

Capacity gains = conservation gains



Jackson SWCD Assistant Director Chris Bauer, left, said capacity funding allowed the SWCD to bolster its partnership with federal agencies by hiring a technician. Contributed Photo

A look at six southwestern SWCDs shows staff hires, equipment upgrades lead to more conservation implementation via allocated Clean Water Fund capacity dollars



By the Numbers

Hires, purchases and upgrades made possible by capacity funds available to the six SWCDs over the past five years included: four field technicians, one area groundwater resource technician, six seed drills, six field trucks, two field ATVs, one rental ATV, six new or upgraded survey equipment purchases, 15 technology and computer-related purchases or upgrades, and shared services and equipment with Technical Service Area 5.

Minnesota’s six southwestern-most soil and water conservation districts in 2020 spent more than 90% of their local capacity funding allocations on conservation practices and the SWCD technicians who work with landowners to implement them.

When local capacity funds became available in 2016, SWCDs during the first biennium spent most of that money to hire technicians; contract for engineering, design and surveying services; or complete much-needed equipment and technology purchases or upgrades.

Some of the purchases eliminated SWCDs’ reliance on partner organizations for computers and networking, basic technical help, and surveying equipment.

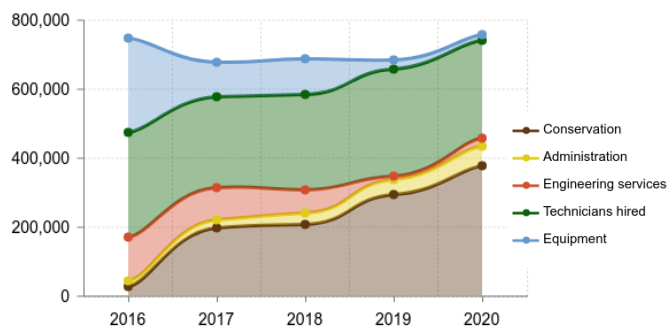
The additional money made it possible to upgrade the equipment used to plant easements or establish and maintain buffers. Some aging field vehicles were replaced.

The six districts hired and trained technicians as they geared up for more cost-share projects.

At the same time, a shared-services agreement among three of the districts made it possible to hire a technician and buy equipment — a computer, truck, surveying equipment and field work supplies — to handle the

Use of Capacity Funds by Category

Jackson, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Rock SWCDs



remaining construction workload from a declared disaster in 2014.

The trend shows the allocations — derived from the Clean Water Fund and administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), as directed by the State Legislature — are working as intended.

Capacity funds were to be used to invest in SWCDs’ operations, facilitate conservation implementation and landowner services for clean water objectives.

Local capacity services grant work plans and reporting summaries show that SWCDs are indeed implementing more conservation using capacity funding.

Between 2016 and 2020 within the six southwestern SWCDs, \$405,642 in local

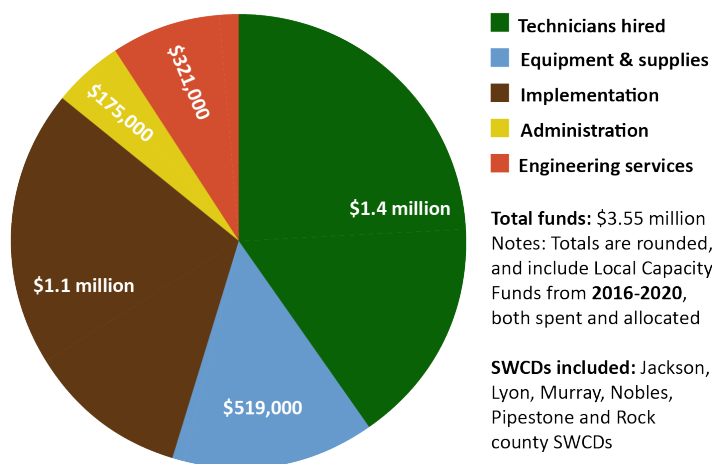
capacity funds combined with local matches, landowner obligations, \$74,790 in watershed district funds, and \$254,158 in federal dollars to bring about:

- 75 water and sediment control basins
- 32,957 feet of grassed waterways
- 250 feet of shoreland protection
- 3 water control structures
- 1 structural grade stabilization project
- 1 pasture management system
- 0.40 acres of critical area plantings

Before capacity funding became available, Jackson SWCD Assistant Director Chris Bauer said the SWCD’s federal partners supplied its conservation cost-share and provided engineering services. The SWCD rarely signed off on technical work for implementation contracts with landowners, and it didn’t have much money to implement practices.

Previously, at SWCDs throughout Minnesota, it was not uncommon to share staff with other agencies or nonprofits. An SWCD’s largest source of regular operational funding — outside county allocations and in-kind funding — might have come from the \$10,000 to \$30,000 state cost-share or conservation delivery

6 SWCDs’ Local Capacity Funds



federal partners.

“Capacity funds provide a full-time technician we wouldn’t otherwise have. Without it, we wouldn’t have put nearly as many projects on the ground,” Bauer said. “Our thought about capacity funds’ use from the beginning was that we answer to the taxpayers out here, and that it would serve the fund better to put projects on the ground.”

In addition to an increase in on-the-ground conservation projects, capacity funding has brought several secondary outcomes.

For example, groundwater is a high priority in Jackson, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone and Rock counties. Pipestone SWCD-based Laura DeBeer, an area water resource technician hired with capacity money, has been instrumental in acquiring competitive state grants. She’s also worked with nonprofits and other funding initiatives. That success has augmented efforts to protect the area’s vulnerable surface-to-groundwater interactions.

Increased capacity has given SWCD administrative staff time to expand planning efforts. SWCDs have built the tools and partnerships needed to facilitate landowner interaction with planning efforts. District supervisors have become more involved in comprehensive planning efforts such as the One Watershed, One Plan program.

Capacity Funds: History and Definition

Conservation workers and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) worked with the Minnesota Legislature to include a line-item appropriation in the state budget.

Enacted in June 2015 and budgeted as part of the Clean Water and Legacy Fund appropriation, was a provision that would allow for payments to SWCDs. From this appropriation, each SWCD was to

receive an increase in its base funding of \$100,000 per year along with a portion of funding to be divided among districts based on county allocated match and a calculation based on private lands and amount of public waters. The State Legislature directed BWSR to administer the funds and operate them as a noncompetitive Clean Water Fund grant. The grants target four resource concern areas — soil erosion,

riparian zone management, excess nutrients, and water storage and treatment — and supports increased capacity by funding expenses in staffing, cost-share and initiatives, technology and capital equipment, and operations.

Grantees completed an annual request identifying their funding needs and the connection to their state approved, locally adopted plan starting in Fiscal Year 2016.

program allotment (or \$22,000 easement delivery payment, in the case of Redwood and Renville SWCDs). SWCDs spent a lot of effort trying to find ways

to get conservation on the ground with as little money as possible.

As funding streams changed, SWCD staff was able to assist