

# Yearlong planning for BWSR Academy creates connections



Conservation professionals from across the state gathered Oct. 21-23 for the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Academy, an annual training event that requires year-round planning to deliver a relevant, engaging experience.

"BWSR Academy is a great opportunity to expand your network, find different people who can assist you and find different processes or information that can make your job easier and help employees feel more confident about how to gather that information and use that information," said Crow Wing Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) Manager Melissa Barrick, a longtime attendee and 2025 BWSR Academy trainer.

BWSR Academy has been part of Barrick's professional life since 2008, when she attended the first regional BWSR Academy event. She has since led several sessions. This year, Barrick led the "Building Position Descriptions With Adaptability & Flexibility" session under the Workshops track.

"It's always a great opportunity at BWSR Academy to see what's working in other

areas and find ideas that you can bring back to your specific entity, and that can help you solve some of the problems or improve the organization that you're with," Barrick said.

Held at Cragun's Conference Center in Brainerd, this year's BWSR Academy offered 63 sessions and drew approximately 470 registrants over three days. Several sessions reached capacity within the first week of registration, and Wednesday reached its daily capacity limit of 420.

Sessions were organized into seven tracks: Technical, Wetlands & Soil, Fiscal & Programs, Emerging Topics, Organizational Capacity, Outreach and Workshops. Topics included best management practices, soil health, accounting, climate change, cultural resource management, conflict resolution and human resources.

The purpose of BWSR Academy is to improve conservation delivery and meet the shared goals of BWSR and local government units (LGUs) by providing relevant, cost-effective training that staff members can apply directly to their work.

*Practicing seed-collection techniques was part of "Community Based Partnerships for Creating Pollinator Habitats," an Oct. 22 BWSR Academy session in the Outreach track led by MN SEED Project co-creator Courtney Tchida, in flower print shirt, and BWSR Ecological Science Conservationist Erin Loeffler. BWSR Academy is a three-day, peer-to-peer annual training designed for local government staff working in conservation. Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR*

For BWSR Training Coordinator Barbara Radke, who leads BWSR Academy planning, the event is a continuous cycle of coordination.

“As soon as BWSR Academy ends, we’re already thinking about what comes next, what worked, what didn’t,” Radke said. “People are surprised by how early we must identify sessions and secure trainers so that everything is in place when registration opens.”

Within days of the final session, BWSR sends surveys to collect feedback and ideas for the next year. Debriefings with logistics, program and fiscal teams follow soon after to review feedback and financial details, including final venue invoices and budget numbers. Several weeks later, a second follow-up asks participants how they have applied what they learned on the job.

By year’s end, BWSR staff finalize the membership of the BWSR Academy program team.

Work ramps up in February when the team sends stakeholder surveys to BWSR staff, agency partners and external collaborators to identify



**From left:** BWSR co-presenters Melanie Bomier, Becca Reiss and Ara Gallo answered questions after leading “Practical AI Tools for Conservation Professionals,” a two-part session in the Workshops track during BWSR Academy on Oct. 22 near Brainerd. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

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— Melissa Barrick, Crow Wing SWCD Manager



priority training needs.

In March, the BWSR Academy program team reviews survey feedback and narrows the list to about 15 potential topics per track.

“The thing that surprised me the most (about the planning process)

was how deliberate the selection of speakers was, how seriously feedback is taken,” said Shane Bugeja, a BWSR board conservationist who served on the program team. “I think that it really helped focus our efforts and made sure that we had the best information

to get speakers that people enjoyed.”

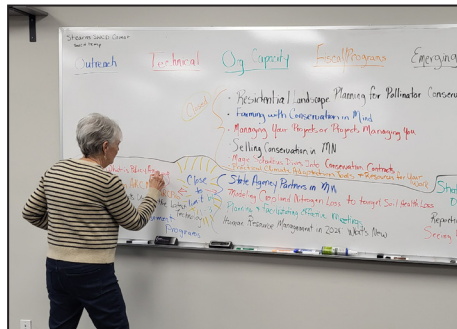
Bugeja co-lead the “eLINK Essentials” session under the Fiscal & Programs track with BWSR eLINK Coordinator Janna Fitzgerald. They were among more than 120 trainers this year.

Later in the spring, the program team finalizes the top nine topics for each track and asks colleagues for input on suggested topics and trainers. All sessions and trainers are confirmed by May. The schedule is finalized by June. The final months of planning focus on refining layout for printed materials, preparing registration and making sure the upcoming event will run smoothly.

“We want to be sure that what we’re training, that it’s applied, that it’s actually used,” Radke said. “That’s the standard we plan for.”

The results of that yearlong effort are clear to those who have attended BWSR Academy for years.

Doug Bos, the recently retired Rock SWCD assistant director who now does contract work as a soil health coordinator for the Southwest Prairie



**Left and right:** The BWSR Academy program team met in March to review survey feedback and narrow the session topic list to about 15 topics per track. **Middle:** BWSR Training Coordinator Barbara Radke recorded session names that reached capacity in previous years. **Photo Credits:** Ashley Rezachek, BWSR



Technical Service Area, has attended BWSR Academy off and on for about 15 years. He has led sessions for five or six years. This year, he co-  
led “Soil Health Toolbox: Mentors, Agronomists, and Soil Health Teams” under the Wetlands & Soils track.

“We had a great turnout this year and we had good interaction,” Bos said of his session.

He emphasized that participant engagement is what makes a session effective.

“There’s a hesitancy to volunteer, and yet we still had people that, when I’d ask a question, would offer their experience or opinion. That back-and-forth is vital to really making an effective session,” Bos said.

As both an attendee and a trainer, Bos said BWSR Academy offers valuable opportunities for learning and connecting.

“What I value the most is hearing what’s successful in other soil and water districts — different programs that have had



*Doug Bos, who does contract work as a soil health coordinator for the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area, completed an exercise with West Polk SWCD Manager Nicole Bernd during “Do You Really Know Who’s in Your Community?” Belinda Armstead, Karen Kill and Rosie Russell represented the Watershed Equity Alliance and led the BWSR Academy session on Oct. 21 near Brainerd. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR*



*Recognizing different modes of thinking, represented by different colored hats, and how to most effectively work with those landowners was part of “Beyond the Fence Line: From Acres to Allies,” an Oct. 23 BWSR Academy session in the Outreach track presented by Troy Kuphal of Scott SWCD and Emily Dick of Prior Lake Spring Lake Watershed District. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR*

success and are continuing to have success,” Bos said. “My second-most-favorite thing is the networking.”

Barrick echoed that sentiment, emphasizing the role of connection and shared learning.

“The big thing about BWSR Academy that’s unique is that you’re getting all these people together at the same time, and then a lot of times it’s about the connections that you make,” Barrick said.

Barrick said SWCDs and watershed districts might not have the same support systems as larger government entities.

“Sometimes we feel isolated and do not always see the big picture of the work we do. The BWSR Academy helps you realize you are part of a team statewide working on local conservation. The connections you make at BWSR Academy are as important as the training components,” Barrick said.

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BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.