



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

WORKING FOR YOU

Meaningful conservation is a top priority for the Shiawassee Conservation District. We are committed to assisting people across our county in protecting the natural resources we all rely on.

The Conservation District and NRCS are working together to help set conservation goals, work with people on the land, and provide services. We take great pride that our agencies were created out of the dust bowl together and we are committed to putting conservation on the land in partnership.

In 2023, we have assisted many landowners and producers to implement conservation practices through both conservation Farm Bill programs and Conservation District cost share programs. Conservation practices were implemented on nearly 64,000 acres, totaling more than \$1,059,220 for practice implementation through conservation Farm Bill programs. Additionally, Conservation District cost share programs provided \$121,323 cost share assistance to implement conservation practices on 3,000 acres. In total, over \$1,180,500 was introduced to our local economy, beginning with conservation planning assistance through our office. Those impressive numbers were accomplished by participation in voluntary conservation. Producers and landowners worked with us, one-on-one to develop meaningful conservation plans. Those plans were developed to protect natural resources in a way that meets the needs and abilities of the participant.

Each acre of land is unique in its site conditions and uses. This means that the conservation efforts for each site are also unique. A wide variety of conservation practices were installed using technical and financial assistance received through our office. On cropland, our technicians certified more than 2,000 acres of nutrient management, 3,500 acres of cover crops, and nearly 300 acres of invasive species control. Other practices applied in 2023 include forest stand improvement, live-stock watering facilities, conservation cover, and tree/shrub establishment.

32 new EQIP and CSP contracts were approved in 2023. These contracts cover 10,255 acres of land and will bring more than \$975,000.00 in practice implementation dollars over the next five years. In addition to the conservation planned in these contracts, many more acres will be protected by producers and landowners who will utilize our technical assistance to complete their conservation plans without enrolling in a program.

As the Shiawassee Conservation District looks forward and enters another year, we would like to thank everyone – past and present – who have supported our mission of providing care, informed usage, and protection of our natural resources. The District will continue to provide innovative assistance to address natural resource conservation.

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www.shiawasseeccd.org



The Shiawassee Conservation District is led by a five-member Board of Directors that are **LOCALLY ELECTED** to serve four-year terms. The Directors make all the decision regarding District programs and activities. Pictured left to right: Director Michelle Glass, Treasurer Amanda Martindale, Chair Tom Braid, Vice Chair Duane Leach, Director Larry Lee.

Open House & Elections April 4

The Shiawassee Conservation District will be hosting an Open House and Elections Thursday, April 4, 2024, from 2-4 p.m. at the Conservation office located in the USDA Service Center, 1900 S. Morrice Road, Owosso. The election closes at 4 p.m. and the results will be announced immediately following. The Open House will be a time to meet the Board of Directors and staff and learn what programs and opportunities the District offers.

COLLABORATE • LEARN • FARMER-LED DISCUSSIONS • GUEST SPEAKERS
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SHIAWASSEE FARMER NETWORK

CONTINUE THE LOCAL
CONSERVATION CONVERSATION

MARCH 19, 2024 • 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM
HOSTED BY FARM LEADERS MICHELLE & JAKE GLASS
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MIDNR Conservation Officer for Shiawassee County will join us
to answer your deer management to mitigate crop damage questions.

RSVP is appreciated but not required.
Request to receive email updates about this, and future
Farmers Network meetings by emailing shiawasseeCD@macd.org.



Working For You



Leach Running for Re-election

Incumbent Duane Leach, a resident of Bennington Township, is running unopposed for re-election for a seat on the Shiawassee Conservation District

Board. He has served on the District Board since 2004. Duane operates Leach Farms and is a Pioneer Seed representative for Washburn Seed LLC.

Leach practices conservation tillage on the approximately 950 acres he farms, raising corn, soybeans, alfalfa, and wheat. He maintains grassed waterways, conservation cover and filter strips to control erosion and protect water quality. Leach also manages a cow/calf beef herd. In addition, he manages his woodlots to improve overall forest health and wildlife habitat.

Conservation District Directors are locally elected and serve four-year terms. They make all the decisions regarding the District's programs and activities. The Director election will take place during the Shiawassee Conservation District Open house on April 4, 2024, from 2pm-4pm. For more information contact the District office.

COMMITTED TO CONSERVATION FOR ALL

Farm Bill Conservation programs offer technical and financial assistance to producers to protect natural resources like soil, water, and wildlife on their working agricultural land including cropland, grassland, and woods. USDA recognizes the need to be inclusive of all people to ensure equitable access to services. So, there are special provisions including specific incentives, waivers, priorities, and other flexibilities for producers who meet the definition for historically underserved producers within USDA programs. The Shiawassee Conservation District wants to ensure that all producers with these unique circumstances are aware of these opportunities.

What does "historically underserved" mean?

