

Benton Soil and Water  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

# ANNUAL REPORT 2025

*New Beginnings*

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# Our Strategic Goals

Our Mission is to engage Benton County residents in the conservation and stewardship of natural resources for current and future generations. Our vision is that the land, waters, and forests of Benton County are healthy and resilient through the care and effort of everyone in our community, and that the benefits of conservation are equitably shared.



## Climate

We will increase our focus on reducing greenhouse gases and creating climate resilience.



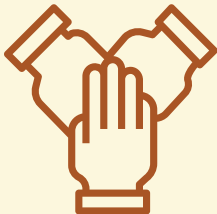
## Targeted Impact

We will ensure our programs are directed towards specific audiences and outcomes.



## Equity

We will increase inclusion and access for marginalized and under-resourced communities.



## Collaborative Leadership

We will work with our partners to strategically leverage our specific organizational strengths in pursuit of shared goals.

# Embracing Change

## Michael Ahr, Executive Director

BSWCD spent the year embracing change through retirements, new staff, and moving to a new office location. Donna had been our Resource Conservationist for 25 years, and Holly was with our District for 14 years as Executive Director, building new programs and leaving things in great order as I took over in February. Their retirements left some holes, so we took the opportunity to reimagine things as we brought new people onto the team.



Cierra Dawson was our first new staff added, and came on ready to help with invasive species projects, Salmon Watch, and the Native Plant Sale. This position was added to expand capacity. Cierra was so capable that she was quickly promoted into a program coordinator position, taking on much more responsibility with our oblong spurge control program, the Benton Cooperative Weed Management Area, and our native plant sales.

Brad Remsey now coordinates our Agricultural Water Quality work. He loves soil health, and thrives on building relationships with the farmers. Brad and Teresa, our Soil Conservationist, have made a highly effective team. Teresa has been a wonderful mentor to Brad in learning about how SWCDs operate.

Tatum VanHawkins started in the final days of the fiscal year as our Habitat Conservationist and brought our staff from 6 people to 7. Her job is to respond to habitat inquiries and lead our Willamette River work. She had a great summer on the river surveying for weeds and leading volunteer events, and has helped to launch outreach efforts to reach land managers who want to enhance oak habitat.

Candace, our Operations Coordinator, was instrumental in our office move to the Corvallis Business Park. She's amazing at keeping our office organized and is often the first person I talk to about any changes or new ideas. Sara, the Community Engagement Coordinator, has been inspirational as she continues to manage so many projects. We're excited about all the work Sara has put into building our Nature Neighbors habitat certification program, which will be launched in 2026.

My favorite days are the ones where I work closely with staff. Come see us at our new office at 808C NW Buchanan Avenue. The office is never quiet. You can see the enthusiasm as staff are constantly sharing ideas and seeking advice from one another, to tackle the next resource concern and engage in the next relationship.

# Impact by the Numbers



## Education and Outreach

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**112**  
volunteers

**800**  
volunteer hours

**620**  
K-12 students

**16**  
community events  
and workshops

## Natural Resource Conservation

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**40**  
acres of soil  
health sampling

**200**  
workshop participants

**108**  
water quality samples  
collected and analyzed

**87,178**  
grant dollars secured

**23,380**  
grant dollars given



# Cultivating New Partnerships with Soil Education

Teresa Matteson, Soil Conservationist



Benton SWCD’s Soil Health Program began in 2009 with an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant titled *The Soil Quality Project*. Over the years, Benton SWCD has been awarded seven federal and state grants for soil health work. Some grant awards have allowed us to offer free soil testing and soil classification consultations. These activities help farmers understand their soil’s inherent capabilities and dig deeper, beyond chemistry, into dynamic physical and biological attributes related to soil function.

Soil health education has become a routine Benton SWCD service that helps us initiate site visits, spark conversations that encourage conservation practices on the ground, fortify partnerships with landowners, and meet Oregon’s objectives to protect the waters of the state. In FY25, we worked with 11 landowners through Benton SWCD’s soil health program. We pulled 25 soil health samples from a diverse array of production systems: pasture, orchards, row crops, hedgerows, and other fields where help was requested.

During site visits, we walk with folks on their land, listen to their natural resource concerns, and help them define conservation goals. We discuss their land’s positive attributes, issues that we see, and practices that will reduce disturbance, address erosion, diversify vegetation, maximize ground cover, and grow living roots year-round. When possible, we refer them to financial assistance resources.

