

Trust + tech advance watershed plan

BWSR names Pennington SWCD's Peter Nelson the 2020 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee; co-workers praise communication skills, expertise as integral part of coordinating 1W1P



As Pennington SWCD's water plan coordinator, Peter Nelson, seen here in November 2019 at the SWCD office in Thief River Falls, also works with county shoreland zoning and septic system programs. He was named district manager in December 2020. **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

Pennington Soil & Water Conservation District colleagues describe Peter Nelson as trusted and technically skilled — attributes they say make him an effective SWCD water plan coordinator, county zoning contact, and watershed point person.



“Peter’s very capable technically, yet he has the ability to work with people and listen. He’s a very good listener,” said Bryan Malone, the longtime Pennington SWCD manager who recently accepted a new job. “Those two in combination make him a really good leader.”

Nelson’s leadership coordinating the Red Lake River watershed One Watershed,

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— Peter Nelson, Pennington SWCD

One Plan pilot project was among the accomplishments cited in his nomination for 2020 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee award.

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Executive Director John Jaschke presented Nelson with the award Dec. 15 during the Pennington SWCD Board of Supervisors monthly meeting, which was held virtually. Nelson attended from the SWCD office in Thief River Falls.

“You can count on Peter to get things done in a timely manner, and to the highest quality. Because of this and because he’s an overall great person, he has built many strong relationships,” BWSR Board Conservationist Matt Fischer wrote in the nomination.

Coordinating One Watershed, One Plan for the Red Lake River watershed involved working with three SWCDs, three counties and one watershed district. The comprehensive watershed management plan was finished in 2017. It was among five One Watershed, One Plan pilots throughout the state funded in 2014. Because Pennington, West Polk and Red Lake SWCDs, their respective counties, and the Red Lake Watershed District had worked together previously, planning went smoothly.

The nomination noted that Nelson’s willingness to listen was a key to easing tensions and finishing the Thief River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan this year.

“He shows empathy for what they’re going through and takes the time,” Malone said.

As an example, Malone recalled Nelson’s patience in working with a landowner from another county who had many questions. Nelson explained why communication is important at the start:

“There’s a lot of stakeholders involved through the One Watershed, One Plan process. Landowners are obviously a big part of that group,” Nelson said. “The more involvement ... and buy-in you can get from them during that planning process, I feel the better implementation (will) go. So the patience really comes from: Put in the time now, get their input, get their buy-in, and build trust in hopes that implementation will go better.”

Besides administering the SWCD’s water plan — which includes monitoring the county’s rivers and surveying for side-water



From left: Bryan Malone, Pennington SWCD manager at the time, Nelson and Zach Foley of Red River Valley Conservation Service Area examine the site of a Clean Water Fund-supported streambank stabilization Aug. 14, 2019, at Hartz Park in Thief River Falls.

Contributed Photo

inlets — Nelson works with county shoreland zoning and septic system programs. (Pennington County doesn’t have a separate environmental services department.) With the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, he’s working with the community to update floodplain maps. Federal programs such as EQIP (the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program), tap Nelson’s technical skills.

“His credibility is high because he’s from this area,” Malone said. “He understands the general attitude of the people around here, too. Those connections really help.”

Nelson grew up on a 50-cow dairy and small-grain farm northwest of Goodridge. He earned an environmental science degree with an applied public policy minor from Bemidji State University, and joined the SWCD in 2012.

“Peter is well respected by his board, co-workers, area SWCD employees, and other partners. He is an invaluable resource, and area employees

frequently glean information from him,” Pennington SWCD coordinator Barb Molskness wrote in the nomination.

The nomination was peppered with references to Nelson’s willingness to help. Malone elaborated on his involvement with conservation workers-in-training:

“We’ve had many apprentices through the Minnesota Conservation Corps, and he was instrumental in taking them out in the field with him and teaching them everything that he does. They had a valuable experience throughout the summer. Instead of sitting at the desk we tried to get them out as much as we could,” Malone said.

Nelson was on the SWCD Board agenda for another reason on Dec. 15: He accepted an offer to become the new Pennington SWCD manager, succeeding Malone, who took a job managing the Becker SWCD but was helping with the Pennington SWCD transition.

The 2020 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee award

was a surprise to Nelson.

“It’s just a big honor to receive the award. I’ve met a lot of district staff over the years. There’s just a lot of great SWCD employees, so it just makes it that much more meaningful, knowing how many great employees there are throughout the state,” Nelson said after the meeting. “Very unexpected.”

His day finished with a Red Lake River watershed One Watershed, One Plan meeting with Fischer.

“It’s unfortunate that he didn’t get to have this award presented to him in front of hundreds of people like he deserves, to get the proper recognition, but we do the best we can,” Malone said.

Each year, BWSR celebrates the excellent work of local government staff members who advance conservation efforts throughout the state. In addition to the Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Employee award, BWSR honors an Outstanding Soil and Watershed District Employee at the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts’ (MAWD) annual conference in December.