

PRAP grant boosts efficiency



For the 16 SWCDs within the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area, hiring a third party to assess workloads and review its structure equipped the TSA to better handle an anticipated increase in requests for service as One Watershed, One Plan implementation gets underway

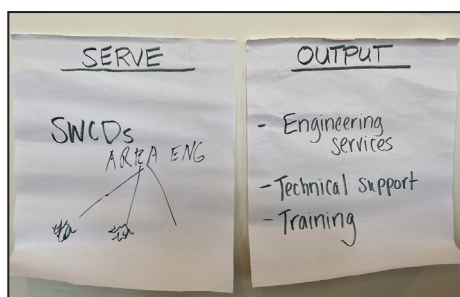
DETROIT LAKES — Burgeoning with 16 member soil and water conservation districts united by a reorganization more than 10 years ago, the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area (CSA) was poised for change when One Watershed, One Plan discussions led to a Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant-backed effort to make technical services available faster and more efficiently.

The results of the consultant-led organizational restructuring are slated to be finalized this month. The work started in September.

The [Red River Valley CSA](#), also known as Technical Service Area (TSA) 1, is based in Detroit Lakes, where, as the TSA host, Becker SWCD District Manager Bryan Malone handles TSA finances. Malone said previous failed reorganization attempts, declining

PROJECT COSTS:

The first phase of the TSA 1 project cost \$51,384 — \$20,000 from the PRAP grant plus a \$31,384 local contribution. The second phase cost \$24,079 — \$9,850 from the PRAP grant plus a \$14,229 local contribution.



Top: TSA 1 Board members met March 8 in Mahanomen to discuss Phase 2 of a PRAP grant-backed reorganization. **Photo Credit:** Pete Waller, BWSR **Above:** Pages from a flip chart show discussion topics during the initial meeting with a consultant. **Photo Credit:** Moriya Rufer, HEI

board attendance, and a clear sense of urgency made the decision to apply for a PRAP grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) easier.

After the TSA reorganized in 2009 to serve 16 SWCDs within the Red River Valley — stretching from Traverse County north to the Canadian border

Details

TSAs: Technical Service Areas throughout the state provide technical assistance to and through member SWCDs, in cooperation with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, BWSR and other local, state and federal government units.

PRAP: The [PRAP Program](#) monitors and assesses performance of local water management entities statewide. Completed on a 10-year rotation, organizational assessments review performance standards and progress toward water/watershed plan goals; review the wetland program; and survey staff, board members and partners.

— travel time affected attendance and made it difficult to get a quorum at meetings. Members attempted reorganization in 2015 and 2016. Then, in 2020 the issue came back in full force. Workload discussions arose as partner organizations participated in One Watershed, One Plan.

“We could see increased workloads. Managers started talking more about staffing and engineering, and technical staff to handle implementation,” Malone said.

As the workload conversation progressed, the topic of organizational structure always seemed to creep in. Just as board members believed they were close to a reorganization, the details derailed the attempt.

Malone said BWSR Board Conservationist Matt Fischer suggested the PRAP grant.

“I give him credit for being persistent. He mentioned it and we all said we could do it ourselves. He stayed for support and kept mentioning it; it ended up coming around in the end,” Malone said.

Fischer said: “It has to be locally led, otherwise it won’t be successful. The decisions are being made by the TSA supervisors, informed through their staff. It wouldn’t be successful if they didn’t own the decisions made (about) how they want to go forward.”

At first, board members could not arrive at a consensus about applying for a PRAP grant.



*Because Becker County is the host county for the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area, also known as Technical Service Area 1, Becker Soil & Water Conservation District Manager Bryan Malone handles TSA finances. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR*

“When we first got the proposal, it showed the timeline taking four months. We had a goal and timeline, and there was concern it was taking longer than we wanted. Some felt it could be done internally,” Malone said.

Others were concerned about the cost. Fischer and Malone said the fact that all meetings cost money, whether or not a consultant or facilitator was present, changed many opinions. Hiring a facilitator was meant to reduce the number of meetings about reorganization, and to make timely decisions about how to move forward.

The PRAP grant itself unfolded in two phases. The initial phase, which began in September 2021, involved hiring a third party to complete a workload analysis. That work was finalized in February 2022. The process began with a series of well-attended workshops. Fischer said board members remained

involved and engaged throughout the process.

“The general consensus (was), it’s not working, and we need to do something to get it on track,” Fischer said.

Discussion of the board’s mission and vision statements were a starting point for individuals to understand the TSA, how it began, and what flexibility existed to make improvements. The questions “What are you here for?” and “What are you trying to accomplish?” brought about thoughtful conversation.

Members then received a survey that evaluated current use of the TSA, existing and desirable wait times for receiving technical services, potential bottlenecks for implementation, and existing workflow. Existing comprehensive watershed management plan implementation activities and potential future technical needs were also reviewed.

PRAP Grants

Since 2021, BWSR has awarded more than \$125,000 in grants to organizations to improve their operating performance. Activities typically include facilitation, mediation or consulting for items related to strategic planning, organizational development, reorganization/merging, assessing capacity, or benchmark analysis.

In 2022 alone, BWSR has funded \$38,675.00 in PRAP grants.

The survey results indicated that a system was in place to request training, and that both training and trainers were available. However, only six of the 16 SWCDs have staff with engineering Job Approval Authority (JAA). Members discussed working through individual offices that have the appropriate JAA, and completing on-the-job-training for those who need to finalize it. This change will speed delivery of engineering and design services. Estimated staffing needs were projected based on anticipated workload output.

The resulting product was presented to the TSA 1 Board on Feb. 2.

The TSA 1 Board then initiated the grant’s second phase, which evaluated governance and structures capable of meeting current and future workloads. Workshops began in May. A final product is slated to be complete in time for the board to make adjustments before the start of its new fiscal year in July.