

Town & Country

Hamilton County Soil & Water Conservation District

Fall 2017

Central Indiana Envirothon Competition for Area Teens to Advance Their Careers and Knowledge in Natural Resources

The Indiana Envirothon is a fun and exciting way for high school students, homeschoolers, 4-H'ers, Scouts, Green Club members, and FFA members in grades 9-12 to learn about the natural world around us. Envirothon teams are made up of 5-6 teammates (1 alternate encouraged) who work together to study Indiana's natural resources over the course of the school year. All topics are very hands-on and include practical skills. The trainings are taught by experts in each field.

"The Envirothon is a great event to help us understand our natural resources and how we can manage them. It helped me figure out what kind of careers are out there since I am interested in nature and the land." - 2013 student winner of Indiana Envirothon State Competition

Topics include:

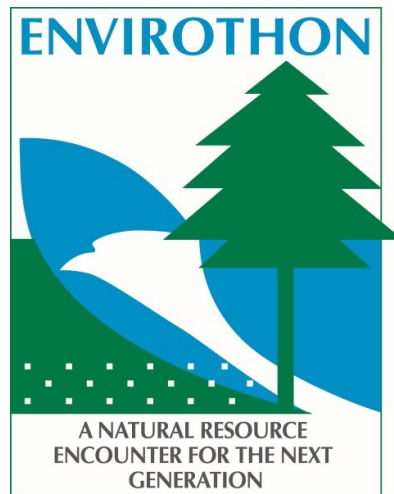
- **Forestry**— Indiana foresters will teach how to identify tree species and determine a tree's height and age. Students also learn management techniques for healthy and productive forestry resources.
- **Soils**— Students work alongside soil scientists to learn about profiling and mapping techniques used to determine soil characteristics for farming and developing activities.
- **Aquatics**— Students explore complex underwater ecosystems with freshwater biologists. They also learn how wetlands and buffers contribute to healthy streams.
- **Wildlife**— Students learn firsthand from wildlife managers about animal populations and dynamics in Indiana and the importance of preserving wildlife habitat.
- **Current Issue**— Every year there is a different current environmental topic. Past topics include urban trees, conservation and agriculture, invasive species, and many more. The 2018 topic is Pasture Management: Balancing Agriculture, Conservation and Wildlife.

The first wave of competitions begins in the spring with local teams competing for the Regional Envirothon title. This year marks the first year that the Central Indiana Region will be hosting and holding a competition for this part of the state. The Hamilton Soil and Water Conservation District will host schools for the regional competitions and is encouraging local schools, clubs, and groups to participate. This year's Central Regional Envirothon competition will be held at the Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds on March 22nd. This all-day event will provide professional growth to the Envirothon teams by interacting with professionals working in the topics listed above, giving them insights to their careers and helping to make these topics relevant to the teams and their future. The teams of 5 will compete against one another to take the title as winner of the Central Indiana Regional Envirothon. The top teams from the regional event will advance to the statewide Indiana Envirothon. This competition is usually held in April and features a hands-on training day in all 5 resource areas as well as number of fun events. The winner of the Indiana Envirothon earns the right to represent the state at the NCF-Envirothon contest. This year's NCF-Envirothon contest will be held at Idaho State University in Pocatello, Idaho.

If you want to be part of Envirothon, you can contact your school's science department or your local soil and water conservation district to see if a program exists in your school. If a program does not exist, then your local soil and water conservation district can help you get one started! Youth groups and other teen organizations can also form teams. Registration Booklets have been sent to all schools and any group that has shown interest in competing. However, if you have not received a booklet and would like one, contact your local soil and water conservation district or go to www.iaswcd.org/events-2/envirothon.

If you have any questions, contact the Indiana State Envirothon Coordinator, Darci Zolman, at (574) 267-7445 x3 or at darci.zolmand@in.nacdn.net. You can also contact Central Regional Envirothon Coordinator, Ginger Davis, at (317) 773-2181 or at ginger.davis@hamiltoncounty.in.gov.

