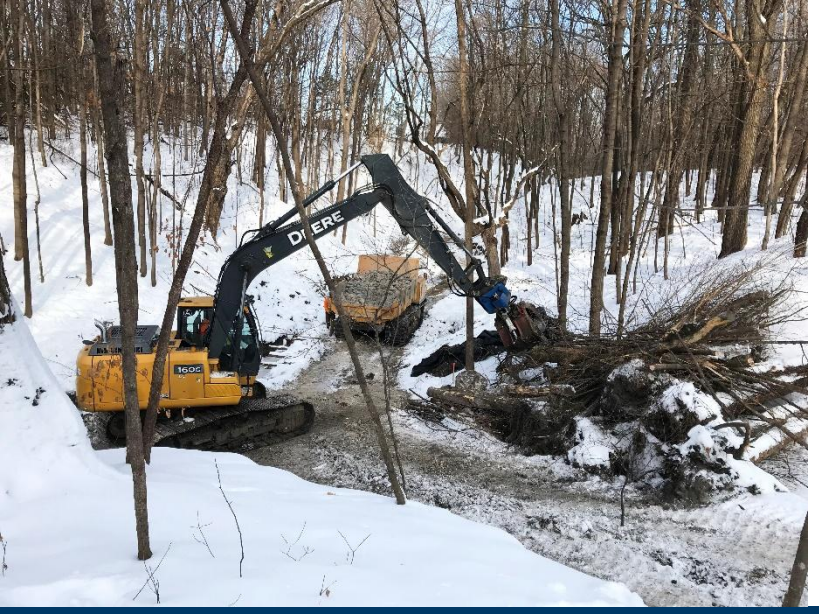





The Value of BWSR Storytelling

Presented by:

Ann Wessel, BWSR Conservation Marketing Coordinator

Ann.Wessel@state.mn.us

BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

Conservation Stories

Conservation stories

MENU

- BWSR Snapshots
- Conservation Stories
- BWSR Story Library
- Featured Plant
- News Releases
- Reports
- Subscribe

Throughout Minnesota, landowners are working with state, federal, and local conservation partners to improve and protect lakes, rivers, wetlands and drinking water sources. These stories highlight the resources and people behind the projects.

More stories are available through BWSR's Story Library where you can search by keyword, county, major watershed basin, publication date, funding source, or publication type.



Clean Water Funds back work tied to 9 removals from impaired waters list

BWSR grants support conservation partners' projects that contribute to water-quality improvements in seven lakes, a river reach and a stream segment.

Full story: Clean Water Funds back work tied to 9 removals from impaired waters list

Keyword Search | Search



Winona County sheep producer boosts productivity with rotational grazing

A Rushford area farmer draws from NRCS assistance and grazing specialists' technical expertise to establish an intensively managed system that improves both animal health and soil health.



Becker County farmers' erosion control benefits Wild Rice River water quality

Becker SWCD and NRCS' Clean Water Fund-backed, EQIP-supported work with producers improves the efficiency of fieldwork while curbing sediment-loading to the Red River.



Fish species signal potential for delisting as Sand Hill River water quality improves

The return of redhorse to a 32-mile-long stretch of the Sand Hill River in Polk County reflects improving trends that could lead to removal from the state's impaired waters list. Water-quality work has involved the Sand Hill River Watershed District, West Polk SWCD, BWSR, the DNR and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



Maple Grove's popular Fish Lake poised for removal from impaired waters list

Three Rivers Park District, the Elm Creek WMC, Fish Lake Area Residents Association and Hennepin County were among the partners in water-quality improvement work backed by Clean Water Funds.



First 7 miles of Whiskey Creek restoration show effectiveness of NRCS-backed work

An NRCS National Water Quality Initiative award, MPCA pilot grant, Outdoor Heritage Funds and BWSR Clean Water Funds support the Wilkin SWCD and Buffalo-Red River Watershed District's work with landowners, which will benefit water quality, water quantity and wildlife habitat.



Sauk River Chain of Lakes water-quality solutions start with livestock producers

NRCS assistance and Clean Water Funds support new manure storage solutions that curb runoff and benefit water quality. Stearns County SWCD and NRCS staff led the $1.9 million endeavor.



Water-quality goals drive collaboration between McLeod SWCD, city of Winsted

The McLeod SWCD's collaboration with the city of Winsted resulted in a constructed wetland that filters stormwater bound for Winsted Lake. Backed by a multipurpose drainage management Clean Water Fund grant, the work builds upon the SWCD's erosion-control projects with farmers upstream.



Duluth's Lincoln Park revamp incorporates stormwater treatment, aids trout...

One element of the $4.2 million revitalization, stormwater work supported by a BWSR Clean Water Fund grant addresses a temperature impairment in Miller Creek, a designated trout stream.



NRCS- Morrison SWCD partnerships focus on forested lands around Camp Ripley

NRCS' $400,000 contribution agreement with Morrison SWCD and its $2.7 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program renewal focus on the Sentinel Landscape, where management can improve habitat and protect the National Guard's mission.



