

Soil & Water

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

FEBRUARY 2026

A supplement of the **Journal Review**

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What is the SWCD?

The Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) is a legal subdivision of state government responsible for conserving natural resources within our county. Each of Indiana's 92 SWCD's is governed by a board consisting of five local citizens. Three board members are elected at the annual meeting and 2 are appointed by the State Soil Conservation Board based on recommendations of leadership in the district.

Our Mission

The purpose of the SWCD is to be a resource for the citizens of Montgomery County seeking information or assistance regarding conservation issues, as well as identifying and addressing natural resource concerns. The SWCD works alongside a variety of conservation organizations and government entities to provide conservation solutions at a local level.

What do we do?

The purpose of the SWCD is to be a resource for the citizens of Montgomery County seeking information or assistance regarding conservation issues, as well as identifying and addressing natural resource concerns. The SWCD works alongside a variety of conservation organizations and government entities to provide conservation solutions at a local level.

Services We Offer

- Educational events
- Invasive species technical advice
- Garden/small farms site visits
- Forestry technical advice
- Volunteer opportunities
- Native plant sale (once a year)
- Answering of questions related to natural resources
- Soil Surveys to answer growers/landowners questions

History

The history of soil conservation and the creation of conservation districts date back to national legislation passed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937. States faced severe economic challenges during the Great Depression in the 1930s, which also coincided with an ecological disaster- the Dust Bowl. The Great Plains prairies gave rise to wheat fields as the western part of the US was settled. These farms were initially very successful, but the combination of intensive plowing and a severe drought turned these once-productive soils into dust. These soils, which took many years to form, simply blew away. Dust storms blocked out the sun and left everything in their wake in a blanket of dust.

On April 27, 1935 one of these great dust storms was headed toward Washington, D.C. when Hugh Hammond Bennett, known as the "father of soil conservation," spoke to members of Congress. Bennett believed that America needed "a tremendous national

awakening to the need for action in bettering our agricultural practices." As Bennett pled his case for soil conservation, the dust storm reached the city and darkened the sky. Bennett responded by saying that "This, gentlemen, is what I have been talking about." Congress then enacted the Soil Conservation Act of 1935, and the Standard State Soil Conservation Act of 1937. The first act created the Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service), and the second encouraged the creation of conservation districts at the county level.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) began in Indiana when the district law was established in 1940. This law was based upon the federal 1937 law, which calls for local citizens to petition for the creation of a conservation district in their county. SWCDs were founded on the concept that the implementation of federal conservation programs is best done through the coordination of local shareholders.



Evans to be keynote speaker

Journal Review

Chad Evans, a native of Daviess County in southwestern Indiana, will serve as the keynote speaker at the 2026 Montgomery County Soil & Water Conservation District annual meeting.

Evans grew up about 40 miles southwest of Bloomington and was active in FFA and 4-H. He was named District and Regional Star Agribusinessman and won District Forestry honors from his freshman through senior years. He studied agronomy through Purdue University's transfer program before earning a degree in climatology from Indiana State University.

Evans has spent 23 years in broadcast meteorology, working at four television stations

before launching his own company, Chad Evans Weather LLC. He also teaches at Purdue University.

