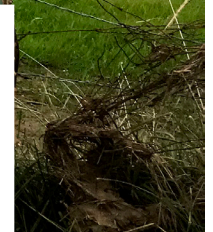


Conservation, cover crops & communication



At the Winona County SWCD, local capacity funds boost all 3. A new hire promotes cover crops; conservation multiplies with cost-share.



Top: This pond, a grade stabilization structure in the Whitewater River Watershed, was designed by Lance Klessig of the Winona County Soil & Water Conservation District, and built for Richard Ahrens in 2017, **center,** using local capacity and state cost-share funds. Klessig, **bottom,** showed off cover crops planted this summer. Local capacity funds support the new position. **Photo Credits:** Winona County SWCD



Cover crops are gaining ground through the Winona County Soil & Water Conservation District's (SWCD) discretionary use of local capacity funds, which allowed it to hire a resource specialist, provide cost-share and amp up outreach.

In an effort to build local capacity, the Minnesota Legislature since 2016 has provided \$11 million a year to Minnesota's 90 SWCDs. The SWCD staff has been putting that funding to good use by helping private landowners implement conservation practices to improve and protect water quality. Additionally, SWCDs have invested in new equipment and technology, increased community



engagement efforts, and hired technical and specialized staff.

Winona County SWCD staff recognized that getting conservation on the ground required relationships with landowners and mutually agreeable solutions to

resource concerns. So Winona County SWCD Manager Daryl Buck used local capacity funds to hire Lance Klessig, a resource specialist whose duties include landowner outreach.

“With Lance’s background and experience with our primary best management practices of grade stabilization structures, water and sediment control basins, diversions and grassed waterways, he was able to hit the ground running with landowners who were waiting for some assistance,” Buck said.

Klessig, a certified crop adviser, also brought new cover crop and soil health expertise to the SWCD.

Klessig helped farmers try no-till planting and develop nutrient management plans when he worked as a conservation planner based in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Most recently, as a Caledonia-based soil conservation technician with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), he surveyed, designed and constructed conservation practices.

“If we can see a significant increase in cover crop and soil health adoption in Winona County, we could not only see an improved bottom line for the landowners, but also may see a reduced need for some of the more costly structural BMPs,” Klessig said.

The Winona County SWCD is using a part of its local capacity funds to provide cost-share assistance to landowners for conservation implementation. Most grant funding is funneled through the SWCD for a specific program, priority or initiative. Local capacity funds allow the SWCD to dedicate dollars to locally identified conservation



Lance Klessig of Winona County SWCD and Dan Nath, a Natural Resources Conservation Service soil scientist, demonstrated a rainfall simulator Aug. 14 during Winona County SWCD’s 80th Anniversary Celebration. The SWCD used local capacity funds to help develop and promote the event. **Photo Credit:** Winona County SWCD

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— Lance Klessig, Winona County SWCD

needs and priorities.

The SWCD established a local cost-share program to help landowners establish cover crops. Together, they are prioritizing areas identified in the Winona County Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan, and the Root River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan.

One priority: Townships where at least 10 percent of private wells showed nitrate levels exceeding 10 milligrams per liter in the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s 2016 round of well testing. Levels above 10 mg/l are

considered unsafe to drink.

Interest in Winona County SWCD’s new cover crop program far exceeded funds available in 2017. That year, five landowners received cost-share to establish cover crops on 100 acres total. All five landowners went on to plant more than 500 acres total of additional cover crops without cost-share.

This fall 30-plus landowners are seeking cover crop cost-share and technical assistance from the SWCD.

The Winona County SWCD received an additional \$18,000 each year in 2017

and 2018 from the county through Local Capacity Services matching grants.

While the state evenly distributes \$9 million of the \$11 million among Minnesota’s 90 SWCDs, it makes the remaining \$2 million available through formula-based grants in counties that increase and sustain annual SWCD allocations.

Winona County SWCD staff has used that funding to augment outreach efforts with environmental education programs and activities.

The SWCD developed and advertised a program celebrating its 80th anniversary this summer.

Winona County’s was the first SWCD in the state. The August celebration featured a conservation bus tour that drew more than 50 people, a rainfall simulator, a Lego model of the Whitewater Watershed, a stream restoration tour and a program that drew more than 120 people.