

County Farm Bureau Issue Backgrounder
June 2012
County Land Conservation Departments

Background

All 72 counties in Wisconsin have either a separate land conservation department or a land conservation division within another county government department. There are approximately 350 people working within county land conservation departments or divisions. Staff levels range from one to 15 staff members per county.

County land conservation departments may be responsible for the delivery of several state and local programs. These include:

- Land and Water Resource Management Planning
- Soil and Water Resource Management
- Farmland Preservation Program
- Targeted Runoff Management Grants
- Urban Nonpoint Source and Stormwater Management Grants
- Impaired Waters and Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)
- Manure Storage Ordinances
- State Standards for the Siting of Livestock Operations
- Wildlife Damage Program
- Local Ordinances and Zoning

In addition, some county land conservation departments may work with the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resource Conservation Service to deliver federal programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program or the Environmental Quality Incentive Program. Not all programs are active in every county. Counties have some flexibility as to whether or not they wish to offer a particular program.

County land conservation departments are delegated implementation authority to offer these programs by state law or administrative rules enacted by the Department of Natural Resources or the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. In addition, county land conservation departments may also partner with the University of Wisconsin-Extension for education and outreach activities.

The State of Wisconsin provides about \$9.3 million annually through DATCP grants to counties for conservation staff salaries and benefits. The majority of county land conservation staff costs are supported through property taxes. In addition to staff support, DATCP provided \$4 million and the DNR awarded \$5 million in cost share grants to counties in 2010 for landowners to install best management practices to improve water quality.

Fifty-nine counties have adopted manure storage ordinances that require farmers to obtain a permit in order to construct a manure storage facility. These ordinances require a nutrient management plan to be implemented in order for the farmer to receive the construction permit. Twenty-three counties have adopted a livestock siting ordinance that regulates the siting and expansion of livestock farmers with over 500 animal units.

In 2010, 15,791 landowners claimed the farmland preservation tax credit on 2.9 million acres of land. According to DATCP, the total amount of these credits was \$18 million. In addition to certifying that a landowner is eligible to receive the farmland preservation tax credit, many county land conservation departments are working with their county zoning department to update their farmland preservation plans and corresponding zoning ordinances. The updating of plans and ordinances was required when the working land legislation was passed a few years ago.

In addition to working with DATCP, county land conservation departments work closely with the DNR on water quality issues, including development of TMDLs, urban nonpoint source and stormwater management and shoreland zoning. Some county land conservation departments also work with the DNR to provide local delivery of wildlife damage and abatement program, which assists farmers experiencing crop damage or livestock depredation from bear, turkey, geese, deer and wolves.

Items for Discussion:

County land conservation departments have the opportunity to provide a wide array of assistance to farmers. These departments also have the regulatory authority to require farmers to implement various best management practices in order to meet water quality regulations or to obtain a permit for their livestock farm.

To further complicate things, each county land conservation department is unique due to local county priorities and needs. For example, shoreland zoning is a very relevant activity for northern counties, whereas agriculture nonpoint implementation is more relevant in the southern two-thirds of the state. Also each county land conservation department reports to and is overseen by the county board land conservation committee.

The net result is wide variance in county land conservation department approaches to agriculture and other environmental and land use issues. However, over recent years many county land conservation departments expressed the need for additional state funding for county staff positions and want more flexibility to address conservation issues at the local level.

This creates conflict at times between county land conservation departments, DATCP and DNR. DNR may want to prioritize an environmental issue such as TMDL development, but an individual county may have a different issue that is more important to them locally.

Questions:

- Are there programs currently being required for county land conservation departments to do that could be eliminated?
- Are county land conservation departments appropriately or adequately funded? If no, what do you suggest?
- Should either DATCP or DNR require more consistency between county land conservation departments?
- Are county land conservation departments necessary?
- Are there other suggestions to improve county land conservation department's interaction with farmers?