



Custer County Conservation District was established in 1940.

Special points of interest:

- District turns 85
- Community Wildfire Protection Plan
- Invasive cool-season annual grasses

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CUSTER CONSERVATION DISTRICT NEWSLETTER

Happy Anniversary! The Custer County Conservation District Celebrates 85 Years.

85!

As 2025 comes to a close, the Custer County Conservation District is celebrating its 85th anniversary. The District hosted a small celebration during its December board meeting with some of its partners. The group shared cake and conversation. A special thank you to all of our partners! We would not be successful without your cooperation and valuable contributions.

Conservation District History:

The official beginning of the district dates back to 1940 when a Land Use Planning Committee passed a resolution proposing that a soil conservation district be formed within the

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The Custer County Conservation District celebrated its 85th anniversary at the December 2 meeting. Pictured left to right (standing) are board supervisors Paul Nettinga, Dave Thom, Oonagh Wood, Tamarah Caster, and Greg Neugebauer, district manager Mike Baldwin, and former board supervisor and current advisor Gladwin Paulsen (sitting).

Community Wildfire Protection Plan - Your Input is Wanted!

Custer County is updating its Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in cooperation with local, state, and federal agencies and other organizations with a stake in wildfire preparedness and mitigation. The CWPP is a collaborative plan developed by a community in an area at risk from wildfire.

What is included in a CWPP?

- fire history, behavior, and probability
- firefighting capabilities & water supplies
- evacuation routes
- wildfire community hazard ratings
- wildfire mitigation recommendations
- home ignition zone recommendations

Your feedback on how wildfires may affect you is valuable. Please scan the QR code to take the survey.

Survey topics include county wildfire risks, landowner mitigation, and evacuation planning.



District anniversary continued

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county. To initiate the process, a temporary twelve-member committee was formed on July 16, 1940. The committee circulated petitions requesting a public hearing, which was held on August 27, 1940, and received a favorable response. On November 12 of that year, a public referendum was held to decide if the district would be created. It passed with more than 2/3 of the voters in favor of creating the district. Then on December 10, the South Dakota Secretary of State signed the "Certificate of Organization" formally establishing the "Custer County Soil Conservation District". Of note, the original district boundary did not include all of Custer County, but only the eastern portion of the county, roughly from the edge of the Black Hills to the eastern county border.

Then on May 29, 1946, voters approved a new referendum to add the western portion of the County to the District. Finally in 1968, all townsites and Federal lands were included within the District.

The members of the temporary organization committee who started the process in 1940 were Robert Hughes, Joe Fugier, F. A. O'Neill, John Chitty, Ferdinand Reub, Bob Caple, Vern Smith, C.E. Pollard, A.D. Miner, Paul Rasmussen, Floyd Miller, and Earl Mohler.

The Land Use Planning Committee members who supported the movement were C.E. Pollard; James W. Soper; Charles D. Phelps; Vern R. Smith; Harold P. Kennedy; Guy



Severe soil erosion produced these drifts of blowing dirt near Huron, SD in the 1930s. Photo from South Dakota State Historical Society.

Caple; Joe E. Fugier; Ed Hawley; and Charles A. Lander.

The first board supervisors were: Paul Rasmussen, Fairburn; Willie B. Clark, Buffalo Gap; Guy Cable, Folsom; Theodore G. Hesnard, Hermosa; and C.E. Pollard, Hermosa.

Others who helped with the organization work were: Sam Wedmore, Hermosa; B.H. Maxam, Buffalo Gap; Theodore Rasmussen, Fairburn; H.H. Streeter; George Darrow; Adolph Sanson; Sam Kirk; Johnathan Waller; Carl Sanson; Dick Westfal; Carl Sandaker; Darwin Pierce; and Jack Mariton.

Why was the District created?

The birth of our district and other conservation districts

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This photo (left) appears to be a desert scene from the U.S. Southwest; however, this is a Gregory County farm in 1936. Below is a photo of a hog house taken in 1935. It is nearly overcome by drifting dirt. Photos from the South Dakota State Historical Society.



