

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



**Cortland County
Soil and Water
Conservation District**

2025 PROJECT SPOTLIGHTS

Before



After



Grout Brook Culvert Replacement

The Cortland County Highway Department, with support from the Cortland County SWCD, completed a stream restoration project on Grout Brook that replaced an undersized culvert, restored fish passage, stabilized 200 feet of stream corridor, and reduced erosion and flood risks to help protect water quality in Skaneateles Lake. The project improved stream flow and eliminated a major stream barrier.

Aquatic Harvesting

In June, the Cortland County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) purchased an ILH-250 aquatic weed harvester through support from the Central New York Community Foundation. The harvester removed over 25,000 cubic feet of invasive aquatic vegetation from Little York and Tully Lakes across 100+ loads, improving water quality, reducing harmful algal bloom risks, and enhancing recreational access for Dwyer Park, lakefront residents and all lake users.



Wetland Restoration

In partnership with Tioga County Soil and Water Conservation District, Cortland County SWCD constructed six vernal pools in the Town of Virgil to enhance wetland habitat and increase water storage on the landscape. The pools provide critical breeding and habitat areas for amphibians and other wildlife, with early monitoring showing successful water retention and immediate wildlife use.



Agricultural Heavy Use Area Implementation

The Cortland County Soil and Water Conservation District assisted a local beef farm with the installation of a covered Heavy Use Area (HUA) to improve livestock management and reduce runoff. The project included a concrete barnyard pad, roof and gutter system, livestock waterer, stabilized animal trails, fencing, and drainage improvements. The new system helps contain nutrients, separate clean water from manure, and improve water quality while supporting efficient farm operations.

Before



After



2025 Ag Program Update

Agricultural Environmental Management

The Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program is a statewide, voluntary, incentive-based program. A tiered, progressive process helps farmers make common-sense, cost-effective and science-based decisions to help meet business objectives while protecting and conserving natural resources.

In 2025, staff updated our AEM strategy which is used to outline AEM priorities and philosophies that support program activities. The AEM strategy allows us to focus county efforts on our unique agricultural industry, specific natural resource concerns and local environmental and societal issues. The review and update process gives local stakeholders the opportunity to provide input.

Based on the 2022 census data, Cortland County has lost nearly 150 farms in only 5 years with losses in all ag sectors. However, animal and farm acreage numbers do not show those same decreases.

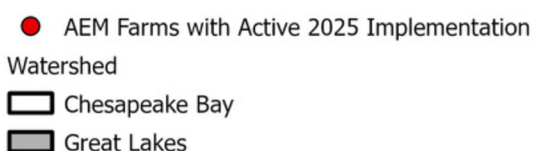
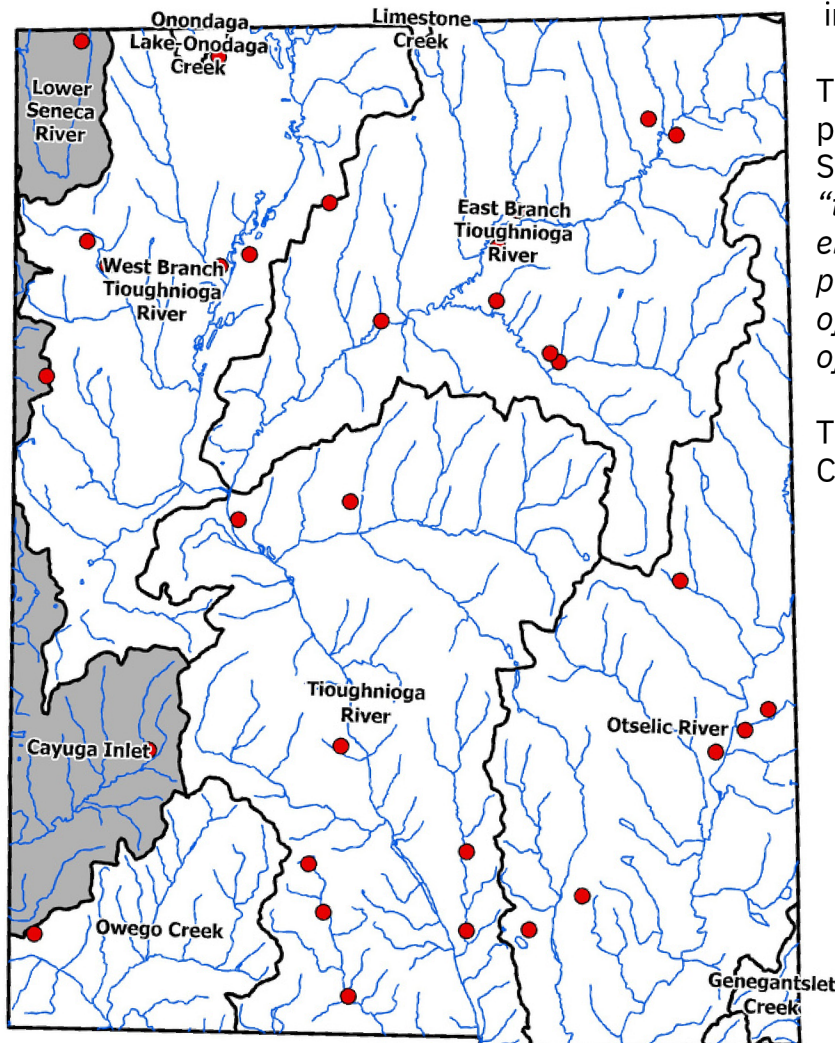
During the strategy review, SWCD also conducted a survey of ag producers and support agencies and business. We received 17 responses. The survey indicates that the loss of farmland to development, particularly solar development, is a growing concern. Other concerns identified by respondents were