Bois de Sioux Watershed District builds on multi-partner, multi-benefit successes

With projects that combine water quality, flood reduction and wildlife habitat improvements, the watershed district at the headwaters of the Red River gained support from landowners and funding sources alike.



What's next for Stillwater's Lily Lake? Partners consider post-delisting...

Water-quality improvement work didn't stop once Lily Lake was removed from the state's impaired waters list — an effort that took 20 years, involved the Middle St. Croix WMO and a host of partners, and tapped nearly $1 million in Clean Water Funds from BWSR.



Neighboring farmers, neighboring SWCDs drive Pope, Swift county conservation

BWSR Clean Water Funds and NRCS assistance support water-quality work in the East Branch Chippewa River watershed, which spans Pope and Swift counties and eventually flows to the Minnesota River.



In Meeker County, MN CREP outreach brings awareness, voluntary enrollments

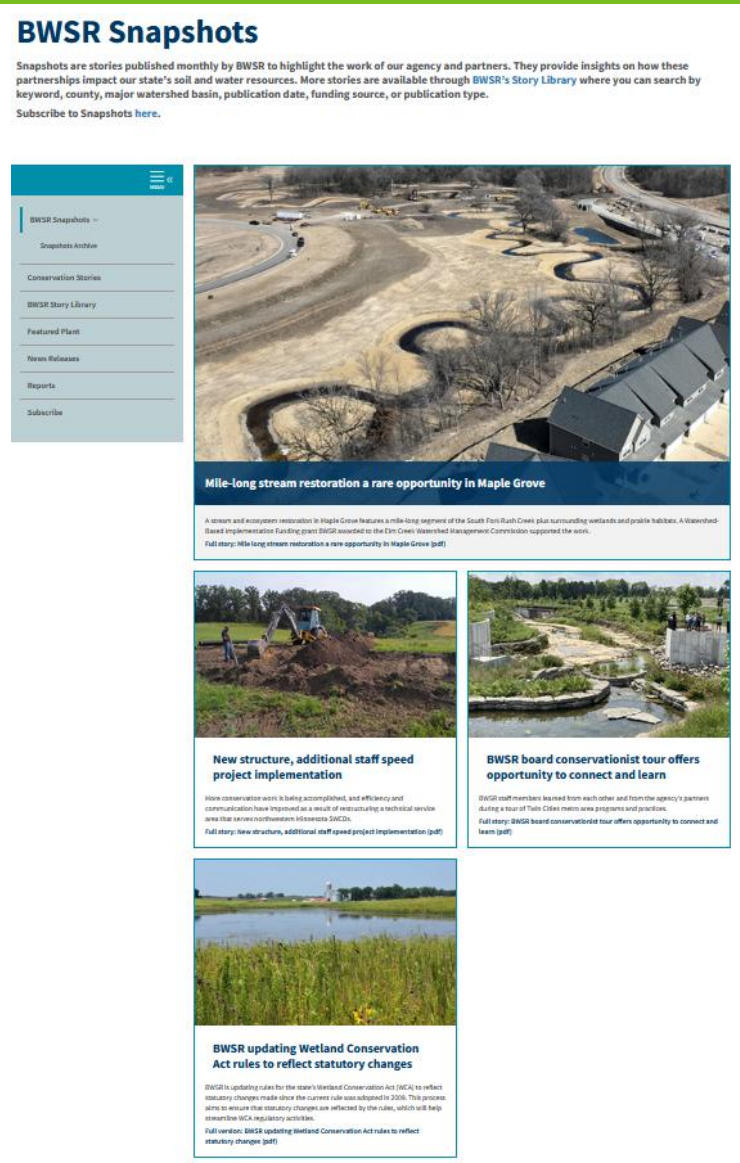
"If we never make an ask, we never bring it up, and people are never going to know that it's an option." — Josh Pommier, Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist



Big Stone SWCD's work with farmers to fix gullies aids Marsh Lake water quality

Big Stone SWCD worked with West Central TSA engineers, landowners on BWSR Clean Water Fund-backed project in Five Mile Creek watershed

Snapshots newsletter



BWSR Snapshots

Snapshots are stories published monthly by BWSR to highlight the work of our agency and partners. They provide insights on how these partnerships impact our state's soil and water resources. More stories are available through BWSR's Story Library where you can search by keyword, county, major watershed basin, publication date, funding source, or publication type.

Subscribe to Snapshots here.

BWSR Snapshots
Snapshots Archive
Conservation Stories
BWSR Story Library
Featured Plant
News Releases
Reports
Subscribe

Mile-long stream restoration a rare opportunity in Maple Grove

A stream and ecosystem restoration in Maple Grove features a mile-long segment of the South Fork Rush Creek plus surrounding wetlands and prairie habitats. A Watershed-Based Implementation Funding grant BWSR awarded to the Elm Creek Watershed Management Commission supported the work.

Full story: Mile long stream restoration a rare opportunity in Maple Grove (pdf)

New structure, additional staff speed project implementation

More conservation work is being accomplished, and efficiency and communication have improved as a result of restructuring a technical service area that serves northwestern Minnesota SWCDs.