Central Indiana Envirothon



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Time for the Census of Agriculture—New Improvements Make Completion Easier

The newly updated 2017 Census of Agriculture is more user-friendly than ever. A simple questionnaire can be completed via mail or on any mobile device. The online questionnaire will store data and automatically calculate totals. The questionnaire averages about 50 minutes in length. Taking the 2017 Census of Agriculture is required by law for U.S. farms, ranches, and those who operate them under Title 7 USC 2204 (g) Public Law 105-113. The stored data from the census will help to shape the future of agriculture in America. The census response deadline is February 5, 2018. For more information, visit www.agcensus.usda.gov

Rulon Named National Soil Health Champion

The Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District is proud to announce that Rodney Rulon has been named a Soil Health Champion by the National Association of Conservation Districts.

The District worked with NACD to nominate Rulon and Rulon Enterprises LLC based on their extraordinary work to promote soil health management practices on their own farm and advance the adoption of these practices within the community. Rulon also serves as board chairman for the SWCD board of supervisors. The District supports the work of Rulon by helping to publicize his field days and farm tours and by providing resources for other soil health related promotional activities.



Rodney Rulon

Soil Health Champions are raising awareness about the benefits of soil health practices from the local level to a national one. Champions share their personal experiences using best management practices through the national network on a peer-to-peer basis and through NACD-hosted national meetings and events.

Rulon Enterprises is a fourth generation family farming operation run by brothers Ken and Roy Rulon, cousin Rodney Rulon, and Roy's sons Nick and Neal Rulon. The Rulon Farm started off as 80 acres in 1869 and has since grown to include over 6,400 acres of no-till corn and soybeans across central Indiana. For decades, the Rulon Family has held the belief that conservation work provides tremendous environmental, societal, and agronomic benefits. Because of these benefits and the economic advantages of using conservation practices, the Rulons have continued to use a no-till system since 1989 and continue to innovate and integrate additional conservation practices such as cover crops and soil amendments into their system. After many years of experimenting, the Rulons have cultivated a highly sustainable production system that has excellent yields, minimal environmental impact, and resilient, healthy soils with high organic matter content.

"It is an honor to be chosen as a Soil Health Champion," said Rulon. "Building soil health is essential if America is to meet the challenges of providing food, fuel, and fiber for a growing population here and abroad."

"Rodney Rulon richly deserves this honor. He is a stellar advocate in helping to increase adoption of soil health practices," said Ginger Davis, SWCD District Administrator. Rodney currently serves as chairman of the Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District board and is an active supporter of his church, Boy Scouts, and 4-H. Rulon Enterprises received the No-Till Farmer Magazine/Syngenta National No-Till Innovator Award in 2011 in recognition of Rodney's efforts to improve soil health and the economics of conservation production practices. The family also received the ASA Regional and National Conservation Legacy Award in 2012 and a long list of state and local awards for their continued work to promote no-till as a sustainable and responsible conservation practice.

To arrange a speaking engagement, interview, field tour, or other activity with Rodney Rulon or the NACD Soil Health Champions Network, contact NACD's Beth Mason at beth-mason@nacdnetwork.org or Mark McCauley at mark.mccauley@hamiltoncounty.in.gov.



Indiana NRCS Announces EQIP Application Deadline

Indiana's agricultural producers who want to improve natural resources and address concerns on their land are encouraged to sign up for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Jane Hardisty, NRCS State Conservationist, announced that December 15, 2017 will be the EQIP application deadline in Indiana.

"While we take EQIP applications throughout the year, applications received after December 15th will be considered in future announced application rounds. I encourage producers with resource concerns on their land to submit an application by the deadline," Hardisty explains.

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program available for agricultural producers. Through EQIP, NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to install conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, improve soil health, improve water and air quality, and create wildlife habitat.

