

Southwest Prairie TSA mentorship expedites SWCD techs' proficiency



The Southwest Prairie TSA, also known as TSA 5, training coordinator position is funded primarily by BWSR's Clean Water Fund-supported, noncompetitive Enhanced Shared Technical Services grant, and supplemented by an NACD technical assistance grant.

Growing up on a grain farm north of Dawson gave Quintin Peterson an advantage when he became a Lac qui Parle Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) technician. He was familiar with farming practices in the area. He knew the terrain. And he already knew many of the landowners in his home county.

Not every new SWCD hire is as well-versed in agriculture.

In the 11 SWCDs served by the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area (TSA), TSA Training Coordinator Dawn Madison can help to fill those gaps with one-on-one training and mentorship. Hers is a unique position among the state's eight TSAs.

"It's kind of a jump-start," said Southwest Prairie TSA Administrative Coordinator Kay Gross.



Gross



Peterson

“How to gain that trust and keep that trust, that's the most crucial thing.

— Quintin Peterson, Lac qui Parle SWCD

Top: SWCD technicians from the 11-county Southwest Prairie TSA learned how to identify and review placement of water and sediment control basins, and the resources being addressed, during a training with TSA Senior Engineering Technician Mike Skoglund Oct. 19, 2022, in Redwood County. **Above:** Southwest Prairie TSA Training Coordinator Dawn Madison has hosted SWCD technicians on her Nobles County beef-and-crop farm. She organized trainings on other livestock producers' farms so SWCD staffers could learn what drives management decisions and get some experience talking to farmers. **Photos Courtesy of Dawn Madison, TSA 5**



Left: Technicians from SWCDs within the 11-county TSA 5 examined soil profiles and the deep roots of Kernza during the Organic Ag 101 Field Day on Aug. 11, 2022, in Lac qui Parle County. **Photo Credit:** Quintin Peterson, Lac qui Parle SWCD **Middle:** Breanna Wagner of the Cottonwood SWCD and Lee Tapper of the Rock County SWCD/Land Management office estimated corn yields in September 2022 on Madison's Nobles County farm. **Right:** Sam Schardin of the Lincoln SWCD, at left, and Courtney Snyder of the Lyon SWCD worked with Madison and TSA Engineer Russ Hoogendoorn, not pictured, on water and sediment control basin design Dec. 19, 2022, in the Lincoln SWCD office in Ivanhoe. **Photos Courtesy of Dawn Madison, TSA 5**

Peterson is one of 41 SWCD staffers who has worked one-on-one with Madison over the past five years.

His background, environmental science degree and experience as a habitat technician with Pheasants Forever's Habitat Forever LLC could not prepare Peterson for every aspect of the job. Shortly after he was hired, Peterson started working with Madison to become proficient in software programs used to design structures, and to learn about ecological practices such as cover crops and no-till.

"Working through (conservation planning sessions) really sped up my development as a technician to complete successful projects in the field on my own," said Peterson, who joined the SWCD nearly four years ago, and was promoted in September to technical manager in the four-person office.

When the TSA hired Madison as a contractor in fall 2017, Gross said TSA engineers could not keep up with demand for services. When SWCD staffers attain Job Approval Authority (JAA) — even to sign off on less complex projects — it

“ These jobs are uniquely different. There’s no manual. Every county is different. Everything is new, and (for) a lot of these young people, it’s their first or second job. ”

—Dawn Madison, TSA 5 training coordinator

frees TSA engineers for work that requires more technical expertise. Enlisting Madison to train employees frees experienced SWCD staff members to focus on their duties.

Landowners benefit when knowledgeable staff can suggest options that fit their operation and improve both conservation and their bottom line.

"If a landowner's got a problem and asks, and we can help them solve that, I'll guarantee you, the next time they're thinking (about a project), they're going to come into your office because you were helpful, you were knowledgeable. We're not hiding any of the facts. This is what it's going to cost you. This is what it's going to look like. So very down-to-earth, honest, talking on their platform — and that's kind of what this training is doing, is getting them the knowledge so that they can confidently talk

with a landowner," Gross said.

Working with Madison, Gross said SWCD employees learn how to talk to a landowner at the counter and in the field, how to investigate and assess resource concerns, and how to determine what options might best suit the landowner. Acting as a mentor, Madison may accompany them when they meet with landowners.

Once they finish training, Madison remains available to answer questions.

"These jobs are uniquely different. There's no manual. Every county is different. Everything is new, and (for) a lot of these young people, it's their first or second job — so they're absolutely fresh to (this type of) work and how to go about learning to do their job," Madison said. "They've got farmers coming through the door asking for some deliverable, and they don't

know what (the farmers) are talking about."

