

With Watershed-Based Implementation Funding, partnerships focus on priorities



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Watershed-Based Implementation Funding is funded solely by the Clean Water Fund. WBIF grants support watershed planning partnerships throughout Minnesota.

Partnerships across Minnesota are using Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to address the most pressing conservation needs in watershed planning areas.

WBIF is a state funding model that funds projects in the highest priority areas in Minnesota's watersheds as identified in local comprehensive watershed management plans (CWMPs).

Local governments form planning partnerships to collaboratively write CWMPs through BWSR's One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) Program. These plans identify and prioritize resource concerns and locations in a watershed. Prioritization is based on water-quality monitoring data and other features of the watershed such as soil types, slopes, and land cover that do or could contribute to pollution risk. These data inform partnerships' decisions about where they will focus efforts to improve or protect water quality.

Once BWSR approves a plan, the partnership becomes eligible for WBIF. Partnerships can then use WBIF for water-quality activities outlined in their plans.

BWSR awards WBIF every two years to eligible planning partnerships. Since WBIF was first awarded in 2018, BWSR has distributed more than \$146 million to planning partnerships for plan implementation. To date, 54 partnerships with completed CWMPs have received funding. In addition, local governments in the Twin Cities metro area share WBIF to implement priority projects in plans developed under the metropolitan surface or groundwater management frameworks. WBIF is supported solely by the state's Clean Water Fund.

WBIF offers a consistent, reliable funding source to meet local conservation needs.

"Local governments need funding they can count on," said BWSR 1W1P Coordinator Julie Westerlund. "WBIF puts funding into the hands of local implementers who have a unique understanding of their communities' needs, giving them autonomy to pursue the most urgent projects within their watershed or planning area."

Once a grant is completed, BWSR uses a set of metrics called assurance measures to analyze how WBIF dollars were spent. For example, one metric examines the extent to which WBIF was spent in priority areas as designated in the plan. Westerlund

Left: The Missouri River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan aims to reduce nitrates entering water bodies such as the Rock River to protect local drinking water sources. **Photo Credit:** Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

Center: Native vegetation was installed as part of a shoreline restoration supported by WBIF at Lake Ossawinnamakee in Crow Wing County. **Photo Credit:** Crow Wing SWCD

Right: A WBIF-supported dam restoration project in Lyon County was completed in 2023. An upgraded dam and reinforced culvert are expected to function for at least 50 years. **Photo Credit:** Area II Minnesota River Basin Projects

said the assurance measures are one way to ensure accountability for dollars spent, and that the majority of partnerships are meeting expectations for focusing implementation in the places where it's needed most.

Members of three planning partnerships that have excelled in geographically focusing their implementation shared their experiences working with WBIF.

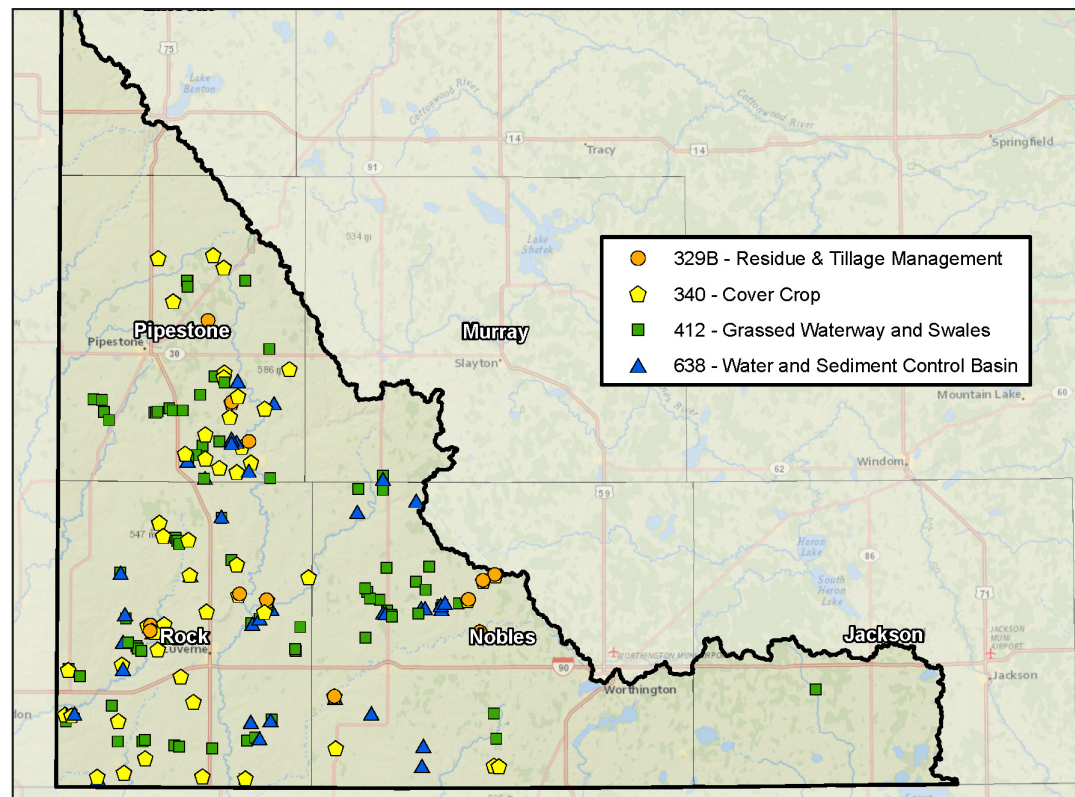
Pine River Watershed Planning Partnership

