



Guide for Emerging Leaders at the 81st SWCS International Annual Conference

The **81st Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) International Annual Conference** is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to connect with a diverse network of conservation professionals, students, and organizations. This event is the perfect place to jump-start your career, continue your education, and make lasting memories with fellow Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) participants and alumni. This is your guide for making the most out of the event and the Emerging Leaders-exclusively tailored content.

This year's conference theme, "Gateway to Conservation," embraces St. Louis's historic and geographic significance. As we gather at this gateway from East to West, we're invited to think about expansion in a new way: the expansion of conservation itself. How do we widen our reach, deepen our connections, and strengthen our collective impact around the world? How do we show reverence for the past? while forging a future? Just as the Mississippi and Missouri rivers converge here to flow forward together, so too can our efforts unite.

The Detailed Agenda and Preliminary Program are available on the conference website. ELP participants and alumni will have specific sessions tailored to meet their needs.

Dates: Sunday, July 26, through Wednesday, July 29, 2026

Location: Hilton St. Louis at the Ballpark
1 South Broadway
St. Louis, Missouri 63012

Event Website: www.swcs.org/26AC



Event Details

Sessions Summary

- 6 general sessions
- 39 symposia, 120 oral presentations, and 88 poster presentations across 13 thematic tracks
- 2 workshops and 2 conservation tours
- 4 partner events (including CEAP and CIG showcases)

Our Attendees

We anticipate ~450 attendees from across the U.S. and internationally, representing:

- Students
- University/Extension
- Federal/State/Local Government
- Industry/Private Sector
- Nonprofit/Foundation
- Conservation Districts
- Ranchers/Farmers
- ...and more!

Additional Costs

- Travel and lodging are the responsibility of the participant or their organization. View [hotel details](#) for information on the reserved block.
- Meals (besides those included in the Agenda At-A-Glance) are the responsibility of the participant or their organization.
- Tours and workshops require an additional cost to register and attend.

ELP Agenda At-A-Glance

Saturday, July 25

(6:15 p.m.) St. Louis vs. Cincinnati Baseball Game \$

Sunday, July 26

(12:00-12:30 p.m.) New Member and First Timer Orientation

(12:30-1:00 p.m.) Emerging Leaders Networking Kickoff*

(1:00-4:00 p.m.) Half-Day Workshops \$

(4:00-4:45 p.m.) Student and Early Career Networking

(5:00-6:30 p.m.) Local Forum and Flavor Reception +

Monday, July 27

(7:30-8:30 a.m.) Morning Coffee and Light Breakfast +

(8:30-10:00 a.m.) Conference Opening/Pritchard Keynote Lecture

(10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

- ELP Exclusive Training and Access to Keynote Speaker*

(12:00-1:15 p.m.) SWCS Members Luncheon*+

(1:30-3:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

- Emerging Leaders Lightning Talks Symposium

(3:30-5:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

(5:00-6:30 p.m.) Exhibitor and Poster Reception +

Tuesday, July 28

(7:00-8:15 a.m.) SWCS Leadership Breakfast* +

(7:30-8:30 a.m.) Morning Coffee and Light Breakfast +

(8:30-10:00 a.m.) Plenary Session

(10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

(12:00-1:15 p.m.) Awards Luncheon +

(1:30-3:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

(3:30-5:00 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

(6:00-8:00 p.m.) Open Networking Time*

Wednesday, July 29

(7:00-7:45 a.m.) Morning Coffee and Light Breakfast +

(7:45-8:45 a.m.) Closing Remarks

(9:00-10:30 a.m.) Concurrent Sessions

- Emerging Leaders Roundtable Session *

(11:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.) Concurrent Sessions

(1:30-5:30 or 6:00 p.m.) Conservation Tours \$

+ Food provided in the session

* ELP/alumni exclusive or invite-only (you're invited!)

\$ Additional cost required to attend (unless volunteering)

Benefits of Attending

The Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) embodies the Soil and Water Conservation Society's (SWCS) commitment to nurturing the next generation of leaders in our field. We encourage participants and alumni to take full advantage of attending the SWCS International Annual Conference!

Networking

The conference provides a platform for you to network with industry peers, potential clients, partners, and thought leaders, which can lead to new business opportunities and collaborations.

Professional Development

This event offers valuable opportunities to enhance your skills, learn about industry trends, and stay updated on best practices.

