

Reaching out to restore, protect water

A new resource could guide local conservation staff seeking ways to achieve more robust and collaborative water restoration and protection.

[“Next Wise Steps for Engaging People in Southeast Minnesota Watershed Restoration and Protection,”](#) a recently released report, recommends four action areas. Clean Water Funds administered through a Minnesota

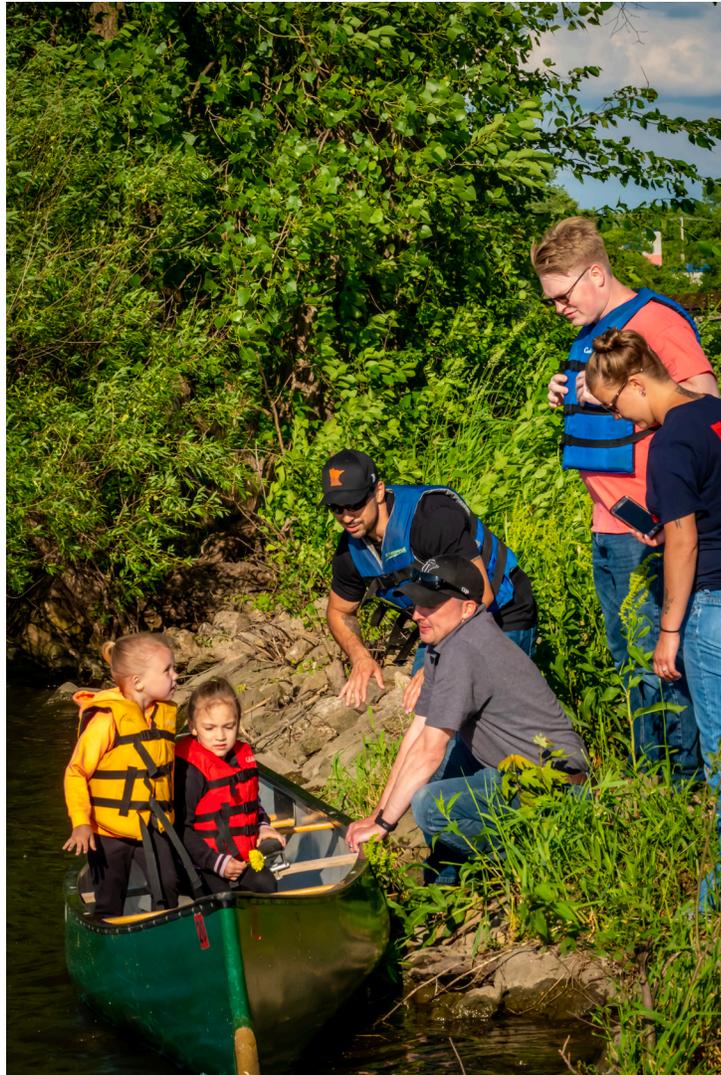


Pollution Control Agency contract with Winona County paid for the report, which drew from 21 interviews, watersheds’ outreach goals, and conversations with ag businesses, crop advisors and conservation staff.

Its recommendations are applicable statewide. The report includes specifics about what motivates people to act with soil and water in mind, what gets in the way, and how it’s possible to do better.

After reading 58 watershed plans directing work in southeastern Minnesota’s 11 major watersheds, report author Nancy North looked at engagement goals and charted action trends. Because most barriers to improving soil and water are social, not technical, she noted the ratio of engagement to on-the-ground conservation.

North, who has developed conservation-related marketing and websites, said she hoped the findings would spark



Cedar River Watershed District outreach coordinator Tim Ruzek, at center in gray shirt, helps a family in June 2019 during Austin’s annual 4th Ave Fest. CRWD teamed up with the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center to offer free canoe and kayak rentals on the Cedar River State Water Trail at Austin Mill Pond. More than 120 individuals paddled the river that evening.

