

# WATER & SOIL CONSERVATION 2005

“Minnesotans care deeply about the quality of their drinking water and the quality and the future of their lakes, streams, and rivers,” said Governor Tim Pawlenty, in outlining his clean water vision in 2003. Protecting the state’s water resources is critical to Minnesota’s exceptional quality of life, he said.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, working in partnership with local units of government, plays a key role in the Governor’s clean water vision, especially on the state’s private working lands. BWSR believes that effective soil and water conservation on these lands is best accomplished through state-local-federal partnerships.

BWSR was formed in 1987 as a result of government reform. Three boards were condensed to one charged with directing financial resources to where they could do the most good for the state’s water and soil conservation efforts. Although today BWSR is a small agency in terms of employees, its impact is felt far and wide in Minnesota. BWSR helps the state obtain its water and soil resources goals by empowering a broad network of local units of government that use local authorities and finances, in conjunction with state programs and priorities, to address local priorities.

It’s easy to find examples of Minnesota’s commitment to conservation on private working lands across the state. That commitment must not waiver if we want to realize the Governor’s clean water vision. Since 78 percent of the state’s

land is held in private ownership, the agency’s work on private working lands is critical for the state’s efforts to improve water quality, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, and protect wetlands.

BWSR’s mission is to protect and enhance our irreplaceable soil and water resources through implementation of the state’s soil and water conservation policy, comprehensive local water management, and the Wetland Conservation Act. BWSR provides financial, technical, and administrative assistance for local implementation of soil and water conservation programs to help get conservation projects on the ground, ensure local planning for water management, and protect wetlands. BWSR serves as the administrative agency for the state’s soil and water conservation districts, watershed districts, metropolitan water management organizations, county water management, and local units of government that implement WCA.

## BWSR PROGRAMS

**State Cost-Share.** BWSR provides base grants to soil and

**2002 State Cost-Share Pollution Reduction Estimates**

- Soil Loss: 64,000 tons/yr.
- Sediment: 33,000 tons/yr.
- Phosphorus: 70,000 lbs./yr.

water conservation districts so SWCDs can help landowners offset the costs of installing conservation practices that protect water quality and control erosion. Landowners are required to

match a percentage of the total project cost, using their own funds in combination with other state, federal, or local sources. A strength of this program is realized by leveraging multiple sources of funding to put conservation on the ground. Without that, landowners often could not afford to implement critical conservation practices. SWCDs set local priorities for projects in conjunction with the state’s overall priorities set through BWSR.

**Wetland Protection.** Minnesota’s stewardship of its wetland resources is largely accomplished by more than 350 units of local government that implement the Wetland Conservation Act. The purpose of WCA is to achieve a no net loss in the quantity, quality, and biological diversity of Minnesota’s existing wetlands. As part of its responsibilities to implement WCA, BWSR provides a range of assistance — through technical evaluation panels, financial assistance with grants, dispute resolution, and coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Department of Agriculture —

PHOTO: NRCS



Since 78 percent of the state’s land is in private ownership, BWSR’s private working-lands programs are critical for improving water quality and enhancing fish and wildlife habitat.

to ensure that decisions about wetland protection are made with local input, sound science, and due process.

In addition, BWSR works directly with individual landowners through the Minnesota Wetland Banking Program. This allows landowners a convenient option of purchasing wetland credits resulting from previously restored or created wetlands. BWSR has led complex, diverse wetland restorations on large parcels of land to help create credits needed to replace wetlands lost through safety-related repair and rehabilitation of existing public roads, as required by state statute.

Another component of this program is BWSR's interagency coordination of local comprehensive wetland protection and management plans. These plans, developed and carried out by local governments, provide a greater degree of protection for high priority wetlands, and at the same time, provide greater flexibility by acknowledging the types, character, and functions of wetlands in a particular area.

**Conservation Easements.** BWSR's flagship easement

**CREP I**

- 2.3:1 federal leverage
- \$81 million state:  
\$164 million federal
- 100,000-acre goal achieved

**CREP II**

- 4:1 federal leverage
- \$50.7 million state:  
\$200 million federal
- 120,000-acre goal

program, Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve, continues to be a strong force in Minnesota's soil and water conservation efforts. RIM increases public and private investment in private lands to improve water quality and enhance fish and wildlife habitat and flood storage. These

private-land conservation activities, administered in partnership with SWCDs, focus on enrolling wetland restorations and highly erodible, riparian, and sensitive groundwater lands into conservation easements.

Because Minnesota has the RIM Reserve program, BWSR can leverage money from the federal government through the USDA to step up the state's work in securing conservation easements. That's done by combining RIM Reserve with the federal Conservation Reserve Program, which forms the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. CREP I recently focused on the Minnesota River Basin and resulted in 100,000 acres of easements targeted to frequently flooded and riparian cropland and wetland restorations. BWSR estimates the pollution reduction benefits from CREP I as follows: 379,000 tons a year soil loss reduction; 164,000 tons a year sediment reduction; and 222,000 pounds a year phosphorus reduction.

A second generation CREP, which will target three regions of the state and has a 120,000-acre goal, is on the horizon. That effort requires a \$50.7 million state investment, which will leverage \$200 million from the federal government.

In addition, Minnesota is the second state to participate in the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program, which will accelerate the state's wetland restoration efforts. Minnesota's WREP is a three-year, \$16.2 million plan. Under the agreement, USDA will provide \$2.8 million in 2004, and commits to a total of \$15 million over three years. The state will provide \$1.2 million in RIM funding, allocated over three years.

**State Soils Office.** BWSR collaborates with the University of Minnesota's Department of Soil, Water, and Climate on this effort. The office, which also works closely with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, has three main areas of focus. The first is to increase the usefulness of current soils data. Work involved in this area helps ensure that current data is digitally correct and technically reliable. Another area involves managing a project to update aging soil surveys in the state. The Soils Office also offers technical support and training to local governments.

**Engineering and Technical Services.** Among the services in this arena, BWSR gives expert input into federal and state agricultural and non-point source pollution policy discussions and rules and regulations development. The focus is on impacts to private landowners and local governments. The agency also supports local units of government in the defense of permit decisions related to WCA and develops standards for soil conservation engineering practices. Design and engineering services are provided for wetland projects restored through RIM/CREP and the Minnesota Wetland Banking Program.



*BWSR partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other conservation groups and agencies on the Straight River Marsh restoration, located in southern Steele County.*



*Design and engineering services are provided for wetlands restored through RIM/CREP and the Minnesota Wetland Banking Program.*

**Local Water Management.** In the late 1970s, the Minnesota Legislature decided that local governments, working with the state, should play a principal role in achieving the state’s surface water and groundwater management goals and objectives. That resulted in the Legislature adopting water planning authorities, including the Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act (authorized in 1982), Comprehensive Local Water Planning (1985), and Metropolitan County Groundwater Planning (1987). BWSR was given oversight responsibilities to ensure that local water plans are prepared and coordinated with existing local and state efforts and that plans are implemented effectively.

In 2003, BWSR worked with the Legislature to shift the focus of the county local water management program. The process now focuses on priority concerns, defined goals and objectives, and measurable outcomes. The new process means a streamlined method for counties to update their plans and greater accountability for state agencies and local governments.

To assist counties in carrying out priority projects and programs

- 2002 Local Water Management Grants**
- Education: 650 projects
  - Inventories: 71 projects
  - Monitoring: 449 projects

in their plans, BWSR provides financial assistance to them through the Natural

Resources Block Grant. Additional funding is available to counties, watershed districts, and watershed management organizations in the form of challenge grants, provided through the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.

**BWSR’S CONSERVATION PARTNERS**

**Soil and Water Conservation Districts.** Soil and water conservation districts are the grassroots of Minnesota’s conservation delivery system. SWCDs work primarily one-on-one with private landowners, aiming to connect them with the financial and technical resources they need to put conservation practices on the ground. Because of a limited amount of money available for federal agencies to implement conservation provisions of the Farm Bill, BWSR, in partnership with SWCDs, could help fill the gap and get more conservation on the ground. BWSR is working on a legislative initiative in 2005 that would provide SWCDs with greater technical assistance.

**Watershed Districts and Watershed Management Organizations.** Watershed districts, organized on hydrologic boundaries, provide a framework to address water management issues that transcend political boundaries. Their projects and activities include flood control structures; public drainage systems; lake level controls; septic system improvements; and construction of storm water treatment ponds and sediment basins. Watershed management organizations, based on hydrologic boundaries, are found in the metropolitan area. WMOs, however, are mandatory and deal with surface water, where watershed districts deal with both surface water and groundwater.

**Counties.** Minnesota’s counties play a crucial role in developing and implementing local water plans. As a general-purpose unit of government, counties, with their planning and land-use authorities, are uniquely positioned to link many land-use decisions with local goals for surface and groundwater protection and management.

**Joint Powers Boards.** BWSR works with a number of joint powers boards that address regional water and soil resource management concerns.

**Federal Government.** BWSR links with several federal agencies on a variety of conservation programs and issues. For instance, the agency works with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency on implementing the conservation provisions of the federal Farm Bill. Efforts to optimize Farm Bill programs bring federal money into Minnesota for private lands conservation.

