

Codington Conservation District (No. 24)

Codington Conservation District boundaries are the same as Codington County, rectangular in shape and encompassing about 442,000 acres with Watertown as the county seat. It includes several lakes, including Lake Kampeska and Lake Pelican and is near the headwaters of the Big Sioux River. The Conservation District was first organized on an area east of Highway 81 and north of Highway 212 in February 1942 and in March 1944, the remainder of the county was added to the Conservation District. In addition to Watertown, some of the other towns in Codington County include Florence, Henry, Kranzburg, South Shore, Waverly and Wallace. According to the 2010 census, the population of Codington County was 27,227, the number of farms was 663, and the county encompassed 440,165 acres with 247,710 of those acres being cropland.

The original Conservation District Supervisors were J.R. Michaels, Watertown, chairman; Harry Schmeling, Watertown, vice chairman; John Schoepp, South Shore; Harry Stein; and T.A. Zemlicka, Watertown, treasurer. Other farmers who were active in promoting the organization of the original Conservation District were H.A. Kranz, Watertown; W.E. Mollberg, South Shore; Smith Robbins, Florence; H.C. Knipple, South Shore; Vic Floden, Wallace; Vern Belk, Henry; Charles Robbins, Florence; Julius Bacon, Watertown; Leslie Gooch, South Shore; L.A. Larson, South Shore; Lewis Becking, Florence; and Joe Strohfus, Henry. Charles Robbins, Joe Strohfus, T.F. Reilly, W.H. Schwanke, Gilbert Kittelson and Vic Floden served on the Board of Supervisors since the organization of the Conservation District. The Conservation District office was located in the basement of what is now known as the Old Post Office building in uptown Watertown.

Some of the resource concerns and problems the Codington Conservation District has dealt with since its inception were wind and water erosion, weed control, flooding, and overgrazed grasslands. These are still some of the problems being addressed today by working closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and many other partners and organizations that are interested in conservation.

During the late 1960's and early 1970's the Codington Conservation District planted record numbers of acres of trees, ranging between 200 – 300 acres per year through 1978; many years having planted the most of all the conservation districts in the state. During this time, Reuben Wicks was the District Conservationist and Leo McMannus was the Soil Conservationist for a time before being replaced by Don Fox who held that position for many years before retiring and becoming an assistant supervisor on the Conservation District Board until he passed away in 2003. Don was heavily involved in the large number of acres of tree plantings that occurred during those years. The Conservation District owned a plot of ground in west Watertown that had an older Quonset storage building on it and in 1973 built a new, walk-in tree cooler and building to house it, to accommodate the large tree inventory required for plantings. That cooler remains in service as of today.

Lana Ronning was hired as the Conservation District secretary in 1971. Some of the other projects the Conservation District worked with during the 1970's were the study of the upper part of the Big Sioux River basin and possible solutions because of record snowfall in 1969 and the heavy flooding in the spring of 1970. There was also a study being done on Still Lake and Grass Lake as a practical use for water diversion and storage. One of the first feedlot waste management systems was built in Codington County in 1971 and received state wide and national attention because of the use of a nylon reinforced rubber liner.

During 1975, the Conservation District worked with the County on planning recreational development of Memorial Park and Camp Watymca. The Conservation District helped publish the Camp Watymca Outdoor Classroom booklet; 1500 Watertown high school students utilized the booklets and the outdoor classroom that year. In 1978, the Conservation District worked with the Lake Kampeska Development Corporation to address the water quality in the Lake.

In the 1980's, the Conservation District continued with the various conservation practices such as grassed waterways, terracing, crop rotations and tree planting to control and prevent soil erosion. Because of limited moisture and increase of fall plowing and chisel plowing in the early 1980's, the Conservation District began encouraging minimum-till and no-till practices to continue realizing the goal of soil conservation but because of the sagging farm economy a limited number of operators were able to switch to no-till equipment. In 1985, the Water Bank Program became available as well as conservation practices through the 1985 Farm Bill. The number of acres of tree plantings declined during the 1980's. The Conservation District became more active in the water quality study and shoreline erosion control of Lake Kampeska and hired Mike Steffen as the Lake Kampeska Watershed coordinator. After the resignation of Mike Steffen, Paul Halonon was hired and the name of the project was changed to the Upper Sioux River Watershed, and also included Lake Pelican.

