

## History of the Meigs Soil and Water Conservation District

By Jim Freeman, Meigs SWCD Wildlife Specialist  
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The history of the Meigs Soil and Water Conservation District actually began with an ecological and man-made disaster 76 years ago and thousands of miles away.

There are few alive today who can vividly remember the Dust Bowl days of the early 1930s, when a severe drought in the Great Plains, coupled with the farming practices of the time, caused the region's soil to erode and blow away, resulting in huge dust storms that darkened the sky from the plains to as far away as Washington, D.C.

During a dust storm that began on May 9, 1934, dust even found its way into the White House and the Oval Office. Dust made it as far as New York City, and that winter red snow fell on New England.

Unfortunately, it took an event as terrible as the Dust Bowl to make the nation realize the importance of soil conservation. Decades of intensive farming without crop rotations, cover crops or other conservation techniques displaced the native grasses that held the soil in place and held in moisture during times of drought and high winds.

Congress unanimously passed legislation making soil and water conservation a national priority, and in 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt wrote the governors of all the states recommending legislation allowing local landowners to form soil conservation districts.

In Ohio, the 94th General Assembly in 1941 enacted House Bill 646 which established the Ohio Soil Conservation Committee with five members, three farmers and two ex-officio representatives. The Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts was established in 1943 to help coordinate districts throughout the state. In Ohio, conservation districts operate today in partnership with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' Division of Soil and Water Resources and their county boards of commissioners.

The first organizational meeting of the Meigs Soil Conservation District was held June 4, 1943 at the Agricultural Extension Office in Pomeroy. The meeting was called to order by Charles E. Blakeslee, county agent with the Ohio State University Extension Service.

The district's financial records started in May, 1943 and showed a \$5 donation from W. A. Compton used to pay the filing fee for the Secretary of State's office for Articles of Incorporation.

The first officers were Harold Carnahan, chairman, W.F. Hawley, treasurer, Harley Musser, secretary, with the other board members Everett Colwell and C.E. Humphrey. Visitors were Blakeslee and R.R. Barker, district conservationist with the Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service).

An initial list of "conservation" practices was made which included leaving corn stalks in the fields, "straightening crooked creeks," terracing, contour farming and tile drainage. Another emphasis was on addressing soil acidity, particularly the application of lime along with the admonition "Do not burn broom sedge."

Farmers were also encouraged to forget about rough pasture land which is "too steep for mower or drill," and to plant trees, if possible, on extremely broken land and to protect trees from fire and grazing. Then, like today, there was a lot of emphasis on getting out the word about conservation to schools, farm groups and others.

The district's relationship with the NRCS began Sept., 1943, with the signing of a memorandum of understanding. F.J. Reed was the assistant conservationist who was assigned to Meigs County.

The first piece of district equipment was a scraper rented for a \$1 minimum charge and 15 cents an hour. The district now owns and rents two John Deere drills, a Tye drill, a Brillion seeder, a tree planter and two lime spreaders.

On July 5, 1944, the district's board of supervisors endorsed the establishment of a state forest in Lebanon and Olive townships on "sub-marginal land" that would be a "much greater asset as timberland to the county than to be permitted to stay as waste land or poor timber or agricultural land."

Agricultural soil conditions in the county were very poor at that time. It was reported in June, 1945 that of 572 soil samples taken before 1945, 80 percent had a pH between 4.9 and 5.9 or required between 2 and 4 tons of lime per acre, and that 60 percent required three tons of lime or more. The ideal for grasses is between 6 to 6.5 pH.

On April 26, 1962, the district's name changed to the Meigs Soil and Water Conservation District; the change served to emphasize the importance of protecting water resources as well as soil.

The watershed approach, or focusing on solving problems in an area defined by drainage areas, is seen by some as a new thing, but in June, 1963 it was being discussed how planting trees could help control flash flooding and retain water. It was also discussed that a watershed program could help in recreational opportunities.

In October, 1963 a letter from the Citizens Committee for Strip Mining Reclamation in Meigs County requested assistance in helping solve problems on farms in Scipio Township which have not been stripped, addressing damage already done to the drainage systems and farm land.

Of course a lot has changed over the years, some of the "conservation practices" of the time like creek straightening and dredging have fallen out of favor and others have taken their place, but the mission of the Meigs SWCD remains the same, to provide assistance for the wise use of our natural resources for present and future generations.

Today much of the mission of the Meigs SWCD includes providing technical assistance and planning for landowners and farmers interested in conserving their soil and water resources, working in cooperation with federal and state partner agencies, as well as conducting science-based educational programs on the importance of protecting natural resources.

The district also manages a wildlife specialist program to help landowners and producers with wildlife habitat, nuisance and crop damage, and a Leading Creek Watershed Project to improve aquatic habitat and water quality in the 150-square mile Leading Creek watershed.

In 2003 the district secured \$172,493 from the Clean Ohio Green Space Conservation Fund to purchase 174 acres of property on New Lima Road in Rutland Township; a donation from the previous landowner made up the remainder of the balance for the \$229,990 purchase.