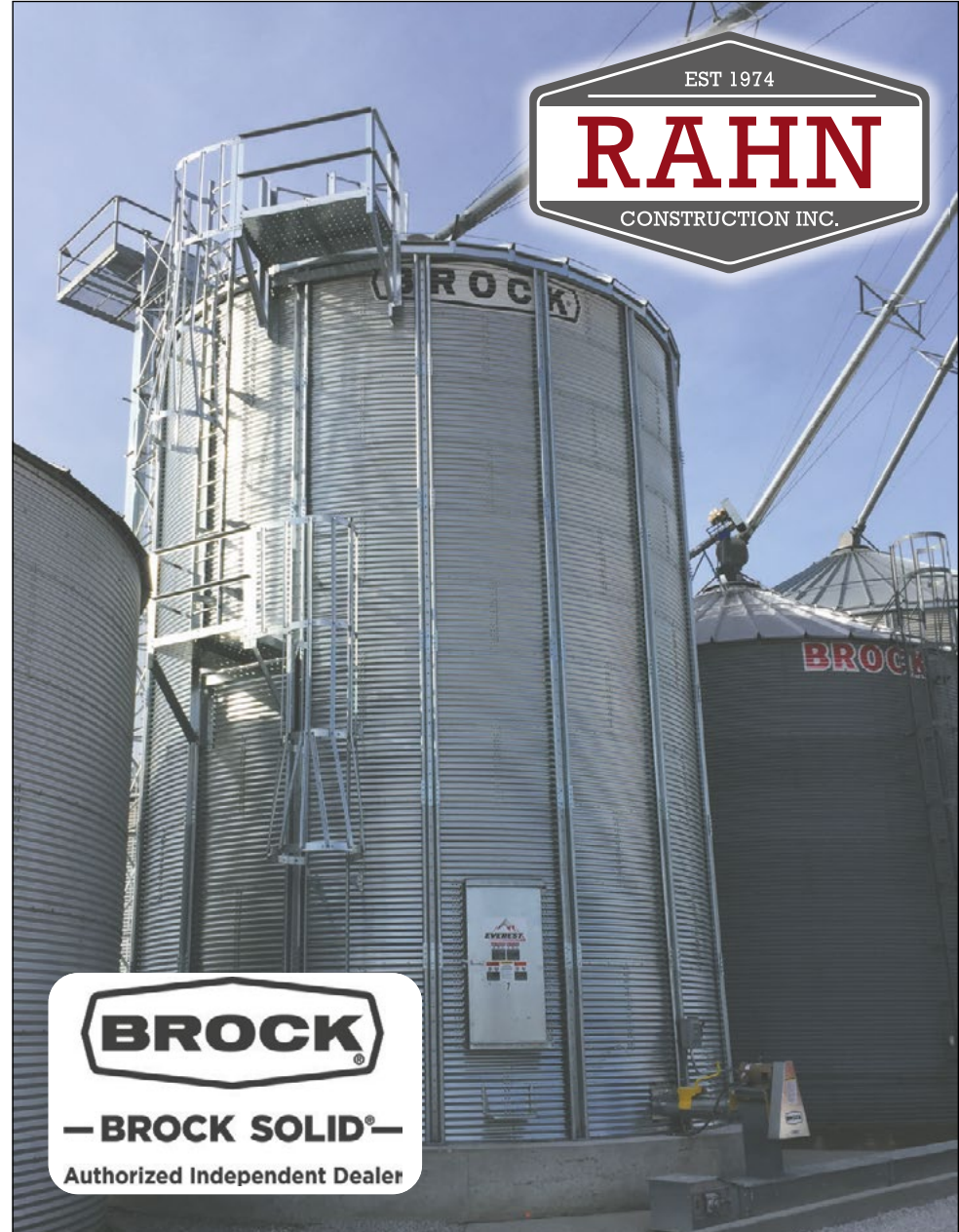
Beyond broadcasting, Evans is deeply involved in forestry, botany and ecology. He has promoted conservation initiatives through efforts such as growing native trees for NICHES Land Trust, producing his "Tree of the Week" feature and blogging about Indiana native species and ecosystems.

During the annual meeting, Evans will share his career journey and discuss the evolving landscape of television weather broadcasting. He also will outline his philosophy as a meteorologist and climatologist and provide a brief spring and summer weather outlook.



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FINDING PEACE & PURPOSE

Shari McCollough,
keeper of rare
wetland prairie,
earns top honors

Hayley Jarman

hjarman@jrpess.com

When Shari McCollough first stepped onto the Lye Creek Prairie Burn, she never imagined she would one day be overseeing 83 acres of federally protected wetlands or be named Conservationist of the Year. “I didn’t,” McCollough said simply when asked about her background in land management. “I didn’t have experience with doing stuff like that.” Yet the Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District recognized McCollough as Conservationist of the Year for her work restoring the Lye Creek Prairie Burn, a rare wetland prairie in northeastern Montgomery County that draws birders from across the country.

McCollough inherited the land nearly two years ago following the death of her close friend and mentor Clint Murray, who spent decades caring for the property and transforming it into a haven for birds. The recognition, she said, still feels unexpected.

“I never thought I would be here,” McCollough said. “I feel like I’m doing my life’s work now. Like this is what I’m supposed to be doing.”

McCollough is a wife and a mother of five, balancing family life with the demanding physical and logistical work of conservation. She said her path to the prairie was shaped as much by personal healing as by environmental passion.

“I was having a lot of issues with anxiety and I had PTSD and a lot of panic attacks,” she said. “I



Photo Provided

Shari McCollough cares for the 83 acres of federally protected wetlands known as the Lye Creek Prairie Burn.

was trying to find an outlet. I was trying to find peace.”

That search led her first to raising chickens, then photography and eventually birds. Bird photography brought her to the prairie about a decade ago after her daughter mentioned a nearby nature preserve.

“It was very unassuming,” McCollough said. “It just looked like a thicket of long grass. I thought, how the hell do you bird this place?”

That question introduced her to Murray, who gave her a private tour of the property and eventually became one of her closest friends.

“We’d ride around the gator and go look for

birds,” she said. “He taught me everything about birds and taught me about conservation and habitat and invasive plants.”

For 11 years McCollough learned alongside Murray, with three to four of those years involving hands-on instruction as his health declined. When Murray could no longer manage the land and later passed away, the responsibility fell to McCollough.

“I was so overwhelmed,” she said. “It was a huge learning curve that first year.”

The land had gone nearly two years without proper management due to Murray’s illness,

SEE **PURPOSE**/7



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Josh & Brittany McCloud



Photos Provided and by Hayley Jarman/Journal Review

ABOVE: A photo of the burn. **TOP RIGHT:** An image after the burn. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** A portrait of Shari McCollough, the conservationist of the year.

PURPOSE

FROM PAGE 5

allowing invasive species like reed canary grass, mulberry trees and cottonwood saplings to take hold.

“You give those saplings two years, there’s a lot of growth,” McCollough said. “It does not take long for those things to grow.”

Working under the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which owns the surface rights to the property through the Wetlands Reserve Program, McCollough navigates a highly regulated process.

“You cannot do anything without their permission,” she said. “You have to have authorization permits to burn, to spray, to cut trees, even

to mow.”

With guidance from NRCS staff and encouragement to take the work one step at a time, McCollough developed a long-term plan centered on prescribed burns.

“The burn was the only way to reset it,” she said. “You can’t get to the root of the problem when you have all that thatch sitting on top of it.”

Last spring McCollough completed the first prescribed burn on roughly 23 acres, about one third of the property. The burn removed dense thatch created by reed canary grass, eliminated saplings and exposed the soil so native plants could return.

“It just feels like it’s freeing almost,” she said. “Like all those

native plants could now breathe.”

After the burn, McCollough hired a drone spraying service from Indianapolis to target regrowth. The large drone carried up to 10 gallons of herbicide and precisely treated the burned area.

“I had never seen anything like that in my life,” she said. “It was so precise.”

The results, she said, were dramatic.

“It killed off all of the reed canary grass,” McCollough said. “It reset it. It gave me a chance.”

She plans to repeat the process on the second section this spring and the final section next spring, completing a three-year restoration cycle.

Beyond vegetation, the prairie supports an extraordinary range of wildlife. More than 240 bird species have been documented at the site using the eBird app, including migratory, nesting and year-round resident birds.