Both Reuben Wicks and Don Fox retired from Soil Conservation Service in 1981 and Earl Henderson, District Conservationist in Clark County became the acting DC for Codington County and Craig Olson was hired as the technician for Codington and Clark Counties. Bonnie Hoy, who had been the Conservation District Secretary since 1976, retired in 1984 and Cleo Meek and Merritt Partlow filled that position for the remainder of 1984. In 1985 Jeannie Bergh was hired as the part time Conservation District Manager, Dave Bronson became the new technician for the Soil Conservation Service and Karen Howell was the District Conservationist for a short time; upon her resignation Arlene Brandt-Jenson assumed that position. Jim Comes, after serving on the Conservation District Board as an assistant supervisor since 1979, became Conservation District supervisor on the Board in 1983 and Dale Tesch also joined the Board that year as a Conservation District supervisor. At that time, Charles Robbins and Harley Gulbraa, as well as Don Fox stayed on the Board as assistant supervisors. After serving as an assistant supervisor since 1985, Larry Bergh became a supervisor on the Board replacing Walt Schawk.

During the later 1980's, the Conservation District increased its focus on education activities and programs for both youth and adults by sponsoring a booth at the Watertown Winter Farm Show for the first time, sponsoring a student to the South Dakota Wildlife Federation Youth Conservation Camp, and working with schools and 4-H clubs in Codington County promoting various contests and programs. In 1986 Codington Conservation District started a three day/night youth conservation camp, held at Camp NeSoDak near Waubay for 6th, 7th and 8th grade students which continued until 1999. Sandy Law became the Conservation District Manager in October 1987.

The Conservation District received a grant in 1986 to initiate and implement new conservation programs such as grass seeding and purchased a Tye grass drill which was used to seed 1000 acres that year. Elden Flurry operated the drill from 1986-1988, Oscar Hogstad from 1988-1989 and then Verlyn Nordseth was hired to operate the drill in 1990. Another grant from the Conservation Commission was used to promote weed control in tree plantings and that was the beginning of the building of a very successful cultivation program for the Conservation District. In 1989, over 90 acres of shelterbelts were cultivated with the Conservation District's first new weed badger which was operated by Brian Comes.

The 1990's saw a definite shift in Conservation District activities, programs and services being expanded. Verlyn was hired on a year around part time basis as the District Technician to oversee the tree planting, drill grass seeding and cultivation programs. Throughout the years, Verlyn put together a crew of eight or nine guys, mostly retired farmers from around the county, to do the tree planting, cultivating and grass seeding. This evolved into a unique situation for the Conservation District as this same base crew has been with the Conservation District from 1990 – 2011. These men started working for the Conservation District while in their 60's and most of them are still employed at the ages ranging from 75 to 80+. Because of this crew, the Conservation District received the American Legion Employer of the Year for Hiring of Older Workers Award in 2009. The Conservation District's tree planting acres went up and down some, based on economy, weather and Farm Bill programs but remained consistently on the high side because of Verlyn's leadership and the continuity of having the same experienced crew each year.

The Conservation District's cultivation program was successful for the same reasons, expanding from running 2 badgers in 1993 to running 4 weed badgers in 1997 and by 2002 the number of weed badgers used by the Conservation District grew to 7 badgers and 3 diggers. Between late April and mid-September each year the cultivation crew cleaned an average of 450-500 acres per year for producers in Codington County. In addition to increasing our inventory of weed badgers, the Conservation District also updated and increased the number of tractors, drills and trailers over the next few years, currently owning eight tractors, four pickups, three trailers, seven weed badgers, four diggers, a 15' Tye no-till grass drill and 20' John Deere no-till drill. All of this equipment is housed in a 40' x 105' building which was built by the crew in 1999 as a 40 x 60' steel sided building and in 2009 adding the additional 45' to house a shop as well as all the machinery.

