

Communicating science pays off for RCWD



Matt Kocian, Rice Creek Watershed District lake and stream specialist, received the 2019 Outstanding Watershed District Employee award from Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources Executive Director John Jaschke on Friday, Dec. 6, during the MAWD annual conference at Arrowwood Resort & Conference Center in Alexandria. Photo Credit: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Rice Creek Watershed District lake and stream specialist Matt Kocian named 2019 Outstanding Watershed District Employee



It's one thing to understand lake and stream ecology. It's another to understand human expectations for conservation projects. Colleagues say Rice Creek Watershed District (RCWD) lake and stream specialist Matt Kocian excels at both, combining scientific expertise with people skills to produce conservation results for his community.

BWSR named Kocian the 2019 Outstanding Watershed District Employee on Dec. 6 in Alexandria during the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts' (MAWD) annual conference. During his 12 years at the RCWD, he's led high-profile district initiatives and developed strong relationships with local organizations to make meaningful change in a diverse watershed that includes rural and urban communities.

"Matt approaches each project with an objective for the resource and an awareness of the human factor," RCWD Administrator Nick Tomczik said. "He can translate very technical information into a language most residents can understand, and he is willing to learn from each interaction."

Tomczik said Kocian has worked to establish strong professional relationships with local media outlets by using humor, storytelling, research and science to inform and change behaviors in the watershed.

Kocian said one of the best parts of his job is working with community organizations such as lake associations.

"Working with a group that cares so much about

a water body and wants to do the right thing for it is rewarding,” Kocian said. “They’re putting in their own time to work on these projects, and you can tell how much they care about their resources.”

RCWD provided the following examples of Kocian’s work:

Carp management

Kocian provides regional and statewide leadership for an enterprising carp management plan that has resulted in a shrinking carp population in the watershed. The program involves radio-tagging carp to monitor behavior for management and removal, plus use of innovative low-voltage electric barriers that block migration and guide migrating fish into traps for removal; 40,000 pounds of carp were removed in the program’s first year. Read BWSR’s Clean Water Fund article on the project [here](#).

With the plan complete, Kocian now oversees carp management. RCWD staff has identified migration routes and is focusing on removal. “I think what I’ve learned more than anything about carp is you have to be flexible about your approach,” Kocian said. “Overall, we’re making steady progress.”

Middle Rice Creek meander restoration project

Kocian led an effort completed in 2016 to return a segment of Middle Rice



Matt Kocian, lake and stream specialist with Rice Creek Watershed District and recipient of BWSR’s 2019 Outstanding Watershed District Employee award, visited a remeandered segment of Middle Rice Creek in April 2018 when water levels were high. Photo Credit: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Creek once straightened to support agriculture to its natural state. This effort included restoring the creek’s historic meanders, stabilizing streambanks and improving habitat. The restored segment provides an enhanced recreational paddling route in addition to water quality benefits. Read BWSR’s Clean Water Fund article on the project [here](#).

“I’ve heard from people who paddle on Middle Rice Creek who are pretty happy with it,” Kocian said. “They’re happy with the way it looks, paddling is more fun, and we’re really happy with how its performing from a technical perspective.”

Bald Eagle Lake TMDL implementation project

Kocian implemented Minnesota’s largest aluminum sulfate treatment on Bald Eagle Lake from 2012-2016, one of three projects to improve water quality. The lake began meeting state water quality standards shortly after the three-part TMDL implementation project finished.

Each year, BWSR celebrates the excellent work accomplished by local government staff members who advance conservation efforts throughout the state. In addition to the award

for Outstanding Watershed District Employee, BWSR honors an Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee during the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts’ (MASWCD) annual conference in December.

“Local conservation staff are the driving force behind successful water quality improvement projects,” BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke said. “Matt Kocian’s dedication to preserving our water resources is commendable, and we appreciate all he does to protect and improve water quality in the RCWD.”