increasing energy/fuel costs and labor issues.

The mission and vision for the county AEM program, created as part of the original 2008 Strategic Plan and enhanced over the years is *“to use the AEM framework to protect and enhance the environment of Cortland County by providing education and increasing participation of the county’s agricultural producers in support of sustainable agricultural practices.”*

The philosophy and priorities of the Cortland County AEM program are to:

- Implement conservation to the benefit of local natural resources without jeopardizing the financial well-being of farms.
- Build relationships with farmers to increase the likelihood of the implementation of conservation plans and the long-term operation and maintenance of BMPs.
- Increase the awareness of the non-farming community about the opportunities and challenges facing Cortland County farmers with the intent to foster understanding and cooperation between these two groups.
- Promote teamwork between farmers, agricultural service agencies, and agribusiness.





Progress through the AEM planning process often requires conservation practices to be implemented at Tier 4. SWCD assists many farms with implementation by developing proposals for competitive grant programs. In 2025, funding was awarded to local farms for ag conservation projects from two state funding programs. Six farms were awarded funds to help install over \$2.65 million in conservation practices on their farms over the next several years. A media event was co-hosted with the Department of Ag and

Markets to celebrate the award of Nonpoint Source Pollution Control and Abatement grants to local farms and the state's commitment of record level of funding - over \$25 million - for water quality improvement projects on farms across the state.

Ag Conservation Implementation and Water Quality Improvement Projects

A late start to the construction season and the early onset of winter proved challenging for implementation activities. Several projects were paused for the winter months with construction to resume in 2026, but nonetheless five projects were completed in 2025 including the Heavy Use Area improvement featured on page 2. Other practices completed were: a manure transfer system including a gravel frack tank pad and access road repairs to improve manure transport and transfer for nutrient management and erosion control; a stream restoration project to prevent erosion and maintain access to ag land; a silage leachate and farmstead runoff management system including vegetated treatment areas; and a covered waste storage and covered barnyard runoff control system to keep clean water clean, eliminate contaminated runoff from impacting the environment and improve management efficiencies and nutrient management of collected manure.

Before

After



31

Farms verified
for Chesapeake
BMPs

63

Soil Group
Worksheets

1,806

Acres of cover
crops planted

\$55.4k

Cover crop
reimbursement

\$1.87 m

in Ag
Conservation
funding secured
for work on 6
farms

2025 Forestry Update

SWCD values the various programs and opportunities for landowners to obtain and plant tree and shrub seedlings and saplings. Whether the purpose is to create hunting opportunities, provide shade, improve aesthetics, or establish buffers, staff can help the residents of Cortland County plan simple plantings or implement forest management projects.

Annual Seedling Sale

The SWCD sponsors an annual Spring Planting Program offering a variety of bareroot tree and shrub species. Beginning each January, landowners can purchase plant materials for large or small-scale plantings with distribution occurring in April. The program emphasizes native species and flexible quantities. Species vary from year to year and are selected to be suitable for a variety of uses and a range of site conditions. Regardless of property size, this program can help landowners achieve their conservation goals for their property. No project is too small with this program, as some landowners purchased a single order of 10 trees for as little as \$15. In 2025, 200+ landowners purchased and planted over 12,000 seedlings.