SOIL DRIFTING OVER HOG HOUSE - J. DWIG, 1935

Custer County 4-H by Keri Cochran, Custer County SDSU Extension / South Dakota 4-H

4-H in Custer County is a growing force within our community through its project-based learning and positive youth development programming. The 4-H Thriving Model includes these four components: fostering a passion for developing an interest or skill that inspires a sense of direction; promoting belonging; supporting developmental relationships; and encouraging engagement. 4-H has historically helped young people with readiness for work and life and produced healthy, productive leaders with skills for success. In light of the constantly changing and challenging world that youth are facing today, the recent Beyond Ready initiative is a more intentional effort to not only promote readiness for work and for life, but to provide individualized support for post-secondary pathways. We need the support of local leaders and community partners like you to reach these new goals!

For the 2024-25 program year, 86 youth actively participated in 4-H and 29 certified volunteers dedicated their time and energy to creating positive experiences for our youth. According to Tufts University longitudinal study of Positive Youth Development (2021), data shows that 4-H'ers are succeeding beyond their peers by being:

2x more likely to have the goal of being a leader;

3x more likely to participate in community service; and

2x more likely to report living life with intentionality and purpose.

In 4-H, you pledge your hands to greater service. Community service work is foundational in 4-H. This past summer, a member of the Custer Health & Wellness Committee reached out to me about a need in the community, and on a hot Saturday in July, four Custer County Mouny youth and their parents helped construct and set up two more raised beds in the Community Garden near Custer High School (pictured above). Talk about "Learning by Doing!"



In 4-H, you also find your spark, whether it's food science, health, creative arts, family and consumer science, photography, animal science, STEM, robotics, forestry, com-



munity service, citizenship, or plant science, just to name quite a few! In September, a local church member voiced a need for a group effort to help clean up the Healing and Wellness Garden at Monument Health Hospital in Custer. A 4-H member who had cultivated an interest in gardening through 4-H, initiated the garden clean-up project as part of his senior project. Two 4-H members and ten volunteers were involved in this effort (pictured below), and it only took one spark!



These are just two conservation-minded examples of what a 4-H community can do. Please consider joining a positive youth development organization that is doing what it takes to guide our youth in the right pathways. For more information about how to help, contact me at keri.cochran@sdstate.edu. The 4-H office is located at 25361 US Highway 385, and office hours are 9am-3pm, Monday-Wednesday.

Looking for cost-share assistance?

The Conservation District works with private landowners to pursue grants to provide cost-share dollars for implementing conservation practices on their property. To date most of our grant dollars have focused on forest health related projects; however, we can seek funding for a variety of practices. Examples include:

- Erosion control and shoreline stabilization
- Forest stand improvement (thinning, slash disposal)
- Grazing management (installing water pipelines, tanks, pumps, fencing)
- Grass seeding and cover crops
- Planting shelterbelts

If you are interested in any of these practices, let us know. Funding is never guaranteed, but we will do what we can to help you find cost-share assistance.



Upcoming student contests

Speech Contest—high school students:

The District is looking forward to the 2026 Resource Conservation Speech Contest. All high school students in the county are eligible. This year's theme is "Urban conservation: healing our communities." The contest is sponsored by Touchstone Energy Cooperatives of South Dakota, South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (SD-DANR), and the South Dakota Association of Conservation Districts. Scholarships will be rewarded to the top 3 contestants in the state. First place will receive \$1,200, second place receives \$800, and third place receives \$500. For more information, contact the Custer Conservation District office (673-5680) or SD-DANR at 605-773-3623. Entry deadline for the local contest is February 28.

Arbor Day Poster Contest—5th grade students:

The contest will be available to all 5th graders within the county; however, each school can submit only one poster to the state contest. This year's theme is "Trees in Mythology". Cash prizes will be awarded to the top three places and the top 12 entries will be featured in the 2027 Arbor Day Poster Calendar. Entry deadline is March 27. Additional information is available through the District office (673-5680) or SD-DANR at 605-362-2830.