Four groups are identified by USDA as Historically Underserved: beginning farmers, socially disadvantaged, veterans, and limited resource. Definitions for each of these groups may differ across USDA agencies and/or programs. The following definitions meet the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) criteria. Please also note that these definitions are not in their entirety. A link to a guidebook can be found on the Conservation District website www.shiawasseeccd.org. A hard copy can also be obtained by contacting the District office.

Beginning Farmer or Rancher: An individual who has not operated a farm, ranch, or non-industrial private forest for more than 10 consecutive years.

Socially Disadvantaged Farmer or Rancher: Members of a group subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of that group without regard to their individual qualities. These groups

are: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; and Hispanic. USDA acknowledges that the term "socially disadvantaged" is not how individuals who fit the definitions listed identify themselves. However, it is used out of necessity as a legal term.

Veteran Farmer or Rancher: An individual who has served in the armed forces, including a reserve component, was released from service under conditions other than dishonorable; and qualifies as a beginning farmer or rancher, or first obtained veteran status during the last 10 years.

Limited Resources Farmer or Rancher: An individual who has direct or indirect gross farm sales not more than the current indexed value in each of the previous 2 years and has a total household income at or below the national poverty level for a family of four in each of the previous 2 years, or less than 50 percent of the county median household income in each of the previous 2 years.

Getting conservation on the land is a top priority of the Shiawassee Conservation District. Free and confidential conservation planning services, as well as conservation education are available to anyone who wants to learn how they can do their part to protect the natural resources our communities rely on. The Conservation District is committed to identifying and addressing potential institutional and systemic barriers that prevent underserved customers from full participation and are committed to providing services and opportunities across the county in an equitable way. Contact the Shiawassee Conservation District office at (989) 723-8263 ext. 3 for more information.

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**Arbor Day
is April 26.**
Make a plan to
celebrate by
planting trees!

WILDLIFE HABITAT WORKSHOP MARCH 23

The Shiawassee Conservation District is offering a Wildlife Habitat Workshop on Saturday, March 23, from 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m. The event will be held at the Shiawassee County Fairgrounds Community Center located at 2900 Hibbard Road, Corunna. It is free to attend. RSVP is requested to the Conservation District office by March 18.

Creating and maintaining healthy wildlife habitat on your property can be fun and rewarding. This workshop is an opportunity to learn about management options and conservation programs available to you. Highlighted topics include making wetlands suitable for ducks, pollinator habitat with a focus on conserving bees, conservation planning, Farm Bill conservation programs, and the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Speakers from Ducks Unlimited and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will join the Shiawassee Conservation District, including members of the Pollinator Task Force's "Bee Squad". They will be bringing bee samples collected from their surveys at the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge.

For more information, RSVP, or to request special accommodations, please contact the Shiawassee Conservation District at (989) 723-8263 ext 3.

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Working For You



Shiawassee Conservation District staff members Melissa Higbee, Andrea Wendt, and Donna Kanan participated in the North Central Region NCDEA's District staff training in downtown Detroit September 2023. Day one of the two-day training focused on DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) strategies and learning to develop a Plan of Work to best meet the needs of all our constituents. Day two ended with a Detroit urban agriculture tour. Pictured is Donna and Melissa with a farmer from the UGAFARM. This farm is supported by Detroit and Ann Arbor's Ugandan community. They grow healthy produce available to the City of Detroit residents including foods commonly used in Ugandan and traditional African-American diets, like collards and okra. Also pictured is the entire group at Pingree Farms. This farm is one of the largest urban farms in the City of Detroit. They are dedicated to neighborhood revitalization and youth education through experiences on their nearly 25 total acres of vegetable and animal production. We at the Shiawassee Conservation District believe that opportunities, such as this training, are opportunities to learn from other Districts and organizations so that we can better serve Shiawassee County. We know voluntary conservation is the key to protecting the natural resources we all depend on.

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CSP Benefits Forestland Owners

Forestry plays a crucial role in Michigan's economy and environment. The state is known for its vast forested areas, which provide numerous benefits such as timber production, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and clean air/water. However, unmanaged, these forests face various challenges, including invasive species, forest stand degradation, wildfires, and unsustainable logging practices.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) aims to address these challenges by providing financial and technical assistance to landowners and agricultural

producers. CSP offers opportunities for producers to expand on existing conservation efforts by applying new conservation practices, enhancements, and bundles. These new activities have the potential to help enhance a site's natural resources and improve the owner's overall operation.

Although it is commonly known that CSP offers opportunities for producers to expand existing conservation efforts on agricultural land and farmsteads, it can also be applied to private forest land. Private forest lands make up a large and important portion of the forested land base in Michigan, with nearly 11 million acres, or 57% of Michigan's forested

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The National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA) President, Shiawassee Conservation District Executive Director Melissa Higbee, and NCDEA Executive Director Tim Riley participated in the USDA-NRCS National Leadership Team meeting held in Bloomington, MN last November. They joined state and national leadership from across the country, including USDA Undersecretary for Farm Production and Conservation Robert Bonnie.