Full story: New structure, additional staff speed project implementation (pdf)

BWSR board conservationist tour offers opportunity to connect and learn

BWSR staff members learned from each other and from the agency's partners during a tour of Twin Cities metro area programs and practices.

Full story: BWSR board conservationist tour offers opportunity to connect and learn (pdf)

BWSR updating Wetland Conservation Act rules to reflect statutory changes

BWSR is updating rules for the state's Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) to reflect statutory changes made since the current rule was adopted in 2006. This process aims to ensure that statutory changes are reflected by the rules, which will help streamline WCA regulatory activities.

Full version: BWSR updating Wetland Conservation Act rules to reflect statutory changes (pdf)

- Staff-written monthly newsletter
- 4 full-length articles per edition
- Features the work of BWSR & its partners
- Ideas come from about 35 staff members

www.bwsr.state.mn.us

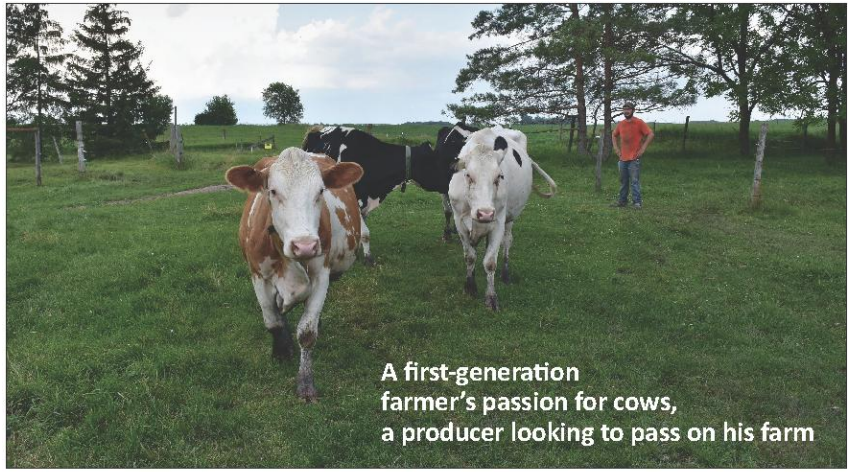
Who’s involved: Sources







How do stories start?



A dairy in transition

BRANDON — A first-generation dairy farmer is getting a start in a more efficient and environmentally sound setup with assistance from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and guidance from the longtime organic farmer whose operation he'll eventually own.

Jack Schouweiler, 21, is phasing into full-time dairy farming as Ben Wagner, 61, transitions into retirement.

A remodeled parlor style barn, new manure storage facility and 59 acres of additional pasture for rotational grazing will make chores less back-breaking, allow the dairy to expand — and protect both groundwater and surface water in the Upper Chippewa River watershed.



Pasture expansion, new manure storage system made possible by Clean Water Funds, NRCS assistance and Douglas SWCD staff help will improve water quality in the Upper Chippewa River watershed as it sets beginning, retiring farmers up for the future

Top: *Jack Schouweiler brings the last of the cows from the pasture to the barn July 8 on Ben Wagner's Douglas County farm.* **Above:** *Schouweiler, 21, is getting into farming as Ben Wagner, 61, prepares to eventually retire. "We disagree, but we've never had an argument," Wagner said of Schouweiler, who started milking for him part time at age 16.* **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

Schouweiler is remodeling the barn at his own expense. Leveraging a combined $247,000 in Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance from NRCS and Clean Water Funds from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources made the manure facility and pasture expansion possible. As a beginning farmer, Schouweiler qualified for higher NRCS payment rates.

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

"Otherwise, we couldn't do this," Wagner said of NRCS and Clean Water Fund assistance. "I couldn't afford to borrow that kind of money, and (Schouweiler) doesn't have the assets to borrow against."



Jack Schouweiler and Ben Wagner will move the milking operation to a remodeled barn on the farm Schouweiler bought from Wagner's retired brother. That new parlor setup — with a new manure storage system at that site and an expansion of rotationally grazed pasture, both made possible with NRCS assistance — will protect groundwater and surface water within the Upper Chippewa River watershed. Those improvements also will make it possible to eventually expand from 38 to 70 cows. The cattle usually stay clean in the pasture but recent heavy rains made spots muddy on July 8.

What Schouweiler does have is a "fire in his belly" for farming, Wagner said, and a talent for working with cattle.

"I'm starting to call him the cow-whisperer. When he works with cattle, they seem to respond to him so easily. He's got cattle sense that you can't teach. He's going to be a better cattleman than I ever was," Wagner said. "He sees calves are sick before I do. ... Heifers, they don't get startled with him."

Schouweiler grew up on a hobby farm 18 miles from Wagner's 38-cow organic dairy, and has milked cows for more than a dozen other farmers. He wanted a farm of his own. Wagner's children had no plans to farm. He was looking for someone to take over.

