



The Sauk River flows into the Mississippi River in Sartell. A Stearns Soil & Water Conservation District project leverages Clean Water Fund grant dollars to work with farmers on out-of-compliance feedlot fixes upstream. Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Clean Water Funds let Stearns SWCD fix more out-of-compliance feedlots

Targeted sites will improve water quality in Sauk River, chain of lakes

More farmers will bring feedlots into compliance in Minnesota's No. 1 dairy-producing county – cutting pollution to a Mississippi River tributary in the process – thanks to Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation



District staff's ability to leverage federal funds and provide technical assistance.

The SWCD is targeting the Top 5 contributors to the nutrient-impaired Sauk River and Sauk River Chain of Lakes. Sauk River Watershed District monitoring showed elevated phosphorous, sediment and bacteria levels. The SWCD typically takes on 10 to 20 feedlot projects a year.

A \$392,500 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources will allow the

SWCD to stretch its resources even further as it strives to eliminate contaminated feedlot runoff.

"Without these dollars, these farmers would have to go out and hire engineers to do the work for them. And with low commodity prices and low dairy prices, a \$15,000, \$20,000, \$25,000 engineering bill isn't something that they planned on their budget. So that's where we come into play," said Nathan Hylla, Stearns County SWCD project management supervisor.

The Stearns County SWCD staff of 19 includes specialty engineers who provide farmers with technical assistance for local, state and federal grants. In 2016, the SWCD received more than \$1 million in funding from Stearns County, nearly \$2 million from state sources and nearly \$4 million from federal sources.

"By having these funds available to have specialty engineering staff to help them, it's resulted in great



Dennis Fuchs



Nathan Hylla

improvements in water quality," Hylla said.

An average Stearns County feedlot fix results in annual reductions of about 20 pounds of phosphorus and

64 pounds of nitrogen, according to Minnesota Feedlot Annualized Runoff Model data. Those numbers can vary widely depending upon factors including the operation's size, setup and location.

SWCD Administrator Dennis Fuchs said one project might require 250 hours of technical assistance – including survey and design work, preconstruction, construction and inspection. During an initial visit, staff determine if construction is the best use of resources. Some producers are near retirement; others might scale back or switch from dairy to beef, for example.

“We’re working on the biggest bang-for-your-buck projects, and working down the list from there,” Hylla said.

The ranking system, based on the Minnesota Feedlot Annualized Runoff Model Index, considers which sites have the greatest potential to pollute surface waters or groundwater.

About 9 percent of Stearns County's 2,454 feedlots – 233 sites – were out of compliance in 2016.

“It’s not only helping the producer to conserve our natural resources, but it’s also got a big impact on the local communities and businesses that prosper with increased activity and improved water quality.”

– Dennis Fuchs, Stearns SWCD

Six years earlier, nearly 15 percent – 385 sites – were out of compliance, according to Becky Schlorf, Stearns County Environmental Services' ag and water resources division supervisor. Open-lot runoff was the most common issue, followed by unpermitted manure pits and a combination of the two. Stearns County staff

years ago inspected every feedlot, even those too small to trigger state inspection.

The cost of feedlot projects can range from \$50,000 for simple fixes to \$200,000 or more for new manure storage facilities.

Landowners who receive grant assistance pay 25 percent of the cost.

With federal Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program grants to cover construction, the SWCD can stretch other sources – such as Clean Water Fund grants, which can pay for engineering costs and for developing nutrient management plans.

SWCD staff expected 10 producers to sign up for federal grants this year for work next season; applications were due in August. Meanwhile, construction was under way on previously funded feedlot projects.

“In reality, we have 40 to 45 folks that are interested in pursuing a practice like this,” Hylla said.



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The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' mission is to improve and protect Minnesota's water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners.