

Blue Earth SWCD targets impaired river



With an accelerated implementation grant from BWSR, Blue Earth County SWCD identified 100-plus potential projects that could reduce sediment-loading to the Le Sueur River

Blue Earth County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff used a \$60,000 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to pinpoint the largest sources of sediment entering the impaired Le Sueur River, a Minnesota River tributary.

Work focused on the County Ditch 86 and Madison Lake watersheds. The BWSR grant allowed SWCD staff

to identify more than 100 potential projects within the two watersheds: 21 within the County Ditch 86 watershed; 89 in the Madison Lake watershed. Recommended project types include grassed waterways, alternative side inlets, and water and sediment control basins.

“Every project makes a difference, but we’re picking projects that will make change. That’s why this was so rewarding — we wanted to make

The Le Sueur River flows 111 miles through portions of Freeborn, Waseca and Blue Earth counties. The river was added to Minnesota’s impaired waters list in 2015 due to turbidity, low dissolved oxygen and excess nutrients.

Photo Credit: Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

incremental changes that visually show progress,” said Jerad Bach, Blue Earth County SWCD manager.

The accelerated implementation grant, which was awarded in 2017, reshaped the SWCD’s overall approach

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— Jerad Bach, Blue Earth County SWCD manager

to prioritizing projects, according to Bach. Blue Earth County SWCD contributed \$15,000 in matching funds. Bach said the grant aims to prepare for implementation as federal, state and local funding becomes available.

A 2015 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (WRAPS) report on the Le Sueur River identified the Beauford Ditch and Madison Lake watersheds as the river’s highest sources of nutrient-loading. The Le Sueur River is on the state’s list of impaired waters.

“We had an idea that there were issues that needed to be addressed there, and when MPCA came out with the WRAPS report, we took an interest in it,” Bach said.

Blue Earth County SWCD staff began by testing water samples to see how their results compared to the MPCA WRAPS report.

“Once we ran the water samples and confirmed the data from MPCA was correct, we started using PTMApp tools to identify where the issues were coming from. That’s how we came up with potential project locations,” Bach said. PTMApp is a desktop and web-based application used by conservation professionals to identify practices best suited for a specific project site.

Monitoring and verifying MPCA data began in 2018. Once potential project sites were identified, the SWCD in 2019 began contacting landowners within the high-priority areas and making them aware of available programs and funding. Final grant details were completed in 2020. Grant work was conducted primarily by Blue Earth County SWCD, with some mapping assistance provided by Blue Earth County GIS Services.

Bach said many landowners were aware of issues

on their properties but were seeking funding opportunities that could help with project implementation. SWCD staff presented information about possible projects at local drainage authority meetings and during site visits.

“(Drainage authority meetings) really opened the door to those conversations,” Bach said. “It created a nice, open environment for people to get to know us.”

Bach said he intends to apply the approach developed for the Le Sueur River projects to future district initiatives.

“Prioritizing feels much more organized after this project. It reinvigorated our board and staff, and excited landowners because they knew the project would mean something and be part of a bigger improvement,” Bach said. “That’s why we’re going to use this process



again and again. It was very educational for us to use this grant funding to formulate a template for conservation in our county.”

Bach said his staff is now working to connect landowners with programs that can assist them with putting projects on the ground. Programs being explored include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), state cost-share grants associated with the Erosion Control and Water Management Policy and grants offered by the Greater Blue Earth Basin Alliance.

“At this point, we’re assessing our shovel-ready projects and possible funding options,” Bach said.



Left: Grassed waterways are a recommended practice identified through the accelerated implementation grant. **Middle:** Blue Earth County SWCD identified more than 30 potential alternate side inlet sites to reduce sediment entering the Le Sueur River. **Photo Credits:** Blue Earth County SWCD **Right:** The Le Sueur River was added to Minnesota’s impaired waters list in 2015. **Photo Credit:** Minnesota Pollution Control Agency