

Each year, hundreds of thousands of Minnesotans head up Highway 169 to experience the beauty and recreational opportunities of northern Minnesota's lakes and forests. Starting at Princeton, northbound drivers will see the environment change from high quality farm fields to beautiful forests and lakes. This transitional area between farm and forest happens in Mille Lacs County. Managing these two environments has been a challenge for the Mille Lacs Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), but with a grant from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment Fund, Mille Lacs SWCD found a way to meet the needs of those living in the forest and on the farm.



The Mille Lacs SWCD is a small office that had only two staff to help landowners manage the county's soil and water resources. With such a small staff, the SWCD board decided to focus staff efforts on those landowners directly adjacent to the rivers who had the most direct influence on the county's water quality. However, the SWCD board knew that farmers and those living in the southern part of the county also needed service.



"Mille Lacs has beautiful lakes and forests, but we cannot forget the farmers," said Board Chair Kurt Beckstrom. "The Mille Lacs SWCD Board knew it was important to ensure that we help farmers keep their soil healthy so they could help us keep our waters clean."

Top: Ag Outreach Tech Todd Kulaf talks with local farmer Chris Carlson.

Bottom: Kulaf appreciating Carlson's bean crop.

In 2013, the Mille Lacs SWCD received \$250,000 in Clean Water Funding to accelerate their outreach efforts to farmers and hired Todd Kulaf as the district's agricultural outreach technician. One of Kulaf's first jobs was to get to know the farmers of the county.

"Mille Lacs farmers like to learn and try new things," said Kulaf. "However, I also know this is their livelihood. As I

work with our farmers, it is a two way conversation. I want to know their needs and concerns so that I can use the district's resources to help their operation while meeting our goals for good water quality."

Kulaf has already connected farmers with the local NRCS office to help them find financial resources to install projects that protect and improve soil and water quality. He also organized a tillage practice workshop, but due to flooding had to change the focus to a demonstration of different cover crops.

"It was great having the real world experience of needing to adapt my management recommendations to the environment, which is something farmers have to do every day," said Kulaf.

The soil conservation movement began in Minnesota in the 1930s as farmers working with farmers to protect

the state's soil resources. Minnesota's conservation districts have evolved into much more complex organizations providing services to more residents and solving ever more challenging problems. This new effort at reaching out to the county's agricultural producers is bringing the Mille Lacs SWCD back to the roots of soil conservation.

Susan Shaw, the district manager of the Mille Lacs SWCD, sums up the district's efforts: "Todd has filled a hole in our office. He is going back to the beginnings of conservation by having the discussion of soil conservation at the farmer's kitchen table. That kitchen table is the place where we are going to have our biggest impact in managing our county's resources."