The rest of the 1990's saw the Conservation District involved in the Five Area Hydrologic Unit planning process to address resource concerns of the local landowners, an Abandoned Well Sealing Demonstration Project, co-sponsoring a no-till tour with Hamlin County with Dale Tesch's operation being one of the stops, working with USF&WS to construct small ponds and dams, seeing several Animal Nutrient Waste Management Systems built, participating in the East River Riparian Demo Project and seeing the Lake Kampeska project becoming active as a 3-year project funded by EPA 319 funds and in 1995 the name was changed to the Upper Big Sioux River Watershed Project. Several of the above projects were funded in part by grants from the Conservation Commission. The Conservation District also started publishing a quarterly newsletter as a source of information for landowners and producers in Codington County. Lynn A. Johnson, of Florence, became a Conservation District supervisor in 1992, replacing Larry Bergh, and in 1996 Kenneth Bunde came on the Board replacing Gilbert Kittelson.

In 1994, Helmut Mattic, the Deputy Director of the All-Russia Research Institute of Agroforestry in Volgograd, Russia, along with four various agency people visited Watertown on a tour through South Dakota looking a windbreak shelterbelts. They visited with personnel at the Conservation District office, stopped to see the Conservation District's tree storage facility and tree planting equipment and then toured the Big Sioux Nursery.

In 1996, the State officially turned the Big Sioux Nursery over to South Dakota's conservation districts with Lynn Johnson and Dale Tesch playing an active role in that agreement with then Governor Bill Janklow. Eventually the nursery was set up as a nonprofit corporation operated and owned by the SD conservation districts. Lynn Johnson served as the Codington

Conservation District representative on the Big Sioux Nursery Board and for many years was the chairman of that Board.

The decade of the 2000's saw a continuation of strong tree planting, tree cultivation, and grass seeding services as the main and strong source of revenue for the Conservation District, until the late 2000's when tree planting acres declined state wide. Codington Conservation District hosted the SDACD Convention in Watertown in 2007, established a Conservation District web page in 2009, and awarded John and Donita Moes the 2009 Soil Conservation Award. The Conservation Commission grant projects in Codington County took a different direction in that many new multi-county ones were implemented. Codington Conservation District took an active part in the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO), the Central Big Sioux River Watershed grant project, the Rapid Watershed Assessment of the Upper Big Sioux-Northern Coteau Watershed, the NE Grazing Water Development project, the Prairie Coteau Grassland Management project, and the NE South Dakota Wetlands Project. The Conservation District continued to work with partners such as USF&WS, Animal Nutrient Waste Management Team (NRCS) and the Upper Big Sioux River Watershed Project.

Brian Robertson was elected to the Conservation District Board of Supervisors in 2001. The 2011 Board of Supervisors are Lynn A. Johnson, Chairman; Jim Comes, Vice-Chair; Brian Robertson, Treasurer; Kenneth Bunde, Supervisor; Dale Tesch, Supervisor and Ken Kittelson, assistant supervisor. Sandy Law is currently the Conservation District Manager, having been with the Conservation District for 24 years as of 2011. In 1993, the Conservation District office, along with NRCS and FSA moved from a building located on West Hiway 212 in Watertown to a new building at 810 10th Ave. SE. In 2011, the offices moved again to a new building located at 1720 4th Street NE. 2011 also brought major NRCS personnel changes with the retirement of Arlene Brandt-Jenson as the District Conservationist. Jim Dylla assumed the position as the new District Conservationist for Codington County, Shannon Ims was hired as the Soil Conservationist for Codington and Day counties, Dan Baukus is the Soil Conservation Technician for Codington and Hamlin counties and Linda Sumner continued as the Administrative Assistant, having started in that position June 2010.