

Local expertise, statewide impact: Minnesota's Technical Service Areas



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Fund AT WORK

The Clean Water Fund is the sole funding source for BWSR's Enhanced Technical Assistance Program, which provides annual grants to TSAs. The Clean Water Fund also supports TSAs via Watershed-Based Implementation Funding and competitive grants.

A steady influx of Clean Water Funds delivered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to Minnesota's 88 soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) over the past eight years is helping to put more conservation projects on the ground. But as the scope of SWCDs' work has continued to expand, staffing levels have largely remained the same.

Technical Services Areas (TSAs) are helping to fill the gaps created by this increased workload during the state's transition to a watershed-based funding model. Minnesota's eight TSAs offer specialized engineering assistance, technical expertise, mentorship and training to member SWCDs.

"TSAs provide stability," said Jerad Bach, district manager for Blue Earth SWCD and manager for the South Central Technical Service Area (TSA 6). "It would be tough for each SWCD to hire their own full-time engineer with fluctuating workloads and needs, so having engineering assistance available from the TSA is a big benefit."

According to a BWSR survey, in 2025 Minnesota's eight TSAs helped to implement 252 projects, completed 819 site visits and contributed to 348 conservation plans.

"It's hard to overstate the value that TSAs bring to the table. They add value and expertise statewide," said Justin Hanson, BWSR assistant director for regional operations. "Their specialized services really show up when there is a crisis or emergency response from flood flow rain events. When you need an immediate response to fix complex problems, TSAs provide that expertise."

TSAs were first authorized in 1994 by the state legislature as a component of the State Revolving Fund Loan Program, which leverages U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) funds to offer low-interest loans to landowners and others for nonpoint pollution abatement projects. At the time, local governments identified engineering and accelerated technical assistance as critical needs for program implementation. In response, the legislature appropriated funding from the state's general fund to BWSR to create the Non-Point Engineering Assistance Program (NPEA). These funds were then used by 11 joint powers boards throughout the state to provide engineering assistance to member SWCDs.

Engineering assistance was the sole focus of the NPEA until 2003, when a committee comprised of SWCD supervisors from the 11 joint powers

TSAs employees met with landowners and regional SWCD staff to discuss options for conservation project implementation.

Photo Credits:
South Central Technical Service Area (TSA 6)



Ethan Bachmann, a Becker SWCD engineering technician working on behalf of TSA 1, surveyed the site of an unused agricultural waste facility in Otter Tail County in June. The site is being prepared for closure as part of a project identified as a priority in the Otter Tail River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan developed via BWSR's One Watershed, One Plan program. **Photo Credit:** Becker SWCD

boards met to discuss potential consolidation and recommended revising the name to Technical Service Areas (TSAs) to encourage including technical services beyond engineering. In 2009, the original 11 boundaries were revised, reducing the number to eight TSAs that aligned with Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) area boundaries.

Today, the eight TSAs house a combined 26 full-time employees who assist member districts as needed.

TSAs draw from multiple funding sources. Each TSA relies on two annual grants from BWSR: A \$127,500 NPEA grant and a \$242,500 Enhanced Technical Assistance Program grant.

Those appropriations are rarely enough to cover costs, leading TSA managers to tap other funding sources such as Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) from BWSR, SWCD member dues or federal grants. BWSR survey data show that in addition to the NPEA and Enhanced Technical Assistance

Watershed-Based Implementation Funding

Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) is a state funding model that targets the highest priority projects 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 Program or the Metropolitan Surface or Ground Water Management framework. Once BWSR approves a plan, the partnership becomes eligible for WBIF, which is awarded by BWSR biennially. Planning partnerships use WBIF to pursue projects based on a watershed's greatest needs.

Program grants, TSAs leveraged a combined \$1.8 million last year in local, state and federal dollars to help complete projects.

"The funding we get through the NPEA and technical assistance program is not adequate to fully fund those TSA staff positions for the work they do," said Bryan Malone, district administrator for Becker SWCD, the host district for the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area (TSA 1) in the northwest region of the state. "WBIF is making up the difference right now, being used to pay for survey design, inspections, the type of work that needs to be done to get a project implemented."

Bach echoed the need for increased, reliable TSA

funding.

"The biggest issue facing our TSA right now is, how do you fund this mechanism?" Bach said.

"Clean Water Funds that support annual TSA grants are not a guaranteed funding source," Hanson said. "It will be important for them to have funding sources that support the specialized staff that deliver those essential services."

Structures and staffing approaches vary among the TSAs. Some TSA staff are employed by member SWCDs; others are employed by the TSA itself. For example, TSA 6 employs five full-time employees within the TSA organization. The Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area (TSA 5) has three staff, each

employed by the TSA but housed in different member SWCD offices (in Lincoln, Murray and Rock counties). TSA 5 Administrative Coordinator Kay Gross said this approach has helped keep engineering expertise available across the 11 member SWCDs.

"Our TSA is an extension of our member SWCDs, and that's how we like it," Gross said. "The engineering staff is there to assist and get these projects on the ground faster."

For many years, TSA 1 relied on in-house employees to assist its 16 member districts. In 2023, the organization was [restructured](#) so TSA staff are employed by member districts. The restructuring was prompted by a workload analysis TSA 1 completed using a \$27,514 Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant from BWSR.

"That workload analysis showed that we need twice the engineering staff we have now to reach our One Watershed, One Plan goals," Malone said.

The reorganization effort

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— Bryan Malone, Becker SWCD district administrator



split the TSA into two regional work pods to streamline project requests: North pod engineers serve Kittson, Mahnomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, East and West Polk, Red Lake and Roseau SWCDs while south pod engineers assist Becker, Grant, East and West Otter Tail and Traverse SWCDs.

“The sheer number of projects we’ve been able to complete these past few years is a reflection of the success of that reorganization and the ability to attract and retain excellent staff that are motivated and dedicated to serving the landowners through those SWCDs,” Malone said. “Our board is more engaged now. We emerged from that process reunited and with a new organizational structure

that allows us to do great things.”

TSAs primarily provide engineering services to their member SWCDs — but increasingly, TSA staff are offering additional support via training, assisting with conservation planning and hosting promotional events to raise awareness about district programs.

“The core work of TSAs is in engineering, but they’re also existing joint powers groups that can adapt to the needs of their districts,” Bach said. “Engineering has always consistently been the main focus, but other things get added on and off depending on demand.”

Gross said having TSA staff with advanced engineering expertise benefits staff at all member districts.

“The TSA staff act as mentors by walking local staff through processes and inspections,” Gross said. “It’s really a good teaching tool for young or newer staff, and a great review for more experienced staff.”

In 2025, TSAs delivered a combined 1,136 training hours to local government staff on topics such as soil health, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and water quality improvement practices.

“Without the TSA staff, our training abilities would be greatly reduced,” Malone said. “They’re helping build capacity for our SWCDs.”

With workloads continuing to rise, TSAs are seeking increased funding to meet local demand.

“I would say that essentially

for us, One Watershed, One Plan is driving the increase in workload,” Bach said. “There’s more money for implementation, so naturally that’s going to lead to more projects and more requests for engineering help.”

Gross said that more funding for TSAs would create local benefits beyond conservation implementation.

“It keeps dollars local, because we’re hiring local contractors to do this work,” Gross said. “Those jobs help sustain the whole area, so the money moving through is phenomenal in multiple ways.”

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