

Initiative takes a whole-farm approach



The Hinderman family raises Holstein bull calves, which they receive at 2 to 7 days old. They sell about two-thirds of the cattle once they reach 400 pounds, and finish out the rest. The operation includes 340 hutches.
Photo Credits:
Hinderman family



Peterson



Carpenter



Hahn

A BWSR-NRCS collaboration, the \$3 million Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative helps producers identify resource concerns across their operation, outlines options to benefit water quality, fit their budget

An initiative shaping up in seven watersheds across Minnesota looks beyond single conservation concerns, fixes and funding sources. The Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative (WCPI) takes a comprehensive view of the land.

While a single gully may prompt a farmer to visit a soil and water conservation district office — and SWCD and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff will address that concern — producers who agree to a site visit will get a whole-farm assessment. They'll have the opportunity to work with a conservation planner to meet their objectives while considering all of the resource concerns.

"A goal of this project is to increase landowner readiness to implement conservation practices by providing



science-based planning assistance during these field assessments. To take a step back and to really understand why that gully is there," said WCPI Coordinator Mary Peterson of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

The Hindermans grow about 300 acres of crops and raise beef cattle.

“The client is in the door for a single resource concern. But our goal is to promote the importance of looking at all of the resource concerns on all of the fields so that together we can formulate alternatives that will benefit water quality, and will benefit groundwater, and also be economical for them to implement,” Peterson said.

The three-year, \$3 million initiative brings dedicated watershed conservation planners to each of the seven selected watersheds. It encompasses 35 soil and water conservation districts within the Blue Earth, Chippewa, Lower St. Croix, Middle Minnesota, Root, Sauk and Upper Cedar watersheds.

Funding is evenly split between the USDA’s NRCS and BWSR Clean Water Funds.

“Being able to gain that additional person to help organize across county lines and provide that direct technical assistance to landowners is a pretty key piece and a good opportunity for NRCS and BWSR to collaborate within watersheds,” said NRCS’ State Water Quality Specialist Shannon Carpenter. “The end goal is to provide better customer service to our landowners as a joint effort. That’s our No. 1 priority.”

Local work groups will determine priority areas within each watershed. The resource assessment that comes from the site visits will identify concerns and options, which the producer and planner will review together. Farmers within the targeted watersheds have a unique opportunity to receive field- or farm-



After a few months on the job, conservation planners involved with the Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative met March 14 to share ideas, receive conservation planning assistance training, and learn more about implementing elements of work plans. Jennifer Hahn is not pictured. The rest of the seven planners are, left to right and front to back: Tessa Zee, Hannah Neusch, Mary Jo Youngbauer, Dan Wermager, Paul Hunter and Ian Olson. **Photo Credit:** Mary Peterson, BWSR

Conservation Planners

The seven conservation planners, the watersheds in which they work and the SWCD office in which they are based follows.

Hannah Neusch, Blue Earth River Watershed, Martin SWCD; **Paul Hunter**, Upper Cedar River Watershed, Mower SWCD; **Ian Olson**, Chippewa River Watershed, Douglas SWCD; **Mary Jo Youngbauer**, Lower St. Croix River Watershed, Chisago SWCD; **Jennifer Hahn**, Middle Minnesota River Watershed, Redwood SWCD; **Dan Wermager**, Root River Watershed, Root River SWCD; **Tessa Zee**, Sauk River Watershed, Stearns SWCD.

scale conservation planning assistance that meshes with their farm goals and watershed-wide objectives.

“We don’t want to lose sight of that watershed concept while we’re doing that direct conservation planning with landowners, because there is a mutual goal of improved water quality within these watersheds,” Carpenter said. “We are a resource for them to make the best possible conservation-minded decision on their farms.”

All seven planners are on board. Working with producers in the designated watersheds, they will develop a total of 700 conservation plans.

“One-hundred conservation plans in three years to me is not scary at all. I would love to double that,” said Middle Minnesota Watershed Conservation Planner Jennifer Hahn.