Located in central Minnesota, the Pine River watershed planning area covers more than 500,000 acres and contains more than 500 lakes. It includes Cass, Crow Wing, and Aitkin counties, plus a small section of Hubbard County.

Local government staff from Cass and Crow Wing soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) and their associated counties led the effort to produce the Pine River Watershed CWMP, which BWSR approved in September 2019. The partnership received its first WBIF award in May 2020, and has received a total of \$1.72 million to pursue plan priorities.

According to Crow Wing SWCD Manager Melissa Barrick, the partnership has tapped WBIF for a range of priorities including soil health practices, shoreline protection, stream restoration, forestry planning, manure pit closures and rain garden installations.

Cass SWCD Conservation Manager Dana Gutzmann said that in addition to funding projects, WBIF has



The Missouri River Planning Partnership developed a scoring and ranking process to ensure funding goes to priority locations within the planning area. Using this approach, the partnership has completed nearly 200 projects to date, including 82 grassed waterways, 53 cover crop transitions, 38 water and sediment control basins and 12 residue and tillage management projects. Map Credit: Rock SWCD

also supported valuable outreach efforts such as hosting events and sending targeted mailings to landowners in high-priority areas.

“While broad public engagement is still important and something we continue to do, we now have the ability to target specific property owners with outreach about the voluntary conservation programs we offer and can help implement,” Gutzmann said. “These comprehensive watershed plans also guide our conversations with landowners. They allow us to explain the importance of water quality practices in their area, present specific goals from the plan, and collaborate on strategies that align both with landowner interests and our conservation objectives.”

The Pine River watershed contains relatively few impaired waters compared with other areas of the state. Because of this, Barrick said the planning partnership has prioritized protecting existing resources at risk of becoming impaired. During planning, the partners used data to identify 19 lakes to protect and restore initially. Barrick said the data helped the partnership develop a lake prioritization matrix to ensure funding goes to the places that need it the most.

“Our No. 1 focus is protection,” Barrick said. “The WBIF has provided a more even playing field for protection and being concerned about waters that are not impaired. Before WBIF, we were focused more on waters that weren’t meeting state

requirements. By protecting the land around these lakes and rivers, we are helping to maintain clean, swimmable and drinkable water for future Minnesotans. These water bodies are also very significant to the local economy and the local tax base. This WBIF is helping to ensure that forests, wetlands, groundwater and shorelines stay intact and alleviate increased development pressures around these lakes and along these communities.”

In addition to focusing on protection, the group used WBIF to purchase a no-till drill that area producers can rent, making soil health practices accessible without requiring farmers to invest in costly equipment. WBIF has also supported chloride reduction training to help reduce negative impacts from winter salting activities.

Missouri River Planning Partnership

In the southwest corner of the state, the Missouri River watershed planning area includes eight lakes and more than 20,000 acres of wetlands. It includes all or portions of Rock, Pipestone, Nobles, Jackson, Lincoln and Murray counties.

Local government staff from participating counties, their associated SWCDs and two watershed districts (the Kanaranzi-Little Rock and the Okabena-Ocheda) participated in the planning process. BWSR approved the Missouri River CWMP in 2019 and awarded its first WBIF grant in 2020. The partnership received two additional grants from BWSR in 2022 and 2024, bringing the total WBIF for the planning area to approximately \$5.3 million.

Rock SWCD Assistant Director Doug Bos said WBIF has supported nearly 200 projects to date, including 82 grassed waterways, 53 cover crop transitions, 38 water and sediment control basins and 12 residue and tillage management efforts. These projects address priorities identified in the Missouri River CWMP such as reducing nitrates in drinking water, improving soil health, improving water quality in lakes and streams, and reducing phosphorus and associated algal blooms in lakes.

The partnership developed a scoring and ranking process to ensure funding goes to priority locations. Bos said the first round of funding was used to address a backlog of structural projects. With the following two grants, staff began to pursue more in-field

practices that improve soil health.

"I think we've got a good balance right now between soil health and structural practices," Bos said. "Some of these soil health practices we put in place have been improving yields and helping us deal with extreme storm events. When we can start to put things out in the field, hold some of that water back in the soil profile itself, we can mitigate some of these problems."

While planning on a watershed level requires time and cooperation, Bos said the results have been worthwhile.

"It takes more effort and time to come together and find consensus, but the decisions at the end are much better. You get better buy-in," Bos said.

Bos said the benefits of a watershed-based funding model are clear: Rock SWCD staff members are now saving time they used to spend applying for competitive grants. Plus, the consistent source of funding has helped the SWCD to retain staff.

"It's helped our employees know we have funding long term, and that's helped us train and keep good staff," Bos said. "To me, WBIF is a really fair and equitable way to distribute state dollars. We're more focused, and we have that priority area we can focus the dollars towards to make a difference."

Yellow Medicine One Watershed, One Plan Partnership

Just north of the Missouri River planning area,

partners from four counties and their associated SWCDs, the Yellow Medicine River Watershed District and Area II Minnesota River Basin Projects (Area II) worked together to produce one of the state's first CWMPs. BWSR approved the Yellow Medicine CWMP in 2016.

The partnership received one of the first WBIF grants in April 2017, while the funding model was in a pilot phase. It's received a total of approximately \$3.8 million in WBIF administered by the Yellow Medicine River Watershed District. Funded projects include grassed waterways, water and sediment control basins, wetland restorations, grade stabilizations and nonstructural practices such as cover crops and reduced tillage.

The Yellow Medicine planning area includes more than 665,000 acres of highly productive agricultural land, which accounts for 79% of the area. The planning area also includes nearly 1,700 miles of streams and ditches, and 16,000 acres of lakes.

Many of the priorities identified in the Yellow Medicine CWMP focus on erosion concerns related to the area's topography. The plan identifies priorities such as reducing crop loss due to bank erosion, protecting infrastructure from flooding, reducing groundwater contamination and improving soil health.

"I think the climate is also part of it," said Kerry Netze, Area II executive director. "The landowners can easily see the damage to their fields and the need for best management practices, especially with

more frequent and more significant rainfalls on the rise."

Lincoln SWCD Manager Dale Sterzinger said cooperation among partners and landowners has been key to the partnership's success in addressing priority resource concerns.

"Historically, the interest in voluntary conservation from farmers was there, but the funding was not," Sterzinger said. "Being able to make decisions about which projects to fund at the local level has provided a flexibility that was not previously available with other funding sources."

The partners use a local scoring and ranking system, evaluating each potential project against the priority issues and locations in the plan to ensure WBIF only goes to priority areas.

Yellow Medicine River Watershed District Administrator Michelle Overholser said the partnership is now embarking on its first plan update; the original plan is set to expire next year.

"Currently, we are compiling all our results. We take data from the most recent WRAPs (Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies) and modeling data to compare our actual reductions to our goals," Overholser said. "Having good data will be key in updating the plan. It will tell us the impact we've made, help us identify areas that should continue to be priority areas, or help us choose new priority areas."

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