



Grass Roots for Conservation



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Elkhart County Soil & Water Conservation District

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Enhanced Field Borders: A Win-Win for Farmers and Water Quality of Life

The Elkhart County SWCD received a Clean Water Indiana grant, and one of our focuses is an Enhanced Field Border program. Now, you might be asking, what is that? An enhanced field border aims to improve the health of the soil in cropland, increase plant diversity, and provide more habitat and food for wildlife along the edges of a field. Elkhart County's version of the enhanced field border includes all of that, plus it offers an opportunity to adjust and work with areas that are less productive in your operation.



Let's look at some examples: take, for instance, the woods. You plant your crop up against the woods, and a couple of things are going to happen. The soil is wetter in the spring, so you "mud" the crop in, and the planter marker might get knocked off by a tree limb. During the summer, the trees soak in all the available moisture, shade your crop in that area, and the crop does not produce to its fullest potential. Even though you sprayed for weeds, the weed pressure is still there. By the way, you got too close and bent

the boom on the sprayer. Now, harvest time comes around, and while the field is fit and ready, you have that one area that is not. So, you either harvest everything and have to come back for about 50 feet (ugh!), or you chance running it through and plug up the combine, spending hours unplugging it while it's really nice out. Oh, and I almost forgot—the corn was down from deer and raccoons riddling it, and you caught the snout on the corn head and broke it off. Then you look at the yield monitor and realize it is showing 0-5 bushels on the screen. Can you tell I've been there and done that? It's what we do; it's what has always been done.

Well, we are offering an opportunity to *not* do what has always been done and to give you an excuse to change things up—no more "that's what Dad or Grandpa always did." Let's not just figure all our acreage into an average; let's get creative and put our dollars in the most productive areas, not where we already know we won't get our return on investment. It doesn't take a professional to tell you how to do it; you are the professional. You know that area of land better than anybody. You know your crop

is going to need a few things to be successful: a good seedbed, fertilizer, water, and most of all, sunlight.

You can control the seedbed (kind of), and you can mostly control the fertilizer. Water is a variable for most, though irrigation is an option. What we don't have any control over is sunlight. So, grab some flags, drive out to the field during a nice bright afternoon, and see where the sun is hitting. Put a flag there. I bet you will find that the crop is less than what you want to see from the flag to the woods. My guess is that it's about 30-50 feet, or 12 to 24 rows, however you want to look at it. So, plant it to something that lessens your struggles. Plant that area to something that gives you another option—an enhanced field border.

Some of the advantages: maybe you have no end rows, so you can make some hay, use it for feed, sell it, graze it, or just let it grow and not mess with it. Seed corn growers, think about permanent ends and then, after harvest, throw in some nitro radishes. I have personally noticed that deer use these areas as paths and that they love buckwheat. What they are not doing is eating corn and knocking it over. I'm not here to sell you a 100% guarantee, but what I am here to sell you is something better than receiving nothing.

These are the benefits for you, the land user. The benefit for the entire community is water quality. The biggest advantage for everyone is keeping sediment and debris in its place—not in the ditch, not on the road, and not in your neighbor's yard or field. Even if you do not plant cover crops or do not do any type of no-till, this field border is a quick way to help secure your resources in the field and increase your return on investment. This process leads us to a stronger, healthier, and more resilient Water Quality of Life for everyone.



ENHANCED FIELD BORDERS: NOT JUST AN AG THING



Enhanced field borders may seem like a concept that would only fit into an agricultural application, but here in Elkhart County, we believe that some of the fringe areas where agriculture and urban expansion intersect would be good locations for these borders as well.

Let's face facts, the agricultural landscape is transitioning to recreational vehicle manufacturing facilities, data storage warehouses, solar energy generating facilities, and sortable fulfillment centers more rapidly than ever.

While the term "cloud storage" implies a completely virtual space, we are finding that like all other things that take up space, storage is storage. This reality may seem like the present and future of some other community, but it is not for Elkhart County. Well, here we are, and this reality will continue to expand as our dependency on these amenities only grows stronger.

How do enhanced field borders work in relation to the urban sprawl that is created by the new industry coming to our area? To answer this, we need to look at the actual land use where many of these facilities are going.

- The vast majority of these projects are replacing farm fields that produced soybeans and corn, or row crops, that do not provide habitat to much other than unwanted varmints. (My apologies to the unsung hero, the earthworm and the important pollinators)
- They do not, in many cases, provide significant natural water storage.
- Depending on how they were farmed, they may have had manure and/or herbicides and pesticides applied that were beneficial to the crops, but not to the waterways that drain many of the fields.



As the children and grandchildren of the farmers who started this community transitioned their land use, the Elkhart County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) applied for a Clean Water Indiana grant and secured funding to incentivize enhanced field borders that would be located on projects that replace land formerly zoned for agriculture. We are encouraging the owners of these projects to consider incorporating areas seeded with native plant species to attract beneficial insects and pollinators that may have been displaced otherwise, during the design phase.

Our mission at the Elkhart County Soil and Water Conservation District is to assist land users and other agencies in the wise use of natural resources in Elkhart County, and this grant aligns with this mission 100%. If you would like to learn more about the Enhanced Field Borders Incentive program for either agricultural or urban applications, please contact our office at (574) 523-2030 or email Jim Hess at jhess@elkhartcounty.com or Todd Clark at tclark@elkhartcounty.com.





Elkhart County k-12 Poster Contest

"May the Forest be
with you, always"

**ENTRIES DUE BY
December 18, 2024**

learn more at www.elkcoswcd.org



Elkhart County SWCD & Michiana Master Gardener's

2025 TREE SALE

**Early Bird
Discount**

*Place your order with payment, on or before
January 3, 2025, and you will receive 10% off your order!*

**Final Order Deadline:
March 7, 2025**

**Order Pick up:
Elkhart County Fairgrounds
March 29, 2025**



**13 Species of Trees and Shrubs:
Seedlings will be approximately
18" to 24" depending on species.**

**You can view our order form online at our
website at www.elkcoswcd.org where you can
order & pay with your credit/debit card.**

More information will be coming in the next few months.

UPCOMING EVENTS

October

21st SWCD Board Meeting: 5:30 PM,
SWCD Office, 59358 County Road 7, Elkhart, IN

November

11th Veteran's Day: The SWCD Office will be closed
for the *Veteran's Day Holiday*

18th SWCD Board Meeting: 5:30 PM,
SWCD Office, 59358 County Road 7, Elkhart, IN

28th-29th Thanksgiving Holiday: The SWCD Office will be
closed for the *Thanksgiving Holiday*

December

16th SWCD Board Meeting: 5:30 PM,
SWCD Office, 59358 County Road 7, Elkhart, IN

24th-25th Christmas Holiday: The SWCD Office will be
closed for the *Christmas Holiday*

SWCD - NRCS CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP DIRECTORY

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