

# History of the Meigs Soil and Water Conservation District

By Jim Freeman, Meigs SWCD Technician  
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The history of the Meigs Soil and Water Conservation District began with an ecological and man-made disaster 84 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. Since January 1, 2016, conservation districts in Ohio operate in partnership with the Ohio Department of Agriculture, Division of Soil and Water Conservation, and their county boards of commissioners. Prior to that time, they operated in partnership with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

The Meigs SWCD began life in April 1943 as the state's eleventh conservation district. 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 organizational meeting of the Meigs County 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 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).

The first supervisors made an initial list of "conservation" practices 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 pastureland 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 other community leaders and organizations.

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 district's first "Plan of Work" was approved Sept. 7, 1943, and the first district farm plan was approved Dec. 7, 1943, for the E.W. Hill farm.

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 an assortment of equipment including two John Deere grass and grain drills, a Tye drill, a Brillion seeder, a tree planter and three 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.

The first annual banquet was a fish fry held at the Rock Springs Fairgrounds on June 7, 1948. Tickets cost 75 cents per person and 211 tickets were sold.

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. For some reason the issue was brought up and approved again on Sept. 24, 1963. Reid Young seconded the motion both times. The meeting minutes do not explain why it was done twice, other than the second time was done just prior to multiple changes at the state level for districts across the state.

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.

The Meigs SWCD began sponsoring the Hay Show at the Meigs County Fair in August 1963, and Roy Holter was the first Hay Show winner.

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 farmland.

Joe Bolin was the 1,000<sup>th</sup> Farm Plan/ Cooperator and was honored as such at the 32nd Annual Banquet on November 18, 1975. Joe was not in attendance to receive his award, but he started his first term as supervisor in January 1993.

In 1984 the Meigs SWCD was named the top district in the state.

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 makes conservation tillage and other equipment available to local producers and landowners. Currently the district owns four no-till drills of varying sizes, a conventional seeder, two lime spreaders and a tree planter.

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. The district works in partnership with the ODNR-Division of Mineral Resources Management in the operation of two lime dosers to reduce acidity in Thomas Fork, a tributary of Leading Creek.

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 (the first woman on the board of supervisors) 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. A 40-by-60-foot picnic shelter was constructed at the Conservation Area in 2010 and a restroom in 2012.

November 17, 2004, Pauline Atkins made a motion to name the farm the Meigs SWCD Conservation Area, with all members voting yea.

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.

In 2012 and 2013 the district took over the duties of the Meigs County Office of Recycling and Litter Prevention. During that two-year span, the program collected over 1,135,662 pounds or nearly 568 tons of material during 2012 and 2013. In 2014 the recycling program was bid out to a private contractor. In 2014 the Meigs SWCD began administering the Meigs County – Pick It Up! Project to help clean roadside litter along township and county roads throughout the county.

In 2017 the Meigs SWCD was recognized by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources-Division of Mineral Resources Management with the Abandoned Mineland Reclamation Award for its role in treating acid mine drainage in Thomas Fork.

The Meigs SWCD observed its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary at its annual meeting and election held Oct. 2, 2018, at Meigs High School with 162 guests in attendance. That evening also marked the first-ever joint annual meeting of the district with the Athens-Meigs Farm Bureau.

Nine past Meigs SWCD supervisors attended including (with years served): Don Mora (1952-1958), Rex Shenefield (1960-1987, 1991), David Gloeckner (1975-1992), Tom Theiss (1979-2002), Alan Holter (1983-1991), Ron Eastman (1988-1990), Charles Yost (1991-1999), and Kim Romine (2010-2015). Past NRCS district conservationists attending included Bob First, Mike Duhl, and Jason Crislip, while former SWCD employees attending were Opal Dyer, Dee Kimes, Janice Carnahan, Cynthia Bauers, and Mike Gosnell. Those being honored received commemorative Meigs SWCD anniversary tumblers.

The theme for the evening was “Bridge to the Present” and district employee Jim Freeman gave a historical overview of the district’s history, accompanied by a 20-minute slide show, including key dates and people.

The district received congratulatory proclamations from the Ohio Department of Agriculture-Division of Soil and Water Conservation, U.S. Representative Bill Johnson, the Ohio Senate represented by State Senator Frank Hoagland, the Ohio House represented by Representative Jay Edwards, and Ohio Secretary of State John Husted.

The district also recognized Supervisor Joe Bolin as its third-ever lifetime cooperator. He joined Rex Shenefield (2014), and John Rice (2016), as recipients of that honor. A half-mile trail at the Conservation Area was renamed the Joe Bolin Wetland and Prairie Trail.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 the district operated behind locked doors but still carried out district functions. There was no fair booth, hay show, school presentations, annual meeting, federation meetings or public programs; the election was held via absentee ballot. However, rental equipment, property maintenance, landfill monitoring and Thomas Fork monitoring and doser maintenance went on mostly unaffected.

