Rum River Watershed Partnership advances clean water protections

With dedicated Clean Water Funds, focused priorities and trust among its 15 members, the Rum River Watershed Partnership in two years exceeded several of the goals set out in its 10-year comprehensive watershed management plan.

As diverse as it is vast, the 997,085-acre watershed encompasses forest, wetlands, farm fields and urban development, stretching from rural Aitkin County to suburban Anoka County. The Rum River flows about 150 miles, from Mille Lacs Lake to the Mississippi River, a source of drinking water for St. Paul. It's also a state-designated Wild and Scenic River and a State Water Trail.

Partners reflected on what makes the partnership work, and how it has used Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to make progress on three of its plan goals: restoring and protecting priority lakes, restoring and protecting priority streams and rivers, and protecting drinking water.

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

YOUR Clean Water Fund AT WORK

The Rum River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan was finalized in 2022. The Rum River Watershed Partnership received $1,280,050 in Watershed-Based Implementation Funding from BWSR in 2023 (including supplemental funding) and $1,331,560 in 2025. Clean Water Funds are the sole source of WBIF.

"It's really allowed us to look at the common good of the community at large, beyond the cities, towns and townships that we're all from," said Mille Lacs Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) Board Chairman and Rum River Watershed Partnership Chairman Jake Janski. "It

Clockwise from right: *The Rum River, a state-designated Wild and Scenic River, flows from Mille Lacs Lake to the Mississippi River. Nutrient-impaired Green Lake will benefit from wetland restorations.* **Photos Courtesy of Isanti SWCD** *Steve Cartwright has worked with the Isanti SWCD on two wetland restorations, including this one completed in late 2025. Both filter water from a county ditch.* **Photo Credit:** Steve Cartwright


Janski


Determan


Cibulka


Kulaf


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Gallice

makes the work we're doing feel like part of the bigger picture, which conservation inherently has to be. You can't do conservation that's impactful and long-lasting on a small scale."

Eight SWCDs, six counties and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe make up the partnership.

By mid-February 2026, with $4.4 million in federal, state, local and non-government-organization grants plus $1.7 million in matching dollars, the partnership had funded 289 activities — including projects installed, practices implemented, protections secured, monitoring tracked and outreach accomplished.

State grants included two rounds of WBIF from BWSR: $1.28 million in 2023 and $1.33 million in 2025.

Across the watershed, the partnership's accomplishments achieved estimated annual reductions including 9,611 tons of sediment, nearly 2,590 pounds of phosphorus and nearly 16,580 pounds of nitrogen; contacted 2,600 individuals and engaged 52 groups through outreach.

By mid-February 2026, the partnership had surpassed several of the comprehensive watershed management plan's goals. Among them: Partners' work with landowners restored 89 acres of wetlands, exceeding the 60-acre goal; enrolled 2,436 acres in soil health practices, more than double the 1,000-acre goal; enrolled 414 acres of aquatic habitat in conservation easements, more than double the 180-acre goal; and enrolled 359 acres of upland habitat in conservation easements, double the 175-acre goal.


The Rum River flowed through Mille Lacs County. Water levels were low because of a drought. Photo Courtesy of Ann Wessel

> **"To have a real lasting, sustainable impact, we need to do this bigger, harder work. ... I think we're laying the foundation for a new approach to conservation."**
> — Jake Janski, chairman, Rum River Watershed Partnership

"Having money for both staff and projects that's essentially non-competitive, we're able to find the projects and move forward," said Isanti SWCD District Manager and Rum River Watershed Partnership Coordinator Tiffany Determan. "It's accelerated our ability to move on projects and get things done."

While creating the plan took time, Janski said the framework clarifies decisions about the best use of taxpayer dollars.

"Taking the competitiveness out of some of these funds has helped us focus on more important conservation goals and less fighting for dollars," Janski said. "It's been really good being able to work across the county line boundaries with the other districts and supervisors and staff. I feel like we are gaining a lot of efficiencies."

