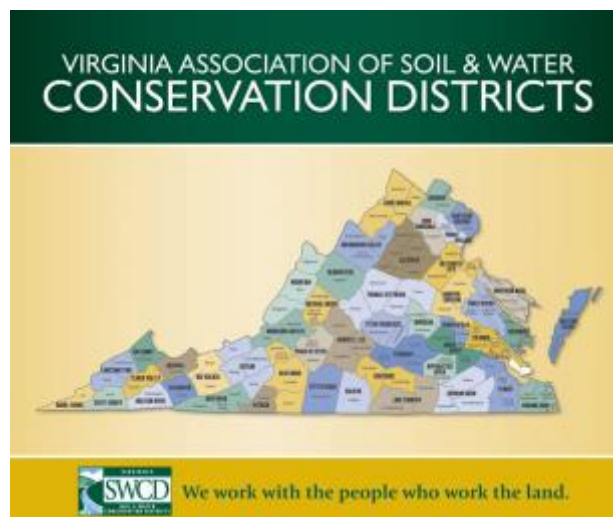


Currently on the Clinch: SWCDs

Written by Robyn Goad, AmeriCorps VISTA member with the Clinch River Valley Initiative

When it comes to protecting, promoting, and conserving natural resources throughout the Clinch River Valley, the phrase, “it takes a village” comes to mind. The Clinch River Valley Initiative, a driving force behind many projects and programs geared towards revitalizing this region, includes over 30 partner organizations. These organizations include federal and state agencies, non-profits, businesses, educational institutions, and involved citizens.

Among these partner groups are Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). Established in the 1930s, these districts are subdivisions of the state and manage conservation programs, employ staff, and deliver conservation services free of charge. There are 47 districts in Virginia, four of which cover the Clinch River watershed: Tazewell SWCD, Clinch Valley SWCD, Lonesome Pine SWCD, and Scott County SWCD.



Map of all SWCDs in Virginia

To learn more about SWCDs and what they do, I spoke with Elizabeth Bennett, Conservation Education Specialist with the Tazewell SWCD. While some of the events and programs we discussed were specific to the Tazewell district, the overlying theme of the work remains the same across all districts: conservation of the region’s natural resources.

These conservation efforts can be categorized into two main initiatives: education and implementation. Education efforts are conducted with kindergarten through high school students, and with adult community members. Bennett organizes and facilitates educational opportunities for the Tazewell SWCD, with the help of numerous volunteers. Examples of these opportunities include the following events for specific grade levels:

- 3rd Grade – Living Soil
- 4th Grade – Food and Fiber Fair
- 5th Grade – Water Wizard Week
- 6th Grade – Tour de Park
- 7th Grade – Kids in the Creek

For students younger than 3rd grade, in-class informational packets and activities are provided by the SWCD. The Tazewell SWCD also provides educational information to community members through festivals and other outreach events.

The Tazewell SWCD also assists citizens in implementing various best management practices that will not only help protect the environment, but also help enhance agricultural production. Examples of these best management practices include building fences to help keep livestock out of streams, installing wells, and creating irrigation systems for crop rotation, among others. SWCDs are often able to help

offset the costs of these project installations through various grant programs and allocated state funding. There are also numerous tax credits that can be applied once the system is installed, which helps provide further incentives for landowners to adopt these conservation practices.

An important distinction between SWCDs and other local conservation groups is that SWCDs are non-regulatory, which means that they do not have the authority to enforce compliance with environmental regulations, but instead issue recommendations. This is a great asset to local citizens and producers, as SWCD employees are able to customize solutions and suggestions to specific needs. This ensures that not only are producers getting the best fit for their agricultural needs, but also that the conservation practices chosen are the best for the surrounding environment.

To learn more about Soil and Water Conservation Districts, or to contact your District, go to: www.vaswcd.org.