

Shared SWCD staff, services improve efficiency



Engineer Wes Drake, second from right, uses GIS equipment to survey a wetland restoration project in East Otter Tail County in 2017. Drake provides services to three SWCDs, plus the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area. **Photo Credit:** East Otter Tail SWCD



Across Minnesota, 88 soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) oversee local natural resource management programs. Many operate with lean staffs: According to the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD), most SWCDs have fewer than six full-time employees. To serve Minnesota landowners efficiently and cost effectively, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) supports SWCDs sharing staff and services when appropriate to get the most out of specialized resources.

Specialized staff members include water planners, watershed coordinators and engineers.

“We should be asking what to do to make it work, and acknowledge things will continue to evolve,” said Darren Newville, East Otter Tail SWCD manager.

Here’s a look at how several SWCDs share staff and services to improve their operations.

One county, two SWCDs

In general, each of Minnesota’s 87 counties has one SWCD. An exception is in Otter Tail County, where one SWCDs serves the east and another serves the west.

Otter Tail County has the potential to be involved with eight separate watershed-based planning efforts. An alternative to the traditional project-by-project competitive grant process, watershed-based funding allows collaborating local governments to pursue solutions based on a watershed’s highest priorities.



Darren Newville is the manager for East Otter Tail SWCD. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR



Peter Mead is the administrator for Becker SWCD. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

The county's two SWCDs recognized a need for more staff to assist with watershed planning.

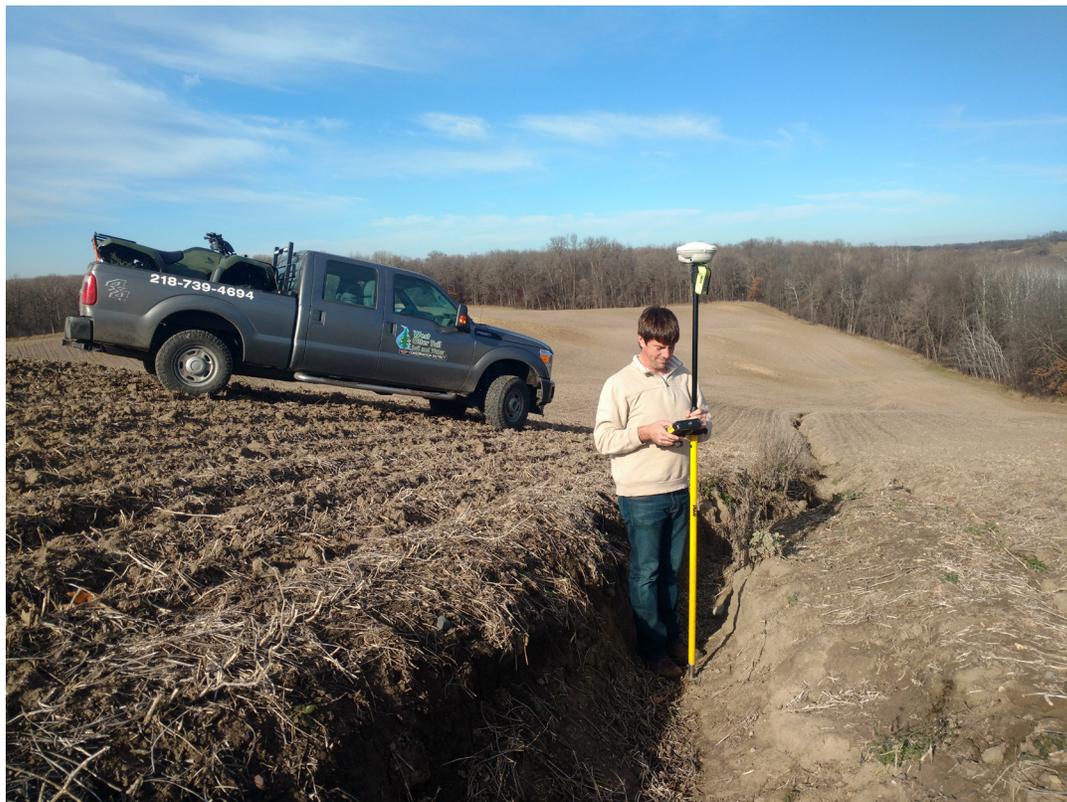
Ben Underhill was hired as a water planner and watershed coordinator for both SWCDs. Underhill writes grant applications, coordinates watershed-based planning activities with other counties and agencies, runs nitrate clinics and conducts water testing.

"It has been very beneficial to work with all these different watersheds. I'm able to learn from the successes and failures of one watershed, and take them to another watershed," Underhill said. "Having those connections across watershed boundaries enabled me to develop those relationships with other staff to comfortably be able to make suggestions and changes based on my other experiences."

Underhill said the arrangement takes more drive time, and more scheduled coordination among groups. But he said the benefits to both districts vastly outweigh the challenges.

One staff, two counties

East Otter Tail SWCD and Wadena SWCD share 12 staff with a range of specialties. All 12 work for both SWCDs. Their specialties include supervising, administrative and financial bookkeeping, forestry, agricultural inspection, irrigation and nutrient management, watershed coordination, shoreland protection, and oversight for the Minnesota



Wes Drake uses GIS equipment while working for West Otter Tail SWCD. Drake provides engineering services for Becker SWCD, East Otter Tail SWCD, West Otter Tail SWCD, and the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area. **Photo Credit:** West Otter Tail SWCD

Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP).

In 2015 the Wadena and East Otter Tail SWCD boards signed an agreement for shared staff. Their solution was to merge programs by merging staff. The agreement took effect in January 2016.

Newville said trust makes these shared services work. Both SWCD boards agreed to re-evaluate the arrangement regularly as their work evolves. Evaluation includes attending the partner SWCDs' board meetings, plus joint meetings every several years.

Three SWCDs, one engineer

Becker SWCD district engineer Wes Drake was

hired in fall 2016. In addition to those duties, he's contracted to serve East and West Otter Tail SWCDs. Each SWCD uses SWCD capacity funding provided by BWSR to contribute equally to pay his salary.

Becker SWCD Manager Peter Mead said the amount of time Drake spends at each SWCD fluctuates based on need, but Drake generally spends the most time working with West Otter Tail SWCD, followed by Becker SWCD and East Otter Tail SWCD. The counties share similar resource needs, such as large shoreland stabilization projects.

"The partnerships we have forged with the East Otter Tail and Becker Soil and

Water Conservation Districts have allowed the West Otter Tail SWCD to expand our conservation delivery approach to protect our precious natural resources here in Otter Tail County," said Brad Mergens, West Otter Tail SWCD manager.

In addition to his work with the three SWCDs, Drake spends 15% of his time on engineering work for the local Red River Valley Conservation Service Area, a joint powers board that provides assistance to private landowners.

"We all just have the understanding he's there when we need him," Mead said. "We have a pretty big shared sandbox and play rather well together."