The Sauk River flows into the Mississippi River in Sartell. A Stearns Soil & Water Conservation District project leverages Clean Water Fund grant dollars to work with farmers on out-of-compliance feedlot fixes upstream. Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

**Clean Water Funds let Stearns SWCD fix more out-of-compliance feedlots**

Targeted sites will improve water quality in Sauk River, chain of lakes

More farmers will bring feedlots into compliance in Minnesota’s No. 1 dairy-producing county – cutting pollution to a Mississippi River tributary in the process – thanks to Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District staff’s ability to leverage federal funds and provide technical assistance.

The SWCD is targeting the Top 5 contributors to the nutrient-impaired Sauk River and Sauk River Chain of Lakes. Sauk River Watershed District monitoring showed elevated phosphorous, sediment and bacteria levels. The SWCD typically takes on 10 to 20 feedlot projects a year.

A $392,500 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources will allow the SWCD to stretch its resources even further as it strives to eliminate contaminated feedlot runoff.

“Without these dollars, these farmers would have to go out and hire engineers to do the work for them. And with low commodity prices and low dairy prices, a $15,000, $20,000, $25,000 engineering bill isn’t something that they planned on their budget. So that’s where we come into play,” said Nathan Hylla, Stearns County SWCD project management supervisor.

The Stearns County SWCD staff of 19 includes specialty engineers who provide farmers with technical assistance for local, state and federal grants. In 2016, the SWCD received more than $1 million in funding from Stearns County, nearly $2 million from state sources and nearly $4 million from federal sources.

“By having these funds available to have specialty engineering staff to help them, it’s resulted in great improvements in water quality,” Hylla said.

An average Stearns County feedlot fix results in annual reductions of about 20 pounds of phosphorus and
64 pounds of nitrogen, according to Minnesota Feedlot Annualized Runoff Model data. Those numbers can vary widely depending upon factors including the operation’s size, setup and location.

SWCD Administrator Dennis Fuchs said one project might require 250 hours of technical assistance — including survey and design work, preconstruction, construction and inspection. During an initial visit, staff determine if construction is the best use of resources. Some producers are near retirement; others might scale back or switch from dairy to beef, for example.

“We’re working on the biggest bang-for-your-buck projects, and working down the list from there,” Hylla said.

The ranking system, based on the Minnesota Feedlot Annualized Runoff Model Index, considers which sites have the greatest potential to pollute surface waters or groundwater.

About 9 percent of Stearns County’s 2,454 feedlots — 233 sites — were out of compliance in 2016.

“Six years ago, nearly 15 percent — 385 sites — were out of compliance, according to Becky Schlorf, Stearns County Environmental Services’ ag and water resources division supervisor. Open-lot runoff was the most common issue, followed by unpermitted manure pits and a combination of the two. Stearns County staff

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission is to improve and protect Minnesota’s water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners.