Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District

Newsletter edition 56
Summer 2025

The Conservation Challenge

CHANGE has been the CHALLENGE!

Over the past year, your Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District has been through the wringer! From moving offices to Federal funding debacles, from no phones to unpredictable wifi, from grant-writing to saying goodbye to good friends — all of these changes and more have brought focus to our efforts and strength to our expansion. This issue of the Conservation Challenge will give a look inside the District and the work we have accomplished.

THANK YOU & GOODBYES

Since Fall 2024, we have seen a number of our good friends move on to amazing opportunities in the City, County, and neighboring communities. We've added to our numbers as well. We highlight each of their stories on pages 5-7, and we hope you will join us in wishing them the very best.

UPDATE ON FEDERAL FUNDING

Since January, our Board of Supervisors and Staff have met the challenge of a Federal hold on nearly $400,000. These funds — in varying time frames — have been restored to our budget and allow the ongoing operations of the District. We have adopted notable changes in focus because of the future potential for limits on our work, but we are stalwart to maintain our mission: to promote the wise use of soil, water, and related natural resources.

Please attend our monthly Board meetings to contribute to the discussions surrounding use of your tax dollars as we serve Allen County.

REFOCUS ON OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

In order to meet the goals of the District in these uncertain funding times, the Board and Staff are taking a long look at how to best serve producers in Allen County. The current Strategic Plan (developed in 2023) provides a strong foundation for conversations that led us to conduct a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).

If you have wisdom, feedback, or would like to be involved during this re-focusing time, please contact Julie Good directly at (260) 702-8426. We ask for your input and welcome all comments.



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BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Chad Shaw, Chairman (elected, term 2027)

Tom Miller, Vice Chair (appointed)

Jain Young, Treasurer (elected, term ends 2028)

Tom Crowe (appointed)

Tyler Stieglitz (elected, 2026)

Associate Supervisors
Don Rekeweg
Dick Crowl

Each year one position of the elected Supervisors is voted at our Annual Meeting (February) in a rotating 3-year term.

Please join us and learn about conservation as an Associate Supervisor or by running for Supervisor.

NEW LOCATION: USDA Service Center moves to Dupont Hospital complex

On September 22, 2024, the Allen County SWCD moved from North Coldwater Road (Watermark Complex) to newly renovated facilities at 2720 Dupont Commerce Court.

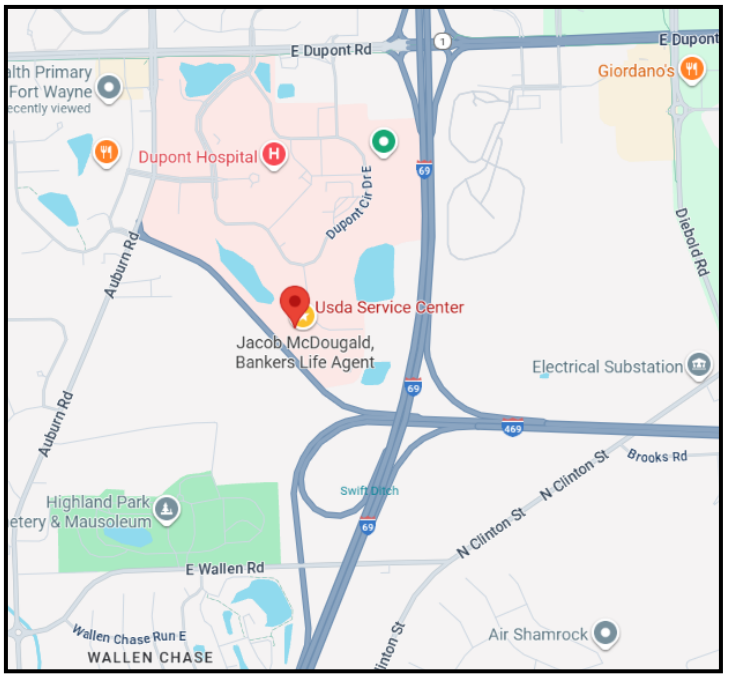
While we are a County agency, we are "affiliates" of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) which is part of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). They host us in their space due to the agreements that we complete for these Federal agencies. Both SWCD and NRCS are housed within the Fort Wayne Area Office with FSA (Farm Service Agency), plus IASWCD representatives, and ISDA (IN State Department of Agriculture) Resource Specialists (RS). The most difficult parts of the move: 2 months without furniture and 6 months without telephones.