Upland Tree Planting

SWCD continues to support tree planting in both urban and rural settings. Various programs and funding are available to help farms, rural landowners and communities to plant trees. Last year a special project resulted in about 530 trees planted on nearly 2 acres of upland. Increasing and improving forested areas on the landscape helps to minimize erosion, reduce runoff, increase infiltration, and generally protect water quality, as well as improving habitat, increasing biodiversity and sequestering carbon to mitigate climate change.

Buffer Establishment & Maintenance

Did you know a forested stream corridor can reduce nutrient pollution by over 30%? These areas, known as riparian forest buffers, are critical components of healthy landscapes. Made up of diverse trees, shrubs, and perennials, they sit along the edges of waterways and act as a natural transition between streams and uplands.

Riparian buffers play a major role in protecting water quality. They capture rainfall, reduce runoff, and filter out pollutants such as pesticides, nutrients, and sediment before they reach streams, lakes, and wetlands. In addition, their dense root systems stabilize stream banks, helping prevent erosion and soil loss.

Each year, SWCD collaborates with landowners to establish and maintain buffers on farms, unused fields, and even residential properties. Participating landowners may also be reimbursed for annual maintenance, such as mowing once per year, which supports the successful growth of young woody plants.



In 2025, 118 acres of previously established buffers were monitored and maintained, with 14 acres mowed. Monitoring and maintenance takes place during the summer season when buffer stewards conduct survival assessments, straighten or replace protective tubes and stakes, weed competing vegetation, and identify if natural regeneration is occurring. Healthy buffer zones safeguard stream stability by intercepting precipitation to slow floodwaters and minimize bank erosion by holding sediments in place with their healthy soils and dense root structure.

Additionally, aquatic and terrestrial wildlife depend on buffers for survival. Pollinators and migratory birds benefit from cover, increased nesting opportunity, and food resources. The provided shade regulates water temperature, increases oxygen, and enriches aquatic habitats with leaf litter, an essential component of the food chain. Aside from ecological benefits, buffers provide people with enhanced recreational opportunities such as fishing, hiking, camping, and hunting; and increased property value with visual appeal.