> **"I want to preserve what I worked for, and he wants to take it to the next level — and that's something unique.**
>
> — Ben Wagner, on building soil health

They met at a 4-H rabbit show.

But Schouweiler was only 14. Wagner wasn't sure what would come of the conversation. Two years later, he got a call. It was Schouweiler, wondering when he could start milking.

"With milking, no matter how fast you go, it still takes the same amount of time. It's just relaxing, the actual milking part of it," Schouweiler said. "You've really got to like cows."

On June 1, 2020, Schouweiler became the owner of the dairy herd.

It's one milestone among many in two years of intensive planning. Schouweiler plans to rent — and eventually buy — Wagner's machinery and land, as cash-flow allows. Meanwhile, Schouweiler is learning about fieldwork and crops from Wagner. Together, they run about 440 acres of cropland and pasture.

Wagner said he could have sold to farmers who would







Left: *Jack Schouweiler shovels corn silage before milking July 8.* **Middle:** *Ben Wagner and Schouweiler usually take turns milking. While he becomes established, Schouweiler also milks at another dairy farm. He said working on different dairy farms since he was a teenager gave him a good look at how each operates differently.* **Right:** *Among the changes since Schouweiler started working with Wagner: The cows now have names in addition to numbers.*

HOW IT STARTED: BWSR staff idea, based on the watershed planner's report on an SWCD-BWSR-NRCS collaboration. SWCD staff contacted the farmers. The level of trust they had working with those producers opened the door.

WHO WAS INTERVIEWED:
First-generation farmer,
retiring organic dairy farmer,
NRCS grazing specialist,
SWCD coordinator,
Chippewa River watershed
conservation planner

Who's mentioned?

PARTNERS, MENTIONS:

NRCS-BWSR-SWCD Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative, NRCS EQIP assistance, BWSR Clean Water Fund grant, Douglas SWCD, Upper Chippewa River watershed, Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, Alexandria Technical and Community College, Ridgewater College, Minnesota Department of Health, 4-H



Top: *On Ben Wagner's Douglas County farm, the cows graze a different 1.5- to 2-acre paddock every day. NRCS grazing lands specialist Jeff Duchene said leaving 4 to 6 inches of growth results in faster regrowth.* **Bottom:** *The 130-mile-long Chippewa River runs through Pope County.*

have absorbed his land into the thousands of acres they already run. But he'd improved soil health over the years, and didn't want to see those benefits disappear.

"I want to preserve what I worked for, and he wants to take it to the next level — and that's something unique," Wagner said.

Together, Schouweiler and Wagner completed a program through the nonprofit Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship, and a farm business management program through Alexandria Technical and Community College. Schouweiler earned a two-year dairy management degree from Willmar's Ridgewater College in May 2019 — the one condition his mother placed on supporting his decision to farm.

"I talk to a lot of older farmers and they (say), 'Well, I write it up on a sticky note," Schouweiler said of tracking business expenses. While a lot of his figuring starts on paper towels, "It's nice to have those numbers in perspective."

Ian Olson, the Chippewa River watershed conservation planner based at Douglas Soil & Water Conservation District, has worked with Schouweiler and Wagner on plans tied to Schouweiler's NRCS applications. Olson was hired as part of BWSR and NRCS' collaborative Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative.

> **"By either eliminating existing pits that aren't in compliance, or (reconstructing) those that are still being used, the groundwater resources in that area will be better protected."**
> —Jerry Haggenmiller, Douglas SWCD coordinator





Building a new manure storage system to replace a decommissioned manure pit allowed Schouweiler to use the milking barn on the farm he bought from Wagner's retired brother, Robert, a mile down the road. When the cows move out of Wagner's tie-stall barn — a setup that's harder on the back — Wagner will continue to rotationally graze heifers on his farm.

The new, 400,000-gallon lagoon at the remodeled barn site has the capacity to hold 12 months' manure.

Clean Water Funds — part of a $356,960 grant Douglas SWCD received in 2019 to improve drinking water quality by upgrading, replacing or closing out-of-compliance manure pits — covered 75% of the project costs, which included a 60-by-100-foot cement stacking slab with 4-foot-high walls, and fenced cattle walkways leading to the pasture.

The area was among those identified through a 2017 Clean Water Fund grant, which led to work in Millerville Township and parts of Ida and Leaf Valley townships.

Douglas SWCD initially targeted the area based on Minnesota Department of Health nitrate testing of 1,864 wells in nine Douglas County townships. On average, 1.7% of the wells tested exceeded the state's allowable limits. MDH has linked nitrate to blue baby syndrome.

"By either eliminating existing pits that aren't in compliance, or (reconstructing) those that are still being used, the groundwater resources in that area will be better protected," said Jerry Haggenmiller, Douglas SWCD coordinator. "As a secondary bonus, any runoff into surface waters will be corrected by these ag waste system (upgrades)."

The Upper Chippewa River watershed in Douglas County consists of dairy farms, cropland, wetlands and lakes set amid rolling hills. Land-use and topography make the area more vulnerable to nitrate pollution.

