

## SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS CELEBRATE 75 YEARS

August 4, 2012 will mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in North Carolina and nationwide. The Brown Creek Soil and Water Conservation District was formed on August 4, 1937, and included Anson, Union, Stanly, Montgomery, and Richmond counties, and was the first SWCD in the state and the nation. The formation of SWCDs was the result of a nationwide movement to reduce soil erosion following decades of poor land management practices that resulted in widespread gully erosion in the southeast and the Dust Bowl in the Midwest. The movement was led in a large part by Hugh Hammond Bennett, a North Carolina native from Anson County who graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1903 and began his career in soil survey field work that same year. Having grown up on a farm, Bennett knew the importance of good soil and recognized the problems caused by soil erosion. At a time when some in scientific community believed that soil was an inexhaustible resource, Bennett began to speak out about soil erosion, which he called "a national menace", and worked tirelessly to gain the expertise and knowledge necessary to present his case to the public and government officials in Washington and around the nation. He was one of the first scientists to recognize the detrimental effects of sheet erosion on topsoil, when most scientists were focusing on gully and rill erosion.



Hugh Hammond Bennett

In 1933, Bennett's efforts paid off with the formation of the Soil Erosion Service (SES), a division of the Department of the Interior and later a Division of the Department of Agriculture. Now regarded as the nation's foremost authority on soil erosion, Bennett became the head of the agency which worked closely with the Civilian Conservation Corps on soil and water conservation demonstration projects. With the passage of Public Law 46 in 1935, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and a national policy for soil and water conservation was formed. The Soil Conservation Service replaced the Soil Erosion Service. Initially the agency's strategy was to continue demonstration projects, which were effective as an educational tool, but Bennett wanted a more efficient way to get conservation practices on the ground and began working on ideas to get local farmers and citizens involved in the process. Thus the idea of local soil conservation districts was born, an idea widely credited to Bennett. The intent behind establishing local Soil and Water Conservation Districts

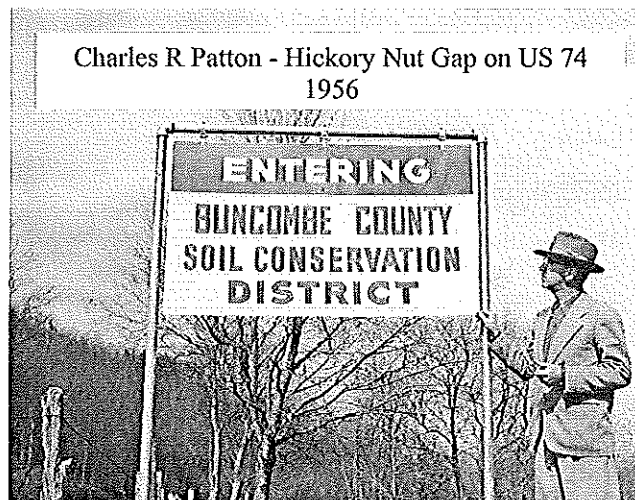
was to involve local citizens, especially farmers in the decision making process and initiate locally-led conservation. In February of 1937, after a long process of technical and legal work, President Roosevelt sent a letter to all the state governors along with a template called "*A Standard State Soil Conservation Districts Law*" to be used by states to develop legislation to form soil and water conservation districts. By the end of 1937, 22 states including North Carolina, had adopted laws to establish soil and water conservation districts. By 1944, 45 states had established laws enabling the formation of soil and water conservation districts.

Now, every state in the nation has soil and water conservation districts, approximately 3,000 in all. North Carolina has 96 Soil and Water Conservation District and each is governed by a five-member Board of Supervisors with close ties to their communities who provide leadership in developing and carrying out soil and water conservation programs.

The Buncombe SWCD was officially chartered April 24, 1951 and began work as an organized District, assisting the citizens of Buncombe County in conservation efforts in 1952. H. D. Carter of Fletcher and W. G. Plemmons of Leicester were appointed as supervisors and served until the District was organized and regular supervisors were elected. Initially, the Board consisted of three elected members. An election was held December 3-8, 1951 to elect the first official Board of Supervisors. The winners were A. W. Nesbitt, D.

M. Snelson, and W. C. Snelson. Later, the Soil Water Conservation Districts Law was changed, adding two appointed members to District Boards, making five-member boards. Up until 1974 ballots were cast in country stores and other businesses around the county. In 1974, the election of Board members was added to the ballot in the general election. District Supervisors have always worked as volunteers, receiving only meeting expenses. There are indications that they also helped pay the expenses of operating the District in the early 1950s. In 1956, the Board members petitioned District Cooperators for funds to pay operating expenses. Now, as with most SWCDs in the country, the majority of funding is provided by county governments, and the state. The Buncombe SWCD has been successful in obtaining grants from a variety of sources to fund special projects such as the Newfound Creek Watershed Project.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the District program focused primarily on developing conservation plans for farmers. By 1958, the District's goal was to develop conservation plans for all the 1,800 farms in the county. In addition to developing conservation plans, the District and Soil Conservation Service assisted with tree planting, tile and open drain ditches, pond construction, and design of irrigation systems. With the conversion of farmland to urban uses, the District's efforts have gradually expanded to solving the natural resource problems caused by urban development, highway construction, shopping centers, and residential housing development.



The Buncombe SWCD administers a number of state soil and water conservation programs including the North Carolina Agricultural Cost Share Program, the Community Conservation Assistance Program, and the Agricultural Water Resources Assistance Program. These programs provide cost-sharing to landowners who are installing conservation practices that conserve soil and protect water quality. Environmental education is a vital function of SWCDs and includes the Envirothon, conservation contests, field days, exhibits, and presentations for schools and other groups.

The District first employed a full-time secretary in 1960 and the first full-time technician was hired in 1973. Currently the District has a total of five staff positions and is funded primarily by Buncombe County government.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (the Soil Conservation Service until the mid-1980's) has provided personnel to assist the District since 1951 when Charles Patton began service as Work Unit Conservationist. He served in that position until 1958. Mr. Patton drafted the maps for the first conservation plan when the first District in the United States was organized in Wadesboro in 1937. He later served on the Board of Supervisors and was inducted into the North Carolina Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Hall of Fame in January 1997. Over the years the District has had five individuals work in the position of District Conservationist, and has had several NRCS Soil Conservation Technicians and Soil Conservationists.

We want to thank past members of the Board, the members of the Conservation Partnership, especially the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the N. C. Division of Soil and Water Conservation for all their help over the years. Special thanks and recognition is also due Buncombe County government, whose support is crucial to the success of our programs.