Arbor Day Creative Writing Contest—5th and 6th grade students:

All fifth and sixth grade students in the county are eligible. Contest information has not been released at the time of this publication; however, cash prizes will be given to first, second, and third place winners and entries must be 250 words or less. Additional information will be made available through the District office once the contest details have been released.

Tree Sale

The 2026 tree sale has begun. Anyone interested in purchasing trees for the 2026 planting season is welcome to contact either the Pennington Conservation District or the Fall River Conservation District. They are both accepting orders at this time. Pennington's order form is available at www.penningtonconservation.com/services or by calling 605-503-5299. Their order deadline is April 1, 2026. Fall River's order form is available by calling 605-745-5716 ext. 121 or by stopping by their office in Hot Springs. They are accepting orders until January 31, 2026.

Supplies are limited so get your order in early before trees sellout. Orders are expected to arrive around May 2026.

Annual Invasive Cool-Season Grasses

Cool-season invasive annual grasses are an increasing concern in western South Dakota. These grasses can negatively affect wildlife habitat, reduce livestock forage on rangelands, and alter fire regimes such that grassland fires become more frequent and more intense. Major contributors to these problems are cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), ventenata (*Ventenata dubia*), medusahead (*Taeniatherum caput-medusae*), and Japanese brome (*Bromus japonicus*). Medusahead is not known to occur in South Dakota, but is present in the Bighorns of Wyoming. Ventenata is known to occur in Harding County, SD, and further expansion is possible.

South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks is considering offering cost-share assistance to landowners for herbicide treatment of these grasses so they would like your feedback. Please complete the survey below and send your response to the email address or mailing address provided below. Your feedback is appreciated.



Invasive cool-season annual grasses: Japanese brome (upper left), medusahead (upper right), ventenata (lower left), and cheatgrass (lower right). Photos by Steven Ripple, Utah State U. (ventenata), Sarah Schumacher (Japanese brome), and Leslie J. Mehrhoff, U. of Connecticut (cheatgrass and medusahead), Bugwood.org. All but medusahead are present in South Dakota. Expansion of medusahead and ventenata in the state is a serious concern.

Landowner Survey on Annual Invasive Cool-Season Grasses and Treatment Support

- Do you own or manage property in South Dakota west of the Missouri river?
YES ☐
NO ☐
- Do you know about the negative impacts invasive annual grasses have on forage production, profitability, and long-term sustainability?
Yes ☐
NO ☐
I would be interested to learn more through a workshop. ☐
- Are invasive annual grasses such as Cheatgrass or Japanese brome, a concern for the property you own or manage?
YES ☐
NO ☐

- Do you currently chemically treat invasive annual grasses on the property you own or manage?
YES ☐
NO ☐
- Would you be interested in a cost-share program to help address issues with annual invasive grasses on property you own or manage.
YES ☐
NO ☐

Other Comments:

Responses can be sent to Ben Pucket with SD Game, Fish & Parks by email or mail:

Email: Ben.Pucket@state.sd.us

Address: Ben Pucket, SD GF&P
28374 West Flag Pole Rd.
Hot Springs, SD 57747





*It is the mission of
the Custer County
Conservation
District to promote
conservation of soil,
water, and natural
resources for
residents and
visitors now and in
the future.*

Browning pine trees near Custer

This summer saw the emergence of browning ponderosa pine trees in isolated pockets near Custer. In most cases the dying needles were scattered throughout the canopy, but did not occur on all needles. At first glance, one might assume these were due to mountain pine beetle or pine engraver beetle infestations. However, after further investigation by Tony Seidl, Forest Health Program Coordinator with SD-DANR, the cause was primarily attributed to environmental stress. The area experienced unseasonably warm temperatures in May and potentially damaging hail storms. The trees did not exhibit signs of beetle infestation. Some of the trees showed signs of diplodia infection; however, Seidl did not observe an outbreak of diplodia, a fungus that causes a tip blight disease in ponderosa pine trees.

While the trees were not beetle infested, they are now stressed and more vulnerable to infestation. A wet winter/spring will go a long way in aiding these trees to making a recovery.