The 130-mile-long river flows from Otter Tail County to the Minnesota River at Montevideo. Its watershed encompasses 2,080 square miles in parts of Otter Tail, Douglas, Grant, Pope, Stevens, Swift, Kandiyohi, Chippewa and Stearns count. Among the concerns within the watershed are sediment, phosphorus, nitrogen and bacteria.

"Whatever protection we can do here is going to benefit everybody all the way down," Haggenmiller said.

Converting marginal cropland to pasture is one protection that benefits water quality.

NRCS grazing lands specialist Jeff Duchene writes 70 to 100 grazing plans a year for producers within 20-some northwestern Minnesota counties. Over the past 10 years, he said rotational grazing has caught on across the region.

"As you get more people implementing better grazing management, it seems like you just get more interest," Duchene said. "Then I think the farming environment has changed, where people see the value of doing things differently."

As land values increased, Duchene said producers turned to pasture management as a way to raise more animals on existing acreage. Commodity prices were another factor.

Duchene initially worked with Wagner to establish his rotationally grazed pasture. His most recent 50-acre enrollment — bordering a wetland, with steep slopes that made it difficult to farm — grew out of a discussion during a field day Wagner hosted. Schouweiler enrolled 9 acres of rented land.

"Probably the biggest challenge on Ben's site was the soil wetness. He's got a couple wetlands near the farm site that the pasture goes around. He had been trying to farm some of those soils. It was poorly drained, and marginal cropland," Duchene said. "With well-managed grazing, you can really minimize your impact as far as water quality and reduced soil erosion."

Grasses will grow where crops were spotty. EQIP assistance will offset expenses tied to seeding, extending water lines and fencing.

By buffering the wetlands, the pasture will decrease the potential for runoff. While that land may be too wet for grazing part of the year, Duchene said it will serve as drought insurance — remaining productive longer, even if it doesn't rain for a few weeks. The site will balance some of the drier upland pasture on Schouweiler's rented farm.

The new setup plus more pasture will make it possible for Schouweiler and Wagner to milk up to 70 cows.

"I feel so blessed that this has happened. I don't know how I'd be running the farm without his help," Wagner said.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender. Natural Resources Conservation Service website: www.nrcs.usda.gov.

USDA

BWSR

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' mission is to improve and protect the state's water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. Website: www.bwsr.state.mn.us.

Details: Grant, WCPI & Grazing

UPPER CHIPPEWA GRANT: Douglas SWCD's $356,960 Clean Water Fund grant from BWSR will protect groundwater and improve water quality in the Upper Chippewa River watershed by upgrading, replacing or closing existing damaged or unpermitted manure storage areas; and by addressing feedlot runoff. In addition to Jack Schouweiler's project, four manure pits have been closed; two more are set to close this year. Eligible projects included feedlot runoff control structures, feedlot fencing and stacking slab construction. The 10 projects would reduce nitrogen by an estimated 421 pounds and phosphorus by an estimated 122 pounds a year. Grant funds can cover up to 75% of a project's cost.

WATERSHED CONSERVATION PLANNING INITIATIVE: Ian Olson is one of seven conservation planners working in watersheds across Minnesota as part of an NRCS-BWSR-SWCD collaboration. WCPI was designed to help producers gain a comprehensive view of their land and the resource concerns they might have. Planners work with producers to develop a whole-farm assessment. Implementation is voluntary. Plans are meant to increase landowners' readiness to implement conservation practice when the opportunity arises. https://bwsr.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/2019-06/Snapshots_Story_1_June_2019_WCPI_NRCS_BWSR.pdf



Olson

COVER CROPS & GRAZING: Jeff Duchene, NRCS' grazing lands specialist covering northwestern Minnesota, considers cover crops when he works with producers to get more grazing days out of their operation. Improved pasture management means improved land productivity — and more profitability. "A lot of producers get in the mind-set that your pasture is pasture and your cropland is cropland," Duchene said. Incorporating cover crops can increase grazing days — by grazing crop residue, or by growing cover crops to be grazed. "I think once you start looking at both your perennial pasture resources and any cropland or hay land you may have access to, you can develop a more well-rounded system. You just get a lot of options."



Duchene

In Minnesota, NRCS grazing plans call for at least five months of grazing. "I think seven months could be a very feasible goal for a lot of operations," Duchene said. Even a couple of weeks more grazing could be more economical. One factor in developing a grazing plan is how much time the producer can spend on management. Some use drones and phone apps to help with livestock and pasture management.

Where do stories land?



WHERE IT LANDED: The Farmer magazine cover story, and among its top 12 stories of the year; The Country Today; Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship newsletter; local newspaper; regional news radio station's website; BWSR website, Snapshots newsletter, blog, social media, YouTube channel; shared with all partners, sources, and organizations mentioned.

Where else do they land?

- Lake associations
- Watershed districts
- Township, county or city associations
- Conservation organizations, EG: Pheasants Forever
- Engineering firms
- Tag contractors, co-ops



This article reprinted with permission from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)

Sauk River Chain of Lakes water-quality solutions start with livestock producers

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

The $392,500 Clean Water Fund grant BWSR awarded to the Stearns County SWCD in 2017 was designed to address Sauk River and Sauk River Chain of Lakes nutrient impairments via feedlot fixes.