Photos Courtesy Cedar River Watershed District

“ I noticed agriculture retail partners were rarely, if ever, at the table. ”

— Nancy North, report author

discussion among agencies, conservation staff and community partners. In the report, she noted emerging patterns of effective engagement. She posed questions to help staff discern what is needed, what is possible — and how everyone can benefit.

The report states: “Collectively, our next

wise step is do-able, and can be facilitated inside the conservation delivery system now, without radical change. It is to insert more professional communications and engagement technical services, staff training, and peer-to-peer learning strategically, at scale, into the good work already being done.”

The report elaborates on the following four action areas.

STAFFING OUTREACH AND

ENGAGEMENT: Accomplishing more outreach requires staff dedicated to that work, the report notes. Hiring

must be done strategically to meet needs; work should be results-oriented and cost-effective.

The report recommends training existing staff, and potentially adding professional communications and engagement staff if that need is identified. It suggests considering whether those needs are best met at the local, regional or state level.

Among the questions asked: Is it possible to more fully develop outreach by building upon existing resources such as BWSR Academy, regional BWSR training, the University of Minnesota Watershed Specialist Training program and peer-to-peer learning?

SHARING SERVICES: Work could be coordinated to meet the needs of more than one office. Interviewees mentioned shared services as an option, North noted in the report. Among their suggestions: Coordinate decisions, resources, tasks, trainings, communications and outreach tools and support to lower the cost.

Among the questions asked: “How can staff expertise be more readily and regularly shared, so others succeed and momentum increases?”

BUILDING COMMUNICATIONS ASSETS: Building and maintaining communications and engagement assets extends to digital tools and related maintenance, relevant training and outreach leadership capacity. Leaders interviewed stated the need for clear, engaging communications and help developing, distributing and maintaining them. Leadership, speaking and organizational training was among their requests.



Ruzek uses an interactive watershed- demonstration table in April 2019 during an annual visit to teacher Arik Andersen’s English Language Learners at Austin High School. Ruzek uses the model to show some of the ways a community can negatively affect water quality — including through residential, agricultural, recreational, industrial, roadway and construction uses.

Among the questions asked: “Which outreach assets are needed by all major watersheds? Which needs can be met with localized templates? How are important digital tools maintained and kept up to date?”

TARGETING OUTREACH: Targeted outreach would meet the needs outlined in watershed plans. To effectively target conservation work to local priorities — which the shift to comprehensive watershed management requires — it’s necessary to support that on-the-ground work with outreach. The report noted small staffs, large workloads, unpredictable funding and inadequate training made it difficult to deliver.

Among the questions asked: “Who is best prepared to design, model and teach staff how to host events that effectively engage citizens as catalysts? What two simple steps can be taken to intentionally educate local government elected officials and staff about Minnesota’s water management framework?”

Tim Ruzek, the Mower SWCD-based outreach

coordinator for the Cedar River Watershed District, developed a public outreach program for Mower SWCD.

Ruzek earned a degree in journalism, worked as a newspaper reporter and was the communications representative for the Hormel Institute before he joined the district in 2016. At the SWCD, he connects people to the watershed by focusing on the beauty, fun and interesting aspects of the resource.

His widest-reaching effort likely comes from the 25 to 30 media releases he sends each year.

Ruzek also helped the Root River watershed transition through the One Watershed, One Plan program to a Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan. He designed a fact sheet about the plan, and serves as a communications and outreach resource for other watershed staff.

A watershed-wide outreach and communication strategy is underway in order to better align staff and resources with this aspect of conservation work.

At A Glance

Mower SWCD-based Tim Ruzek’s duties as outreach coordinator for the Cedar River Watershed District have included:

- Sending 25 to 30 news releases a year;
- Getting more than 600 fourth- through sixth-graders on the water, using state Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) funding to bring Wilderness Inquiry’s Canoemobile programming to town;
- Curating CRWD’s Facebook page, which has more than 1,800 followers;
- Organizing a weekly, river-based photo contest hosted on Facebook, which has drawn about 300 entries from about 50 photographers;
- Collaborating with a nature center to offer free canoe and kayak rentals, and with an art center to showcase watershed scenes.