



Working for water quality in the Pomme de Terre

January 2016 Snapshots



Western Minnesota's Pomme de Terre River, a 125-mile-long tributary of the Minnesota River, has been a clean water priority for Grant, Ottertail, Swift, Stevens, Douglas and Big Stone Counties for a long time. The six County Boards and county Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) formed the Pomme de Terre River Association through a joint powers agreement in 1981. In its early days, the organization focused primarily on collecting water quality data while trying to figure out how to protect water quality with little to no funding.



When funding became available in 2000 through the local Resource Conservation and Development Council to conduct more comprehensive monitoring and focus on community outreach, the association was finally able to become more active. It wasn't the only change for the association at the time. They had to incorporate a new vocabulary as well, centered on Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDLs), impaired waters and pollution load reduction calculations.



When the Clean Water Legacy Act passed in 2006, the Pomme de Terre watershed was one of the first to start an intensive watershed monitoring program and the first watershed in the state to complete a Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy. Managing a watershed-based strategy for monitoring, assessment and implementation among the twelve partners on an ad-hoc basis proved challenging, though. Using funding from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's 319 Clean Water program and, later, Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment funds, the association hired a full-time watershed staff person to coordinate its monitoring and assessment work and begin implementation planning.

Top: Buffer strips established along both sides of the Pomme de Terre River.

Bottom: Buffer strips and fenceline protection separate a cornfield from the river.

Demand for Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment funding is extremely high and competition is intense. The Pomme de Terre Watershed has received Clean Water Funds totaling \$1.36 million for project implementation activities; a far cry from its early struggles to match need with available resources. Leveraging over \$1.4 million in local resources and Federal Farm Bill programs for project implementation dollars, the

watershed has been able to make substantial progress in best management practice (BMP) implementation. The actual total spent on conservation activities is likely far higher, as watershed residents use their own resources and other Federal conservation incentives that aren't tracked as part of the grant expenditures.

In 2012, the next generation of watershed leaders ratified the existing Joint Powers agreement, reaffirming their desire to work cooperatively on a watershed basis utilizing Clean Water Fund opportunities. Successful Clean Water Fund applications have re-energized and re-focused the Pomme de Terre River Association and its

technical committee, engaged more citizens and groups on the topic of watershed management and allowed some high priority projects to move forward.

Over the last three years, over 1,700 acres of buffers along rivers and ditches and 1,400 acres of wetland restorations and associated buffers have been completed within the watershed. These strategies have been the primary focus of funding, but other BMPs have been implemented that address field erosion, shoreline and stormwater management, livestock exclusions and a host of other issues. Increased communication with landowners and the ability to provide technical assistance and project funding have strengthened existing relationships within the agriculture community, and helped the association form new relationships with lake associations and community governments.

The size of the Pomme de Terre Watershed can make assessing change difficult because it takes time for changes on the land to show up as changes in water quality measurements of the river. The association uses monitoring and assessments to target where to install Best Management Practices for greatest impact and to provide a valuable long-term record of water quality within the watershed. Building on that work, the district is in line to receive Fiscal Year 2016 Clean Water Funding from BWSR to deploy a watershed-wide database model to help refine future conservation targeting and better estimate the impacts of previous conservation implementation on the Pomme de Terre River.

Commodity prices have a dramatic impact on participation in conservation practices. During periods of high commodity prices some landowners refrain from participating in necessary conservation activities because of the immediate economic returns that are possible. During periods of low commodity prices, other landowners may face challenges in providing required match dollars. Clean Water Funds have made additional landowner contact, technical assistance and project design possible. During the early part of the decade, having trusted local SWCD and county staff on the ground talking about long-term conservation with landowners kept, and in some cases expanded, buffer and wetland areas that could have brought high immediate economic returns.

When Grant County began their systematic approach to buffer implementation, a county commissioner asked, "Who's in favor of clean water?" It turns out a lot of people are - sometimes you just have to get everyone at the table.