District anniversary continued

(Continued from page 2)

can trace its roots back to the “Dust Bowl” era of the 1930’s. Prolonged drought and unsustainable agricultural practices resulted in severe soil erosion, economic hardships across the Plains states, and a large migration of people away from the affected areas to other parts of the country, particularly the Pacific coast states.

One federal response to the crisis was the creation of the Soil Conservation Service in 1935, now known as the Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCS). The new agency helped farmers to combat soil erosion and implement more sustainable farming

practices. However, the problem of soil erosion was too large for a single federal agency to tackle. Therefore, in 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged the States to take additional action. South Dakota State Legislators headed the call and introduced HB 206, which was later signed into law by the Governor G. T. Mickelson in March, 1937. The law allowed for the creation of soil conservation districts to manage natural resource concerns at the local level. Tri-County Conservation District was South Dakota’s first district created while others were formed across the state through the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s. Today there are 68 districts covering every corner of the state.

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While soil erosion and water conservation were the primary foci of the district in its early years, its role has expanded over time to address additional natural resource concerns. These include forest health (mitigating bark beetle and wildfire hazards), rangeland productivity and health, invasive species, habitat for wildlife and pollinators, and water development for livestock. The district looks forward to working with its partners and local producers for many more years of conservation in Custer County.

Scholarship Notice for Class of 2026

The Custer Conservation District is excited to offer two \$1,000 scholarship to high school graduates in the class of 2026. Eligible students are graduating high school students that reside in Custer County and plan on attending a post-secondary institution. Applications are available online at custercountysd.com/conservation-district/ and at our office. Applications are due by March 31. Questions can be directed to our office at 673-5680 or email us at custercd@sdconservation.net.



Rain Barrels still on Sale

The Conservation District still has a couple 55 gallon rain barrels available for sale. They are \$85 each. Let us know if you would like to purchase one.

Newsletter Mailing List

We are always interested in expanding our audience. Let us know if you would like to be added to our newsletter distribution list. Just give us a call @ 605 -673-5680 or send an email to custercd@sdconservation.net.



Calendar of Events

- January 8—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- January 13-14—South Dakota Soil Health Coalition Annual Conference, Aberdeen, SD. For more information, visit sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference/.
- January 15—The Burning Beetle Learning Event, 6:30 PM in the Pine Room, Custer County Courthouse Annex Custer, SD.
- January 17—The 13th Burning Beetle, Custer, SD. For more information, visit the Burning Beetle Facebook page.
- January 21—Ranchers Workshop, Mission, SD. Visit ranchersworkshop.com for more info.
- February 5-7—Rogue Food Conference, Rapid City, SD. For more information, visit roguefoodconference.com/rapid-city-sd-rogue/.
- February 12—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- February 20-22—Pheasant Fest. Minneapolis, MN.
- March 3-4—South Dakota Grassland Summit, Mitchell, SD. More information available at www.sdgrassinitiative.org/.
- March 12—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- April 9—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.
- May 14—Custer Conservation District Board meeting, Custer Co. Courthouse, Custer, SD.

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30



Custer County Conservation District
25363 US Highway 385
Custer, SD 57730
Phone: 605-673-5680
Email: CusterCD@sdconservation.net
www.custercountysd.com/conservation-district/

Type address here or use Mail Merge
to automatically address this
publication to multiple recipients.

Newsletter of the Custer County Conservation District

District Board

Dave Thom - Chair
Paul Nettinga - Vice-Chair
Oonagh Wood - Treasurer
Tamarah Caster - Supervisor
Greg Neugebauer - Supervisor
Advisors: Stuart Adrian and Gladwin Paulsen
Mike Baldwin - District Manager
Mike Linde - County Commission Liaison

NRCS Staff

Paige Uher - District Conservationist, Rapid City
Brad Humbracht - District Conservationist, Hot Springs

Partners / Cooperators

SD Dept. of Agriculture and Natural Resources
SD Game, Fish & Parks
SD Wildland Fire
National Wild Turkey Federation
USFS, Buffalo Gap National Grassland
USFS, Black Hills National Forest



The mission of the Custer County Conservation District is to promote conservation of soil, water, and natural resources for residents and visitors now and in the future.



Established in 1940