Many applicants are interested in using funds to address soil erosion and water quality issues on their land; however, funds are also available for pasture and grazing land, confined livestock operations, organic producers, drainage water management, invasive plant control, and wildlife habitat improvement. Also included in this sign up are several state and national initiatives including:

- **National Organic Initiative:** NRCS provides financial payments and technical assistance to help producers implement conservation measures in keeping with organic production. Beginning, limited resource, and socially disadvantaged producers may obtain additional assistance.
 - **National On-Farm Energy Initiative:** NRCS provides agricultural producers with technical and financial assistance that quantifies how energy can be used more efficiently to reduce input costs, increase productivity, and reduce air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions. This initiative only offers assistance for 128 Conservation Activity Plans-Ag Energy Management Plans (AgEMPs) and certain energy conservation practices.
 - **Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Initiative (EQIP):** The Monarch Butterfly Habitat Development Project is a multi-state effort focused on increasing monarch habitat on private lands through plantings of milkweed and nectaring forms as well as managing pesticide use in proximity to monarch habitat.
 - **Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative (EQIP):** The goal of this initiative is to convert tall fescue and other non-native forages to native grasses and forbs and develop prescribed grazing plans to address the habitat needs of bobwhite quail and associated grassland/shrub land species. This category is available statewide on land which overlaps one of the Indiana DNR C.O.R.R.I.D.O.R.S. priority areas.
 - **NRCS Landscape Conservation efforts:**
 - **Resource Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects:** RCPP promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and through the following program contracts or easement agreements.
 - **Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI):** NRCS and partners work with producers and landowners to implement voluntary conservation practices that improve water quality, restore wetlands, enhance wildlife habitat, and sustain agricultural profitability in the Mississippi River basin.
- ◆ Big Cicero Creek Watershed (Boone, Clinton, Hamilton, and Tipton Counties)

In addition, EQIP offers financial assistance for payment of practices and conservation activities involving the development of plans appropriate for the eligible land. The conservation practice associated with plan development is known as a Conservation Activity Plan (CAP). EQIP applications for CAP are not required to be submitted by December 15th; they may be submitted, accepted, and considered for funding at any time. Funding is based on dollars available and meeting eligibility requirements.

Producers interested in EQIP should submit a signed application to the local NRCS field office. Applications submitted by the December 15th deadline will be evaluated for the funding period submitted. Participants in EQIP must meet eligibility requirements. NRCS staff will work with producers to determine eligibility and complete necessary worksheets and rankings in order for the applicant to compete for funding.

For more information about EQIP and other technical and financial assistance available through Indiana NRCS conservation programs, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/programs/financial/eqip/ or contact Angie Garrison, District Conservationist, at 765-482-6355 x3.



Know Your Soil pH

Mark McCauley, Resource Conservationist

So what is “soil pH” anyway? The technical definition is the negative logarithm (base 10) of the activity of hydrogen ions (H+) in solution, but what good is that to the everyday gardener? Not much, but with a little understanding of the basics, it can be much clearer. In general, soil pH is a measure of how acidic or how alkaline (the opposite of acidic) the soil is. You may hear other words interchanged with alkaline, such as “high pH” or “basic”. You may also hear other words interchanged with acidic, such as “low pH” or “sour”. The pH scale ranges from 0 to 14, with 7 being neutral. A pH below 7 is considered acidic while a pH above 7 is considered basic.



Soil pH is an extremely important variable in soils as it controls many other chemical processes. Most importantly, it specifically affects plant nutrient availability by controlling the chemical forms of the nutrient. Soils commonly range in pH from 5.0 to 8.0. Most plants grow best when the soil pH is between 6.0 and 7.0. When the soil pH is greater than 7.0, phosphorus and some trace minerals may be less available to plants. There are some acid loving plants such as blueberries, azaleas, and rhododendrons which prefer more acid soils (less than 6.0). When the soil pH is too low (acidic), lime should be applied. When the soil pH is too high (alkaline), sulfur may be applied to help lower the pH.

In my experience in Hamilton County, the soil samples that we receive from urban areas are typically higher pH, and those from rural areas are typically lower pH. Why is that? Well, I have a theory that in urban areas, much of the land has been disturbed, exposing what would have been subsoil, and that soil is often at the soil surface, or at the very least, mixed with added “top soil” or nearer the surface than would be normal. Since subsoil is naturally higher in pH, that would seem to make sense. In rural/ag areas, I think it is more of an issue of additions of certain nutrients and forms of nitrogen, which in turn can result in a lower pH, which would then require lime to help raise it.