“For miles and miles there’s nothing like it,” McCollough said. “It’s like an oasis.”

She said the land’s history makes the work even more meaningful. The prairie sits on an ancient lake bed with peat-rich soil that still holds dormant seed banks.

“You’ve got seeds from thousands and thousands of years ago,” she said. “They finally have a chance to grow.”

SEE PEACE/9



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"I never thought I would be here. I feel like I'm doing my life's work now. Like this is what I'm supposed to be doing."

• Shari McCollough

Pictured at right is a bobwhite quail and below is a Nashville Warbler. Pictured bottom right is a rainbow stretching over the prairie.

Photos Provided



PEACE

FROM PAGE 7

McCollough said she approaches conservation with the same dedication she brings to everything else in her life.

"I'm not afraid to work hard," she said. "I only put my best effort into every-

thing I do, whether it's watercolor painting, chickens, photography or conservation."

Her motivation, she said, is not recognition.

"It's not for the accolades," McCollough said. "It's because I want to and it makes me happy."

She hopes her work will

inspire others to find their own purpose.

"I think you should have something that keeps you going and gives back," she said. "The determination of knowing that I can take something that needs fixing and make it better, that's the most important thing."

Looking ahead, McCol-

lough sees her role as both caretaker and teacher.

"It's not just land management," she said. "It's educating people. You can do this too."

And when the time comes to pass the land on, she hopes the next caretaker will feel the same responsibility.

"When I go, the next person I hand the baton to will take the same passion and the knowledge and do the same," she said.

For McCollough, the prairie is no longer just a place she stumbled upon. It is where she has found peace, purpose and a future she never expected.

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Photos Provided

Pictured from left is the prairie restoration work at the Brickyard Nature Park. The work was a collaborative effort by the Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation and the Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District, with support from the USDA, Crawfordsville Fire Department and Purdue Extension.

Brickyard Park project wins conservation award

For the Journal Review

The City of Crawfordsville announced in December 2025 that Brickyard Nature Park at 759 Concord Road has been awarded the Clark Ketchum Award of Excellence by the Indiana Park & Recreation Association.

This recognition honors parks and creations initiatives across Indiana that demonstrate outstanding vision, dedication and commitment to elevating quality of life through innovative projects and environmental stewardship.

The award celebrates the recent prairie restoration initiative at Brickyard Nature Park, a collaborative effort led by Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation in partnership with the Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District, with support from the USDA, Crawfordsville Fire Department, Purdue Extension and a dedicated local farmer.

Under the supervision of the Crawfordsville Fire Department, crews conducted a controlled burn of a former agricultural field to prepare the land for native prairie establishment. This process created a clean slate for planting a diverse mix of native species designed by the USDA. The prairie restoration improves soil health, restores native biodiversity, and provides vital habitat for pollinators and wildlife. By transforming a monoculture landscape into a resilient and low-maintenance native ecosystem, the project preserves regional natural heritage while strengthening local ecological balance.

The restoration also includes an educational component. Three signs now installed at the site highlight the importance of prairie ecosystems, the impact of invasive species and ways to address them, and the native birds and plants visitors may encounter. The Soil and Water

Conservation District continues to help monitor field conditions, while Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation provides ongoing maintenance as provided by the USDA-developed plan.

The prairie was seeded in March and early blooms started late summer 2025.

“It has been a pleasure to work with Lea Dick and Sam Lovold from the Soil and Water Conservation District on this project,” said Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation Director, Fawn Johnson. “I am excited to watch the prairie develop over the next few years.”

The city extends its appreciation to all agencies, volunteers and community partners who contributed to this impactful and forward-thinking conservation effort.

For more information about Crawfordsville Parks and Recreation visit www.crawfordsville.in.gov/parks/.

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For the 27th year the Montgomery County Soil & Water Conservatin District conducted its Fourth Grade Field Days at Cain's Homelike Farms.