Now known as the Meigs SWCD Conservation Area, the property is used for outdoor and conservation education. It features the 1.5-mile Pauline H. Atkins Memorial Trail, named for Meigs SWCD Board of Supervisors member Pauline H. Atkins who passed away on Jan. 2, 2006, a wetland (designed by the NRCS and constructed in 2008 using the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program), a warm-season grass and wildflower prairie and a quarter-mile walking path.

The Meigs SWCD Conservation Area is open to the public and permission is not necessary for general use, hiking, bird watching and other non-consumptive activities.

The first five supervisors were: Harold Carnahan – June, 1943 to July, 1952 and June, 1958 (replaced John Hamill) to May, 1975 (26 years total); C.E. Humphrey – June, 1943 to May, 1954; Everette Colwell – June, 1943 to June, 1951; Harley Musser – June, 1943 to February, 1944 (9 months – died in an accident); W.F. Hawley – June, 1943 to Dec., 1948.

Other supervisors during the 1940s included: Cush Johnson – April, 1944 to June, 1945 (appointed to replace Musser's term, resigned); Vernon Greenler – June, 1945 to June, 1946 (appointed to replace Johnson); W.S. Michael – June, 1946 to June, 1951; Dale Dye – June, 1948 to Aug., 1956; Hobart Shields – June, 1949 to May, 1952.

Terms beginning in the 1950's: Grafton Stout – June, 1951 to Sept., 1952 (died in office); Donald Mora – May, 1952 to June, 1958; Clarence Price – July, 1952 to Sept., 1961; Dana Hoffman – Sept., 1952 to Sept., 1960 (replaced Stout, resigned); John Hamill – May, 1954 to June, 1958 (resigned, moved from county); Thereon Johnson – Aug., 1956 to Dec., 1982 (26 years, four months); Early Roush – June, 1958 to May, 1975.

Terms beginning in the 1960's: Rex Shenefield – Sept., 1960 (filled Hoffman's seat) to Dec., 1987 and May-Dec., 1991 (27 years, three months and eight months for a total of 27 years, 11 months – holds record for longest and shortest terms); David Koblentz – Sept., 1961 to Dec., 1974; Reid Young – Sept., 1961 to Aug., 1966; Roy Miller – Aug., 1966 to Dec., 1982.

Terms beginning in the 1970's (Seats now commencing in January with the exception of unexpired terms): David Gloeckner – Jan., 1975 to Dec., 1992; Joe Bailey – May, 1975 to Dec., 1978; Tom Theiss – Jan., 1979 to Dec., 2002.

Terms beginning in the 1980's: Jim Lucas – Jan., 1983 to Dec., 1985; Alan Holter – Jan., 1983 to Dec., 1991; Rodney Chevalier – Jan., 1986 to May, 1991; Ron Eastman – Jan., 1988 to Dec., 1990.

Terms commencing in the 1990's: Charles E. Yost – Jan., 1991 to Dec., 1999; Joe Bolin – Jan., 1992 to Present (Current term commencing Jan., 2010); Marco Jeffers – Jan., 1992 to Dec., 2000; John Rice – Jan., 1995 to Dec., 2001.

Terms commencing in the 2000's: Chris Hamm – Jan., 2000 to Oct., 2004 (resigned); Bill Baer – Jan., 2002 to Present (Current term commencing Jan., 2008); Pauline Atkins – Jan., 2003 to Jan., 2006 (died leaving unexpired seat); Richard Sterrett – Dec., 2004 to Dec., 2005 (filled Hamm's unexpired seat); Edward L. Gibbs – Jan., 2006 to Present; Tonja Hunter – Jan., 2006 to Present (filled Atkins' unexpired seat).

Terms commencing in the 2010's: Kim Romine – Jan., 2010 to Present.

Over the years, 37 people have served on the Meigs SWCD Board of Supervisors. Some long-term board members included Rex Shenefield, who served a total of 27 years and 11 months; Thereon Johnson, 26 years and four months, and the late Harold Carnahan, 26 years.

Current supervisors include: Chairman Joe Bolin (who has served on the board since January, 1992), Vice-chairman Bill Baer, Secretary-treasurer Ed Gibbs, Tonja Hunter and Kim Romine.

Many SWCD employees are what we call "slashies," referring to the slash symbol in their job titles denoting their various job duties. Current district employees are Steve Jenkins, program administrator/technician; Vicki Morrow, administrative assistant; Jim Freeman, wildlife/watershed coordinator; Jenny Ridenour, education coordinator/district technician; Raina Fulks, Leading Creek Watershed coordinator; Karla Sanders, AmeriCorps volunteer.

Many others have worked for the district over the years in varying capacities including: Marie Watson, Leota Young, Opal Dyer, Gary Howard, Dave Burt, Blair Windon, Janice Carnahan and Diana Kimes. Cynthia Bauer and Mike Gosnell have worked in recent years as Leading Creek Watershed Coordinators.

The current NRCS district conservationist is Jason Crislip. Other NRCS employees over the years included Carl Bilikin, Bob First and Mike Duhl.

It would also be impossible for the district to function without the support of the Meigs County Board of Commissioners. Current commissioners include Thomas Anderson, Michael Bartrum and Mick Davenport.

Today the Great Depression-era Dust Bowls seem like nothing more than a page in our history books, but we should always remember these words from an unknown author: "Man - despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication, and his many accomplishments - owes his existence to a six inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains"