



Helping People...

...Help the Land.



Partnership Agreement Allows For Better Customer Service

Tim Schwipps, district conservationist for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Kim Jolly, administrative assistant for Ripley County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) are no strangers when it comes to working together; they've spent the last 10 years located in the same service center. But not until recently, after the SWCD entered into an agreement with NRCS, have they really seen an impact of the quality of customer service they can provide as full partners.

In 2015, Indiana NRCS entered into a contribution agreement with the Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts for Program Support Specialists (PSS) to address the needs to fully meet administrative workloads for Farm Bill programs. The intent of this agreement was to reduce administrative workload on NRCS field staff, allowing more time to be spent in the field completing conservation plans and related field activities. PSS agreements focus on five main tasks: uploading contract information; assembling contract files and documentation; managing correspondence; data entry and reviewing documentation; and compliance and additional miscellaneous activities. Ripley County SWCD is one of several Indiana SWCDs that have entered into this agreement. And while the work performed for an agreement may vary in each office, they all have the same goal in mind – providing better service to our customers.

"Since we've been working together on this agreement, I've been able to focus more

on our customers' needs," says Schwipps. "Before it was hard to find the time to get everything done that's required for me to do with contracts. With Kim's help, I'm able to spend more time following up with farmers on EQIP applications that have been installed and doing conservation planning with new landowner applicants."

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) process has also become more streamlined with the implementation of this agreement. Ripley County SWCD Technician, Steve Franklin, assists Schwipps with CRP reenrollment and status reviews. Once the field work is complete, the information is given to Kim who creates the core documents required by the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

"In previous years we were able to generate the CRP plans and contracts for FSA quicker because of this agreement," said Schwipps. "Having Kim help with creating the maps, plans, contact, job sheets and other documents has made this process much more efficient."

Field work isn't the only thing that has improved since this agreement was put into place. Both Ripley County and Jefferson County share a district conservationist, which makes this agreement vital to assisting customers in a timely manner. Often, Tim is working in Jefferson County when a landowner comes in to submit receipts, sign a contract or inquire about their plan. Kim can assist the landowner at that time rather than having that person (or customer) make an

additional trip back to the office.

"This agreement has helped me gain a better understanding of the Farm Bill programs," said Jolly. "As district staff, we don't always know exactly what is going on with EQIP, CSP and even CRP. Going through an agreement like this gives you a better understanding of these programs and builds your skill set."

No process is ever perfect, but Tim and Kim have been able to work through some of the challenges associated with having a district conservationist covering multiple counties. When answers are needed quickly, they utilize communication through email, texting and instant messaging. Additionally, new technology like the Document Management System and Conservation Desktop are becoming more effective as folders become available electronically, allowing Kim to have better access to files.

Both Tim and Kim agree that trust between the district conservationist and PSS and a willingness to share responsibilities are crucial to establishing benefits to our landowners. They recommend other counties with agreements to keep an open line of communication between the district conservationist and PSS.

"If you don't have faith in the person that's helping you, you're going to be less likely to hand off some of that contracting responsibility," said Schwipps.