



Berkshire Conservation District
78 Center St., Suite 102, Pittsfield, MA 01201
Phone: (413) 443-1776 x102
admin@berkshireconservationdistrict.org
www.berkshireconservation.org

FISCAL YEAR 2024 ANNUAL REPORT JULY 1, 2023 - JUNE 30, 2024

Background

Berkshire Conservation District (BCD, the District) is a tax-exempt state organization, established as an entity of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. Founded in 1946, it is one of more than 3,000 conservation districts across the country established under state law to carry out programs for the conservation and best management practices of soil, water and related resources. Guided by an elected volunteer Board of Supervisors, BCD works with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other Berkshire area non-profit environmental, conservation and agricultural organizations. The District is dedicated to environmental education, the conservation of natural resources and best land use and agricultural practices in Berkshire County, MA. The District does not receive budgeted state aid for operations so available programming is dependent year-to-year on funds provided by grant awards, fundraising income, and private donations. Past programming has included nutrient management resources, increased pollinator habitat, low-cost rental of no-till seeder drills, District funding of environmental scholarships for local students at Berkshire Community College and UMass Amherst, hosting educational workshops, and providing community/school programs.

Mission

“The Berkshire Conservation District helps farmers, landowners and land managers improve and protect their natural resources. In cooperation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), we offer assistance through education and outreach.”

Programming

The District submitted a grant request to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) in August 2023 to promote a Resilient Soils Campaign focused on providing information, technical assistance and partnerships to demonstrate the effectiveness of biochar and compost as a soil amendment.

We started the fiscal year with three cancelled rentals due to intense precipitation and flooding for Northern Berkshire. However the remaining three rentals resulted in 238 acres in no-till planting which boosted our program beyond the FY22 season. Winding down the rental season of 2023 we received feedback that a smaller drill would be of great benefit to area farmers.

In the spring of 2024 we rented the larger Esch 5512 out to six renters, three of which were new to the program. We were able to subsidize rentals on over 260 acres and assist one producer in taking soil samples. An increase in rentals is primarily due to word-of-mouth from previous renters. This is an important point to emphasize since it can reduce our reliance on digital and paid advertising and support the focus of relationship building and direct outreach to increase no-till adoption.

On June 5, 2024, the District was awarded the FY24 grant focusing on biochar and compost amendments from EOEEA. This delay of 11 months since submitting our grant proposal contributed to a change in our planned and anticipated activities. Within 6 days of this award we also received funding for the Healthy Soils Action Plan Challenge Grant Round Two grant on June 11, after submission on February 1, 2024. As soon as we received word of the grant award we pursued a local lender to provide a bridge loan for the equipment purchase. We immediately contacted Zimmerman’s Farm Service in Pennsylvania to complete our purchase of the Esch 5607.



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We expect this new equipment to increase adoption of no-till, and at least double the amount of individual farmers we serve with our equipment rental program.

We started offering a promotional 'no per-acre fee in 2023' for farmers renting our no-till seeder in addition to subsidies for soil testing. We continued to reach out to farmers to promote cover crops and no-till adopting alongside finalizing our plans for a September native plant sale. In July 2023, the District partnered with Hamden-Hampshire Conservation District and the Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) to offer an in-person reduced till/perennial clover trials event at Sawyer Farm in Worthington MA.

The No-Till Seeder rental program continues to expand and offer Berkshire area farmers a more sustainable way to plant pasture, hay, forage and cover crops while saving time, fuel and money as well as maintaining soil health. This program allows farmers to try the no-till method for seeding as an alternative to purchasing the equipment. The concept of no-till practices is to minimize disturbing the soil structure when planting to reduce erosion and decrease evaporation. The seeders are housed by our Caretakers and are available for rent by farmers who share the use of the machine over the growing season. The daily rental rate and a per-acre fee contributes to maintenance of the seeder and administrative support, when renters do not enroll in our Acreage Subsidy Program. The seeder was used on approximately 503 acres between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024. This is more than double what the acreage in the previous fiscal year (236). Once we were able to implement a no per-acre fee, the acreage increased dramatically and we ended the 2023 calendar year with having it used to plant over 400 acres.

The District is deeply grateful to our Associate and Caretaker of the Esch 5512 no-till seeder, Mike Balawender, and Daniel Dunton, Caretaker of the Esch 5607, for their time and expertise in interacting with farmers and facilitating the rentals, as well as our Program Manager Ambrose Clausen for revitalizing this program and reaching out to many farmers directly.

We also want to thank all of our friends who have supported us within the last year. We could not have done it without all of your generous support! Most especially:

- The District Board of Supervisors: Adam Galambos, Ron Kujawski, Donna Kittredge, and Ned Kirchner.
- Associates: Mike Balawender and Dave Klimowicz
- NRCS Staff: Kaliegh Walther and Ben Fellows, MACD Support Staff: Jill Wenner
- Thomas Anderson, Executive Secretary, State Commission for Soil, Water and Related Resources, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA)
- Michael Leff, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts
- Fellow MA Conservation Districts
- Everyone who supported our native plant sale with a purchase
- All of the farmers who rented our no-till seeder drills to plant more sustainably and increase soil health
- Our fellow conservation/environmental/agricultural community partners, including BEAT (Berkshire Environmental Action Team), Berkshire Grown, Housatonic Valley Association, Berkshire Natural Resources Council and Berkshire Agricultural Ventures.

Looking Ahead to FY 2025

In addition to the on-going No-Till and native plant sale programs, the District submitted a grant proposal to EEA for a *Resilient Soils Campaign Initiative* in August of 2023 and awarded the contract on June 5, 2024, to be a comprehensive public outreach campaign that advocates for the utilization of compost and biochar, emphasizing their role in enhancing soil health and resilience.



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The District launched this new program to promote resilient soils as a method to mitigate the effects of climate change by building healthy soils, improving air and water quality and increasing carbon sequestration. This will include educational workshops and hands-on demonstrations, as well as resource materials, technical assistance and support. We will also plan for another fall native plant sale to benefit pollinator species.

In November 2024 the District sent proposals to EOEEA for the second round of Challenge Grants as well as the FY25 Conservation District Basic and Innovation grant. We optimistically await acceptance of both which, upon receipt of contracts, will expand our reach in the County.

The goals and objectives of the District in FY25 include:

- Conduct at least one in-person workshop aimed at educating farmers, gardeners, and community members about the benefits and methods of using compost and biochar.
- Develop printed and digital/web-based brochures, flyers, and instructional guides that offer information about composting, biochar production, and their application.
- Set up a demonstration plot(s) in a community garden or local farm showcasing the results of using compost and biochar.
- Coordinate available resources to provide hands-on technical support and consultation services for individuals or organizations wanting to begin using compost and biochar.
- Conduct at least one digital training session or webinar that individuals can attend or access at their convenience.
- Collaborate with neighboring conservation districts and other organizations for joint events, information sessions, or shared resources.

Board of Supervisors

The District is currently seeking conservation-minded individuals interested in serving on our active board. Board members are essential to the success of the District as they help guide the focus of the District and volunteer for special events offered throughout the year. The District welcomes new input and ideas as they relate to conservation of natural resources of Berkshire County. If you are interested or know of someone who would be a great fit, please contact the District via email, admin@berkshireconservationdistrict.org

BCD Board of Supervisors

Adam Galambos, Chair
Ron Kujawski, Vice Chair
Donna Kittredge, Secretary
Ned Kirchner

Associates

Mike Balawender
Dave Klimowicz

Staff

Cynthia Grippaldi, District Administrator
Ambrose Clausen, Program Manager
Lynn Browne, Bookkeeper