280

Landowners
planting trees
and shrubs

18,000

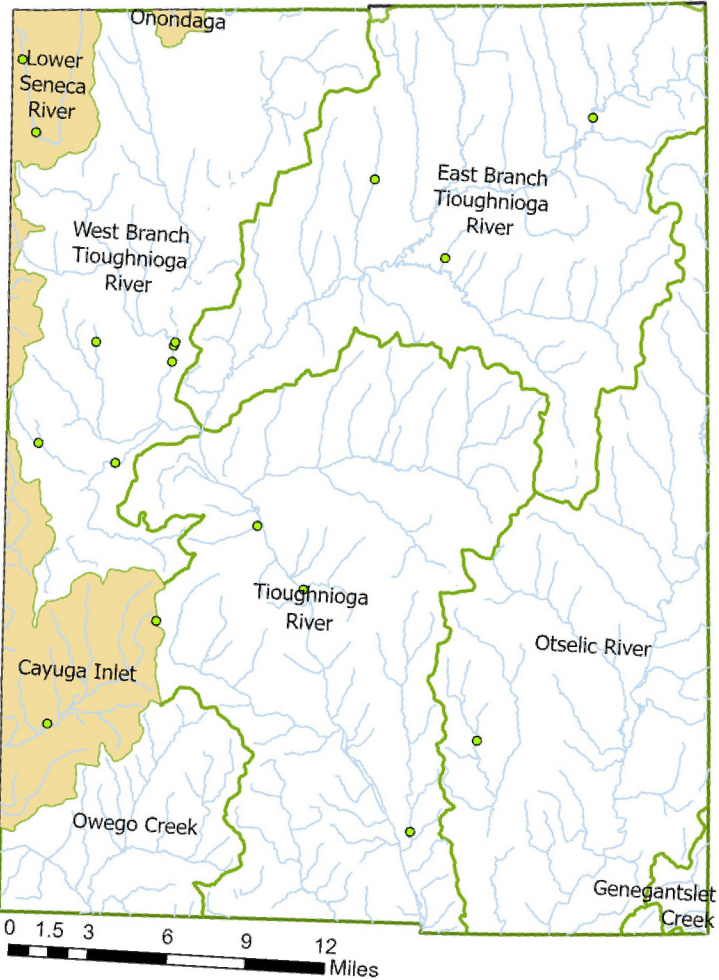
Seedlings and
trees
distributed

11.1

Acres of buffer
planted

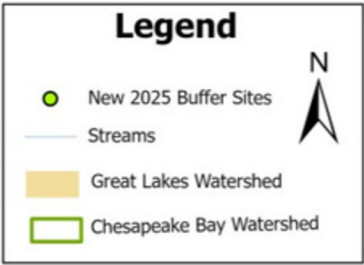
118

Acres of
buffers
monitored and
maintained



Trees for Tributaries

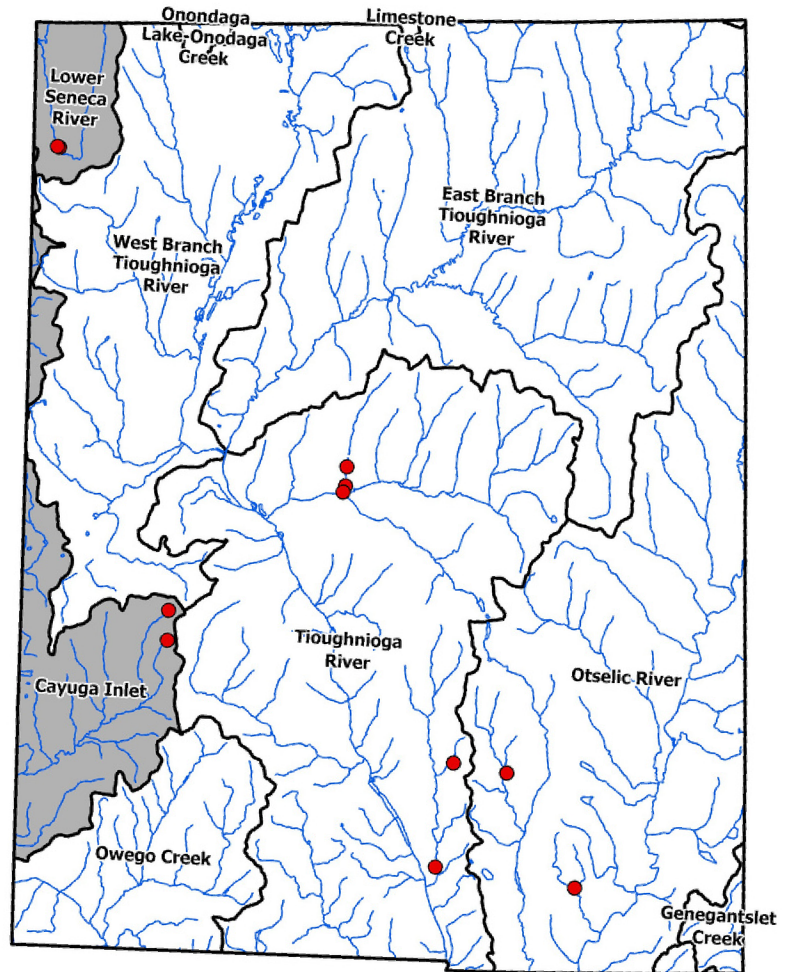
Do you have a stream running through your property that needs some native plant life? Through the Trees for Tributaries Program, administered by NYSDEC, landowners can receive native trees, shrubs, and protective shelters at no cost, so riparian buffers can be established throughout Cortland County. SWCD assists with planning and application, while participants supply labor. Both public and private lands qualify but eligibility requires a stream on the property. Planting supplies are distributed in spring and fall. In 2025, SWCD partnered with 21 landowners through this program and other similar programs to plant over 2,515 trees and shrubs, creating or expanding riparian buffers across more than 11 acres.



2025 Water Resource Program Update

Stream Projects

In 2025, SWCD staff provided stream permit or stream stabilization assistance to 20 landowners and/or municipalities. Services included preparing stream permit applications, providing technical recommendations, and, in some cases, design assistance. Additionally, grant funding was instrumental in facilitating the implementation of one agricultural and two municipal stream corridor restoration projects. SWCD worked with engineers to design these projects and with Town and/or County highway departments to implement them. These projects are designed to enhance aquatic habitat, augment culvert capacity, fortify storm resilience, and mitigate streambank erosion. Funding was from NYSDEC Water Quality Improvement Project and Climate Resilient Farming grants. See additional project photos on page 2.



