

Introduction to SWCD Case Studies

Written by Lynn Sprague, Agricultural Economic Development Director for Polk County, 2009

North Carolina's Soil and Water Conservation Districts have the ability to address one of the most severe issues this state has ever faced, **“the loss of working farms and forests”**. It is an environmental problem as we try to plan for the future demands on our soil, water and air resources, an economic problem since our working farms and forests are our state's top economic engine and a quality of life problem as North Carolina becomes more urbanized.

Through General Statute 139, soil and water conservation districts have the power to hold conservation easements to help preserve farm and forest working lands. Soil and water conservation districts have a long history of holding easements for watershed projects and other constructed conservation projects. Over the past decade, various soil and water conservation districts considered the loss of working farm and forest lands as a local conservation issue and began to hold conservation easements. Many of the early easements had to go through the process of confirming legal authorities, establishing new procedures, checking on liabilities and establishing monitoring protocols. Since each easement is unique depending upon various landowner needs, a soil and water conservation district often needs guidance and an outside funding source. Over the years, many resource people in agencies and land trusts have helped greatly with specific easements, but each new project had to go through a questioning process and learning curve. Hopefully these case studies will help share the experiences.

The decision for a soil and water conservation district to hold conservation easements is a local board decision. Not all easements may be suitable for a soil and water conservation district and preservation easements may be better held by a land trust, conservancy or environmental organization. Working lands conservation easements are really a good fit for soil and water conservation districts. Working land conservation easements are dynamic documents that remove most of the development rights and protect certain environmental features, but allow management decisions on the farm and forest. In a farmland preservation program, sound economics keeps farms and forests viable. Management strategies may greatly change over the years to utilize new technologies, different crops, markets and trends. The soil and water conservation districts can balance conservation planning with these changing farm management decisions.

The loss of working farms and forests has clearly been identified as one of the most severe issues in the state. While there are many groups working on the problem, the soil and water conservation districts have the ability through their powers under General Statute 139 to be a significant part of the solution. It is a new direction and requires an extra effort by both the Supervisors and staff of the local soil and water conservation districts to more fully utilize the enabling legislation. Working lands preservation is an opportunity for the North Carolina soil and water conservation districts to show real leadership. These case studies have been written to collectively utilize the experience and expertise of the many resource people and the soil and water conservation districts who have actually implemented working land conservation easements. We thank the many writers and resource people who have shared their experiences.