

SWCD Leveraging Spreadsheet: Benefits of Conservation Districts vs. Costs to Local Governments

SWCD Spreadsheet Purpose

Indiana's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) receive financial, technical and educational support from a number of nonprofit, private, federal and state agencies in addition to county government. They also receive direct or in-kind operational support from other public and private organizations. Local government support is vital to district operations to carry out district programs. Too often county councils and commissions are reluctant to extend additional funding to Districts because they are unaware of the significant federal and state dollars, as well as private funding, that a district brings into their respective counties to support the local economy; improve the soil, water and related natural resources of the county; and in turn, improve the quality of life for its citizens.

ISDA encourages districts to carefully complete the spreadsheet and use it to present their local officials with a bigger picture of how their District impacts their local economy and the quality of life in the community.

SWCD Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet Construction & Data Entry

- Familiarize yourself with the various spreadsheet tabs to see what is offered
- Enter items under the appropriate heading and the spreadsheet calculates totals and the leveraged impact of the SWCD on the local community.
- Rows/boxes can also be added or deleted to fit the specific needs of your SWCD; when doing so, please double check summing formulas within the appropriate cells. You don't need to include everything as presented. It can be adjusted to fit YOUR District.
- If you need assistance understanding formulas, a tip sheet is available from your ISDA District Support Specialist (DSS)
- For best results, SWCD supervisors, staff and conservation agency partners should discuss individual programs, practices, and funding amounts *as a group* to best represent total conservation efforts in your county.
- Installed conservation practices and their respective costs (which is a value to the local economy) are available from the USDA-NRCS P.R.S. reporting system, with assistance from your local NRCS District Conservationist. Some districts print this information on the back side of their handout; others choose not to.

Utilizing Spreadsheet Data

Once the spreadsheet is complete, consider how this tool can tell your bigger story and how it will be presented.

- Is it easy to understand?
- Is it visually appealing?
- Are there other ways to take it to the next level, such as capturing volunteer hours, presenting the data in a different format, or utilizing an attractive cover page?

Once the spreadsheet is completed, the marketing begins! The spreadsheet is designed as a tool to assist SWCD supervisors and staff in one-on-one discussions with County Councilmen, Commissioners, and other appropriate local officials. **However**, we recommend that under no circumstances should the spreadsheet be printed and mailed to these individuals unless accompanied by a well written letter detailing how these figures are derived. Local leaders will not see the true value of what your District

brings to the county without a detailed explanation. Without an explanation by someone in your District, officials may regard some figures as highly inflated. They need to know that even though the district doesn't directly control some of the non-county dollars, they do however strongly **influence** these dollars coming into the county. They also need to know that some other non-county appropriated dollars shown (i.e. 319 grants, Clean Water Indiana funds, Lake and River Enhancements grants, Contribution Agreements) are in the direct control of the District.

Items To Promote & Discuss With Public Officials

Once the spreadsheet is complete and desired handouts are created, there are several items of budgetary significance that SWCD Supervisors and support staff should discuss with local officials:

1. Explain to your local officials how your District is the local governmental agency responsible for determining **their** constituents' needs and for setting local conservation policies carried out by various agencies and organizations. Assisting the SWCD with increased funding allows for better-trained and equipped SWCD staff to meet the soil and water quality needs of the county.
2. Discuss how establishing specific agricultural and/or urban practices aids in controlling erosion and runoff, while reducing expenses to other county agencies by solving problems like ditches filled with sediment, decreased property values, poor water quality at water treatment plants, animal waste runoff, urban sedimentation in city streets, or any number of other challenges that your SWCD helps the county address or prevent.
3. When speaking with local officials, discuss facts such as how many dollars from outside sources are matched for each dollar invested by the county (many competing county agencies will not have such matches, so demonstrate why it is wise for the County to invest in **your SWCD and its programs**).
4. Bring attention to the fact that SWCDs are a key mechanism for federal NRCS assistance to local landowners, meaning that all salaries, office space, equipment, and all technical and financial assistance may not be available to your officials' constituents without your District's continued presence. NRCS and ISDA-DSC staff often live and make purchases in the counties in which they work, adding to the local economy. Practices installed through NRCS also utilize local construction firms, materials, seed, etc., further stimulating the local economy.
5. Demonstrate to local officials your District's future plans for addressing county concerns by explaining your SWCD's recent Business Plan or Long Range Plan, and explain how your budget is needed to accomplish your plans. Show your District's goals for solving local challenges as well as your administrative ability to do so!

For additional assistance, please contact your local ISDA DSS.

Input From the Field: Using the Leveraging Spreadsheet

"I think it's a great tool to use. When I present this sheet to Council, I remind them who we are, what we're doing, projects we have going on, and what's going on with the watershed projects and Rule 5 efforts. I tell them how much money we're asking for, and close with the leveraging sheet dollar amount, calling it a return on investment. No other county entity can do this or come near that figure. I treat it as a sales pitch. I tell them you've got to keep investing in us- for every dollar you put in, look at all you're getting back. It's been perceived well. None of this is going to line my pockets. I'd also

encourage the same person to present the sheet when possible. You get more comfortable each time you do it, and you don't have to reintroduce yourself." Todd, SWCD Supervisor, South-Southeast Region

"We use the leveraging sheet in many public meetings to help highlight the value of our District. This document really helps organize and justify the work that we do and the asset we have become for the local community. On more than one occasion this document has helped us both defend and gain more funding from our local county officials." – Lesli, SWCD staff, North-Northwest Region

"This year I have several new and "newish" County Council members. A few of these new members are known to be fiscal hawks so this was an excellent opportunity to not only educate them on what Soil and Water does in the county, but also see what kind of dollars come into our county via the SWCD. I did not spend much time detailing what comes in and out, but I did focus their attention to the Return on Investment and drove home that point. I wanted to them to see what residents in our county and, in turn, the council received for every dollar they invested in the SWCD." – Eric, SWCD staff, North-Southwest Region