Before

After



Irish Hill Rd
Culvert
Replacement

AIS Spread Prevention

The water bodies of Cortland County are vulnerable to aquatic invasive species (AIS) infestations. AIS impacts include creating dense monocultures unsuitable for aquatic animal habitat that block sunlight, preventing native plant establishment and altering food webs. SWCD is committed to maintaining recreation on our lakes, rivers, and streams by raising awareness of invasive species impacts and prevention methods. Every summer, boat stewards are stationed at Little York, Tully, and Skaneateles Lakes to conduct inspections and educate boaters about the best watercraft cleaning method, “Clean, Drain, Dry”. In 2025, stewards performed over 2,000 inspections, educated nearly 4000 people about cleaning protocols, and intercepted over 200 invasive species.

On The Lookout for Water Chestnut!

Water chestnut, *Trapa natans*, is an aggressive invasive aquatic plant found throughout New York State, but it is not yet known to be in Cortland County. Water chestnut out-competes native vegetation through exponential growth due to the lack of natural predators. It has severely impacted native habitats, fishing access and recreational use in some areas. Only herbicide applications and intensive hand-pulling efforts have helped to control this invasive. Through some special funding and partnership efforts with surrounding counties to our north, SWCD will utilize social media, printed materials, festivals and events to teach the public how to identify water chestnut, prevent its spread, and assist in management efforts.

Hydroseeding

Hydroseeding is the process of mixing “mulch”- paper and wood fibers with a sticky additive, a seed mix, water and often fertilizer which then is sprayed on bare ground to re-establish vegetation. This mixture can be sprayed on slopes or flat ground to establish vegetation and prevent erosion of soil. It is often used on road ditches, construction sites and other disturbed areas with bare soil that need quick protection to prevent erosion. The mulch protects the soil surface until vegetation can begin to grow and keep soil in place.

SWCD provides hydroseeding services to establish vegetation in road ditches and other sensitive areas at no cost to Cortland County municipalities. In 2025 SWCD hydroseeded a little over 4 acres of critical areas such as road ditches, culvert replacement projects, and other disturbed sites where bare soil was at risk of eroding and creating a water quality concern.

Stream Assessment Work Underway

Streams are a valuable resource in Cortland County, but are often unpredictable and can cause catastrophic damage like flooding, severe erosion, or declines in water quality if not properly maintained. They directly impact land use management decisions such as where to place buildings, transportation infrastructure, animal access, crop fields, or septic systems. SWCD is currently working on stream assessments of Grout Brook and East Branch Owego Creek. Staff members will assess all aspects of each stream including the active stream channel, floodplain, riparian zone, and the immediate upland area to ensure that they function as necessary to manage normal flow events and transport sediment and water in a stable manner. Potentially critical sites are identified for further evaluation and design. These sites can become stream projects, culvert replacements, buffer establishment, or debris and sediment removal. In 2025, 51.2 miles of stream were assessed and 44 potential project sites were identified.

Before



After



1.7
Acres of
wetland
restoration

7,779
Linear feet
of road ditch
hydroseeded

5,460
Technical
assistance
requests

4.1
Acres of
critical area
seeding

2025 Education and Outreach Update

214
Social media
posts

5,304
Public
education
participants

23
Outreach
events

1,314
Youth
educated

Envirothon

The Envirothon is an environmental education competition designed for high school students. It challenges teams in areas critical to environmental stewardship: Aquatics, Forestry, Soils, Wildlife, Current Environmental Issues, and Problem Solving. Teams compete at county-level competitions, with the winning team advancing to the state level. From there, the top state team has the opportunity to compete internationally. The Trail Blazers team from Marathon Central School was the 2025 Cortland County Envirothon winner.



River Clean-Up

On Saturday, September 20, 2025 SWCD sponsored the 29th Annual Cortland County River Clean-Up. Over 60 volunteers helped to clean up portions of Cortland County's lake, stream and river shorelines. Members of a number of Cortland County agencies helped to fill a dumpster with over 1,120 lbs of trash! We would like to thank the volunteers for their invaluable contribution to keeping our waterways clean and healthy.