BWSR partners with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency on wetland regulations. These agencies continue to examine ways to achieve regulatory simplification and still achieve mutual goals of no net loss of wetlands. BWSR also restores wetlands in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



**BWSR BOARD MEMBERSHIP**

The board consists of 17 members representing local government entities (three from soil and water conservation districts, three from counties, and three from watershed districts or watershed management organizations), state agencies (University of Minnesota Extension, Department of Natural Resources, Pollution Control Agency, Department of Health, and the Department of Agriculture), and citizens (three). This unique business model of diverse interests and organizations is well suited to address the complex water and soil management policies and issues for Minnesota. The board meets nine times a year. Board members are appointed by the governor to four-year terms.

**BWSR STAFF**

The agency has eight field offices, with locations in St. Paul, Rochester, Marshall, New Ulm, Brainerd, Bemidji, Fergus Falls, and Duluth. The St. Paul field office is co-located with the central office. This model means that agency staff members, who are experts on regional issues and concerns, have access to a network of colleagues across the state. Field staff members are the first points of contact for local governments.

**TRACKING BENEFITS**

Accountability and reporting measures are built into BWSR's grant programs. Through its web-based reporting system called eLINK, BWSR can monitor dollars spent on conservation and resource management programs and estimates for soil loss reduction, sediment reduction, and phosphorus reduction. Local governments use eLINK to perform business functions as well. Examples to the right show two ways data can be presented.

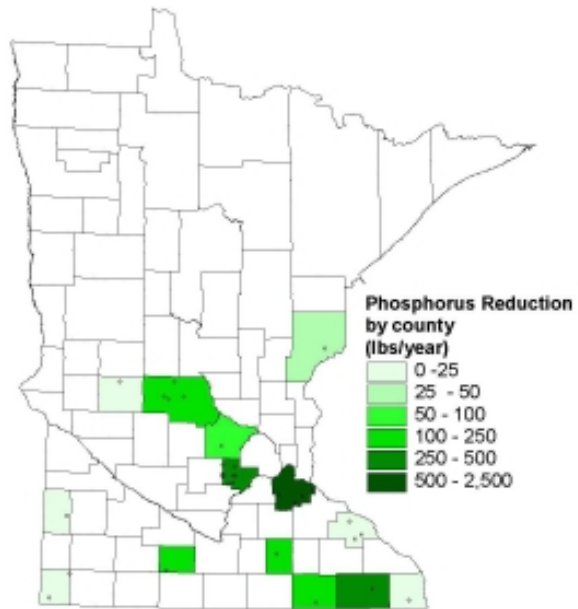


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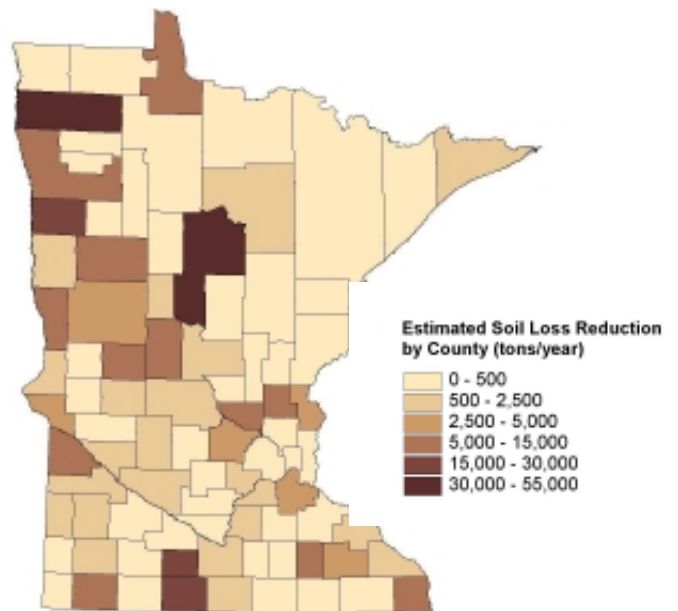
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**2002 FEEDLOT WATER QUALITY MANAGEMENT COST-SHARE GRANT PROJECTS**



32 projects ■ Phosphorous reduction estimate: 4,066 lbs./yr.

**2002 LAND AND WATER TREATMENT PROJECTS**



4,064 projects ■ Soil loss reduction estimate: 301,000 tons/yr.;  
 sediment reduction estimate: 94,000 tons/yr.;  
 phosphorous reduction estimate: 199,000 lbs./yr. ■  
 Total cost of projects: \$17,564,000

Occupier: \$4,928,000	LGU: \$1,369,000
State grants: \$4,609,000	Federal: \$3,585,000
State loans: \$2,790,000	Other: \$282,000