What does this all mean for the typical homeowner/land manager? It would seem to indicate that getting a routine soil test (every 3 years or so) might be wise to do. In order to grow the best lawn, flowers, fruits, vegetables, or trees you can, you need to make sure the soil is supplying the proper nutrients the best it can. A soil test can help determine that, and that is just one of the services available through your local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

Your local SWCD has been around since the 1960's and literally has decades of experience in providing sound guidance to land owners and managers in several natural resource issues. Whether it be fixing an erosion problem, building a pond, testing the fertility of your soil or quality of your water, developing wildlife habitat

and native plantings, addressing a drainage issue, nutrient management, etc., we are here to help. Please feel free to give us a call or send an email and we will schedule a time to meet with you.

Sheridan FFA Wins Hamilton-Boone Soils Judging Contest

The recent soils judging competition between Hamilton and Boone County schools was held September 21st in eastern Boone County. If you are unfamiliar with “soil judging” competitions, it is basically an event where students examine local soil profiles and answer questions related to soil components, such as sand, silt, clay, texture, drainage class, fertility, suitable land uses, topography, etc. Four separate trenches are dug in different soils types/locations on the contest site and soil judging teams conduct hands-on tests and examinations at each of the four trenches, completing individual test sheets. Students work alone and are not allowed to communicate with each other or their coaches until after the competition is completed.

Recognitions are given to the top three teams as well as the high scoring individual. Coming in at first place with a total team score of 1059 was Sheridan FFA (team members include: Lauren McKinney, Nolan Miller, Michael Reed, and Coach Scott Ison). The second place award went to Western Boone FFA with a team score of 1020 (team members include: Ellie Garst, Laura Graddy, Austin Bush, Ben Wilkinson). The third place award was taken by Lebanon FFA (team members include: Jacob Winger, Lilly Carlisle, Austin Wright). The top scoring individual of the entire competition was Lauren McKinney (Sheridan) with an individual score of 413!

This soil judging event is a collaborative effort between Hamilton and Boone County SWCD's, Purdue Cooperative Extension (Hamilton and Boone), 4-H, and local FFA's. We want to thank Mike Wiggington (NRCS Soil Scientist) for officiating.

The Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District supports soil judging competitions because we recognize the valuable skills that are learned by students – skills that will enable them to make wise decisions in the future concerning the use and protection of our natural resources.



Urban Conservationist Honored by Environmental Education Association of Indiana

SWCD Urban Conservationist Claire Lane was recently presented with the Joe Wright Recognition of Excellence Award for Outstanding Achievement in Environmental Education. The award was presented by the Environmental Education Association (EEAI) at their annual conference at Waycross Conference Center in Brown County on October 14th. Claire was selected for the award for her commitment to the Indiana Children and Nature Network and management of the statewide Nature Play Days initiative.



EEAI President Ann Niednagel (left), Claire Lane, Retired DNR Conservation Educator Warren Gartner

District Welcomes New Intern

Kelsey Hughes is our new intern working at Hamilton County SWCD. She is joining us through the internship program at Noblesville High School, where students are given the opportunity to intern at their desired location during part of their school day. Kelsey is a senior and plans to use her internship experience to prepare for college where she plans to study either biology or environmental science. Kelsey joins SWCD staff on site visits and assists with various office projects to learn about conservation. We look forward to hosting her for the remainder of the school year.

