



Working Together on the Bluffs of the St. Croix

July 2014 Snapshots

The St. Croix River is well-known to most Minnesotans. Designated as a National Wild and Scenic River, the St. Croix and the escarpment, or bluffs, that surround it, are home to a wealth of plant and animal species, some of which you won't find anywhere else. Over the years, changes in land use and land disturbances have resulted in an acceleration of gully erosion of the bluffs. This erosion has been identified as a major source of sediment and nutrients in the river, which affects its water quality.

In 2011, the Chisago Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) received a Clean Water Fund (CWF) grant to spearhead a project to inventory and prioritize active gully erosion sites along the St. Croix River escarpment



from the entrance of Wild River State Park near Almelund, MN to the Chisago/Washington County line. Using mapping and surveying tools, staff identified 427 large and 193 small gullies within the project area. Using that data, SWCD staff began contacting landowners, both to confirm their survey data and start building support for addressing the erosion problem. By the time they had finished their field survey, the SWCD had identified 36 gullies that were highest priority based on the severity of erosion and how much sediment and phosphorus they were running off into the St. Croix.



Gully Project Site C before and after installation of a Water and Sediment Control Basin to stabilize gully erosion.

"The St. Croix River Escarpment has been a problem area for years, but the Chisago Soil & Water Conservation District never had a good method of addressing it," said Craig Mell, Chisago SWCD District Administrator. "We worked with landowners that came to us, but we knew there were bigger problems out there that were not being fixed. This inventory has revolutionized the way we approach landowners and spend money. We are able to see where the grant funds are best used."

Before Clean Water Funds were available, addressing erosion issues on gullies of this size was cost-prohibitive for most individual landowners; even if they wanted to address the problem, they simply didn't have the funds. In 2012, the Chisago SWCD obtained another CWF grant that enabled them to implement gully stabilization projects on 10 of the 36 high-priority gullies. The results were so successful they received another CWF grant in 2014 to fund the next phase of stabilization work.



“I knew there was a problem out there [in the field], but never knew how to fix it,” Project Site “C” landowner said. “When Craig [Mell, District Administrator, Chisago SWCD] came to me and offered to fix it, how could I say no? I feel responsible, as a farmer, for making sure I’m not polluting the river. With their help, now I feel like I’m being a good steward of the land and water.”

BWSR Conservationist Dan Fabian, who works with the SWCD, notes that it’s a great example of the BWSR mission in action. “The Chisago SWCD leveraged the relationships it has cultivated and the trust it has built with landowners over the years along with its technical skills, and knowledge of the resource, to implement conservation practices where they matter most and can make a difference.”