

# Mississippi headwaters collaboration



Across five counties in north-central Minnesota, watershed-based implementation funding supports shared staff and services, including an expanded soil health program. Landowners gain access to equipment, financial incentives and technical assistance — which lowers the risks of experimenting with cover crops and no-till.



A partnership between Clearwater and Beltrami soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) spurred by the Mississippi Headwaters watershed One Watershed, One Plan process will provide additional staff capacity to five partner SWCDs and help landowners in the associated counties implement soil health practices.

In 2015, Clearwater SWCD leveraged an \$89,845 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to launch the Agricultural Stewardship Program (ASP), which makes no-till drill rentals available to landowners interested in exploring soil health practices. The program also offers per-acre payments and technical assistance to participating landowners. Chester Powell, program technician and

**Powell**

water plan coordinator for Clearwater SWCD, said three landowners and two farming co-ops have purchased no-till drills based on their positive experiences with the program. The ASP has assisted 85 landowners since the program launched.

During the Mississippi Headwaters watershed's One Watershed, One Plan process, partners discussed the potential to share services and expand Clearwater's ASP program into Cass, Beltrami, Hubbard and Itasca counties. The watershed includes more than 580 farms, most located in the western part of the watershed. Agriculture accounts

**Above:**  
*Landowners in five north-central Minnesota counties can rent no-till drills through the Clearwater SWCD's Agricultural Stewardship Program. The drills can also be used to plant cover crops.*

**Photo Credit:**  
Clearwater SWCD

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— Zach Gutknecht, Beltrami SWCD clean water specialist

for about 10% of land use within the watershed. BWSR's board approved the Mississippi Headwaters Watershed Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan in September 2021.

When it became available, Clearwater SWCD tapped Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) to make seasonal staff member Kaleb Buesing a permanent full-time employee, and to expand incentives available to landowners. Buesing now provides technical assistance to landowners throughout the watershed. No-till drill rentals and related technical assistance and financial incentives are now available to landowners watershed-wide.

A \$861,581 WBIF grant from BWSR supports the collaboration. The grant targets four resource issues identified in the Mississippi Headwaters Watershed Comprehensive Management Plan, including soil health implementation; \$289,517 of the grant is earmarked for the ASP and related technical assistance. The WBIF funding also can be used to train SWCD staff throughout the watershed by helping them obtain Job Approval Authority, which can enhance their ability to

provide technical assistance to landowners. JAA is a credentialing system for planning, designing and installing standard conservation practices.

“With watershed-based implementation funds, we were able to expand that (ASP) outside our county and assist other counties instead of our neighbors hiring staff and starting programs from scratch,” Powell said. “We’ve had great working relationships with the other four counties, and they’ve entrusted us to expand this program into their counties.”

Here’s how it works: Landowners can rent one of two no-till drills (which are also able to plant cover crops) through Clearwater SWCD for \$14 an acre. SWCD staff members deliver and calibrate the drill and walk behind it during planting to ensure the equipment is being used effectively. Staff provide recommendations about fertilizer types and answer landowners’ questions. After planting is complete, landowners qualify for a \$40 an acre incentive payment through the ASP. The drills are rented on a first-come, first-served basis.

Clearwater SWCD staff members schedule drill rentals and provide technical assistance to landowners. Beltrami SWCD serves as the program’s fiscal agent.

“We see this as a steppingstone for a lot of folks to start doing these conservation practices,” said Zach Gutknecht, Beltrami SWCD clean water specialist. “I think the biggest benefit to our landowners is the ability to not have to take on all the risk when they’re changing their management styles. That can be the biggest barrier to landowners.”

Soil health practices such as reduced tillage and cover crops offer a range of conservation benefits, including sequestering carbon in the soil and reducing wind and water erosion.

“Another benefit to the producer is there’s a lot less time in the tractor, a lot less fuel burned, and a lot less time for the farmer to be working in the field,” Powell said of no-till.

Over the next two years, the partnership aims to engage 60 more landowners by implementing soil health practices on 1,600 acres

within the five counties.

“Ultimately, our goal is to cover as many acres as Mother Nature and time allow,” Powell said.

Gutknecht said the many benefits of shared staff and services include increased staffing capacity and the ability for SWCD staff to play to their strengths.

“We’re a small office in a large county, so shared services can help us tremendously,” Gutknecht said. “Being able to defer some of the agricultural stewardship work to Clearwater (SWCD), who specializes in those practices, is a big benefit. The same applies in reverse — if they have lakeshore work needs, they can send that our way because that’s our expertise.”

Powell said the collaboration that developed via the One Watershed, One Plan process strengthened relationships among SWCDs.

“It helps us get familiar with each other and develop those relationships, and we can bounce around ideas for other programs,” Powell said. “It’s helped expand those relationships, and that wouldn’t have happened without the One Watershed, One Plan Program.”