LOCALLY LED CONSERVATION

Locally led conservation is based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to deal with local resource problems. It is driven by the community's natural resource conservation needs and requires involving people and organizations in the planning process and working to successfully execute a long-range plan. The Shiawassee Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) held a Local Work Group (LWG) meeting in September as part of that process. The public was invited and encouraged to attend and participate. The public was also offered the opportunity to take a Natural Resource Assessment Survey.

The Shiawassee Conservation District and NRCS work one-on-one with landowners through conservation planning and assistance designed to benefit natural resources including soil, water, air, plants, and animals. LWG meetings and Natural Resource Assessment Surveys are a valuable part of the District and NRCS's planning process, providing an opportunity for local land managers, landowners, and colleagues to be part of the collaborative effort to improve natural resource within our County. The community feedback provided helps all of us work towards a stronger, healthier, and more economically viable community and agricultural industry.

The LWG meeting and the survey provided valuable advice to the Shiawassee Conservation District Board and NRCS District Conservationist concerning the implementation of conservation programs in Shiawassee County. Through this process, we learned that our constituents want us to focus on the following over the next five years:

- Top three water quality priorities: 1. Drinking water/groundwater, 2. Farmland surface water runoff, 3. Rivers/streams.
- Top three forest/woodland priorities: 1. Invasive species management, 2. Plant and wildlife habitat, 3. Loss due to housing development.
- Top three agriculture/farmland priorities: 1. Farm chemicals/fertilizers/pesticides, 2. Pollinator/wildlife habitat, 3. Groundwater quality.
- Top three non-farmed land priorities: 1. Invasive species/native plants, 2. Pollinator populations, 3. Wildlife habitat.
- Top three quality of life/human behavior priorities: 1. Hazardous materials, 2. Invasive species/native plants, 3. Recycling/proper garbage disposal.

The locally-led conservation effort is the foundation of the conservation program delivery process. "The Shiawassee Conservation District promotes the responsible land use decisions for the conservation, protection, and improvement of our natural resources," stated Shiawassee Conservation District Executive Director Melissa Higbee. "Feedback from our County residents is vitally important to help decide what services and programs we will offer in the future." The Shiawassee Conservation District appreciates those who participated. Offering programs that best serve the District constituents promotes the voluntary conservation concept that works best to protect the natural resources we all depend on.



The Shiawassee Conservation District held a Beekeeping Basics Workshop in February 2023. This workshop was designed to help beginner beekeepers understand what is necessary to get started in beekeeping. Attendees also learned about conservation programs offered through the District office and how they could complement their beekeeping operation. Pictured are Shiawassee Conservation District staff and workshop presenters.

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TREES: WATER QUALITY GUARDIANS

Trees play a pivotal role in improving water quality. There are many ways you can support these amazing plants that protect our planet's most precious resource.

Trees function as natural filters by capturing and absorbing pollutants from the soil with their extensive root systems. When established next to water, trees protect against polluted runoff. Their network of tree roots reduce erosion and stabilize shores and banks by binding the soil. Trees not only capture sediment from runoff, but they also moderate water temperatures and provide habitat.

Trees play a part in nutrient cycling by absorbing nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus from the soil. This helps reduce issues such as algal blooms in water bodies. Trees also release water vapor into the atmosphere through transpiration. This part of the water cycle increases oxygen levels in surface water and helps aquatic ecosystems.

You can play a role in improving water quality by planting trees. These green additions act as a natural defense by reducing water pollution and fostering a healthier environment. Adopting sustainable practices in your gardening or landscaping is equally essential. Prioritize existing tree cover and be mindful of choices such as the use of fertilizers or pesticides.

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Agricultural Incentives Program in the Looking Glass River Watershed 2023 Recap

The Looking Glass River Watershed Restoration Project is part of a grant awarded to the Shiawassee Conservation District (SCD) in fall of 2020 through the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) Nonpoint Source Program. The goal of this project is to conserve and protect water quality by helping agricultural producers integrate conservation practices into their operations.

The Agricultural Incentives Program (AIP) is included in the Looking Glass River Watershed Restoration Project. This program assists agricultural producers in the Looking Glass River Watershed improve water quality through voluntary programs. Producers can receive technical and financial assistance to incorporate conservation practices into their operations. Conservation practices available through this program include cover crops, nutrient management, no-till, and filter strips.

Eleven producers enrolled in the AIP, totaling 2,654 acres. The conservation practices applied on these acres reduced sediment by 956 tons, Phos-

phorus load by 15,730 pounds and Nitrogen by 40,300 pounds. SCD staff conducted 37 field visits, developed 6 conservation plans, and helped facilitate the application process for numerous landowners applying for conservation Farm Bill programs.

