

## McPherson County Conservation District (No. 61)

History from 1969 publication:

McPherson County is located in north central South Dakota along the North Dakota border. The county was created in 1873 and organized in 1874. The first settlers came in 1882 followed by a large colony of Russo-Germans in 1884. With the construction of the railroad in 1890, train loads of German-Russian immigrants settled in the Eureka area. As in Russia, these settlers grew mostly wheat resulting in Eureka becoming the primary wheat market in the world.

The northwest part of the county drains west through Spring Creek into the Missouri River and the east and southeast parts drain into the James River, Snake Creek and several other smaller creeks. The topography is steep to nearly level with the steeper, undulating lands in the western two-thirds of the county. The eastern third is undulating to nearly level. Soils vary from clay loams, loams to silt loams. Cultivation of these soils requires protection from wind and water erosion as well as management of organic matter and fertility. Early settlers found the land covered with abundant growth of grass and dark fertile soil. This induced extensive cultivation for wheat production.

Eventually the continued cropping depleted the fertility and organic matter to the result of wind and water erosion. Drought during the thirties increased the wind erosion resulting in extensive dust storms and the demise of many farmers. A few shelterbelts were planted and some conservation practices were tried under the AAA program, but not enough was done to alleviate the erosion problems.

In 1954 several farmers inquired for more information about organizing a conservation district. An initial meeting of about 35 farmers was held in Leola resulting in enough interest to have additional meetings in Eureka, Long Lake, Hosmer and Leola. The purpose and function of a conservation district were explained at these meetings and petitions were signed for a public hearing. The hearing resulted in a referendum held on April 20, 1954 and a favorable vote of 722 for and 120 occurred to form a conservation district.

The first board of supervisors selected was: Howard Mettler, Eureka; Lawrence Wachter, Forbes; Walter Strobel, Eureka; Harry E. Hoffman, Leola; and Ferdinand Wolff, Eureka.

Others who helped with the original organization of the Conservation District were Allen Morrison and Dominic Kallas. These supervisors elected officers, prepared and signed necessary agreements with cooperating agencies and prepared their program and plan of work.

The problems named were:

1. Wind and water erosion and dust storms
2. Soil productivity due to loss of organic matter
3. Too much grass plowed out
4. Water loss from runoff
5. Insufficient water supplies for livestock

To meet these needs they proposed to:

1. Plant trees
2. Build waterways
3. Promote strip cropping
4. Grass seeding of marginal lands
5. Construction of livestock water facilities
6. Grass seeding of cultivated lands

Updated information provided in 2012:

The first years in the life of the Conservation District emphasis was primarily on the stated priorities of tree planting, grass seeding and land management practices. The Conservation District acquired a tree planter, scalp planter and a Nesbitt grass drill to accommodate the needs of the county farmers at a reasonable service charge. This service provided the financial needs for operation of the Conservation District.

Through the development of the Conservation District long range plan, it became evident that the Conservation District program needed to expand its goals. As a result of the review of the plans and the annual work plan the Conservation District board included educational projects and cooperation with additional governmental agencies and neighboring conservation districts.

One such project was the support and promotion of a countywide soil survey conducted by the Soil Conservation Service. Information on the needs and benefits of the survey were conveyed to the county farm operators and clerical assistance to Soil Conservation Service staff was provided. Additional services offered to farmers by the Conservation District were tree cultivation, chemical weed control in tree plantings, livestock water development (dugouts), and pasture and rangeland management through promotion of cross-fencing and pasture rotation.

Some other educational programs initiated in the 70's included: soil stewardship materials distributed to county churches, conservation and range camps for high schools, conservation speech contest conducted through the county high schools, poster contests in the elementary schools, and the GSDA contest for outstanding conservation farmers. The Conservation District GSDA winner received an expense paid trip and a short course co-sponsored by South Dakota State University in Brookings.

With the ever expanding programs the Conservation District Board realized the need for more information and communication with the State Association of Conservation Districts (SDACD) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). Attendance at the State and National meetings was encouraged. For several years all Board members attended Area and State Convention meetings. This participation provided the opportunity for McPherson supervisors and Auxiliary members to be elected as SDACD and NACD Boards and Officers. In 1979 Supervisor Robert Gab was elected to the SDACD Board and then elected Vice President and John Weisser took his place on the State Board.

The Conservation District Auxiliary also took on State level leadership positions as Mary Gab served first as Auxiliary Secretary/Treasurer, then Vice President and President. Fellow McPherson Auxiliary member Delores Rath served as Auxiliary Treasurer, Cheryl Jahraus was Auxiliary Historian and Ella Weisser also served as State Historian and Scrapbook chairperson. Wilma Haupt. They were also leaders in Auxiliary fund raising projects.

As State Auxiliary President Mary Gab and Perkins Auxiliary member, Nora Anderson developed the Sammy Soil Saver puppet project with the assistance of State Conservationist Bob Swenson as an education tool used throughout the State. The Ag in the Classroom project also grew in South Dakota as Mary and Nora created "The Little Red Barn" packed with ag resource teaching materials for the classroom.

The McPherson Conservation District applied for and received a grant from the State Conservation Commission to conduct "Teacher In-Service" training programs statewide. This multi-year project conducted by Mary and Robert Gab exposed 1440 teachers and 30,000 students to agriculture and conservation.

In 1987, Mary Gab was elected Secretary/ Treasurer of the National Auxiliary for a 3 year term, in 1990 she was elected National Auxiliary Vice President and in 1993 she was elected President. A project of the National Auxiliary during her tenure as President was the compilation and sale of a cookbook which proved to be highly successful.

In the 80's, the Conservation District also become more involved in operations outside the county boundaries such as the Mina Lake Assessment and Development Project. This project involved McPherson, Edmunds and Brown Conservation District along with State and Federal Agencies with McPherson being the lead sponsor. The Conservation District hired a coordinator for the project and was responsible for collecting water samples and conducting of the project. Another multi-district project was the promotion of no-till and several educational meetings were held in the Conservation District and neighboring counties featuring panel discussions and slide presentations.

Tree planting and grass seeding continued as popular conservation practices as 143 acres of trees were planted and 12,426 acres of grass were seeded in 1989. Additional equipment was purchased including a "Weed Badger" to enhance the service to producers in care of shelterbelts. Living snow fence plantings were promoted to reduce the problem of snow blocked roads in the winter. Increased assistance to producers was provided by hiring 2 fulltime and as many as 8 seasonal workers. A leased building and land was purchased which enabled the Conservation District to install a tree cooler room which greatly improved tree care.

Educational tours in the Conservation District created great interest and so in addition to the annual GSDA tour the Conservation District sponsored a grass species identification tour on the range of the Natures Conservancy land west of Leola. The State Society of Rangeland Association held their State tour on the Robert Gab farm, who had been chosen Rangeman of the Year in 1984. McPherson Conservation District also receive first place in the State Goodyear contest in 1985. Cooperator Richard Jasmer and Supervisor John Weisser received a trip to Scottsdale, Arizona and a tour of the Goodyear Farms. The Conservation District had received the runner-up award the previous year. In 1986 the Conservation District moved to its present USDA Service Center location with office space provided through an agreement with NRCS and USDA.

In 1981, Supervisor Robert Gab was elected President of the State Association of Conservation Districts and with the support of State Conservationist Bob Swenson the Association Endowment Fund program was renewed. The goal and purpose was to raise enough funds to alleviate the need for continued rise of conservation district dues to the Association for its operation. The fund is an ongoing program to this day. Robert was also a member of the committees establishing the Conservation District Bookkeeping Guide and the State Association Employee's handbook.

In 1987, McPherson Conservation District was honored to have its first member elected to the National Association of Conservation District Board of Directors. Robert served on this Board for six years and was Chairman of the National District Operations Committee. During his tenure as Chairman, the National Association of Conservation District Employees was organized under the guidance of the District Operations Committee. He also served on the NACD Resolutions Committee and the NACD Great Plains Committee.

In the 90's, the introduction of the fabric weed barrier eliminated part of the labor of tree cultivation and has become one of the most used practices to date with near to semi-loads of fabric used some years. The Conservation District purchased another no-till drill in 1998, an experimental tree plot was planted, two tree spades were purchased for use of replanting in

shelterbelts and a composting kit was purchased for use by anyone interested in composting. Another very successful program was the "dam-dugout" practice sponsored by the USFWS for water development benefiting livestock and wildlife. The McPherson Conservation District was the first Conservation District in the State to participate in this program. The supervisors also participated in training Board members of their responsibilities by use of the training modules supplied by the Association.

McPherson, Edmunds and Faulk Conservation Districts initiated the organization of the Dakota Central Organization in 1992 for the purpose of addressing common conservation concerns in the three county areas. Several projects have resulted through effort, the most notable being the Upper Snake Creek Watershed Project. Over the years the Association has expanded to include four additional counties of Beadle, Hand, Spink and Brown. A Weed Control Project and the Faulkton Dam Restoration Project are additional accomplishments.

In 2006, the Conservation District erected a new tree cooler and storage building. This will improve the quality of the trees in storage prior to planting which in turn will improve the survival of trees and help maintain tree plantings in the county. Since the beginning of the living snow fence program in 1986 the Conservation District has planted 43 miles of living snow fence.

The annual awards dinner features the recognition of accomplishments of the Conservation District, its Supervisors and individual operators. In 1991 John Weisser received the State Outstanding Supervisor Award. This was the second such honor for McPherson Conservation District as Robert Gab had won that award in 1983. The second Goodyear Award for McPherson was won in 1993 and Gordon and Delores Rath enjoyed their trip to Scottsdale, Arizona. The Conservation District celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary at the annual awards dinner in 2004 with a special banquet and program with over 70 people in attendance.

Another honor for the Conservation District occurred when Robert Gab was appointed to the State Conservation Commission by Governor George S. Mickelson in 1991. He was reappointed by succeeding terms until his retirement in 2008. He served as Chairman from 2001-2008 and Governor Michael Rounds proclaimed January 8, 2009 as Robert Gab Day in South Dakota for his dedicated work to conservation.

The 2011 Conservation District Long Range Plan lists as its goals as: conservation planning; promote erosion control and enhance water quality and quantity; proper management of rangeland, hay land, and pastureland; proper management of wildlife and development of wildlife habitat; and promote educational projects.

Conservation Projects the Conservation District is currently involved in are: tree planting; grass seeding; weed control by using fabric; chemical and/or cultivation; water management and development; range and pasture management; livestock waste development; cropland erosion practices; cover crop program; Soil Stewardship program; Arbor Day program; poster contest; speech contest; Soil and Moisture Clinic; range and wildlife camp; leadership conference; State and National Awards; State and National meetings; and partnership in Big Sioux Nursery.

Former District Conservationists were: Merle Shelbourne, Alton Taylor, Jim Rezar, John Price, Chuck Logan, George Liebel, Wayne McDaniels, Ralph Stensland, Wayne Vander Vorste, Yvonne Haefner, Kevin Kehrwald, and Bruce Healy. The current District Conservationists is: Neil Schaar.

Former NRCS technical staff were: Clint Blumhardt, Jim Schaffer, Sylvia Regnier, Mike Wolf, Della Schaffner, Cheryl Schaar, Jim Hilgemann, Wayne Nesby County Agent, and Patrick

Moriarty County Agent. The current NRCS technical staff is: Holly Hatlewick, soil conservationist.

Following are the agencies cooperating with the Conservation District: SCS/NRCS, AAA/FSA, USFWS, SDGFP, DENR, EPA, SD Extension, SDACD, NACD, State Conservation Commission, other conservation districts, cities, schools, churches, sportsmen organizations, local businesses, and media organizations.

Present Board Members are: (from left to right) Robert Gab, supervisor; Ken Kunz, supervisor; Mark Gruebele, supervisor; Lee Kindelspire, supervisor; Dan Mettler, advisor; and John Weisser, supervisor.



Former Board Members and Assistants were: Lawrence Wachter, Howard Mettler, Ferdinand Wolff, Harry Hoffman, Walter

Strobel, Dominic Kallas, Allen Morrison, Elvin Feickert, Aaron Bertsch, Ernest Jasmer, Elmer Feiock, Stanley Strobel, Gottlieb Gienger, Reuben Nies, John Weisser, Robert Gab, Merle Meier, Emanuel Haupt, Gordon Rath, Ernest Rath, Clifford Wolff, Frank Geffre, Reuben Ehresman, Jeff Neuharth, Mark Gruebele, Lee Kindelspire, Mark Opp, and Ken Kunz.

Former employees were: Linda Heiser, secretary; Pam Schaffner, secretary; Marva Lou Geffre, secretary; Nancy Crist, secretary; Sylvia Arioso, secretary; Val Rath, secretary; Nancy Kallas, secretary; Jack Geffre, manger; Mike Lapka, manager; Gerald Jasmer, manager; Greg Merkel, manager; Matt Schaefer, manager; Byron Kindelspire, Dallas Henderson, Darel Yost, LaVerne Skott, Julius Bonnet, Wally Kracke, Bernie Martin, Jenny Martin, Delmar Metzger, Carl Wahl, Frank Geffre, Chris Bentz, Ervin Anliker, Richard Mock, Jim Geffre, Delmar Wahl, Ervin Lammle, Adolph Zantow, Cindy Turnwall, and Carl Lapka. The current employee is Anjanette Kindelspire, Administrative Secretary.