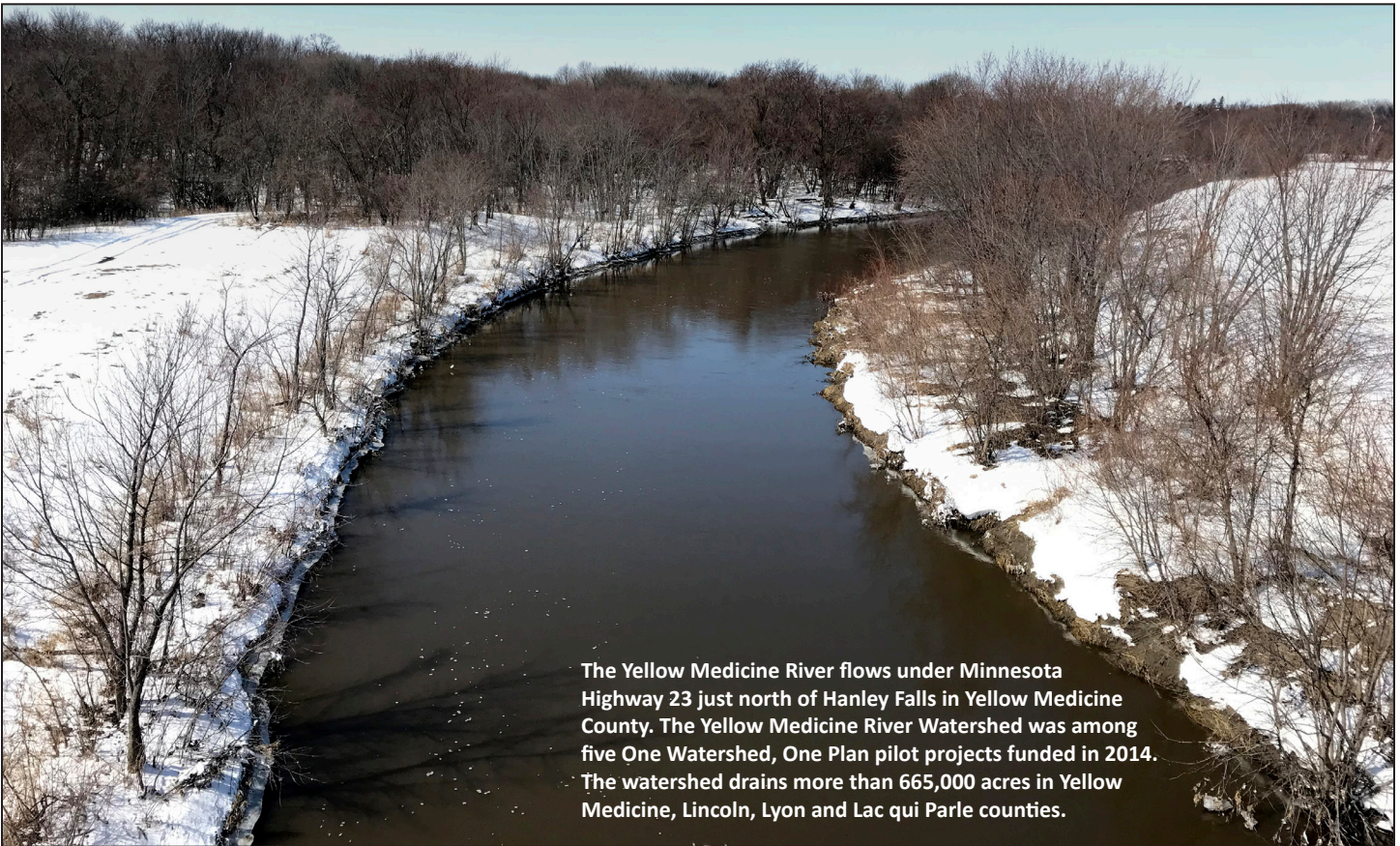


ONE WATERSHED, ONE PLAN



The Yellow Medicine River flows under Minnesota Highway 23 just north of Hanley Falls in Yellow Medicine County. The Yellow Medicine River Watershed was among five One Watershed, One Plan pilot projects funded in 2014. The watershed drains more than 665,000 acres in Yellow Medicine, Lincoln, Lyon and Lac qui Parle counties.

Leveraging funds, sharing expertise in the Yellow Medicine River Watershed

MARSHALL – In the Yellow Medicine River Watershed, upstream projects are gaining downstream support as One Watershed, One Plan catches on.



The locally driven, watershed-based approach spans political boundaries as it prioritizes conservation

work with the potential to make the biggest water-quality improvements.

A \$551,700 Clean Water Fund implementation grant allowed the Yellow Medicine



Knutson

River Watershed to leverage federal funds that will cut landowners' shared costs and put more projects on the ground.

The watershed drains land in four counties, from Lincoln County in the southwest to the Minnesota River south of Granite Falls in Upper Sioux Agency State Park.



Netzke

"If we're putting those practices in and the money in upstream, you're going to see benefits downstream," said Michelle Overholser, Yellow Medicine River Watershed District administrator.

Yellow Medicine County Commissioner Ron Antony, whose district lies in the



Overholser

middle of the watershed near Canby, agreed. Antony has phased out of full-time farming since his crop insurance business took off, but most of his constituents are farmers.

"The watershed isn't just isolated to our county. As projects are being done upstream, it's ultimately going to help us downstream," Antony said. "This is how you have to think, as a watershed, not as 'I'm part of this county,' or 'I'm part of this district.'"

Agriculture dominates the 665,073-acre watershed. Most watershed districts in this part of the state formed decades ago to alleviate flooding.