Besides leveraging implementation funds, WBIF supports three staff positions. It partially funds two watershed-wide outreach workers. They organize workshops, find landowners interested in conservation projects and build community support. And it fully funds a land protection specialist, shared between Isanti and Mille Lacs SWCDs, to work with landowners to fund, develop and design conservation easements.

Determan said the complexity of the plan itself was challenging, but having a core group in place to navigate the changes and bring new staff up to speed made a difference.

"We've been able to leverage each partner's expertise in the areas where they're best suited, and it kind of comes together like a puzzle. We all do our small parts and it just melds," Determan said.

The Anoka Conservation District is the fiscal agent. Sherburne SWCD Senior Water Resource Specialist Dan Cibulka tracks implementation on the ArcGIS Online dashboard he built. Mille Lacs SWCD Administrator Susan Shaw leads civic organizing efforts.

The sheer number of partners could have derailed the plan. Among the factors contributing to speedy implementation: longevity and trust.

Staff turnover is low; some have 10 or 20 years on the job. Partners' working relationships predate 2017, when they developed the Rum River Watershed Restoration and Protection

A 1.25-acre wetland restoration completed in late 2025 will help to improve Green Lake's water quality. Steve Cartwright and his family grew up fishing and water-skiing on the lake, which will also benefit from his previous work with the Isanti SWCD on a 1.7-acre wetland restoration. Both filter water from Isanti County Ditch 23. Photo Courtesy of Isanti SWCD

Strategy (WRAPS). Both Determan and Janski, who attends implementation planning committee meetings, said the joint powers board trusts staff recommendations.

"There's a lot of pretty solid processes in place to allow for a lot of transparency in what's going on behind the scenes, how decisions around projects, budgets, policies are being made. So when (it) does come to the board, we know it's gone through a rigorous process to get to us," Janski said.

"To have a real lasting, sustainable impact, we need to do this bigger, harder work. And it takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of energy and input," Janski said. "I think we're laying the foundation for a new approach to conservation, thinking about it at a broader systems level, and getting — hopefully — more of the population in that mindset. Everyone can do a little something on their own, but we also have to look at the big issues and actions that we have to take collectively."

The following illustrate results of some of that collective work.

> **"I'm just a temporary tenant of this land. While I own it, I want to do the most I can to make it better than what I found it."**
> — Steve Cartwright, Isanti County landowner

Lakes

Green Lake is the largest lake in Isanti County, and one of its top recreational lakes, with two public boat accesses, about 400 lakeshore homes and an active Lake Improvement District. Two county ditches drain into the lake. It was listed as nutrient-impaired in 2008.

Improving water quality — and, ultimately, removal from the state's impaired waters list — is a top-level goal of the partnership for priority impaired lakes listed in the plan, including Green Lake. Green Lake is also a watershed-wide priority, as Green Lake Brook connects it to the Rum River.

"It's impaired, but the numbers aren't skyrocketing," Determan said. "We think we can enhance the recreational suitability of the lake."

A previous Green Lake watershed study pinpointed the most cost-effective sites for water-quality projects. Clean Water Funds from BWSR supported the study, and leveraged U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grants from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) for projects including a bioretention basin and eight lakeshore restorations. Stormwater treatment reduced phosphorus entering the lake from Wyanett Creek and North Brook.

"It's helped us to leverage the plan dollars," Determan said of the previous work and federal funding sources, "because we have all these project locations and plans to get a lot of work done."

Retired real estate broker Steve Cartwright's work with the Isanti SWCD on two wetland restorations, 1.7 acres completed in summer 2024 and 1.25 acres in winter 2025, filters water from Isanti County Ditch 23. The ditch cuts across his property and eventually becomes Wyanett Creek.

In late 2025, he was considering a third restoration.