In 2020 the district took possession of 1.34 acres of property in Chester Township located along Pine Grove Road near the junction of Pine Grove Road and Resort Road. The parking lot and driveway was constructed in fall, 2020, and the district’s rental equipment was moved to the property prior to the 2021 Meigs County Fair, with the equipment storage building completed in October 2021. Rental equipment and other district-owned equipment was moved into the building on Oct. 29, 2021.

In 2023 the district took on the role of flood plain administration for the county.

The Pick It Up! Program ended December 31, 2023. During its 10-year lifespan, workers under the program picked up 13,513 bags of litter and collected 2,982 tires from along 3,637 miles of combined

county and township roads (both sides of the road). Meigs County has approximately 765 miles of county and township roads with township roads making up roughly 505 miles.

In addition, workers cleaned 109 illegal dumpsites throughout the county. The total cost of the program over its 10-year span was \$169,715.

Today the Meigs SWCD is a legal subdivision of state government that provides natural resource management assistance to county landowners and other units of local government in line with its mission statement of “providing assistance for the wise use of our natural resources for present and future generations.” The district is funded by the Meigs County Board of Commissioners, and county funds are supplemented by funding from the Ohio Soil and Water Conservation Commission. The district is governed by a five-member board of supervisors, all county residents. Board members serve staggered three-year terms.

Over the years, 43 people have served on the Meigs SWCD Board of Supervisors. Some long-serving board members included Joe Bolin, 30 years; Rex Shenefield, who served a total of 27 years and 11 months; Thereon Johnson, 26 years and four months; Harold Carnahan, 26 years; Tom Theiss, 23 years, and Bill Baer, 21 years.

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; Everett 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); 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 (23 years).

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 Dec. 2021; Marco Jeffers – Jan. 1992 to Dec. 2009; 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 December, 2022; 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 Jan., 2015; Tonja Hunter – Jan., 2006 to Present (filled Atkins’ unexpired seat).

Terms commencing in the 2010’s: Kim Romine – Jan. 2010 to Dec. 2015; Keith Bentz, Jan. 2015 to Present; Tony Carnahan, Jan. 2016 to Present.

Terms commencing in the 2020’s: Travis Mugrage – Jan. 2022 to Present; Roy Vaughan - Jan. 2023 to Present.

Current supervisors include: Chairman Tony Carnahan (grandson of the first board chairman), Vice-chairman Tonja Hunter, Secretary-treasurer Keith Bentz, members Travis Mugrage and Roy Vaughan.

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 Jenny Ridenour (since 2005), education coordinator then later program administrator/wildlife specialist/floodplain administrator; Jim Freeman (since 2000), wildlife specialist/watershed coordinator, then resource specialist; Cindy Diehl (since 2017), administrative assistant; Jessie Donohue, education coordinator (since 2021).

Many others have worked for the district over the years in varying capacities including: Marie Watson, Reid Young and Leota Young, Opal Dyer, Bill Ireland, Dave Burt, Blair Windon, Greta Riffle, Janice Carnahan, Diana “Dee” Kimes, Vicki Morrow (2000-2012), Steve Jenkins (2002-2020), Stephanie Allen (2012), Darla Staats (2012-2020), Michelle Schultz (2012-2015), Tina Connolly (2015-2017), Hannah Swope (2019-2020), and Kevin Young (2022-2023). Cynthia Bauer, Mike Gosnell and Raina Fulks (2005-2012) worked as Leading Creek Watershed Coordinators. Americorps workers from 2010-2013, respectively, included Karla Sanders, Lauren Armeni, Lisa Prince, and Michelle Tarian.

The current NRCS district conservationist is Kevin Lewis. Other NRCS employees over the years included F.J. Reed, Carl Bilikam, Dave Parry, Boyd Ruth, Bob First, Mike Duhl, Jason Crislip, and Carrie Crislip.

It would also have been impossible for the district to function over the years without the support of the Meigs County Board of Commissioners. Current commissioners include Zachary Manuel, Shannon Miller and James Will.

The Meigs SWCD office has been in several locations over the years including inside the now-demolished Masonic Temple in Pomeroy, above the old Farmers Bank Building in Pomeroy, and on Hiland Road near Pomeroy from July 1990 to December 11, 2012. The district is currently housed in a county-owned annex building at 113 East Memorial Drive in Pomeroy.

For many years the district shared office space with the Farm Service Agency (formerly the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service) but that came to an end on Nov. 30, 2012, when the FSA office moved to Gallia County and combined with the Gallia and Lawrence County FSA offices.

Today, more than 75 years after the district’s founding, the 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 (and often quoted by former board member, the late John Rice): “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”