

# PRAP grant helps Red Lake Watershed District assess strengths and opportunities



**Left:** The Spring Gravel Dam project in Polk County at the headwaters of Burnham Creek is one example of projects the Red Lake Watershed District pursues to meet local water quality goals. The project installed rock riffles to stabilize the streambank after a washout. **Top right:** District staff members (from left) Lindsey Deselich, Corey Hanson, Tony Olson, Erick Huseuth, Tammy Audette, Melissa Bushy, Nate Koland and Elaine Rychlock were among the people surveyed as part of the PRAP assessment process. **Bottom right:** District board members (clockwise from top left) Tom Anderson, LeRoy Ose, Grant Nelson, Allan Page, Terry Sorenson, Gene Tiedemann and Brian Dwight also participated in the survey process.

Photos courtesy of Red Lake Watershed District

THIEF RIVER FALLS – The Red Lake Watershed District (RLWD) is using a Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to survey residents, partners, board and staff about the RLWD’s existing programs, strengths and weaknesses.

The effort comes at a time of transition and reflection for the district.

“I’ve only been in this role three years now as administrator,” said RLWD Administrator Tammy Audette, who has been with the district for 38 years. “I’ve got a lot of new staff. We’ve got two new board members.”

The assessment aims to ensure the district is moving in the right direction.

“I don’t want to be doing things just because that’s the way we’ve always done them. That’s not right,” Audette said. “Maybe we need to broaden our ideas and think differently.”

RLWD Board Member Brian Dwight said the process is designed to evaluate how the organization functions internally and externally.

“It gives us the opportunity to hear what we’re doing good and where we’re maybe missing the mark,” Dwight said.

BWSR awarded the district a \$10,000

PRAP grant in January. The RLWD anticipates contributing about \$4,500 in staff and board time.

District staff and board members met several times with Houston Engineering to develop a tailored survey and outreach approach for three separate groups: residents, partners, and internal staff and board members.

Staff and board surveys and interviews were conducted in early April, followed by broader outreach to partners and residents later that month. Selected partners and residents completed follow-up phone interviews. Responses were submitted directly to the consultant to encourage open and honest feedback. A summary report was expected later this spring.

Dwight said using an outside facilitator helps people feel more comfortable providing candid feedback.

The district's outreach effort included 226 residents and 76 partners. Outreach included local governments, schools, engineering firms, non-governmental organizations, state and federal agencies, township officials, county commissioners and landowners involved in project work teams. Outreach also included Red Lake Nation staff; a portion of the Red Lake Watershed District is within the Red Lake Reservation.

The watershed spans nearly 6,000 square miles across northwestern Minnesota. It includes all



**Top:** One of the district's primary activities for its One Watershed, One Plan work is stabilizing eroding streambanks in the Red Lake River, Clearwater River and Thief River. Toe-wood sod mat stabilization was installed along the Thief River in 2024, with vegetation established the following year. **Bottom:** Local agencies and artistic volunteers completed storm drain stenciling as part of a stormwater treatment project designed to help protect drinking water for the City of Thief River Falls. The project was substantially completed in 2025.



of Red Lake County, most of Pennington County, and parts of Mahnomon, Polk, Itasca, Marshall, Clearwater, Beltrami, Roseau and Koochiching counties.

"We sent (the survey) to every township in our watershed ... it was quite the process," Audette said.

The survey was also sent to people who may have had little or no interaction with the RLWD. Dwight said those results can show if residents understand the district's role and responsibilities or if additional public outreach may be needed.

The surveys evaluated communication, partnerships, organizational

effectiveness and program delivery. They asked what the district is doing well and where improvements could be made. For example, partners were asked how they would rate their partnership with the district and why, how effective communication has been, and how coordination or collaboration could be improved. Residents were asked how familiar they were with the watershed district, what they believed its responsibilities were, and whether they had been affected by any district projects.

Early responses are already providing insight, particularly around awareness.

"A lot of people don't

understand what a watershed is," Audette said. "We need to make the public aware of what we are, or who we are and what we can do."

The district plans to use findings to refine priorities, improve communication and guide decision-making. Information gathered through the surveys will guide strategic planning, help refine goals and priorities, enhance internal and external communication, and strengthen engagement with residents, partners and stakeholders. The district also plans to develop actionable next steps based on the findings to help guide future efforts.

Audette emphasized that she welcomes constructive feedback as part of the process.

"Is there something we're doing wrong? I want to know," Audette said.

Dwight said the board views the assessment as an opportunity to strengthen the organization and better support staff, partners and the public.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure the district is aligned with community needs and expectations while building a stronger organization.

"We're working on taxpayers' money ... and they need to know what we are doing," Audette said.

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