Fourth graders from around the county hopped off buses and jumped onto tractors to explore the farm and learn about the natural world on the Cain's farm. Each station offers an activity or game that engages each group in one of eight different conservation topics.

Students put on their naturalist hats at the wildlife station and searched for hidden butterflies and recorded their habitats. At the water quality station students searched for the tiny critters that call the pond at Cain's Farm home.

Soils demonstrated the difference between healthy and depleted soil and how earth worms play a big role in keeping our soil fertile.

Every station at Field Days is designed to inspire and show the fourth graders of Montgomery County just how interconnected our natural world is. If a station gets even one student excited about conservation and interested in learning more then we've been successful. It is also an annual reminder of the strength of our relationship with the Cains, our schools, community, and conservation partners who all come together to help make this a special field trip for everyone.





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Statewide water stakeholder input workshops planned

For the Journal Review

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources will host multiple workshops across Indiana through February, April and May to allow Hoosiers to provide input on the development of Indiana's statewide water inventory and management plan under Governor Mike Braun's Executive Order 25-63.

"Water is an essential resource for life and for the vitality of all Indiana communities, which is why it's crucial that Indiana's ample water supply is available for Hoosiers in all corners of our state," said Gov. Braun. "Through a transparent water inventory and development of a management process, we'll make sure Indiana is well-positioned for resource needs now and for future generations."

At the workshops, attendees will

be asked for input on developing a regional water planning framework, enhancing Indiana's water monitoring networks, and creating an online water data and management platform. This planning effort builds upon the regional water studies led by the Indiana Finance Authority and by many local and regional partners, utilities, industry, municipalities, and other water users.

The first meeting was conducted Feb. 12, prior to this publication.

The meetings are planned for:

- Feb. 24, 1-4 p.m.

Clifty Inn at Clifty Falls State Park
1650 Clifty Hollow Rd, Madison, IN 47250

- Feb. 26, 1-4 p.m.

Washington Community Building
405 Burkhart Dr, Washington, IN 47501

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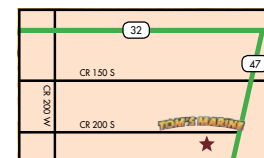


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U.S. farmland values enter new phase

Regional differences underscore need for local expertise as market adjusts

For the Journal Review

OMAHA, NEB. — The U.S. agricultural land market is shifting after years of steady growth. Although land values are still high historically, current signs indicate a more complex situation driven by local and regional factors rather than nationwide trends.

“After years of steady growth, we’re seeing the farmland market stabilize,” said Colton Lacina, senior vice president of real estate operations at Farmers National Company. “This isn’t a sign of collapse but a recalibration that reflects current commodity prices, input costs and

regional production conditions.”

Farmland demand now varies widely by location. Areas with high crop yields, diversified farms, and dependable groundwater continue to attract buyers and maintain steady values. Regions facing commodity price pressure, lower yields, or limited alternative income sources are seeing lower demand.

“Farmland values are increasingly determined locally, sometimes down to the township,” Lacina said. “Buyers are carefully assessing soil quality, the percentage of tillable acres, water access, and how a parcel fits into their current operations. Those details matter more than ever.”

Despite mixed signals, market conditions remain favorable for many sellers. Farmland remains a resilient, long-term asset, and well-priced properties are attracting strong interest.

“This is still a workable window for sellers,” Lacina noted. “The key is understanding current local demand and choosing the right approach to bring land to market. Sellers who partner with experienced local land professionals often see better results because they’re aligned with how buyers think today.”

The makeup of buyers remains steady, but their strategies are changing. Active farmers remain

the largest group of buyers, yet many are more cautious, weighing profitability concerns against long-term ownership goals. They focus on high-quality land within their established areas.

Investor interest from both local and institutional buyers remains steady. Many view the moderation in land values as an opportunity to enter the market at more disciplined prices.

“Investor buyers are focused on fundamentals,” Lacina said. “They’re targeting land with strong lease potential and reliable income that can support long-term returns.”

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2026



Forestry educational opportunity available to teachers

Journal Review

Indiana educators can now apply for the 2026 Natural Resources Teacher Institute (NRTI), which will be June 15-19 at the Forestry Training Center at Morgan-Monroe State Forest.

Hosted by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Division of Forestry and Purdue University Forestry and Natural Resources Extension, this week-long immersive professional development program will provide up to 18 educators with the knowledge, skills, and tools to effectively teach their students about forest ecology, research, and management in Indiana at no cost to them. Educational materials, meals, and housing are provided.

Participants must attend all days of the program and fully participate in all activities, which include exploring public and private forest sites, touring forest industry facilities, and engaging in hands-on educational activities that they can adapt for their classrooms.

All educators who attend will earn 30+ Professional Growth Points, as well as receive Project Learning Tree curriculum materials, a forestry tool kit, Indiana-specific field guides, and a stipend for developing and implementing a lesson plan.

Learn more at dnr.IN.gov/forestry/programs/education/nrti. To request an application, contact Lexi Eiler, forestry education specialist, at leiler@dnr.IN.gov or 463-253-8835.

WATER

FROM PAGE 15

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 - April 16, 1-4 p.m.
Beck Agricultural Center
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 - May 12, 1-4 p.m.
Knox Community Building
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- This session is in the scheduling process.

In addition to the workshops, feedback on the statewide water inventory

and management plan can be provided at DOWWaterResources@dnr.IN.gov.

Key stakeholders who should attend are local officials, economic development groups, basin commissions and drainage boards, soil and water conservation districts, academic and research institutions, federal and state agencies, water and wastewater utilities, power generators, industrial and commercial users, agriculture users, homeowners, fish and wildlife interests, and recreational water users.

Contact the DNR for more information or to make a reservation.

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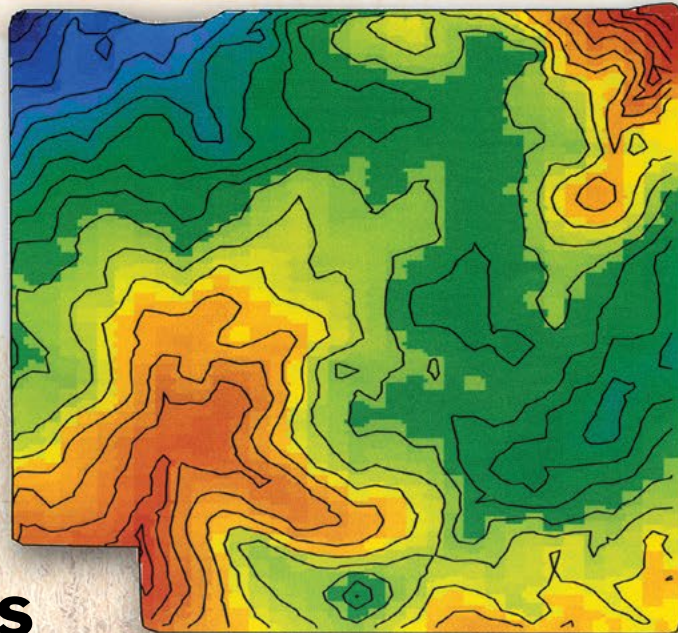
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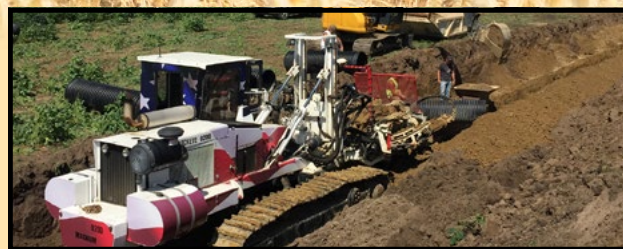
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