

Watershed-based funding spurs cooperation



The Yellow Medicine River flows under Minnesota Highway 23 just north of Hanley Falls in Yellow Medicine County. The Yellow Medicine River Watershed was among five One Watershed, One Plan pilot projects funded in 2014. The watershed drains more than 665,000 acres in Yellow Medicine, Lincoln, Lyon and Lac qui Parle counties. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR



A new funding model allows a timely, local response to watersheds' highest priorities.

Local governments across Minnesota have applied for competitive water quality project grants since voters approved the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment in 2008. To date, more than 1,615 Clean Water Fund grants have been awarded to local

government units pursuing water quality improvement projects. However, these grants are highly competitive by nature — approximately 33 percent of applications receive funding.

Watershed-based funding offers an alternative to the traditional project-by-project competitive grant process. This targeted, science-based approach allows collaborating local governments to pursue timely solutions based on the watershed's highest priority needs. Comprehensive watershed management plans are central

to the watershed-based funding approach. Plans are developed by local partnerships under the One Watershed, One Plan program or the Metropolitan Surface or Ground Water Management framework. The following organizations support watershed-based funding: the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC), the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) and the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts (MAWD).

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil



A flotilla makes its way down the Red Lake River. The Red Lake River watershed-based planning partnership received a \$667,550 grant to implement a plan that calls for the construction of 248 side-water inlets. Installation is projected to keep 2,480 tons of sediment out of the river each year.

Photo Credit: Red Lake River Watershed District

Resources (BWSR) implemented a pilot watershed-based funding program in 2017: Five watershed planning areas including the seven-county metro area received funding to pursue water quality improvement projects identified in their comprehensive plans. Twenty-two planning partnerships are being developed in addition to the pilot areas, bringing the total number of partnerships to 27.

Until recently, the 10 local government units within the four-county Yellow Medicine Watershed that deal with conservation issues were likely to compete over project funds. Today, they're working together to implement a One Watershed, One Plan comprehensive management plan. BWSR awarded the partnership a \$551,700 pilot watershed-based grant in 2017.

"It always did seem like each county was a little island unto themselves, whether it was the county or the soil and water district. They were all competing for the same money," said Kerry Netzke, Area II

Minnesota River Basin Projects executive director. "But now that the perspective has changed to a watershed basis, it seems to me like those turf wars aren't as obvious as they once were. I think there's a lot more collaboration and cooperation going on."

In Yellow Medicine, rather than a flat distribution of funds across the watershed, the group targets its efforts strategically to prioritize the watershed's greatest needs.

"The watershed isn't just isolated to our county. As projects are being done upstream, it's ultimately going to help us downstream," said Ron Antony, Yellow Medicine County commissioner. "This is how you have to think, as a watershed, not as 'I'm part of this county,' or 'I'm part of this district.'"

In 2017, BWSR awarded the Red Lake River planning partnership \$667,550 to implement its One Watershed, One Plan. The targeted approach unfolding in Pennington, Red Lake and West Polk counties is one result of planning efforts

that unified seven local government units. The Red Lake River is impaired for turbidity and sediment. With plan priorities set and funds available, the partnership is targeting sites with the potential to make the greatest improvements in water quality and topsoil retention. Plans call for the construction of 248 side-water inlets, estimated to keep 2,480 tons of sediment — the equivalent of 190 dump truck loads — out of the river annually.

More predictable funding has increased interest in conservation practices on the part of landowners, who previously might have waited years for funding to come through.

"To look at it as a watershed approach makes a lot more sense," said Peter Nelson, Pennington Soil & Water Conservation District water plan coordinator. "When you bring all these partners and players to the table that are involved in conservation, it allows more opportunities to prioritize and target areas where we can have the greatest impact."