34th Annual Water Festival

The Cortland County Water Festival, hosted at the Cortland Waterworks on Saturday, June 7, 2025, was a vibrant and engaging event with an impressive turnout of over 300 attendees. Participants enjoyed a variety of educational displays and activities aimed at celebrating our water supply and resources. Topics such as aquatic invasive species, water pollution, water quality monitoring, and forested stream buffers were presented to the public. The festival transformed learning into a fun and interactive experience.



Aquatic Invasive Species Education and Outreach

Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) spread prevention activities are supported by grant funding received from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. District stewards are able to conduct educational outreach around Cortland County throughout the year to increase public awareness and encourage actions to prevent the spread of harmful AIS. In addition to inspections at public boat launches, stewards and full-time staff attend, table, and provide presentations at various events including the Water Festival, Farmers Markets, Lake Association Meetings, the NYSFOLA Conference, and Conservation Field Days. The 2025 outreach program activities reached over 1,000 people.



Conservation Field Days

Every fall, SWCD hosts Conservation Field Days, a hands-on program to introduce middle school students to the vast field of conservation. The event is designed to encourage students to appreciate the natural resources of Cortland County. Held outdoors at 4-H Camp Owahta, classes rotate through a variety of stations where students learn about the environment by engaging in activities and presentations developed by local natural resource professionals. In 2025, about 410 6th grade students visited stations discussing wildlife, forestry, green energy, household hazardous waste, geology, AIS, and many more! Teachers reported back that they like how active and engaged students were at the event and they appreciated the different perspective of teaching that CFDs provide.



Contractor Erosion and Sediment Control Training

We hosted 50 attendees at a Contractor Erosion and Sediment Control Course for SPDES construction activity. This was a New York State-endorsed erosion and sediment control course that meets the requirements described by the State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) General Permit for Stormwater Discharges from Construction Activity. According to the Construction General Permit, at least one trained individual responsible for the implementation of the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan must be on site on a daily basis when soil disturbance activities are being performed. SWCD provides this training to help keep our contractors in compliance and to prevent erosion and stormwater concerns from developing on local construction sites.

Legislative Education and Advocacy

In March 2025 Cortland County SWCD board representatives and staff were joined in Albany by Skaneateles Lake Watershed Agricultural Program Committee members and Onondaga County SWCD representatives to confer with state legislators on conservation initiatives and priorities. Communicating with and educating our elected officials about District programs is an important duty of SWCD Board members.





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Conservation District

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Celebrating 80 Years in 2026

For nearly 80 years, the Cortland County Soil and Water Conservation District has worked alongside farmers, landowners, municipalities, and community partners to protect and enhance the county's natural resources. Since its establishment in 1946, the District has provided local leadership in conservation, implementing projects that improve water quality, reduce erosion, support agriculture, restore wildlife habitat, and strengthen environmental stewardship throughout Cortland County. As we celebrate in 2026, we will be honoring the partnerships, dedication and conservation successes that have helped to preserve our soil, water, and natural resources for future generations.



Welcome Jeremy Boylan!

Jeremy Boylan joined the Cortland County Soil & Water Conservation District Board of Directors as the Member at Large and Treasurer. Jeremy is the president of Bailey Place Insurance. He is a 40-year resident of Cortland County, and he lives in Homer with his wife and two children. In addition to his SWCD role, Jeremy is active in the community as a member of the Cortland Breakfast Rotary Club and he serves on a number of non-profit boards, including the Cortland Regional Sports Council, the Homer Trojan Basketball Club and Homer Winterfest. Jeremy is also a veteran SWCD River Cleanup volunteer, participating since 2006.



In Memory- Eugene E. Wright

For 58 years, Eugene E. Wright dedicated his time, knowledge, and leadership to the Cortland County Soil and Water Conservation District. Serving on the Board of Directors from 1966 through 2023, including 56 years as Chairman of the Board, Gene was a strong advocate for conservation and agriculture throughout Cortland County.

A lifelong farmer, Gene believed in caring for the land and led by example through the conservation practices he implemented on his own farm. He proudly represented the District at local, state, and national meetings and events, always supporting its mission.

In January 2024, at 95 years young, Gene stepped down from the Board after a remarkable career of service. On December 23, 2025, Eugene joined his wife Leslie in heaven. Gene is sorely missed, but his dedication and commitment to the District will be remembered for many years to come.

