

Whiskey Creek's \$10M restoration



Thirty-mile-long Whiskey Creek lies within Wilkin County. Its 157-square-mile watershed stretches into Otter Tail County. The project's overall objective is to create stable stream conditions, which would reduce sediment and nutrient loading to the creek and downstream; improve natural waterways' drainage; improve stream corridor habitat; and reduce the frequency and severity of flood damage to fields and adjacent home sites.

Landowners, leveraged funds and partners are the key to this Wilkin SWCD, Buffalo-Red River Watershed District project that prioritizes clean water, wildlife habitat and drainage solutions; taps 7 funding sources



Albright



Quast



Bajumpaa

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Ann Wessel, BWSR



BRECKENRIDGE — A \$10 million Whiskey Creek restoration project designed to produce clean-water and wildlife habitat benefits — and fix drainage problems that for decades have affected the 200-some landowners within the watershed — is moving ahead. Creek restoration work is slated for 2021.

A Red River tributary, 30-mile-long Whiskey Creek drains 157 square miles in Wilkin and Otter Tail counties.

“The creek is the lifeblood of this area. If the creek doesn’t work, everything else will eventually fail,” said Buffalo-Red River Watershed District (BRRWD) Administrator Bruce Albright, who has since retired.

Six drainage ditches outlet directly into the creek. Its channel has filled with sediment over the years, which causes water to

slow, and then back up into fields after a heavy rain or spring melt. Gullies send more sediment and nutrients downstream. Whiskey Creek is impaired for turbidity and bacteria.

Leveraged funding, longstanding partnerships, landowners’ support — and a similar restoration that’s working well on nearby Wolverton Creek — helped move the project forward.

“I think (farmers) see it as an opportunity to be good stewards and do what’s right and what’s beneficial to not only them but their neighbors downstream,” said Jon Quast, Breckenridge-based soil conservationist with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Whiskey Creek was the only Minnesota project to receive an NRCS National Water



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From left: Evidence of spring flooding remains in August 2019 along a county road in Connelly Township. Flood debris collected at a Whiskey Creek road crossing near U.S. Highway 75 and the city of Kent. Wilkin SWCD Manager Don Bajumpaa and technician Kim Melton leave an eroded field inlet.

Quality Initiative (NWQI) award in 2020. The \$2.9 million NWQI award will be made available over four years.

“Typically, NRCS’ strength is the technical expertise. In this instance, it’s the financial assistance,” Quast said. “The strengths of the (Buffalo-Red River) Watershed District are local funds plus the engineering side of it. We’re able to leverage everybody’s strengths to make the project successful.”

Drawing from a \$320,000 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Wilkin County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff last fall worked with landowners to install 11 grade-stabilization structures that fix gullies along the creek.

The Whiskey Creek restoration also taps a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) small watershed pilot project award totaling about \$1 million over four four-year cycles. The first four-year award starting in 2020 totals \$270,000.

The BRRWD is seeking \$2 million in Outdoor Heritage Funds from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and \$1.6 million to expand Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) easements on 250- to 750-foot wide buffers.

The BRRWD would levy \$1.4 million. It would create a water management district to generate \$700,000 over time.

Creating a watershed management district would establish a funding and maintenance mechanism. The landowners benefiting from the project would be charged a fee, spread over a period of up to 10 years. Under the maintenance agreements, the SWCD would be responsible for seeding and maintaining the MN CREP easements buffering the stream.

Before the BRRWD Board schedules a public hearing, it will wait for One Watershed, One Plan approval in order to more smoothly establish the project under state watershed statutes. COVID-19 restrictions have delayed that process.

The BRRWD has applied for a DNR permit to work in protected waters. Although altered, Whiskey Creek is classified as a natural stream.

“Putting together the road map as to what the project is going to look like when you’re done is the most important step,” Albright said.

Having a plan allows action when funding sources align. When Wilkin SWCD staff learned of the NWQI award, the sign-up deadline was one week away.

But landowners had been involved with the planning.

Wilkin SWCD’s work through a \$103,100 Clean Water Fund accelerated implementation grant from BWSR in 2016 had identified priority projects.

The first projects funded through the NWQI award will likely begin in spring 2021. They center on four landowners with five parcels bordering about 3 miles of Whiskey Creek, starting in the headwaters region.

Wilkin SWCD Manager Don Bajumpaa summarized plans for Whiskey Creek restoration:

“Ultimately, we’re going to create a stable channel, a two-stage channel similar to Wolverton Creek. It’ll have a deeper center, which will convey the flows pretty much year-round. The second stage will be a broader floodplain. That area will accommodate in a safe manner the higher flows. Adjacent to it will be this wide riparian zone that will be (planted) to native grasses and flowers. Some of the sinuosity will be restored where it makes sense and where we can.”

About \$7 million of the budget relates directly to the stream corridor and tributaries. The remaining \$2.9 million covers upland conservation practices.

Large projects’ success hinges on landowners’ support.

“The hard part is bringing them on board as ‘You are my partner. You are my friend.

You are a project supporter.’ That takes time. It takes effort. It takes education. It takes communication. It takes perseverance,” Albright said.

Pat Freese is among the Wilkin County farmers who support the project. Whiskey Creek runs for about three-quarters of a mile through a corner of his Nordick Township home site.

Straight-line ditches emptying into Whiskey Creek were routinely cleaned, but Freese said excess sediment was never removed from the creek.

“I have to work around all of this when it really isn’t my farm that’s causing the problem. It’s the fact that the water system, which is Whiskey Creek, just can’t handle what it’s being asked to handle,” Freese said.

Freese has seen pictures of the Wolverton Creek restoration, and likes the looks of the streambank stabilization.

“We’re going to basically mirror what’s been done on Wolverton Creek,” Quast said. “What we’ve heard from landowners on Wolverton Creek is they’re happy with it. They’ve seen less issues with flooding. They’ve seen less runoff. Anything that may run off gets filtered through a grass riparian herbaceous buffer. It’s been a win-win. They’re not losing crop.”