fatigue and allow attendees to work in the afternoons.

The online format presented both benefits and challenges.

Admission fees were waived because renting a space, providing food and other costs related to an in-person event did not apply. Attendees' travel time and associated costs were eliminated. Registration exceeded past years', with more than 430 people participating in 24 sessions.

"The online format worked well to enable a large group to participate in the BWSR Academy in a safe manner," said Jennifer Hahn, Middle Minnesota watershed planner

for Redwood SWCD and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). With Redwood SWCD resource specialist Brian Pfarr, she led a session about relationship-building.

Among the challenges: fewer opportunities for engagement among students and trainers. Without face-to-face interaction, Hahn said it can be more difficult to hold group discussions.

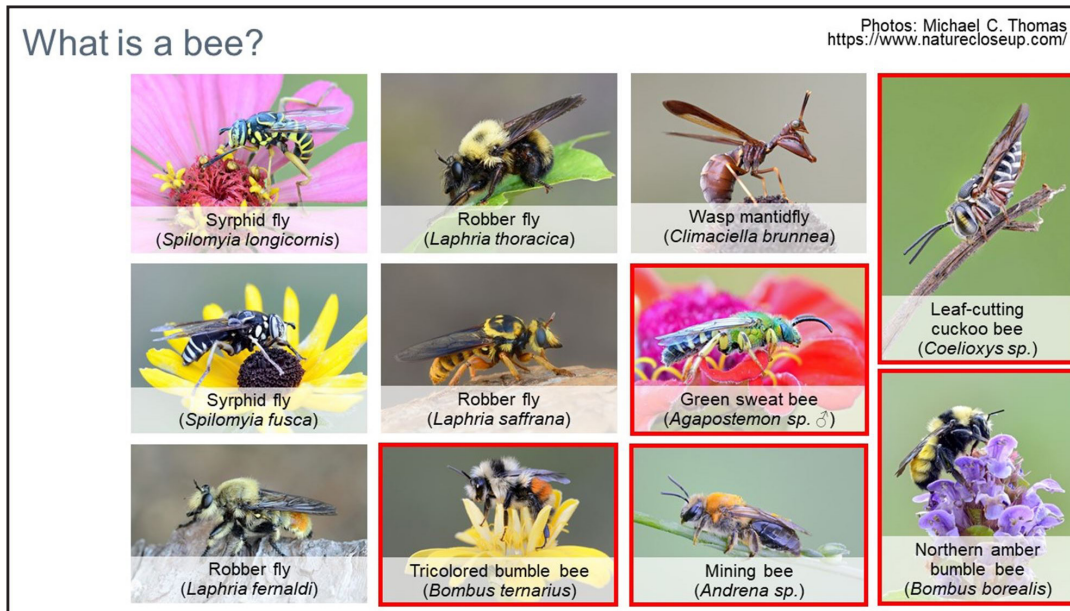
"Nothing beats in-person learning when open discussions are available," Hahn said. "But I'm glad that the BWSR Academy was made available."

Trainers encouraged interaction via chat, annotation tools and live conversation. Annotation tools allow participants to write or draw on a community "whiteboard" to share ideas and respond to questions.

"We sprinkled a number of opportunities for using the annotations and chat box throughout our presentation," said BWSR board conservationist Jill Sacket Eberhart, who led a session on cost-share basics with three other BWSR staff members. "I'm proud of everybody who stepped up, got out of their comfort zone, and showed up to learn and share."

Despite the challenges of a new online format, trainers employed creativity to maintain high-quality training that attendees can apply on the job. One example: State Soil Health Specialist Anna Cates conducted a live soil stability demonstration via video from a University of Minnesota conference room.

"Presenters from the sessions I attended reached



Top: A screenshot taken during the Oct. 29 BWSR Academy session "Pollinator Habitat: The Importance of Seed Mixes" shows a range of bee species. The presentation was hosted by Redwood SWCD conservation specialist Kristy Zajac, Dakota SWCD resource conservationist John Stelzner and Xerces Society Farm Bill pollinator conservation planner Karin Jokela. **Photo Credit:** Michael C. Thomas

Bottom: St. Cloud Times photographer and videographer Dave Schwarz used a pointer tool (red dot) while discussing a photo of a controlled burn to illustrate photo composition during his Oct. 27 session "Photography in the Field." **Photo Credit:** Dave Schwarz, St. Cloud Times



out prior with materials and tasks in order to prepare," said Nicole Bernd, West Polk SWCD manager, who attended BWSR Academy. "WebEx hosts and presenters navigated fluidly through the platform and were well-

prepared for any upsets."

Radke said she was grateful to the trainers, who took extra time to learn online PowerPoint design and familiarize themselves with WebEx and its associated interaction tools to avoid

technical problems during the live trainings.

"Anything virtual presents challenges," Bernd said. "I feel as though the more we gain experience and navigate this type of instruction, the more confident we'll become."