Partners involved in creating Yellow Medicine's One Watershed, One Plan set three goals for the watershed: Mitigate altered hydrology and reduce flooding; reduce nutrients (including sediment, contaminants and E.coli) in streams; preserve and protect groundwater quantity and quality.

"If we don't do it and we don't take the initiative to do it and show everybody that we can do it, somebody's going to make that decision somewhere else and we're not going to like it," Antony said of the years-long planning process.

Having a Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan in place and state money available enabled Yellow Medicine to apply for National Water Quality Initiative funds. That \$123,750 award is one of two it's received from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The second, for about \$500,000, is its share of Regional Conservation Partnership Program dollars awarded to BWSR and the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

Within the Judicial Ditch 24 subwatershed, NWQI funds target Lyon County's Cottonwood Lake, which is impaired for aquatic recreation. The biggest single project: a three year, 721-acre cover-crop planting.

"It's a one-stop shop for hitting all of our priority concerns," said Tyler Knutson, Yellow Medicine SWCD technical director. Cover crops slow snowmelt runoff, retain sediment and fix nitrogen.

"I think there's a lot of landowners that are interested in it, but it's really tough to get a lot of buy-in from landowners when there's



The Yellow Medicine River, foreground, meets the Minnesota River in Upper Sioux Agency State Park southeast of Granite Falls. Reducing nutrients in streams, mitigating altered hydrology and reducing flooding, and preserving and protecting groundwater are among the Yellow Medicine River Watershed's goals. Photo Courtesy Ann Wessel

“
Sometimes the ag community gets a bad rap about being the polluters of the water, but I think they're the best conservationists we have.

— Ron Antony,
Yellow Medicine
County commissioner

”

uncertainty. There's worry that it could drop their yields. There's worry that it's not going to take, and they're just going to waste the money," Overholser said. "For us to financially help people to do it so that we can see some of those success stories and neighbors can see that it worked — that's some of the best advertising you can get."

The 721-acre planting would meet 10 percent of the subwatershed's cover-crop goal.

Not long ago, the 10 conservation-related local government units within the Yellow Medicine River Watershed were more likely to compete than to cooperate over project funds.

"It always did seem like each county was a little island unto themselves, whether it was the county or the soil and water district. They were all competing for the same money. There were times it would get a little bit tense," said Kerry Netzke, Area II Minnesota River Basin Projects executive director. "But now that the perspective has changed to a watershed basis, it seems to me like those turf wars aren't as obvious as they once were. I think there's a lot more collaboration and cooperation going on."

Collaboration has paid off in other ways. Local government units have cut expenses by sharing expertise and staff. That's been especially helpful to people like Overholser, who's been on the job for not quite four months.

"Not every single office has to have every single capability. We can share that," Overholser said.

For example, the watershed district is sharing staff with Lincoln and Yellow Medicine SWCDs for bookkeeping and technical assistance.

Ultimately, the resource will benefit.

"When you focus on the watershed and not the political boundary, you're really putting the focus on the resource and looking at that contributing area," said Marcey Westrick, BWSR's clean water coordinator. "If you work on that watershed basis, it does allow for that more holistic approach where you're looking at ... the biological, the physical, the chemical collectively — so habitat and wetlands and water quality."



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. www.bwsr.state.mn.us.

‘There’s only so much soil, and we’ve got to protect it’

One Watershed, One Plan leads to federal funds for 721-acre cover crop

COTTONWOOD — The three-year cover crop experiment David Loe plants after this fall’s corn harvest could grow well beyond the 721 acres he enrolled in a Natural Resources Conservation Service program.

“If this works ... I would do it on the whole farm,” Loe said.

Loe, 46, runs 3,700 acres of corn and soybeans with his wife, children and parents. The fourth-generation family farm spans Lyon and Yellow Medicine counties. The NRCS contract will cut the risk.

The Yellow Medicine River Watershed qualified for NRCS’ \$123,740 National Water Quality Initiative funds because, as a One Watershed, One Plan pilot site, it had a targeted, prioritized plan backed by science and Clean Water Funds. The dollar amount will grow as the result of a reallocation.

The cover crop plantings could serve as a



David and Missi Loe run a fourth-generation family farm in Yellow Medicine and Lyon counties. Their children, from left, Aaron, Isaac, Andrew and Ashley, all have been involved in the operation. **Courtesy Photo Below:** Cottonwood Lake will benefit from a cover-crop experiment on the Loe’s land. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

demonstration plot for farmers throughout the four-county watershed.

Loe summed up his reasons for trying cover crops in two words: Soil erosion.

“There’s only so much soil, and we’ve got to protect it. Wind and water — those are the two main antagonists,” Loe said.

Heavy rains sometimes cut gullies into the clay-loam

fields, carrying pollutants with the eroding soil. The 721 acres Loe plans to seed this fall with a winter rye mix includes a quarter-mile of Cottonwood Lake shoreline. Cottonwood Lake is surrounded by the city of Cottonwood and by farmland. It’s impaired for aquatic recreation.

Loe’s parents live on the lake, which he describes as green.

The cover crop would benefit the lake by reducing erosion. The contract would give Loe three seasons to determine which seed mix, planting method and tillage option work best. Among the concerns: Whether cover-crop residue will keep soil cool enough to delay spring planting.

“It was a good opportunity to learn the ins and outs and see how they work and what might work best,” Loe said.

“I hope to limit — or eliminate, if possible — as much of that (soil erosion) as we can. Also there’s a green fertilizer value. Anytime you have something growing that’s green out there, it’s going to bring you soil fertility,” Loe said.

NWQI contracts also will make possible a smaller cover crop site near Cottonwood Lake, a nutrient management plan and possibly a fourth project.