THANK YOU ALL for your patience as we adjusted to these challenges.

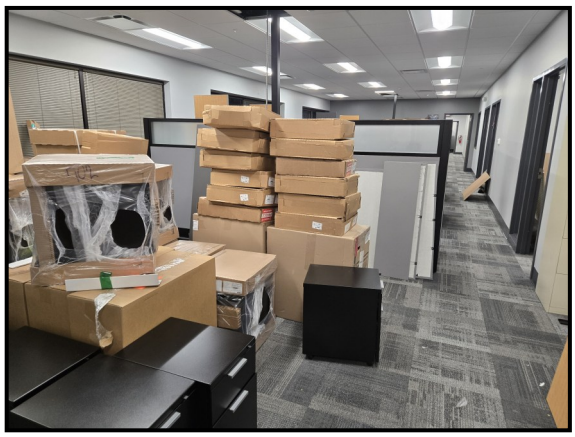
Our new location is on the south side of the "loop" around Dupont Hospital, just northwest of the intersection of I-69 and I-469. Visitors can reach the office from Dupont Road (near the entrance by Trolley Bar) or from Auburn Road (opposite direction from DeBrand Chocolates). Come visit!

Organization of SWCDs:
The District is a County-funded Department, but we are Federally and State mandated.





Stop in to see us anytime.







ANNUAL MEETING: 2025 Elections and Financial Reports

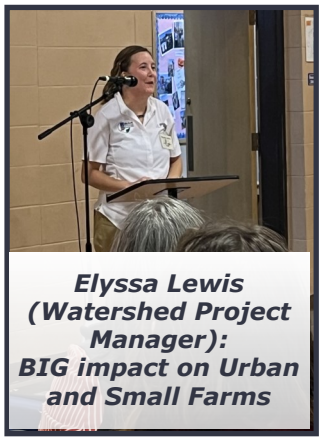
The Annual Meeting of the Allen County SWCD Board of Supervisors was held February 13, 2025, at the St. Joseph United Methodist Church on the north side of Fort Wayne. Approximately 40 attendees enjoyed a charcuterie board and desserts to celebrate the Valentine's Day theme.



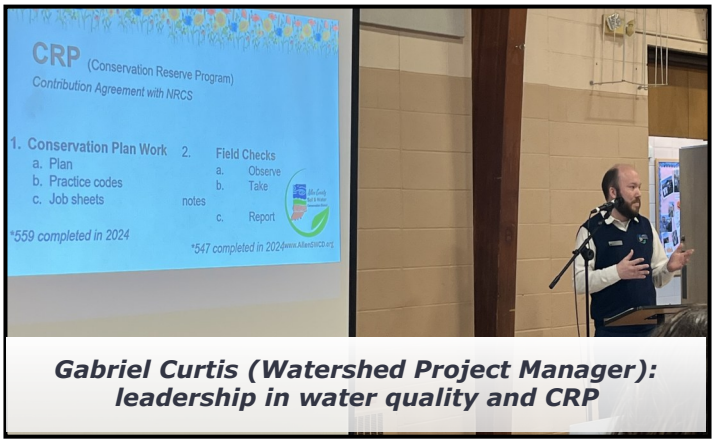
Delectable appetizers assembled by Courtney Taylor, Conservation Grants Manager

The District also celebrated their 80th year in conservation with a slide show to demonstrate the efforts of Supervisors over the years. Supervisor Tom Miller was reappointed and Supervisor Jain Young was reelected prior to taking the Oath of Office.

Details of the event and financial reports can be found online or by calling the office. **Please join us next year!**



Elyssa Lewis (Watershed Project Manager): BIG impact on Urban and Small Farms



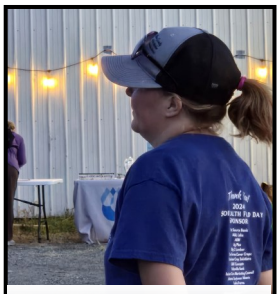
Gabriel Curtis (Watershed Project Manager): leadership in water quality and CRP



County Councilman Don Wyss executes Oath of Office for Tom Miller.

COMPOST MIXER: A one-of-a-kind event and experience!

The Healthy Soils Collaborative, with leadership by **Elyssa Lewis**, Watershed Project Manager, assembled a magical event in late October. This collaborative was formed as a grassroots movement to address issues with soil health. With ample support from Urban Soil Health (USH, which is a division of Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts), Allen Co. SWCD partnered with **Dirt Wain** and **Wood Farms** to bring an exciting event focused on COMPOST to southwest Allen County. The evening event featured two primary speakers on soil health (Terri Theisen, MS, USH) and benefits of composting (Brett Bloom, CEO, Dirt Wain). Demonstrations included diverse methods of composting, uses of compost, compost sifting, and large-scale production facility at Wood Farms. Bravas Food truck and eco-focused vendors were huge hits.



Elyssa Lewis led the excellent event.



Brett Bloom (Dirt Wain) speaks passionately about the value of compost.



Evening enchantment as composters engage on Wood Farm with vendors and exhibitors



Terri Theisen, MS (USH) convinces us to make soil healthy.

SUPPORTING JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT: Allen SWCD wows the high schoolers at JA JOB SPARK

On November 13-14, 2024, the local Junior Achievement hosted "Job Spark", a massive career event aimed at thousands of high school students in the tristate area to aid their career planning. **Rhiannon Lake** led the District's participation in both 2023 and 2024 with great success. Over 8,000 students converged to visit careers from construction to health-care. Our Education Trailer was a hit with all four stations fully functional plus a 5th station on Drone Gaming (led by Rhiannon)! What a great experience for young people to be exposed to the world of agriculture and conservation as they are planning their schooling and careers.









ALLEN COUNTY GOVERNMENT UPDATE

At a recent Allen County Executives Quarterly Meeting, Director Julie Good saw more of the results from the Indiana General Assembly that impact soil, water, and related natural resources. Both House SB 4 (Water Utilities) and HB 1037 (Stormwater Management) passed, dictating regulation at the State level that supersedes local control. SB 477 passed also and eases removal of low-head dams.

As we assemble our 2026 County Budget, we are mindful that financial impacts to our local government will hit hard in 2027.

***Mission of the Allen County SWCD**: to promote the wise use of soil, water, and related natural resources*

FARM SHOW: regional attendance increases at the annual Fort Wayne event

Over 28,000 attendees attended the Fort Wayne Farm Show at the Allen County War Memorial Coliseum between January 12-14, 2025. Attendees enjoyed the equipment and vendors, with education sessions focused on the Markets, Climate, Water resources, Risk, and Careers. Allen Co. SWCD was pleased to offer the first "walking job fair" for attendees to find companies who were actively hiring. Another change was the location of the District booth, partnered with FSA, NRCS, ISDA, and other Conservation Partners. We moved into the Main Exhibit Hall, and plan to stay for next year's event. Hope to see you there!

FORT WAYNE FARM SHOW

January 13-15, 2026

Your SWCD is busy in the community.



ALLEN CO. FAIR with EDUCATION TRAILER



Native Plant Sale with Gabe Curtis



Suzi Eloph (SWCD) and Heath Hurst (ISDA) help folks understand soil.

EDUCATION FOR CONSERVATION

A major effort of the District is contact with the community. We connect with them at Fairs, Festivals, Field Days, camps, and our Annual Meeting.

This summer we hosted a series of educational sessions at the Allen Co. 4-H Fair on Ag Day. Focused on healthy soil and conservation gardening, our speakers included Terri Theisen (USH), Marissa Renz (Plant Happiness), Sue Billian (soil microbiology), and Art Franke (NRCS grazing specialist). THANK YOU!

WATER QUALITY IN OUR STREAMS

The District's long-term devotion to water quality has increased with an intensive effort to make the data usable for decision making and public awareness. In order to accomplish this, extensive analysis is necessary. **Jason Hartenstein** joined the District last Fall as part of our "Smart Soils Initiative". He is a 2025 Computer Science graduate from Indiana Tech and has undertaken an enormous effort to automate thousands of computations to permit us to see 20 years in a snapshot. THANKS JASON!



NEW COUNTY STAFF: Courtney Taylor becomes 1st Conservation Grants Manager



Courtney Taylor has been an indispensable member of the District since her arrival in 2017. During her service, she has participated in every aspect of District functions: running Water Route, collecting USGS samples, designing and delivering events and education, while always providing advice and technical assistance for grants and agreements at the local, State, and Federal level. No one knows more about the ins-and-outs of a multitude of Federal software interfaces than Courtney.