Recognition and Visibility

Showcase your work, achievements, and leadership skills. Gain recognition within the conservation community through events like the ELP poster, awards ceremony, ELP symposium, members luncheon, and more.

Personal Growth

Take advantage of the conference's range of sessions and activities to enhance your leadership abilities, communication skills, and self-confidence.

Inspiration and Motivation

Get inspired by success stories, case studies, and experiences shared by fellow conservation professionals and program participants. Reignite your passion for making a positive impact on the environment and find support from others who share your vision.

Volunteer

Enhance your conference experience by volunteering for one of the sessions below. Volunteering for at least 5 hours at the event will fulfill your ELP event-planning requirement and earn participants a 50% registration discount.

- Sign up as a session moderator/tech
- Help facilitate the silent auction
- Volunteer at the SWCS booth
- Volunteer on a tour (complimentary tour ticket included)

Contact events@swcs.org by May 15 to learn more about on-site volunteering opportunities.



Emerging Leader Recommended Sessions

Participants and alumni are welcome to attend any conference session. Below are specially curated events.

Sunday, July 26

Time	Event	Location	Details
11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.	Registration Desk Opens	Second Floor Grand Foyer	Sign into the event and pick up your ELP or ELP alumni ribbon. <i>(Also open Monday-Wednesday).</i>
12:00 p.m. - 12:30 p.m.	New Member and First-Timer Orientation	Lobby Level Broadway	Get acclimated to the conference environment and learn about the event structure.
12:30 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.	Emerging Leaders Networking Kickoff	Lobby Level Broadway	Receive networking tips and an overview of the ELP-specific events at the conference. <i>(ELP participants and alumni exclusive session)</i>
4:00 p.m. - 4:45 p.m.	Student and Early Career Professional Networking	Lobby Level Broadway	Meet and network with attendees and other ELP participants and alumni. Create connections you can grow throughout the event.

Monday, July 27

Time	Event	Location	Details
All Exhibitor/ Poster Breaks	SWCS Booth	Second Floor Arch View Ballroom	Volunteer at the SWCS Booth to inform conference attendees about our offerings and how to connect with our members. <i>(Also Tuesday, more on pg. 5)</i>
All Exhibitor/ Poster Breaks	Emerging Leaders Poster	Second Floor Grand Ballroom A-B	All participants and alumni are welcome to help present the ELP poster. Share your experience in the program and network. <i>(Also Tuesday, more on pg. 5)</i>
10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.	SWCS Emerging Leader Exclusive Training and Access to Keynote Speaker	Lobby Level Broadway	Learn more from our keynote speaker and participate in an open dialogue about the next generation of conservation professionals. <i>(ELP participants and alumni exclusive session) (More on pg. 6)</i>
12:00 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.	SWCS Members Luncheon	Second Floor Grand Ballroom C-G	Learn about our work in the SWCS State of the Society presentation and be acknowledged as a group for your participation in the ELP program.
1:30 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.	Emerging Leaders Lightning Talks Symposium	Lobby Level Broadway	Participate in or support other ELP participants as they share lightning talks about the program, lessons learned, and their events. <i>(More on pg. 6)</i>

Tuesday, July 28

Time	Event	Location	Details
7:00 a.m. - 8:15 a.m.	SWCS Leadership Breakfast	Second Floor Grand Ballroom C-G	Network with SWCS chapter leaders and engage in a facilitated dialogue on leadership in conservation. Volunteer to be a note taker for your region.
12:00 p.m. - 1:15 p.m.	Awards Luncheon	Second Floor Grand Ballroom C-G	Sit at the reserved VIP tables for Emerging Leaders! Receive your certificate for graduating the program and take a group photo following the event. Want to bring a guest to celebrate with you? Email Renee!
6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.	Open Networking Time	Meet in the Hilton Hotel Lobby	Meet up with other ELP participants and alumni and spend an informal evening in St. Louis. <i>(More on pg. 6)</i> <i>(ELP participants and alumni exclusive session)</i>

Wednesday, July 29

Time	Event	Location	Details
9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.	Emerging Leaders Roundtable Session	Lobby Level Lindbergh Room	Share your program experiences, insights, and challenges in a supportive and collaborative listening session. <i>(More on pg. 6)</i> <i>(ELP participants exclusive session)</i>

Recommended Session Details

Exhibitor/Poster Breaks

(All Exhibitor/Poster Breaks Monday, July 27, and Tuesday, July 28)

Volunteer at the SWCS Booth or help present the SWCS ELP Poster, “Equipping Tomorrow’s Conservation Workforce: Our Year in the SWCS Emerging Leaders Program,” during the breaks below.

