

The Swift County Soil and Water Conservation District has named Tom Orr as the 2017 Outstanding Conservationist. Tom began working for the Swift SWCD in 1977 as a WAE Technician, and then became the District technician in 1980.

Tom oversaw the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) programs in Swift County. During his time with the district, Tom assisted with over 180 easements totaling nearly 9,000 acres! He remembers some long days during the first CREP sign-up as he worked diligently to complete contracts and help protect acres for years to come.

One of Tom's primary duties was heading up the district tree program. Tom designed numerous field windbreaks, farm shelterbelts, wildlife plantings, and living snow fences and planted over 500,000 trees! He still recalls his first day of work back in 1977 in which he showed up for work and immediately started on his first tree planting. It took 12 hours to plant 3,000 trees. He recalls, "After planting I came home and was covered in dirt. But over time I realized it was actually soil and is one of our most precious and irreplaceable natural resources. I never looked at soil the same way after that experience."

Tom also assisted with the surveying, design, and implementation of many grass waterways, terraces, and holding ponds. He was heavily involved with various planning groups, including the Swift County Water Plan, the Wetland Conservation Act-Technical Evaluation Panel, the Chippewa River Watershed Project, the Pomme de Terre River Watershed Technical Advisory Committee, and administered the AgBMP Loan Program for the county. In 2006, Tom became the County Ag/Weed Inspector, this was a good fit as he is very passionate about controlling the spread of invasive and noxious weeds like leafy spurge, wild parsnip, and spotted knapweed. He still holds this position and enjoys being able to drive around the county, always on the lookout for any new invasive species. Tom was also a member of the local Pheasants Forever Chapter where he was able to share his passion for wildlife and wildlife habitat.

One of the most enjoyable parts of his job was being able to see the shelterbelts and windbreaks grow over the years and fulfill their intended purpose. His passion for trees grew over the years and driving around the county he points out just how many tree plantings he was a part of, and how each one was special and unique, just like the landowners he planted them for.

After 40 years of doing what he loved, Tom retired and is spending more time outdoors. Some of his favorite hobbies include birding, photography, hunting, fishing, and golfing. Tom has been a fantastic spokesman for conservation and preservation over the years, leading by example to showcase his dedication to the field of natural resources. Join us in congratulating Tom Orr as Swift County Outstanding Conservationist for 2017! Thank you Tom!