

Pine River 1W1P builds on past success



Left: Members of the Pine River watershed's One Watershed, One Plan planning partnership met in May 2018 at the Ideal Township Hall in Pequot Lakes to develop their comprehensive watershed management plan. The partnership is one of 27 in Minnesota working to prioritize water quality improvements on a watershed scale.

Below: Planning documents show sources used to develop Pine River watershed's comprehensive watershed management plan.

Photo Credits: Julie Westerlund, BWSR



A partnership of local governments in the Pine River watershed has seen early success in its transition to a watershed-based funding model through the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) One Watershed, One Plan program.

One Watershed, One Plan offers an alternative to the project-by-project competitive grant process. By developing comprehensive watershed management plans, collaborating local governments prioritize water quality improvement actions to ensure limited resources are spent where they are needed most within a watershed.

The Pine River watershed comprehensive watershed management plan is in the final stages of review. BWSR Board Conservationist Chris Pence said the plan is currently significantly under budget and ahead of schedule. Local staff attributed the planning effort's success to a



solid foundation of existing data and plans, and experienced and committed partners motivated to move toward implementation.

“The fact that water ignores political boundaries means that we need to think differently about

our local water resource management activities,” said JoAnn Weaver, Crow Wing Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) supervisor and policy committee member. “That means working with upstream and downstream neighbors in other counties that share a common watershed.”

Located in northern Crow Wing County and southern Cass County, the Pine River watershed contains some of the state’s most popular recreational lakes, including the Whitefish Chain of Lakes and Pelican Lake. These resources are at risk for increased shoreline development, urban expansion and conversion of forestland to agricultural uses. The U.S. Forest Service ranks the Pine River watershed No. 1 out of Minnesota’s 81 watersheds for at-risk source water. The watershed is a major source of drinking water for St. Cloud, Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The planning partnership involves Cass and Crow Wing counties and SWCDs. The partnership’s policy committee consists of elected officials from both counties and SWCDs. In addition, committee members invited representatives of state water agencies and lake associations, plus local business owners, city and township officials and other stakeholders to serve in advisory roles.

The partnership’s commitment to a shared vision for lake, river, and groundwater protection was a cornerstone of the planning process, according to Pence.

Considering the watershed as a whole was nothing new in Crow Wing County. In 2013 the county adopted a water plan based on an innovative subwatershed framework.

The Pine River planning effort is the second One Watershed, One Plan partnership for Cass County, which helped create the Leech Lake River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan approved by BWSR’s board in March 2019.

The partnership built upon the forest



Members of the Pine River watershed One Watershed, One Plan Planning Partnership discuss long-term water quality goals during a May 2018 meeting about plan development in Pequot Lakes.

resource plans Crow Wing County produced while drafting forestry-related elements of its comprehensive plan.

Recognizing the key connection between forests and clean water, the U.S. Forest Service and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) awarded the partnership grant funds to develop a landscape stewardship plan based on minor watersheds. The plan will prioritize which watersheds should be the focus of protection efforts and which are prime for restoration work.

Protecting forests provides multiple benefits. Among them: It protects lake and source water quality, preserves fish and wildlife habitat and reduces erosion on sandy soils.

“The forest landscape plan was already complete. The fact that it was based on watersheds made it a solid foundation for building a comprehensive watershed management plan that recognizes the importance of the land-water connection,” said Melissa Barrick, Crow Wing SWCD district manager.

Outside of forest management, the comprehensive watershed management plan aims to enhance

lakes with declining water quality trends. It addresses groundwater, shoreland habitat, impaired streams and problematic culverts. The plan’s protection goals extend to sensitive lakes, forests, habitat, groundwater, wetlands and downstream communities’ source water.

Pence said the planning partnership is eager to start implementation. The partnership has begun to assess agricultural landowners in one of the priority restoration watersheds to determine interest in implementing best management practices. It also is joining members of the Leech Lake River One Watershed, One Plan partnership to request additional Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) dollars for forest protection in the priority watersheds identified in both plans.

“It’s encouraging to see a strong local government response to the opportunity One Watershed, One Plan offers to come together with neighboring communities to identify and implement shared goals and priorities,” Pence said.