

SWCD managers collaborate to solve problems, save money

Prompted by the knowledge that communication is the key to implementing new conservation programs, five soil and water conservation district managers from northwestern Minnesota initiated quarterly brainstorming sessions in 2017.

“Manager meetings provide an open forum for neighboring districts to discuss opportunities, difficulties, and bounce new ideas off one another,” said Bryan Malone, Pennington Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) manager.

SWCD managers from Red Lake, Pennington, Marshall, Kittson and Roseau counties attend the quarterly meetings. Managers from the five SWCDs already communicated when questions arose. Bringing everyone together for quarterly management meetings strengthened that cooperation and increased feedback.

The quarterly meetings began during a time of great change for Minnesota SWCDs: The buffer law had recently passed; the state’s One Watershed, One Plan program was moving out of its pilot phase; and the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program was expanding statewide.

The new programs required additional staff, new policies and detailed work plans. Manager discussions helped facilitate consistent implementation.

The meetings played a role in



From left: Matt Sorvig, Pennington SWCD resource technician; Zach Foley, Technical Services Area 1 technician; and Peter Nelson, Pennington SWCD water plan coordinator, close a bench mark shot on a GPS survey they completed for a grade stabilization project on a Pennington County farm.

Photo Credit: Pennington SWCD

successful buffer law implementation in the area — especially in terms of consistent communication, determinations of alternative practices, and cost-share policies. Managers have shared alternative practice scenarios and ways in which they have determined comparable benefits. Because each SWCD is unique, differences in buffer law implementation still exist. According to Malone, the meetings helped identify areas where the five districts could align approaches.

Jamie Osowski started her job as Kittson SWCD district manager just before the meetings began.

“The manager meetings were extremely beneficial to me in



transitioning into my new position,” Osowski said. “The small setting allowed me to open up and ask questions about not only new programs that everyone was asking about—including buffers and local capacity funds—but also the day-to-day tasks of a district manager including policy writing, human resource topics and employee benefits.”

This spring, the group hired engineering technician Zach Foley to work on behalf of the five districts plus West Polk SWCD. Managers discovered that shared need during a quarterly meeting.

Foley is a Technical Service Area (TSA) 1 employee, and his position is funded by the TSA and each participating SWCD. Most of the SWCDs included the budget item in their local capacity grant work plans.

“We all expressed the need for further engineering assistance and how we weren’t sure we could afford a staff person individually,” Malone said. “By working together and sharing the expense, it became a reality.”

The group plans to continue meeting three to four times a year. Participants believe these group conversations will continue to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of delivering conservation.