Based in Brown County and hosted by Redwood SWCD, Hahn had worked with some of the Redwood, Renville,



Brown and Cottonwood county producers during her 12 years with NRCS. She now works with producers within locally prioritized areas of the eight-county Middle Minnesota Watershed, where soil erosion, water quality and water storage tend to be farmers’ top concerns.

Hahn has completed 40 conservation plans since she started on Oct. 1. She has met with more than 60 producers and completed more than 50 site visits.

Implementation is voluntary.

“The whole key is you’ve developed relationships with those producers so one year, two years down the road they still have a plan,” Peterson said. “The alternatives have been laid out. A few things may have changed and you may have to revise it some, but the basic plan is there. Then

if the producer decides — because of economic reasons, because it's timely, because there's a program available — they can jump back in, and begin implementing their plan."

Peterson outlined some of the initiative's other benefits.

Producers who implement projects within the three-year timeframe will receive free engineering and technical assistance. The watersheds will gain seven trained conservation planners whose expertise will be retained if a partner hires them after the three-year initiative.

"The neat thing about having more than one county, (is by) bringing in information from all eight counties, we can build on that and say, 'Here's another alternative that might work for you,'" Hahn said.

The conservation workers benefit, too.

"Bringing them together as a group of people that often don't work together because of geography, it can help build relationships between them and bring in different ideas," Hahn said. "Just bringing more variety in what works with our landscape, our management, our soils and resource concerns — because we have similar landscape resource concerns and management within the watershed."

In the short term, Hahn said watershed conservation planners can help short-



Brandon Hinderman started farming in 2003. His wife, Sarah, and their children, Ethan and Olivia, also help out on the farm near Sleepy Eye. Through the Watershed Conservation Planning Initiative, the Hindermans are working with a conservation planner to identify potential solutions for resource concerns across their farm. **Photo Credit:** Hinderman family

staffed field offices with technical planning. Long term, producers will receive more timely service, which will make them more likely to consider future conservation projects.

No specific implementation fund is linked to WCPI, but Peterson said the initiative would prepare landowners to pursue watershed-based funding or existing federal programs when they become available.

"One of the benefits of the planning process is it's not driven by program policy and specific resource concerns that funding sometimes drives. It's based on their operation and what resource concerns they have and what needs to be addressed to sustain and improve their resources for the future," Peterson said.

Brown County farmer Brandon Hinderman's resource concern centered on fixing gully erosion, which has worsened since a 10-inch rain in spring 2014

brought mudslides and seemed to open a vein of silt.

He and his wife, Sarah, raise beef cattle and run about 300 acres near Sleepy Eye. At any one time, they feed about 700 head of cattle — finishing out about 100 a year and selling the rest at about 400 pounds. The Hindermans grow mostly corn, plus some soybeans and oats. Their land stretches from the blufftop to within 500 feet of the Minnesota River.

When field tiles flood, water can back up and top the 30-year-old berm that sits about 1,500 feet from the river.

"It's pretty much open wounds yet from five years ago," said Hinderman, who has tried removing accumulated sediment from the basin in front of the berm. "We just can't get ahead of it."

Hahn visited the Hindermans' farm in January.

Landowner contact usually starts with a phone call, which might lead to a site visit. During that visit, Hahn discusses alternatives with landowners, and sees what might fit into their operation.

"They're still in control. They're still the ultimate decision-maker," Hahn said.

She had worked with the Hindermans a few years earlier on a manure storage facility. In January, they discussed the washouts, and talked about replacing a battered grove with a new windbreak.

Hinderman decided to pursue both, but he especially liked the idea of catching runoff and slowing it down higher up in the watershed.

"I felt like we actually had a good chance of coming out of it with something we felt would be the proper solution," Hinderman said of the site visit. "My dad and I know the lay of the land. We know where our issues are. You (might) have somebody else who comes out here and doesn't really listen to your issues or take your point of view into consideration. I just felt like when (Hahn) came out that we were on the same page and could get something finalized."

Now Hinderman is waiting to see the engineer's plans.

"If we're going to do it, it's going to be done correctly, and hopefully it should be something that should last for another 25, 30 years," Hinderman said.



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