So it is fitting that she was selected from all applicants as the inaugural Conservation Grants Manager, fully funded by a new appropriation of the Allen County Council. This new position was given to the District to improve service of the District to the residents of Allen County, to bring new opportunities to the District, to file many reports for grants and agreements, and to lower fiduciary liability of the County by having a full-time, County-vested manager. This new salary line—funded by your generous tax money—brings immense stability and effectiveness to the work of the District and confirms Allen County's investment in agriculture.

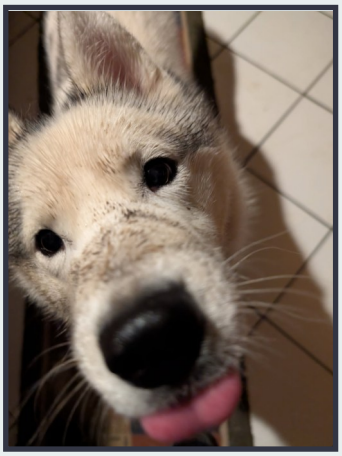
NEW OFFICE MANAGER:

SUZI ELOPH

When you call or stop by the office, Suzi Eloph is the friendly face and efficient one that meets you at the door.

An Allen County native, Suzi has two bachelors degrees: Wildlife Science (Purdue) and Accounting (Indiana Tech). She is a precise and knowledgeable financial guide as we navigate the waxing and waning of funding in the new era. Alongside a wicked talent with numbers, she has great skill in identifying invasive plants and suggesting native replacements. We look forward to the restoration work she will do here at the District.

Suzi has three dogs, Linus, Bo, and Kismet (pictured below). She enjoys them immensely as well as spending time outdoors.



THANK YOU: MIKILA COOK

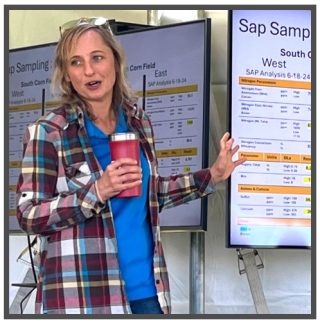


Allen County SWCD bid farewell to our previous Office Manager, Mikila Cook on October 25, 2024, as she was appointed Conservationist of Adams Co. SWCD.

During Mikila's tenure at our District, she brought improvements in our communications, marketing, outreach, branding, and customer service. She was an excellent events manager, and we benefited from her crafty designs, sound production, and large network.

We are so grateful for the work she accomplished here in Allen County, and we are excited about the collaborations we have in the works with Adams County conservation. Thanks for all your service to ACSWCD, Mikila!

HIGHER CALLING: RHIANNON LAKE, MS



The "Smart Soils Initiative" began with a dream of Greg Lake, intelligent skills of Rhiannon Lake, and generous funding from the Board of Supervisors. Technology-enabled approaches to image crop health and monitor soil moisture took off due to Rhiannon's effort. Her immense devotion to "flying fields", "stitching" the imagery, and interpreting the data has been phenomenal. After data analysis last winter, Rhiannon received an invitation to join St. Rose of Lima in their elementary program. Blessings upon your 2nd Grade!

SMALL FARMS THANK YOU: ELYSSA LEWIS



Elyssa Lewis led the programs for Urban and Small Farms over the past 1.5 years. A Purdue grad with devotion to regenerative agriculture, Elyssa headed the Healthy Soils Collaborative with Urban Soil Health. Between that and NRCS work, she led the District in presenting two excellent small farm events: Compost Mixer (October 2024) with the Collaborative, and Small Farm Field Day (April 2025), wrapping up our work with NRCS's "Western Lake Erie Basin: Urban and Small Farm Coop. Agreement" in May 2025. Sadly, the lack of funding led to Elyssa's departure, but her love of ag continues. All good wishes, Elyssa!