Monday, July 27

- 7:30 a.m. - 8:30 a.m. (Morning Coffee and Light Breakfast)
- 10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. (Morning Break)
- 3:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m. (Afternoon Break)
- 5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. (Exhibitor and Poster Reception)

Tuesday, July 28

- 7:30 a.m. - 8:30 a.m. (Morning Coffee and Light Breakfast)
- 10:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m. (Morning Break)
- 3:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m. (Afternoon Break)



“SWCS Emerging Leaders Exclusive Training and Access to Keynote Speaker”

(Monday, July 27, 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.)

This session is exclusively open to current SWCS Emerging Leaders and alumni. During the first half of this symposia, Ray will dig deep into soil health principles, practical management strategies, and the economic and environmental benefits of regenerative agriculture. The second half of the session will open into dialogue between Ray and the next generation of conservation professionals who will lead the charge on regenerative agriculture. This interactive exchange will allow participants to ask candid questions, explore challenges they are facing in their early careers, and gain insight into how to build trust with farmers while advancing soil health systems at scale.

“Emerging Leaders Lighting Talks” Symposium

(Monday, July 27, 1:30 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.)

In this session, participants from the 2026 class of the SWCS Emerging Leaders Program will present 5-10 minute presentations about their experiences in the program, events, and any additional insights. SWCS staff will moderate the session and there will be a Q&A session following the presentations. Presentations may include a PowerPoint to display relevant visuals. Increase your professional visibility and practice your public speaking by participating! Contact events@swcs.org to get involved in the session.

Open Networking Time

(Tuesday, July 28, 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.)

This is an informal and optional networking session. Use this time to meet up with other ELP participants and alumni. Choose an activity of interest to your group like visiting a nearby restaurant, playing mini golf, or going bowling. Visit the conference webpage to find additional things to do in St. Louis.

Emerging Leaders Roundtable Session

(Wednesday, July 29, 9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.)

Provide SWCS staff with your perspectives on the Emerging Leaders Program and the conservation career field in general. This is your time to let us know how we can best serve you and your careers moving forward. *This session is for current ELP participants only.*

Information for Employers

Thank you for contributing to your employee's professional growth through the Emerging Leader Program! We strongly recommend continuing to invest in your workforce by supporting your employees to attend the 81st SWCS International Annual Conference. Your employees and your organization benefit!

Brand Representation

Sending employees to events allows your organization to showcase its expertise, thought leadership, and commitment to industry advancement. Have your employee represent your organization through an exhibit booth, social media posts, and in sessions. Sign up as an exhibitor or sponsor by June 12.

Recruitment and Retention

Offering opportunities for professional growth and networking can attract top talent to the organization and improve employee retention by boosting morale and motivation.

Is your organization hiring? Utilize this event as a recruitment opportunity. Have your employee bring flyers to be displayed at your booth and/or the Student and Early Career Networking Session.

Competitive Advantage

Stay informed about industry developments and trends. Conferences are the perfect place for market research. Learn what others in the field are doing to make better-informed, strategic decisions for your organization. Stay competitive!

Skill Transfer and Collaboration

Employees bring back knowledge and insights gained from events to share with their colleagues. This promotes collaboration within the organization and with potential external partners.

Expanded Perspectives

Attending an international conference exposes employees to different perspectives and global trends, broadening their worldview and enhancing their ability to work in diverse environments.

Registration Instructions for ELP Participants and Alumni

If you are planning to take advantage of discounts for Emerging Leaders and/or the volunteer discount, please wait to register until instructions are emailed directly to you. For those who are planning to pay for the full member rate, complete your registration following these instructions:

1. Go to <https://registration.socio.events/e/26ac> (registration opens April 15)
2. Input discount coded emailed to you (if applicable)
3. Follow the registration process

All Emerging Leaders and alumni should register before the early bird deadline of **June 16**
Please don't register unless you are fully planning on attending (wait for supervisor approval if needed)

Email events@swcs.org with any questions.