Soil health work with one landowner led to an Oregon Department of Agriculture grant to help him fence livestock out of his wetland, plant native trees and shrubs to improve wildlife habitat, and direct rainwater away from a heavy use area by adding gutters to his barn. To complement the funded work, he agreed to manage invasive weeds and install a livestock water trough. These practices will improve groundwater recharge in an area plagued by low domestic well levels during our dry summer months.

Over the years, the world’s appreciation for soil’s role in natural and managed ecosystems has escalated. This soil health movement creates opportunities for agencies, university, landowners, and conservation districts to collaborate as never before. We’re proud to help foster a soil-minded community whose members make informed decisions that improve our precious soil resources.

# Inviting New Neighbors to Our Backyards

Sara Roberts, Community Engagement Coordinator

In the last several years, interest in gardening for wildlife - not just appearances - has taken off globally. Authors and scientists such as Doug Tallamy and Benjamin Vogt have inspired thousands of people to exchange their neat lawns for vibrant meadows. Others choose to add rain gardens, build insect hotels, or simply trade ornamental species for native ones. But this kind of gardening isn't always easy, nor is it always accessible. It requires significant investments of time, money, and knowledge-building. How can we invite more people into the habitat movement?

One answer has come in the form of backyard habitat certification programs, such as the one in the Portland region led by Columbia Land Trust and Bird Alliance of Oregon. This program was groundbreaking in its hands-on approach to supporting those who wish to establish wildlife habitats. This model has been replicated successfully across the country, and especially in Oregon, with several new programs popping up in the Willamette Valley just in the last few years. And now, I'm thrilled to share that Benton County will be joining the network of habitat certification programs with our new program coming this Spring - *Nature Neighbors!*



Nature Neighbors will empower Benton County residents to create resilient, wildlife-welcoming spaces through native plantings, invasive species removal, and practices that support soil health and water conservation. We will provide direct technical assistance and recognition for people who create and maintain ecologically functional landscapes through site visits, abundant resources, and one-on-one support, culminating in the delivery of a beautiful yard sign when certification is complete.

But we're not aiming to improve only our local biodiversity. We also want to enhance the diversity of people participating in habitat gardening. Nature Neighbors seeks to engage new audiences by offering enrollment fees on a sliding scale (starting at just \$5), bilingual materials, and mini-scholarships for those who find the financial burden a significant barrier for participation.

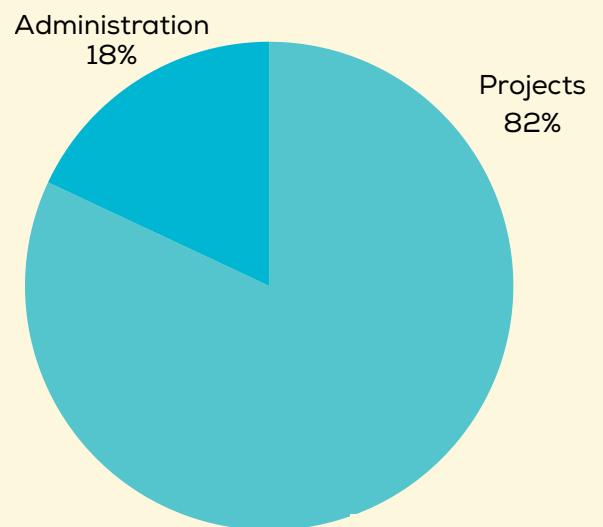
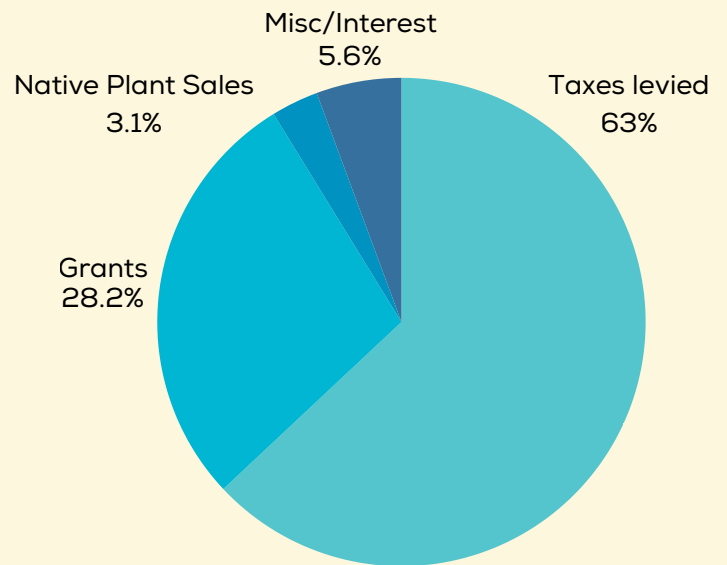
This project has also provided a wonderful opportunity to partner with Greenbelt Land Trust, a fellow leader in local conservation. Together, we can't wait to watch this program - and habitat connectedness in our area - flourish and grow!



# Financial Report FY25

Revenue	
Taxes levied	534,871
Grants	239,473
Native Plant Sales	26,564
Misc and interest	47,900
<b>Total</b>	<b>848,808</b>

Expenses	
Projects	704,859
Administration	155,005
<b>Total</b>	<b>859,864</b>



# New Role, New Opportunities

## Cierra Dawson, Plant Program Coordinator

2025 has been a year full of wonderful new beginnings here at Benton SWCD!

I began in September 2024 as the Conservation Outreach Assistant. My role was to assist all the district's programs, such as stimulating outdoor learning for kids through Salmon Watch, making connections during the fall and winter native plant sales, collecting data during soil and water quality field days, and, of course, spending my summer trying to eradicate oblong spurge!

In February 2025, I was promoted to be the Plant Program Coordinator. Now, my role is dually focused on native and invasive plants technical assistance. I also now coordinate both of our annual native plant sales and manage our Invasive Species Program. This new role has provided me with the opportunity to do a lot more community engagement focused on plants, which I love!



The Invasive Species Program had two new beginnings in 2025. The first is the "Weed of the Month" series where I author a short article and flyer featuring a new invasive plant species each month. The flyers appear in our monthly E-newsletter as well as on our blog. They include photos and a description of the weed, their ecological impacts, and best management practices for removal.

**WEED OF THE MONTH**  
Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*)

**DESCRIPTION**  
Herb Robert is a deceptively charming annual forb that thrives in partially shaded, moist forest understories and riparian areas. Though its pink, 5-petal flowers are similar to shining geranium, their leaf shapes are very different. Herb Robert leaves have deeply dissected lobes on both sides and are in an arrangement of threes.

**WHY IT'S A PROBLEM**  
This species is listed as a noxious weed in the state of Oregon. It can cover significant swaths of forest floor if left unmanaged and compete with native germinates in early spring.

**MANAGEMENT**  
Manually digging up the entire plant for small infestations, or applying herbicide

The second new beginning for our Invasive Species Program was the successful pilot Invasive Species Control Grant program. Benton SWCD allocated \$12,000 in our annual budget for Benton County residents to apply for up to \$2,000 to fund any invasive plant removal/management project. We received a total of 24 project proposals and funded 8 of them! We're incredibly excited about the interest in this grant program and plan to offer it again next year.

To learn more about our invasive species programs, check out [bentonswcd.org/invasive-plants](https://bentonswcd.org/invasive-plants)

# Expanding Our Water Quality Monitoring: A New Strategic Implementation Area

Brad Remsey, Resource Conservationist



Strategic Implementation Areas (SIAs) are agricultural areas in small watersheds strategically selected by Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) because of their importance for local water quality. This year ODA selected four counties, including Benton County, to begin a new SIA project. Due to the outreach success of our Upper Muddy Creek SIA, ODA asked Benton Soil and Water Conservation District to build upon the momentum gained in the area. The project is set to begin in 2026 just as our current SIA project, in the Upper Muddy Creek watershed, ends. The new SIA will move into the adjacent watersheds of Middle Muddy Creek and Oliver Creek.

The primary goal of an SIA is to work with local landowners and managers on targeted projects to improve water quality for fish, wildlife, and drinking water. With these goals, the partnership between BSWCD and ODA opens more funding opportunities for projects focused on restoration and achieving compliance within the SIA boundary.

Our new SIA in the Middle Muddy Creek Watershed is in southern Benton County and consists of approximately 40,623 acres. Of these, approximately 14,591 acres are under agricultural production, including vineyards, hay, grass seed, filberts, and berries. There are also a number of equestrian and livestock operations.