At field trainings that introduced agricultural crops, farm implements and soil health practices — and allowed technicians to hear farmers explain their management decisions — Madison has worked with even more new hires. She started a training series focused on different types of livestock operations — dairy, beef, hogs — and how they drive crop production, land use and management decisions.

"It's not as intimidating," Gross said of working one-on-one or in small groups. "What she's trying to do is build up their confidence."

Training usually starts with a call from an SWCD manager, who describes what skills the position requires. Madison then meets the employee to learn about their abilities and aspirations. Together, they set two large goals and one small goal that mesh with the SWCD's needs.

"What I want and what they're craving in a job — we meld those two together and then she starts working up a training plan with them," said Gross, who is also the Cottonwood SWCD

administrator. “I need them to run the gamut.”

In Cottonwood County, Gross said the SWCD must be ready to pursue prioritized conservation projects funded through the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ (BWSR) [One Watershed, One Plan](#), which is supported by Clean Water Funds. Implementation is underway in the Watonwan River watershed. The BWSR Board is slated to consider plans for the Des Moines River watershed this spring. Next up will be the Cottonwood-Middle Minnesota River watershed.

Successful implementation will hinge upon working with private landowners. Gross described her office’s big-picture goal:

“What we’re trying to get out there is as much conservation on the land as we can to keep (farmers’) resources as healthy as possible in whatever ecosystem they’re working in — if they’re working in dairy, beef, swine. Maybe they’re just crop farming. But what can we do out there to help them so that their bottom line improves but also our conservation on the ground improves?”

The one-on-one training augments — and prepares staffers for — state, local and national trainings, which might only be offered every two years, and which tend to draw larger groups of varying skill levels. Madison’s hands-on field days introduce the jargon, tools, implements and practices new employees will build upon.

“It doesn’t hurt to have a background in what you’re looking at before you go to a (more advanced) training,”



Joe and Rita Vander Kooi explain their dairy operation and answer SWCD technicians’ questions during a Dec. 1, 2022, tour of their Nobles County farm. **Photo Credit:** Dawn Madison, TSA 5

Details & Definitions

TSA 5: The Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area, also known as TSA 5, serves SWCDs in Cottonwood, Jackson, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Redwood, Rock and Yellow Medicine counties. TSA 5 had 160 projects on the books as of December 2022 — including those being investigated, surveyed, designed, or construction-ready. Additionally, TSA 5 completed 95 projects in 2022.

JAA: Gaining [Job Approval Authority](#), a credentialing system for planning, design and installation of standard conservation practices, requires training, experience and demonstrated competence.

Gross said. “A lot of people we’re hiring right now do not have a close farm background.”

Madison and her husband ran a dairy farm until 2019, when they switched to a black Angus cow-calf operation. They have hosted hands-on trainings centered on the cover crops and no-till practices they employ on their farm near Adrian.

“The technicians being able to come out here and dig in our soil and do the infiltration test and survey on my land without feeling that they’re going to get in trouble — it’s nice,” Madison said. “They can practice in a non-judgment zone without having to have a deliverable.”

Madison said her mentors at the Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS) inspired her to do the same for others. She earned an associate degree in ag business, and then interned with the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Worthington. The FSA job led to a recommendation for an NRCS position, which offered more hours than the banking job she was considering. She worked as an NRCS soil conservation technician for nearly 20 years before buying a greenhouse a few years ago.

When she took the TSA job — which is funded primarily by BWSR’s Clean Water Fund-supported, noncompetitive Enhanced Shared Technical Services grant, and supplemented by a National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) technical assistance

grant — Madison said she thought she could fulfill SWCDs’ training needs in one year.

“But nobody can understand the amount of turnover, and until you’re in those shoes you really don’t understand the dynamic. It’s been a learning process. Sometimes you go through a couple people before you find the one that really wants to be there,” Madison said. She tries to help employees feel more comfortable in their new roles. “From there, some components have to sort themselves out. I think I came into it thinking that I could help them become fit for the job. You can’t create that.”

What she can do is help SWCD staffers tap their motivation. For example, one employee with an interest in invasive species spearheaded successful work to increase awareness.

“What we get is people very motivated to change the world in some way. It is important that we help them understand that changing the world takes time. Slow down. Get your foundation going. As you develop your skills, you can venture into more things of interest, provided the supervisor’s good with it,” Madison said.

Peterson, meanwhile, seems to have found his niche.

“This has always been a lifetime goal of mine. At least since middle school I knew what path I wanted to take — not the SWCD in particular, but in conservation,” said Peterson, who grew up hunting and fishing along the Lac qui Parle River. “I believe we should leave our landscape in better shape than when we found it.”