PAYNESVILLE — Eleven Stearns County livestock producers within the Sauk River watershed have installed manure storage solutions and adopted management plans that curb runoff and benefit water quality in the nutrient-impaired Sauk River Chain of Lakes.

What started with a $392,500 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources targeting five feedlots most susceptible to runoff grew to a $1.9 million endeavor that leveraged nearly $1.5 million in Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

> **"Producers are trying to do the right thing out here environmentally, to protect water quality."**
>
> — Mike Hemmann, NRCS civil engineering technician

Across those 11 farms, Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District and NRCS staff worked with producers to install eight stacking slabs and seven manure storage basins, and to implement nutrient management plans affecting 1,664 acres.

"You're reducing nutrients, runoff from fields," said Stearns County SWCD

Top: *Rolling topography and the region's high water table made the Stearns County feedlots targeted for Clean Water Fund and NRCS-supported improvements more susceptible to runoff. The Stearns County SWCD-led effort within the Sauk River watershed benefits the Sauk River,* **bottom, center,** *and the Sauk River Chain of Lakes.*

Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Shirley and Kevin Klaphake, **left,** *raise chickens, hogs and cattle on 320 acres in Spring Hill Township. In September 2020, they paused outside a poultry barn a short distance from the covered stacking slab that gave them 12 months of manure storage space. David J. Meyer,* **right,** *seen in September 2020 in a soybean field near a recently built stacking slab, added poultry to the family's 1,000-acre crop and cattle farm in 2015.*

Left, from left: *Shirley and Kevin Klaphake told Mike Hemmann, a Stearns County-based NRCS civil engineering technician, and Stearns County SWCD Project Management Supervisor Nathan Hylla how a newly constructed, roofed stacking slab built to store 12 months of poultry litter fit into their operation.* **Right:** *Meyer, seen here shortly after a 40-by-100-foot covered stacking slab was constructed near the poultry barn on his Lake Henry Township farm, said having 12 months' storage made it possible to incorporate that nitrogen source in the fall.*

Project Management Supervisor Nathan Hylla, who has since left the SWCD to start his own business.

Hylla

> **"I always had to watch when it was going to rain, if there was a snowstorm coming. Now I can come out of the barn and into this building and place the manure in here without having to handle it three times."**
>
> — David J. Meyer, crop and livestock producer

"Producers get long-term storage for their manure — whether it be poultry, beef or dairy — and then they utilize those nutrients when they can use them, and then incorporate them so they're not running off into our streams, lakes and rivers."

The region's high water table and rolling topography made the targeted feedlots more susceptible to runoff.

Clean Water Funds supported the technical assistance SWCD engineers made available to farmers. At four of the 11 sites, the state grant provided cost-share for construction. Seven sites tapped only EQIP assistance to offset construction costs.

"These Clean Water funded projects just add a lot of flexibility," said Stearns County SWCD Conservation Planning Team Manager Mark Lefebvre, referring to a list of potential projects that await funding, and to competition for EQIP assistance. "Even if they would be funded in EQIP, with the increased cost of some of these projects, some of these farmers aren't going to go through with it unless they get supplemental funding."

In September 2020, Hylla and Mike Hemmann, a Stearns County-based NRCS civil engineering technician who has since moved to NRCS' Glencoe office, visited two farms where stacking slab construction had just finished. At both sites — the Kevin and Shirley Klaphake farm, and the David J. and JoAnn Meyer farm — the slabs were built to store poultry manure.

"I wanted to be environmental-safe. Instead of putting our manure on the ground all the time and stacking it for a whole year, I wanted to have a stacking slab so water doesn't leach into the ground," said Kevin Klaphake. "We probably wouldn't have been able to do this project without the assistance."

VIDEO: "Stearns County Feedlot Fixes," featuring a visit to the Klaphake farm in September 2020

With his wife, Shirley, and father, Eldred, Klaphake raises chickens, hogs and cattle on 320 acres in Spring Hill Township. Adding poultry in 1990 and then hogs 10 years later allowed Klaphake to sell the 35-cow dairy herd but stay on the family farm. The Klaphakes typically raise six batches of 42,000 chickens a year.

The 56-by-96-foot covered stacking slab near the poultry barns holds 12 months' storage. Previously, poultry manure was stored on the ground until fall when it could be spread on the fields. Nearly three years after construction finished, Klaphake reflected on another benefit:

"When you clean the barn out, you don't have to worry about mud," Klaphake said in July 2023. "It's worked out very good. In the fall, too, when you haul it away, you're always on dry cement. You're not outside if it rains or something, trying to load in the mud."

A couple of miles down the road in Lake Henry Township, David J. and JoAnn Meyer added poultry to their 1,000-acre crop and cattle farm in 2015.