Our goal is to address degraded riparian habitat and water quality problems in this watershed due to agricultural practices. We will accomplish this by increasing landowner engagement to implement conservation practices on agricultural lands, including riparian health assessments, and conservation planning help. We also intend to reach out to landowners wishing to implement conservation practices within other land uses including forestry. Increasing forest health and wildlife diversity will provide additional ecological uplift to the watershed.

Protection of these waterways will improve water quality and resilience in the Muddy Creek watershed. We hope this project will also improve overall farm resilience by improving drainage, decreasing soil erosion, and aiding pasture productivity.

# ArcGIS Pro: The New Addition To Our Workforce

Tatum VanHawkins, Habitat Conservationist

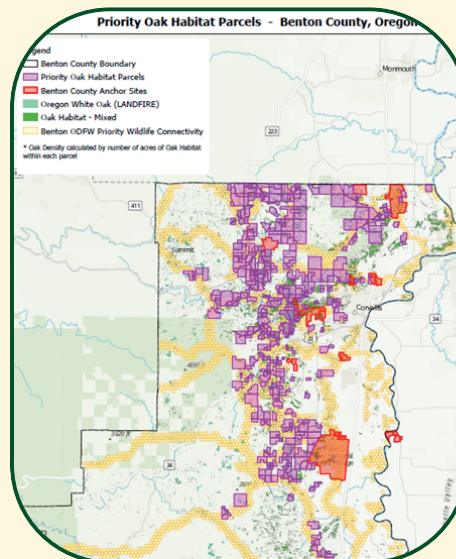
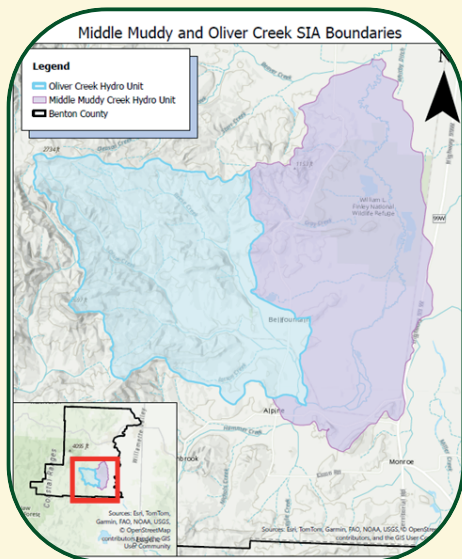
Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can be used to create, manage, analyze, and map all types of data. With GIS, our technical capacity has expanded beyond traditional mapping into a dynamic platform with endless applications. I've been working to turn what once were simple site-visit maps into integrated spatial products that help us create a cohesive organizational structure, better project efficiency, and to share our work with ease.



The suite of ArcGIS applications – Story Maps, Survey123, Field Maps, and many others – has introduced a level of interconnectivity that brings us up to speed with many of our partnering agencies. I find myself envisioning new workflows all the time: Story Maps embedded into our website to showcase project successes; Survey123 forms that streamline data collection and reduce redundancy; Field Maps that guide staff in real time; and all of the above to coordinate our ever-expanding spatial records.

We've already put ArcGIS to work on our most recent grant applications and for visualizing our new SIA efforts (see previous article). Building our own library of district-specific layers and shapefiles has taken patience—lots of it—but the foundation is growing with every project. We are lucky to work with partners who are

more than willing to share data and information they have found to help us speed up the process. I'm really excited to see where this all goes - It feels like we're on the cusp of organizational masterpiece.



# OUR TEAM

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## STAFF

Executive Director  
Michael Ahr

Soil Conservationist  
Teresa Matteson

Community Engagement Coordinator  
Sara Roberts

Operations Coordinator  
Candace Mackey

Plant Program Coordinator  
Cierra Dawson

Resource Conservationist  
Brad Ramsey

Habitat Conservationist  
Tatum VanHawkins

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Marcella Henkels

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Greg Jones

Zone 5/Secretary  
Kerry Hastings

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Rana Foster, Michael Rhoades, Charlene  
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LEARN HOW TO GET INVOLVED AT:  
[BENTONSWCD.ORG/JOIN-OUR-BOARD](http://BENTONSWCD.ORG/JOIN-OUR-BOARD)



## REACH OUT TO US

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