2018 District Cost Share Application Deadlines

The 2018 SWCD Urban Conservation cost share program will have application deadlines of March 8th and August 3rd. The spring deadline has been moved forward one month to help facilitate spring planting projects. A list of all applicable practices and associated policies can be found online at hamiltonswcd.org/byc-cost-share. Applications must be accompanied by a conservation plan written by SWCD staff, so it is important to start the cost share process early. We recommend you contact the SWCD at least one month before the cost share deadline. Individuals, businesses, churches, homeowners associations, and other groups can apply for cost share. Contact Claire at the SWCD to get started. The Heartland Backyard Conservation Cost Share program is a program available to Hamilton, Marion, Madison, and Hancock county residents through a state Clean Water Indiana grant. Application deadlines and procedures are the same as above. District staff can help you identify which program is right for your project.

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Urban Conservation Spotlight

Claire Lane, Urban Conservationist



Cut Back or Wait— When Should I Cut Back My Native Perennials?

Most perennial flowers and grasses benefit from having the previous season's growth cut away before the new growing season. The question then becomes, should I cut back my garden in the fall or wait until late winter/early spring? Generally, unless your plants are exhibiting signs of mildew or insect damage, it's great to leave the plants over winter. Birds will love the dried seed heads and many other species will appreciate that habitat to overwinter. While some people prefer the clean look of cutting down growth before winter, many native flowers and grasses look great over winter and provide aesthetic appeal among the snow and frost. When the time comes, in fall or spring, to cut your plants back, trim to 2-3 inches above the ground before new growth begins. The LBJ Wildflower Center online plant database (wildflower.org/plants) is a great resource to find information on specific species needs.



Little bluestem in snow



District Awarded \$5,000 Grant To Establish Pollinator Forage

These funds will be re-distributed to help District partners establish pollinator habitat projects across the county. This funding is part of the Bayer Feed a Bee program's \$500,000 initiative to plant forage areas in all 50 states by the end of 2018. As one of the recipients of grants awarded during the third selection cycle of this two year initiative, the District has received \$5,000 to fund planting projects which, together with the 93 additional projects honored through the initiative, will help provide a tangible, sustainable solution to the current lack of forage for bees and other pollinators. In the third round of selection, 22 projects with demonstrable local impact have been funded across the country.

Battle Invasives This Fall

Fall is a great time to assess your yard/property for invasive species or noxious weeds. Several types of control measures including manual, mechanical, and chemical are effective in the fall. Additionally, identification of undesirable plants (such as invasive honeysuckle) is often easy in the fall as they are still leafy and green when most other shrubs have dropped their leaves. Assess your property for invading species and their density. Make low density infestations your priority to eliminate small infestations and prevent continued spread. Target higher density areas as resources allow knowing that invasive species management is a multi-year process. The Indiana Invasive Species Council keeps a helpful list online of common Indiana invasives and a simple internet search will yield details on specific management strategies for various species. Of course, you can contact the SWCD for information on managing invasive species on your property.

Woody invasives control: Mechanical control such as cutting, tilling, and mowing are most effective when used in conjunction with herbicide treatments. Cut stems of a plant near its base and apply herbicide to the cut stem. Using an applicator such as a sponge top bottle or paint brush, keep herbicide treatments targeted. Add a dye to the herbicide so you can keep track of what stumps have been treated. Always apply herbicides in accordance with their label.

Tree Tags Made Possible Through Duke Energy Grant

This fall, over 700 trees were purchased through the SWCD's annual fall native tree sale. For many people, planting a tree seems pretty straightforward but when you consider things like utility lines, mature tree size, planting info, mulching, and maintenance, there really are quite a few considerations to tree planting and success. To help us convey this information to customers and share Duke Energy's "Right Tree Right Place" message, tree tag placards were created and hung on each order in the tree sale making it easy for each customer to have all the relevant details at their fingertips. Many thanks to Duke Energy for making the creation and printing of these tree tags possible!



Urban Agriculture Update

Andy Fritz, Urban Agriculture Conservationist

Let It Be: Messy Gardens Are Needed Too

In the United States, anecdotal evidence and citizen monitoring activities indicate a significant decline in insect populations. This trend is primarily influenced by habitat loss, fragmentation of the landscape (e.g. urbanization), and environmental quality degradation through chemical applications. One piece of anecdotal evidence that many older drivers have observed is how car windshields, plastered with insects twenty-five years ago on a single evening drive, is hardly an issue today. Entomologists call this the windshield phenomenon.

This is alarming. Insects offer significant ecosystem services. Economically, researchers at Cornell University estimate that insects contribute more than \$57 billion conservatively. Furthermore, insects provide nutrition for a host of wildlife, offer pest control by preying on other insects, and pollinate plants including much of which we benefit from. Fewer insects equates to less insect control, less wildlife (think birds), and decreased food security.



Flower heads covered by snow in winter.

Increasing the amount of diverse habitats with complex food-web systems is needed to reverse the declining trend in insect populations. Thankfully, backyard and community gardens, which already contribute to providing food and habitat to insects during the summer, are just as valuable in offering nesting habitat for insects to hibernate and lay eggs throughout the winter. This is called overwintering. Many beneficial insects like swallowtail butterflies, multiple species of katydids, and goldenrod lace bugs, will nest in the dead remains of your standing tomatoes, flowers, weeds, and other plants as well as under the leaves and debris that fall onto the garden in autumn.

Therefore, in essence, when it comes to preparing your garden for winter, lessen your workload and let it be. You have permission to be lazy! Of course, there are some questions regarding appearances, disease, weeds, etc. Below is a step-by-step outline to protecting your garden as a winter habitat while also preparing it for the following spring.

- 1) Remove plants that may have been diseased and dispose of them by burning, in a waste receptacle, or by composting properly.
- 2) Leave flowers and other plants standing. Many insects like to hibernate or lay eggs and larva in the soil, under leaves, and on plants. Flowers with seeds will be consumed by birds. In addition, by leaving the dead plants standing, you are protecting the soil from wind or water erosion.
- 3) Removing weeds is your decision – you may remove any weeds that have gone to seed or that are considered invasive. Consider leaving them in a pile nearby your garden until spring.
- 4) Plant a winter cover crop in the fall like rye, oats, clover, hairy vetch, or oilseed radish by dispersing the seed between the dead standing plants. Cover crops not only nurture the soil by increasing tilth and organic matter, they provide even more protected habitat for insects.
- 5) If you are concerned by what neighbors or passersby may think, create signs or share why you are leaving the garden a mess with neighbors and friends. It won't convince everyone but at least they know you are being intentional and that you care. Where there is intention and care, there is life!
- 6) Consider placing some leaves from your lawn on the garden as protective cover. This also helps your soil by protecting it and offering much needed organic matter as it decomposes.
- 7) After several 50°F days in the spring (which allows enough time for overwintering insects to hatch and move on), it is okay to begin cleaning up your garden for planting.

Finally, take the pledge to be a “Lazy Gardener” by going to <https://goo.gl/A9h5oJ> and enjoy being lazy!

Results from The Farmers Bank Summer Produce Donation Program Are In

As part of an effort to supply fresh vegetables and fruit to local food pantries, the citizens of Hamilton County were successful in donating 457 pounds of produce to The Farmers Bank this summer. This was made possible through a partnership between the HCSWCD, The Farmers Bank branches in Noblesville and Sheridan, and six local food pantries - Mama's Cupboard, St. Vincent de Paul, Noblesville Township Trustee, Open Arms Food Pantry, Sunflower Food Pantry, and Sheridan Community School Food Pantry - with the hope of encouraging customers of The Farmers Bank as well as local passersby to donate their surplus garden produce to the cause.

The program works like a canned food drive except that fresh produce is donated instead of nonperishable food. Each week, a member of a food pantry would take turns picking up the donated produce for delivery to their respective food pantry.

We want to thank our partners in making this program a success and we look forward to continuing next year.



Beverly Watson of the Noblesville Township Trustee's Office and Sydney Loomis of The Farmers Bank in Noblesville.

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Save the Date

2018 SWCD Annual Meeting and Workshop

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Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds Exhibition Hall

More info coming soon.

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December 2017 Board Meeting and Holiday Luncheon

Thursday, December 21st, 2017 11am at Matteo's in Noblesville

Contact the SWCD for more info. This is a public meeting
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