

Cultivating connections, cover in Lower Minnesota River West



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The Lower Minnesota River West Partnership is nearing the finish line on its first two-year Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) grant. The partnership in those two years surpassed its 10-year goal for cover crop signups.

The \$821,617 in WBIF dollars the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) made available to the partnership was critical in enrolling thousands of acres of cover crops in one- to three-year contracts, and in building a key sediment control project just outside Arlington.

Lower Minnesota River West's [One Watershed One Plan](#) (1W1P) was approved in March 2023. The grant runs through December, but work is



Sibley SWCD Manager Joel Wurscher, **top**, put into perspective a Watershed-Based Implementation Funding-supported project, **middle**, that replaced a failing drainage culvert, **bottom**, just outside Sportsman's Park in Arlington. The SWCD, High Island Creek Watershed District, city and township's solution will keep an estimated 86 tons of sediment out of High Island Creek annually. **Photo Credits:** Sibley SWCD



Left: A multi-species cover crop grows in Sibley County's Moltke Township. Within two years, the Lower Minnesota River West planning partnership enrolled 4,704 acres in cover crop contracts with 11 farmers. **Middle:** High Island Creek is seen in 2023 under low-flow conditions at the point where it outlets into the Minnesota River. The view is from the riverbank, looking toward High Island Creek. **Right:** The Minnesota River winds through a stretch of Sibley County between Henderson and Blakeley.

expected to wrap up sooner. This collaborative effort included the Sibley Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the High Island Creek Watershed District, plus Sibley County, and McLeod and Nicollet SWCDs and counties. As Sibley County comprises most of the watershed, the Sibley SWCD staff felt the pressure to deliver results.

“Right before we started with WBIF, I was extremely anxious and a little bit skeptical about the change,” said Sibley SWCD District Manager Joel Wurscher.

The watershed’s rich, clay loam soils are perfect for corn and soybeans. According to the [2022 Census of Agriculture](#), Sibley County ranked No. 11 out of 86 Minnesota counties where grains and oilseeds are grown. Because soil is a practically nonrenewable resource and agriculture is critical to the local economy, the partnership listed curbing excessive erosion among its highest conservation priorities.

Lower Minnesota River West’s 1W1P called for sowing 4,000 acres of cover crops or perennial vegetation. The plants anchor the soil with their roots, reducing the risk of soil loss from wind or

rain. Achieving this ambitious goal was a 10-year plan. The partnership accomplished it in two years, enrolling 4,707 acres in cover crop contracts with 11 different farmers.

“I did not see this happening in my crystal ball. I think we just had a perfect storm,” Wurscher said. “We had some operators that were interested — or on the fence. We held some very successful, well-attended events tailored to soil health practices, all while finally having the money to offer these folks incentives to give it a try.”

Outreach was [a key part](#) of Lower Minnesota River West’s strategy, as its WBIF allocated \$100,000 toward dedicated staff and programming. Two-thirds of the 104 attendees who participated in Lower Minnesota River West’s soil health-focused events were farmers.

Lower Minnesota River West’s cover crop policy offered farmers a suite of options. The largest cost-share payment required farmers to commit to a three-year, multi-species cover crop. If a producer committed to planting cover crops for more than one year, there was no limit on the number of acres that could

be enrolled. Eleven producers enrolled in 12 contracts. Five of the contracts were for three years; five involved multi-species mixes.

While cover crops were a major focus of the partnership’s first WBIF grant, strengthening the relationship among watershed partners was another.

One example is Project 7: a failing drainage culvert near the city of Arlington’s Sportsman’s Park, which contains a baseball field. The site was not only an eyesore but also a potent source of pollution as its banks gradually eroded and flowed into High Island Creek. Because High Island Creek eventually flows into the Minnesota River, downstream impacts extend beyond Sibley County.

The site was identified as a priority area in the partnership’s 1W1P, and WBIF funds unlocked a solution.

The Sibley SWCD and the High Island Creek Watershed District quickly came together with Arlington city and township leaders to plan the next steps. After the city of Arlington transferred ownership of a key parcel to the High Island Creek Watershed District, Lower

Minnesota River West worked with Houston Engineering for a unique solution.

By combining elements of a water and sediment control basin and a grade stabilization structure, the resulting design met Lower Minnesota River West’s ambitious water-quality goals while also meeting the needs of the High Island Watershed District.

A direct result of the efforts of Lower Minnesota River West and WBIF funding, which covered about 94% of the \$92,280 construction and design cost, that project will keep an estimated 86 tons of sediment, 615 pounds of phosphorus, and over 15 tons of nitrogen out of High Island Creek.

Now, with the next round of WBIF, the partnership plans to shift its focus to more structural projects such as Project 7.

“It has been a huge boost. Honestly, we wouldn’t have been able to accomplish one-fourth of what we have done without the help of WBIF funding,” Wurscher said. “I would hate to see where we would be without it.”

BWSR staff members write and produce *Snapshots*, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.