

Hand County Conservation District (No. 27)

History from 1969 publication:

Hand County is located a short distance east of the center of South Dakota in the 14 to 17 inches rainfall area. In 1880, there were a few squatters along the slopes of the Wessington Hills. But soon after, with the coming of the railroad, many settlers came to the area and started grain farming systems.

The topography of the area is quite level to undulating, except in the Wessington Hills where it is quite steep. Most of the drainage is to the east into the James River, through Turtle Creek and Wolf Creek and their tributaries, except for the southwest part of the county which drains into the Missouri River through Crow Creek.

Most of the area's soil is a grayish brown loam developed from glacial material and is suited for general and livestock farming. The south and west parts of the county are a little more rough and the soils range from loams to silt loams and clay loams, and it is more suited to a livestock economy. In all of the farming areas, there are problems of maintaining the organic and nitrogen supply in the soil, and practicing the conservation of the water and the soil is needed. Of course, the most important resources of the area are the very fertile soils which produce abundant grasses and the good supply of water found along the streams and later from wells.

In Hand County, as in all newly settled areas, the settlers broke out the sod and started raising cash crops. For many years wheat was the leading crop since it was a cash crop. Some flax was also grown. As horses and other livestock numbers increased, oats became an important crop and that was followed by barley. Following World War I, the farmers started growing corn and that acreage has increased to where the wheat and corn acres are about equal.

During later years, livestock numbers increased. In and immediately following the dry years, the milk cow numbers increased, but later the dairy cattle were replaced by beef cattle, resulting in a high population of beef cattle. At the same time, the hog numbers were on the increase to the point where now the county produces approximately 50,000 head per year.

During the 1930's and early 1940's, the area experienced serious erosion problems, overgrazed range and pastures, and grasshopper devastations. About that time, areas to the south and east had soil conservation districts and the people observed the work being done there. They decided to set up a conservation district of their own, including four townships in the southwest part of the county. Meetings were held, petitions circulated, and a hearing held, followed by a referendum. The vote was 111 to 15, covering the four townships, in 1942.

The original conservation district was known as Elm Creek-Midland Conservation District. After three additions, the name changed to the Hand County Soil and Water Conservation District.

In 1943, one township was added by petition. In 1944, about sixteen townships were added by a referendum with a vote of 182 to 22. In 1945, another addition of 263,897 acres was added by a referendum of a 397 to 46 favorable vote. Finally in 1945, the remainder of the county was added to the district by a favorable vote of 515 to 10.

The original supervisors appointed and elected were: Wilbur Lingscheit, Ree Heights; Joe Roalstad, Miller (deceased); Ed Fawcett, Ree Heights; Robert Leyson, Ree Heights; Richard Bawdon, Ree Heights. George Fawcett of Ree Heights was also active in the preliminary organization work.

As soon as the organization of the conservation district was approved and the supervisors elected, they prepared their program of work and agreements with the U. S. Department of Agriculture and requests to the Soil Conservation Service for assistance.

In their program of work they specified their problems as: wind erosion control; water erosion control; lack of water on ranges and some pastures; improper range and pasture use, overgrazed; flooding of valleys from run-off in the spring; and too much large scale tillage.

They proposed to solve these problems through the use of: stubble mulch farming; tillage methods to reduce wind erosion; use of crop rotations; proper range and pasture use so as to prevent erosion; single row field belts.

The supervisors report that the district has made remarkable progress with its work and that it has become very popular.

Others who have served as supervisors were: Frank McGinnis, St. Lawrence; Philip Testerman, Wessington; Charles Droz, Miller; M. A. Nelson, Tulare; and Herley McCarl, Miller.

The 1969 supervisors were: Arthur Stayer, Miller, chair; Orval Rogers, Ree Heights, vice chair; Herley McCarl, Miller, treasurer; Bernard Coss, St. Lawrence; James Graham, Miller; and Robert Schubloom, Miller, secretary (county agent).

Updated information provided in 2012:

Since 1969, the Hand County Conservation District has continued to emphasize the importance of living snow fences, windbreaks and the preservation of wildlife habitat. Over 10,536 acres of trees have been planted in the county to create new shelterbelts, renovate existing shelterbelts or create wildlife habitats.

The main problems identified in the county are water erosion and control of invasive species. The Conservation District recommends grass waterways, permanent vegetation and planting of cover crops to help solve the water erosion issues. As for the invasive species, scouting is the most effective control method. Education of invasive species and identification has been a focus for several years at local Rancher's Workshops and Info Shows.

The Hand County Conservation District is an integral part of the community and a member of the Miller Civic and Commerce Association. This involvement increased community awareness and opened new doors of opportunity for education. Cooperation with the local schools provided opportunities for outreach through educational programs and promotions. The Conservation District continues to support youth in the county by also sponsoring scholarships for local seniors, Speech Contest winners, and Range Camp participants.

The board members continue to be active participants with the majority of the board members serving double digit years! Other county residents who have served on the Board of Supervisors include: H.A. Poindexter, Miller; Gordon Pollock, Orient; Jacob Carlson, Miller; Lowell Prentice, Wessington; Edwin Rowen, St. Lawrence; Wilbur Fremark, St. Lawrence; Lawrence Rezek, Miller; Ken Willert, Miller; Doug Beckett, Miller; Terry Johnson, Miller; and Randy Schultz, Tulare. Currently the serving board members are Tammie Schaefers, Miller; Dean Odden, Ree Heights; Joe Fanning, Miller; Dennis Simons, Miller; and Robert Speck, Jr., St. Lawrence.