"We were looking to diversify a little bit to help pay our medical insurance. That was what we could do to have a steady monthly income," David J. Meyer said.

continued next page

Who receives Snapshots?

2,692 subscribers:

- BWSR Board
- BWSR staff
- Partners including SWCD NRCS, MASWCD, MACDE
- General public (anyone can subscribe)

bwsr.state.mn.us/bwsr-snapshots



BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

2024 July Snapshots
Subscribe to Snapshots

Hands-on training equips NRCS, SWCD staff to work with farmers

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

Through its Technical Training and Certification Program, BWSR provided funding, and assisted with promotion and logistics. TTCP is funded equally by NRCS and by state Clean Water Funds.

STAPLES — Cultivating Career Success: On-Farm Communications Training, a hands-on introduction to agricultural practices and technology, drew conservation professionals from throughout the state to Central Lakes College's (CLC) Ag and Energy Center farm fields in early May.

From the seat of a tractor during individual ride-alongs, they saw high-speed tillage equipment in action in one field, and a corn planter in a second field. Throughout the day, they inspected the latest in precision planting equipment and technology, tracked real-time field progress and stats via GPS, deciphered a soil test report, and considered economic factors and real-life scenarios.

Forty-seven employees from county soil and water conservation districts and federal Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offices attended one of the identical trainings May 8 and 9. The three-part series aligns with tillage and

Top to bottom: *From left: Ag technician Taylor Thompson explained the monitoring data available to farmers during a May 9 On-Farm Communications Training session at Central Lakes College's Ag and Energy Center in Staples as Fillmore County-based NRCS soil conservationists Stacy Every and Jess Stevens and Cottonwood SWCD program technician Breanna Wagner looked on. Lily Kingsley of Hennepin County watched high-speed disk monitors from the driver's seat. Isanti SWCD conservation technician Matthew Remer watched real-time corn planting data.*
Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Right: *Ride-alongs are part of what make the On-Farm Communications trainings unique. The May sessions' focus included tillage. The remaining sessions are in July and October.*

www.bwsr.state.mn.us



Stevens rode along with Todd Pollema, farm manager at Central Lakes College's Ag and Energy Center, as he planted corn May 9 at the college in Staples.

planting; irrigation, cover crops and livestock (July 18 and 19); and harvest equipment, technology and soil conditions (Oct. 16 and 17).

Led by AgCentric staff and developed by CLC and NRCS, Cultivating Career Success: On-Farm Communications Training helps to prepare those new to agriculture or new to their district to work with farmers.

"It's about communicating with the farmer. I call it 'farmer-speak,' but really we're just trying to scratch the surface of how to talk with farmers, understand some of what they're going through, as well as some of the equipment they're using," said Keith Olander, director of AgCentric.

CLC's Ag and Energy Center runs a 2,000-acre farm. The behind-the-wheel experience makes this training unique. Conservation workers listed that experience, plus insights into what influences farmers' decision-making, among the top take-aways.

"I was really hoping to come out here today and get some hands-on activities with agriculture and learn what goes through the farmer's head when we're talking to them about conservation practices ... the things that they're thinking about that we wouldn't necessarily think about," said Matthew Remer, Isanti Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) conservation technician. "Today is a really good chance to take a look at that and see what we can come up with as far as the best way to help these landowners, because they're the ones adopting these practices."

"The farmer at their heart, they are not in it for this year. They are in it for a lifetime. When we approach the farmer, we've got to understand that they're thinking not just, 'How do I pay the bills today?' but 'How's this land going to be good for me and my next generation going forward?'"

— excerpt from a conversation with Keith Olander, director of AgCentric

NRCS District Conservationist Jess Stevens moved to Fillmore County after working for NRCS in Iowa.

"I learned a lot about different tillage implements, different planter setups, nutrients applied on fields and best ways to manage those," Stevens said after the training. "I think it'll help a lot with communication with farmers. ... It's good to speak their language and try to relate to them as much as possible when working with them."

Breanna Wagner joined the Cottonwood SWCD staff two years ago as a program technician. She grew up on a farm, but said she wanted to learn more about how to initiate conversations about trying new practices such as strip-till or cover crops. While she'd driven a tractor before, it was nothing like the equipment used on the Ag and Energy Center farm.

"This was really fun," Wagner said after her turn on the tractor pulling the high-speed disk. "They have the auto-steering. You line it up and it goes for you, essentially. You don't have to touch the steering wheel. This is really incredible technology."

Stacy Every, a Fillmore County-based NRCS soil conservationist, grew up on a Fillmore County livestock and crop farm.

"I am brand-new to the NRCS, so I am looking to learn more about the farming practices that I can help local farmers with," Every said as the May 9 training began. "I think it'll give me more information to work with farmers with, and a little bit more knowledge base to cover some of the things that they're new to, and let them know how it'll help them out."

A change in demographics — most NRCS and SWCD employees no longer come from a farming background — drove demand for the training.

