

Next stop: Easements, water storage



Board tour attendees visit a property in Mower County's Dexter Township to view a water control structure. The dam was the third stop on the Aug. 25 tour, which featured 13 conservation projects in Mower and Freeborn counties. **Photo Credit:** Adam Beilke, BWSR

Annual BWSR Board tour showcases conservation work led by three watershed districts, two SWCDs, other Freeborn, Mower county partners

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Board members, staff and partners visited 13 conservation projects Aug. 25 in Mower and Freeborn counties during the agency's annual board tour.

Approximately 35 people attended the tour, which featured water storage structures, conservation easements, and a collaborative 8-acre farm in Mower County used to study best management practices for soil health.

BWSR Board Conservationist David Copeland, who along with BWSR Clean Water Specialist Shaina Keseley helped organize the tour, said local government partners helped select tour stops and presented information throughout the nine-hour event. Featured projects

were implemented by the Cedar River Watershed District (CRWD), Shell Rock River Watershed District (SRRWD), Turtle Creek Watershed District (TCWD), Freeborn Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and Mower SWCD.

"You need partnerships to make conservation work," Copeland said. "Here we had three watershed districts plus SWCDs working well together and communicating across those lines."

The tour included stops at three water storage structures, which slow down and temporarily hold back water from re-entering nearby waterways after significant rainfall



events. In recent years, Minnesota has experienced larger and more frequent and intense rains, which have damaged crops and infrastructure, significantly eroded riverbanks, and degraded water quality. BWSR received \$2 million in general fund dollars from the state Legislature this year to develop a water storage and treatment program as part of a statewide effort to mitigate the negative impacts of severe weather events spurred by climate change.

The importance of conservation easements also emerged as a theme during the tour. Voluntary conservation easements take land out of production. The conservation practices that are part of restoration can benefit water quality, reduce soil erosion and create habitat. Common practices implemented on conservation easements include wetland restorations, native vegetation establishment and drainage improvements.

Five easements on the tour route were funded by programs including the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP), the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program and the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

“We’re putting these easements on properties that are not the most productive, but they are environmentally sensitive,”



Board tour attendees view an outlet structure at Geneva Lake in Freeborn County. **Photo Credit:** Adam Beilke, BWSR



BWSR Board tour attendees visited a water storage structure in Mower County's Dexter Township (shown under construction above). The completed project (below) is estimated to reduce phosphorus by 194 pounds per year and total suspended solids by 126 tons.

Photo Credits: Mower SWCD



said Ed Lenz, BWSR Southern Region manager, who attended and helped plan the tour. “We aren’t seeking opportunities to take the best cropland out of production.”

To mitigate risks associated with COVID-19, masks and hand sanitizer were provided, and attendees were asked to socially distance throughout the day.

The tour concluded with a visit to the Sustainable Answer Acre (SAA) Research Farm in Mower County’s Lansing Township. Created in spring 2018 by a collaborative partnership of local, public and private organizations, the SAA’s mission is to test current agronomic practices that affect nitrate movement in the soil profile and groundwater while maintaining crop productivity and improving soil health.

A collaborative that includes three local farmers operates the 8-acre farm. Northern Country Cooperative, a farmer-owned local organization, plays a leading role in operations. The farm’s current goal is to test commonly used agricultural practices that enhance profitability and environmental sustainability in local agricultural systems. Funding for the SAA is provided by local supporters, the Minnesota Corn Growers Association, and The Nature Conservancy.