"We've always considered Green Lake our lake," Cartwright said. In 1943 his grandparents moved to the farm where he lives now, a mile from the lake. He rents the tillable land to a dairy farmer. Over the years, he and other family members have owned lakeshore cabins. A son now lives there year-round.

"It's got a special importance and meaning to us," said Cartwright, 76, recalling summers spent fishing and water-skiing on Green Lake when he lived in Minneapolis. Even then, the lake turned green with algae in late summer. "Anything I can do that would help Green Lake, I'm going to do it."

Wetland restorations help Green Lake by diverting and treating water bound for the lake.

Isanti SWCD Watershed Specialist Todd Kulaf said wetland restorations' cost-benefit ratio for phosphorus

reduction is high. Cartwright's two projects divert water from a combined total of 1,050 acres through nutrient-filtering wetlands before it re-enters the ditch bound for Green Lake.

"It's big-scale projects, and we're getting awesome numbers from these projects," Kulaf said.

The estimated annual phosphorus reduction for Cartwright's two projects together is nearly 107 pounds — more than one-third of the plan's 300-pound-reduction goal related to external sources. One pound of phosphorus can feed 500 pounds of algae.

"Great cost-benefit, that's the biggest thing. Awesome pollution reduction. A ton of landowner-partner buy-in. The habitat component. The wildlife component," Kulaf said. "When you're prioritizing (projects), these just end up checking all the boxes and are a clear frontrunner in where we should focus our efforts."

The partnership's comprehensive watershed management plan's goal related to surface water: Reduce total phosphorus loading to priority waters by 2,500 pounds over 10 years.

Grants covered the cost of both wetland restorations. WBIF and EPA grants from the MPCA leveraged Isanti County Sportsmen's Club dollars for the first restoration, which carries a 10-year deed restriction; and The Nature Conservancy dollars for the second, which carries a 25-year deed restriction.

Wetlands also function as flood storage, which, in turn, translates to less ditch maintenance. Habitat improvement is another secondary benefit: replacing degraded monocultures with native species feeds and shelters migratory birds.

Dennis Kresal is in the process of protecting 970 acres across his entire Isanti County property, including MN CREP and RIM Critical Shorelands easements. Photo Courtesy of Isanti SWCD

> **"I think the biggest thing is retiring marginal croplands in the county that have other benefits to water quality, some of that being through groundwater."**
>
> —Douglas Page, Isanti SWCD land protection specialist

"It's cool to see that everybody's coming together and we're seeing improvements. What we are doing is working," Kulaf said of the partnership. "It's very rewarding to know that our efforts are something that is making a difference."

An archery deer hunter, Cartwright said he also wanted to help wildlife. And he said he liked the look of the ponds, especially the second, which is deeper and surrounded by trees.

"I'm just a temporary tenant of this land," Cartwright said. "While I own it, I want to do the most I can to make it better than what I found it. And if I'm enhancing just the looks of it, that's one (thing). If I'm cleaning up the mess that others have left, that's another. But if I can help the lake at the same time, I've got three bonuses."

Streams and Rivers

Maintaining the water quality of healthy lakes and streams — and avoiding new impairments — is a top-level goal of the partnership for protecting priority rivers listed in the plan, including the Rum River, which is also a watershed-wide priority.

Conservation easements, most of them through BWSR's Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Critical Shorelands program, are helping to protect the Rum River.

Isanti SWCD Land Protection Specialist Douglas Page was hired with WBIF funds to work with Isanti and Mille Lacs SWCDs. Because specialized easements work can take years from start to finish, staff with other duties often don't have time for it. Since he was hired in June 2024 and began outreach efforts, more than 60 people from both counties have contacted him about potential easements within the watershed; about half showed interest in pursuing an easement.

As of mid-February 2026, four easements had been recorded, eight applications had been submitted and five were in the early conversations stage.

"The properties that we're targeting have some surface water connection to the Rum River, be it a private ditch, county ditch, smaller stream, or being on the river itself," Page said. "We're basically buffering that stream and any of the surface waterways from (development and agricultural runoff)."