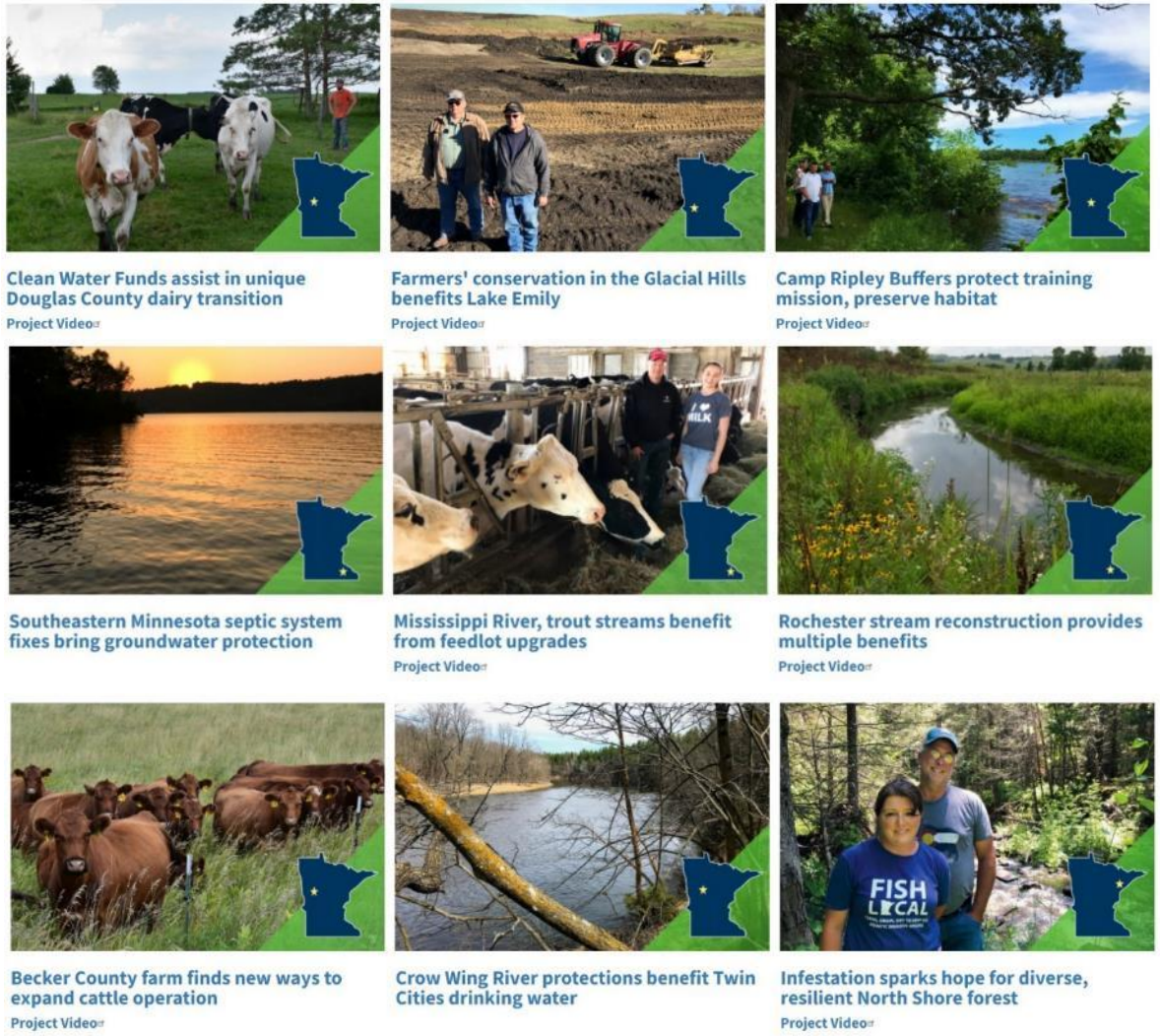
"We have people entering the agencies — either soil and water districts or NRCS — that have very limited (ag) background, often in environmental science," Olander said. "That ability to have common knowledge and base talking points (may not) always be brought forth in their traditional education setting. We're trying to complement that in ... a customized training."

Previously, the training was offered to NRCS staff. This year, a collaboration among CLC, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts opened it to SWCDs.

www.bwsr.state.mn.us

How BWSR storytelling informs lawmakers

We track Snapshots and Conservation Stories by legislative district, so BWSR legislative staff can provide lawmakers with examples of BWSR projects in their home districts, localizing the importance of our work.



YouTube: Storytelling for short attention spans



On-Farm Communications

160 views • 1 month ago



Watershed-Based Implementation Funding: Root River SWCD

322 views • 6 months ago



Watershed-Based Implementation Funding: Wright SWCD

356 views • 6 months ago



Watershed-Based Implementation Funding: Cook SWCD

90 views • 6 months ago



Conservation on the Sand Hill River

229 views • 7 months ago



Rotational Grazing in Winona County

433 views • 7 months ago



McLeod SWCD Water-quality Collaboration

90 views • 9 months ago



Conservation Collaboration

117 views • 10 months ago

youtube.com@MNBWSR

Thank you!



Ann.Wessel@state.mn.us