New hires, grant bolster McLeod SWCD

Photos Courtesy McLeod SWCD
McLeod County Ditch 11 will receive much-needed repairs, and related conservation practices in the watershed are designed to improve the water quality of Winsted Lake.

With three experienced staffers on board and its first Clean Water Fund award, SWCD staff pursues erosion fixes that benefit Lake Winsted, a ditch in disrepair

WINSTED — When the McLeod Soil & Water Conservation District's (SWCD) first-ever Clean Water Fund grant application was approved, it allowed staff to start working with willing landowners to improve the function of McLeod County Ditch 11 and the water quality of Winsted Lake.

The SWCD's fully funded $111,000 application was the top-ranked multipurpose drainage management project of the four awarded by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) for 2019. The ditch's 14,827-acre watershed drains directly into the lake.

Winsted Lake, a popular panfishing spot encircled by the town of 2,300 and bordered by the Luce Line State Trail, is impaired for aquatic recreation because of excess nutrients. Recommended fish consumption is limited because of mercury levels.

Work on the three-year, $141,000 project could begin this summer.

Matching funds come from two sources. Landowners contribute toward the cost of projects on their property, such as water and sediment control basins. The drainage authority, through assessments to benefitting landowners on the ditch, contributes toward the cost of projects within the ditch right of way.

For the SWCD, County Ditch 11 work represents a culmination of its expanded capabilities.

Over most of its 25-plus years, the SWCD had operated on a small scale. A local capacity funding grant from BWSR allowed it to add the staff required to undertake a project such as multipurpose

drainage management.

The combined skills of three additional full-time employees hired in fall 2017 allowed the McLeod SWCD to pursue a targeted, prioritized watershed project that addressed erosion.

Drainage Inspector Adam Leske's duties include completing an inventory of county drainage systems, and meeting with landowners to assess resource concerns. Technician Coleton Draeger had experience with watershed-based projects and grant-writing. Technician Mark Yrjo's survey and design experience allowed him to identify the most effective best management practice for each site, design projects and estimate costs.

County Ditch 11's state of disrepair made it a priority.

McLeod SWCD staff put in hours of on-the-ground investigation, and then collaborated with the city, the drainage authority and interested landowners within the watershed to prioritize gully stabilization sites. Plans call for one grassed waterway, four water and sediment control basins and 10 grade stabilization structures within 302 highly erosive acres.

Because of its state of disrepair, McLeod County Ditch 11 was a priority. McLeod SWCD staff worked with the city, drainage authority and landowners to prioritize gully stabilization sites within the watershed.

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The project involves three landowners. The drainage corridor affects about 15 more landowners.

Historically, landowners in this watershed hadn't worked much with the SWCD. Staff aims to build upon the current collaboration, which was spurred by the need to repair the ditch system and by region-wide pressure to improve the lake's water quality.

Once all elements of the multipurpose drainage management project are in place, the SWCD estimates those measures will keep more than 108 tons of total suspended solids, nearly 125 pounds of total phosphorus and more than 289 tons of eroded soil out of Winsted Lake a year.

Meanwhile, the Winsted city engineer has developed a stormwater runoff plan with several implementation options, which city leaders are considering.

Partners realize restoring Winsted Lake's water quality cannot happen overnight. Improvements will most likely be the result of cumulative efforts. These projects are a start.