FROM FRESH TO WASTE WATER: GABRIEL CURTIS, MS



Gabriel Curtis, MS, was everything "water" at the District. He brought a strong background in aquatic habitats from his graduate work with Dr. Robert Gillespie (Purdue FW Biology) and prior work at the Allen County Health Department. During Gabriel's work in the District, the weekly "water route" (a 200-mile loop through all 4 sub-watersheds in the Western Lake Erie basin) fueled information that has now been analyzed and automated. This enormous task has been a collaboration with Jason & Maiya. Gabriel left the District in July to become an "Analytical Chemist for the City of Fort Wayne's Wastewater Treatment Plant. Sincere thanks, Gabe!

NEW STAFF: RON McQUEEN
Smart Soils Initiative (Watershed Project Mgr.)

Since Ron's start on June 9, he has been a busy Watershed Project Manager! Attending events in two states and both sides of Indiana each week has become his "new norm". As a former seed production manager, Ron brings experience, understanding, and willingness to travel.

Ron leads the "Smart Soils Initiative" (established in 2022) as he studies to obtain his drone pilot license. In order to bring success to this technological undertaking, he continues to immerse himself in information about the watersheds to identify agricultural regions of Allen County where he can help make the largest impact through conservation.

As he cruises through the alphabet soup (NRCS, USDA, ISDA, CRP, CCSI, IASWCD, IDEA, and more!), Ron has prepared critical information about the many conservation options and program offerings. These are beneficial as he prioritizes his time and becomes more focused on meeting farmers and providing soil tests and technological services. As he has been onboarded, Ron has engaged with trainings and field days that are influencing his plan and enlarging his network. Watch for his calls and visits! He will be joined soon by a part-time help!



RON McQUEEN

- Director of international seed production for Syngenta
- Self-employed businessman and agricultural consultant prior
- Water quality engineer
- Columbia City Joint

The 2023 Strategic Plan for Allen Co. SWCD identifies three priorities: Soil Health with agronomic support, Water Quality by sampling and analysis, and Knowledge through technological assistance.

NEW STAFF: MAIYA RIZZO
Water Quality (Watershed Project Manager)

Maiya Rizzo brings wide experiences in water quality, GIS, and environmental science, alongside studying abroad and volunteering.

Maiya came to us last December as an intern while also interning for the City of Fort Wayne in City Utilities. She brings expertise in GIS and mapping. She has been active in conservation since her graduation from college, and so the District was a great place for her to set her sights.

Since her arrival last year, she has been promoted within the District twice, and now serves as a full-time Watershed Project Manager, still wearing many hats! Due to her talents in design and communication, she has designed updates to the website (stay tuned!), managed social media, and worked with the Small Farm Equipment Trailer.

Her training and experience put her in a perfect spot to assume the Lead in Water Quality Monitoring. She dove right into managing the weekly Water Route in preparation for Gabriel Curtis' departure. Currently, she is pulling samples at USGS sites when needed and helped to retire one of the Bull Rapids samplers to new location. Newest among her responsibilities is working on our recently funded EPA grant for soil remediation in Fort Wayne. WELCOME MAIYA!



MAIYA RIZZO, BS, BA

- 2022 Graduate of Western Michigan U.
- Double majors in Hydrogeology and Environmental Sustainability
- Studied in Germany
- Northside High School alum

DID YOU KNOW?

Allen Co. SWCD was incorporated in 1945, pursuant to IN Code (IC 14-32-5-1).

The majority of Indiana's 92 districts were established under the Indiana District Law in the 1945-1960 timeframe.

In 1974 the last district (Tipton) was created, resulting in a district being in place in all 92 Indiana counties.

DAY AT THE LAKE!!

The Maumee Watershed Alliance and Allen SWCD are hosting!



UPCOMING ON-FARM DEMO:

WYSS FARMS — Seed and Field Day on 8/28/25

5pm—8pm, 1725 W. Yoder Road, Fort Wayne

Wyss Farms enterprises

Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District

2720 Dupont Commerce Court,
Suite 101
Fort Wayne, IN 46825

Phone: (260) 484-5848
Extension 3 (NRCS also)
YES! Phones are working!

email: allenswcd@gmail.com
web: www.allenswcd.org

Allen County Soil & Water Conservation District

PLEASE PLACE STAMP HERE

Enjoy this newsletter! *Since my arrival at the District in 2024, things have proceeded at break-neck pace; I apologize that this letter is later than we planned. I am so grateful for every one of you who has helped my transition back to my roots in agriculture.*

If we have not already met, I look forward to meeting you soon! Call or stop by anytime. Sincerely, Julie Good, Director