"It has been a productive year working in this watershed," stated SCD Conservation Specialist Andrea Wendt, "I'm looking forward to getting more conservation on the ground and reaching more individuals in 2024." Funds are still available to agricultural producers wishing to participate in the Agricultural Incentives Program. To find out if you qualify, and for more information on how you can make positive changes to help our most precious water resources, contact the Shiawassee Conservation District.

This information is part of a larger project funded by EGLE under the NPS Control Fund and Section 319 of the federal CWA.

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CSP Benefits

Continued from Page 4

land base. Forest management decisions on these lands have important impacts on the nature and level of benefits derived from the land.

CSP encourages the expansion and/or adoption of conservation practices that promote sustainable forestry management. The forest management practices generally implemented through CSP include forest stand improvement, brush management, invasive species control, snags/dens, pollinator and beneficial insect habitat, and forest health management. By implementing conservation practices on their forestland, landowners can enhance the resilience of their forests to climate change, reduce the risk of forest fires, and improve the quality of timber produced. These practices also help to protect and restore wildlife habitat, ensuring the long-term viability of Michigan's diverse plant and animal species.

In addition to the environmental benefits, applying CSP to private forest lands also provides economic incentives for landowners to participate in the program. Through financial assistance, landowners can offset the costs associated with implementing conservation practices. USDA is increasing the minimum annual payment for agricultural producers participating in the Conservation Stewardship Program from \$1,500 to \$4,000 starting in fiscal year 2024. The increase addresses challenges faced by small scale, underserved, and urban producers and improves equity in the program by making participation more financially beneficial for smaller operations. This new minimum payment is available for new and renewed CSP contracts.

Shiawassee County landowner and forester Ben Schram has worked closely with the Shiawassee Conservation District to plan for and implement conservation practices on his property. He and his wife Chelsea are currently enrolled in a CSP contract that includes

several activities within his forested land. When asked what initially got him interested in CSP, Ben responded with, "We had recently completed all the conservation practices outlined in our conservation plan and EQIP contract. We wanted to do more to protect water quality and benefit pollinating insects. CSP was a logical option, especially because of the generous financial assistance associated with participation in the program." Ben and Chelsea are presently struggling with woody invasive species and increasing biodiversity within their woods. Due to these struggles, they are currently implementing brush management and forest stand improvement practices in their woods. We asked Ben how he thought CSP had directly benefited their forested land and/or forestry throughout Michigan and he responded with, "Our forest and adjacent habitats are certainly in better shape since participating in CSP. We have been able to reinvest these funds into combating woody invasives and increasing biodiversity. Our forest is more resilient to a changing climate and the next catastrophic bug, as well as providing a more diverse long-term food source for our beekeeping business. Owning woodlands costs money. There are constant pressures on converting ours' and others' family forests to other land uses, like traditional agriculture or building developments. The money we received from CSP helps relieve those pressures because it pays to keep forests as forests."

The Conservation Stewardship Program is an important initiative that focuses on promoting sustainable agricultural and forestry practices. By providing financial and technical assistance, the program helps landowners and forest managers implement conservation practices that enhance the health and productivity of Michigan's forests. Through this program, Michigan can continue to benefit from its valuable forest resources while ensuring their long-term sustainability.



Working For You



Shiawassee Conservation District staff attended the National Association of Conservation District Annual Meeting held in New Orleans, LA in February 2023. Pictured are the attendees from Michigan. Left to right: Michigan Association of Conservation District President Jerry Miller, Shiawassee Conservation District Conservation Specialist Donna Kanan, Shiawassee Conservation District Executive Director Melissa Higbee, Kalkaska Conservation District Conservation Specialist Renee Penny, Michigan Association of Conservation District Executive Director Dan Moilanen, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Private Lands Forestry Program Manager Ben Schram, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Conservation Programs Manager John Switzer.

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Shiawassee Conservation District's newest conservation team member is Conservation Specialist Danner Molnar. Danner is pictured taking soil samples for a pasture management plan. We work with producers and landowners to develop meaningful conservation plans for all land uses including pasture, crops, woods, and idle lands.



TREES: WATER QUALITY GUARDIANS

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Raising awareness about the importance of trees for water quality can begin in your own community. Share your knowledge with neighbors through conversations that highlight the functions of trees. Leave a lasting impact right from your doorstep by helping others understand what it means to the environment to plant a tree.

Recognize yourself as a tree steward by understanding the crucial role of trees. Show off your appreciation of trees as they perform their duties of water quality guardians. Trees are truly remarkable as they ensure a healthier and more sustainable environment for generations to come.

The Shiawassee Conservation District is accepting orders for the Spring Tree and Shrub Sale now through April 1. Visit www.shiawasseeccd.org or call the District office for more information.

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