

Benton and Morrison SWCDs, USFWS partnership drives wetland restorations



From left: Morrison SWCD technician Nathan Sanoski and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service private lands biologist John Riens discussed the project overview and scope of work for a wetland restoration project with a Benton County landowner. **Photo Credits:** Grayson Smith, USFWS



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Wetland restoration work in Morrison and Benton counties was funded in part by the Clean Water Fund.

In central Minnesota, a partnership among the Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), Benton SWCD and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is quietly changing how wetland restorations are completed. Landowner interest is increasing as a result.

“We’ve never advertised this wetland restoration effort,” said Nathan Sanoski, Morrison SWCD technician. “Once we started going, it was all word of mouth. Landowners started talking, neighbors saw what was getting done, which led to new landowners calling or stopping by the office to see if anything could be done on their property.”

That growing landowner demand has helped expand the partnership and accelerate the work among the Morrison SWCD, Benton SWCD and USFWS’ Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, supported in part by funding from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

What began as a local collaboration has grown into a regional model that has restored more than 200 wetlands across central Minnesota, including more than 580 acres in Benton and Morrison counties in recent years. Additional work is underway in surrounding counties.

The partnership took shape in 2017, when Sanoski and USFWS





Left: USFWS private lands biologist John Riens (left) and Morrison SWCD technician Nathan Sanoski inspected a wetland restoration project in Benton County that was completed in 2025. **Middle:** Riens (right) installed polyvinyl sheet piling for the primary spillway on a wetland restoration project in Benton County with a local contractor. **Right:** Riens (standing) discussed the hybrid cattail scraping for a wetland restoration project in Benton County with a local contractor.

private lands biologist John Riens began working together to find a faster, less complicated way to complete wetland restorations.

Projects range from restoring wetlands at former beaver dam sites to restoring wetland basins to bring back natural water storage in areas no longer actively farmed but once drained, and improving sites affected by past drainage, including ditching.

“It doesn’t take an elaborate, engineered plan to get these done, and the building material is usually always on site,” Sanoski said. “So we can move them relatively quick that way ... get them done within the year.”

Sanoski is often the first point of contact. His conversations with landowners who have questions about drainage, ponds or permits might lead to discussions about wetland restoration. Riens leads the wetlands design and planning process.

Together, they visit potential restoration sites and walk through options with landowners, develop plans and cost estimates, handle permitting

requirements, coordinate bids with local contractors and oversee construction.

“Nathan and I do a great deal of work together and keep the bureaucracy behind the scenes,” Riens said. “We take on different tasks so that we can do more, supporting landowners at every stage. ... When we present this opportunity to participate it’s an easy yes.”

As projects began to take shape, interest quickly spread from neighbor to neighbor.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen a true snowball effect happening with conservation,” Riens said.

“We saw a pattern in large operators being pressured by their local neighbors to also do these restorations. Now we have those same operators calling us,” Riens said.

Sanoski and Riens are currently working with about two dozen Morrison County landowners on about 45 projects to restore nearly 130 acres. Interest continues to grow, with a waiting list of more than 40 landowners, representing well over 100 additional potential wetland restorations.

Riens said Benton County saw similar levels of interest and restoration, where Sanoski helped build the foundation for this approach before moving to Morrison SWCD in April 2025.

While some landowners are initially drawn to the wildlife habitat benefits, the restorations also help to reduce downstream flooding and increase water storage.

“We’re getting more water back on the landscape, more storage, more water retention to help with drainage systems, better water quality and groundwater recharge,” Sanoski said.

In Benton County, wetland restoration projects led in part by Benton SWCD over a three-year period have added more than 144 million gallons of water storage back to the landscape, helping to slow runoff and reconnect natural hydrology.

In some cases, wetland restoration work can also enhance agricultural productivity.

“Some of these producers are actually taking that soil, we call it ‘black gold,’ and applying it back onto certain areas of their

fields to help increase nutrients, microbial activity and organic matter for their crop production,” Sanoski said.

Most project funding goes directly into construction. Local contractors often complete that work, which keeps conservation dollars in the community.

Behind each project is a coordinated effort to bring together multiple funding sources.

Support from BWSR, including Clean Water Funds, Conservation Delivery grants, Conservation Contracts Program grants and emerging peatland initiatives, plays a key role. Additional funding comes from the USFWS’ Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Nature Conservancy and private partners.

Project costs can range from \$500 to \$7,000 per acre, depending on the site. Funding sources vary by project, but partners work together to combine available resources, often covering up to 75% of project costs. The 25% landowner portion is not entirely an out-of-

pocket expense and can include in-kind services they provide, along with certain materials for the project.

“This is all a cohesive effort,” Reins said.

“We’re looking at the landowner’s best interest and goals,” Sanoski said. “We’re just a piece of the puzzle to help make that a reality. In a lot of cases, it

might be the landowner’s first time working with the district. After building that relationship and trust with these landowners, often time leads to the landowner looking into other conservation practices, program opportunities and working with other partners to see what else can be done on the property to achieve their goals and resource concerns.”

That approach carries through every step of the process.

“When we go talk to a landowner, I’m John and he is Nathan, I’m not Fish and Wildlife, and he’s not Soil and Water,” Riens said. “We’re just people trying to do things together. It’s the way this works.”

Additional projects using

this partnership model are underway in Todd, Mille Lacs, Kanabec, Sherburne, Chisago and Pine counties, with similar approaches being explored in other parts of the state representing hundreds of acres to be completed this year.

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