Some properties bordering the Rum River have been restored to native grassland or forest.

Dennis Kresal is working with Page to establish five easements on four 70- to 80-acre parcels, two of them Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP), which became available in Isanti County in 2025, one of them RIM Critical Shorelands, and one property a mix of the two.

Across his entire Isanti County property, Kresal is in the process of protecting 970 acres in three Isanti County townships, and has protected more than 14,000 feet on both sides of Stanchfield Creek where it enters the Rum River.

"I think the biggest thing is retiring marginal croplands in the county that have other benefits to water quality, some of that being through groundwater," Page said of Kresal's easements. "It also just buffers the landscape. Anywhere you're taking ag out of production and restoring it back to grassland or forest, you're getting all the benefits of an intact ecosystem: soil stability, stabilization, reduced nutrient inputs."

Wetlands and forest surround Kresal's ag land, which will be seeded to a native grass mix.

The four parcels are part of the 970-plus acres Kresal, a retired homebuilder, has permanently protected through a variety of conservation easements.

"I grew up with it being really rural and natural and wild. It's gradually becoming an urban housing development with blacktop driveways and (2 ½ -acre lots), and I'd like to see some of it stay natural and not full of houses. We can't lose all our rural properties to urban developments," Kresal said.

"Some places should be destined to be left natural so people can appreciate rural beauty and wildlife and have a place to go (where they) don't have to look at streets and high-rise apartments," Kresal said. "If you don't save some of this property near the metro area, there won't be any places to go."

Easements remain privately owned. But Kresal said the property had the potential to one day become city-owned parkland.

Kits test for bacteria, nitrates, arsenic, lead and manganese.
Photo Courtesy of Mille Lacs SWCD

Drinking Water

Ensuring groundwater is safe to drink — by decreasing the risk of nitrate contamination, in part by increasing awareness of vulnerabilities and what can be done to cut that risk — is a top-level goal of the partnership related to drinking water.

In Mille Lacs County, three Clean Water Fund grants from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) are in play. The first, an accelerated implementation grant awarded in 2021, built a network of stakeholders, supported an open house and nitrate testing clinics, and pinpointed what residents who attended those clinics said they wanted: additional, economical well water testing.

Each of the two, $50,000 grants that followed made 150 kits available to detect the Top 5 pollutants for which MDH recommends testing: bacteria, nitrates, arsenic, lead and manganese. The first centered on the Milaca area. The second, awarded in 2025 and still underway, is focused on the northern part of the county near Mille Lacs Lake.

"What really speaks to the health of the community is groundwater," said Mille Lacs SWCD resource conservationist Lynn Gallice.

Gallice meets with landowners when they pick up a test, and then follows up to discuss results and available resources — including other conservation opportunities for which they might qualify — and other water quality issues in the watershed, such as shoreline buffers, forestry or ag practices.

"What we're really trying to do is put as much knowledge as we can in the hands of landowners," Gallice said. "If they have a well, it's their responsibility. A lot of people don't understand that. They think someone else is monitoring that or will monitor it. So (we're) just giving them as much knowledge as (we) can to be aware of the possible risks to their drinking water and to know what they're drinking and, if there's problems, help them solve those problems."

In addition to supporting nitrate clinics, to date WBIF has sealed 21 wells — 17 in Isanti and Mille Lacs counties, three in Anoka County and one in Benton County (the 10-year plan calls for sealing 70). Additionally, the Anoka Conservation District is tapping WBIF earmarked for the seven-county Twin Cities metro area for well-sealing.

Soil health practices implemented where the risk of nitrate contamination is higher use WBIF to leverage soil health delivery grants from BWSR, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) support from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Written by Ann Wessel, BWSR conservation marketing coordinator

Online tracker displays partners' progress

Early in the planning stages, the Rum River Watershed Partnership discussed the need to track its plan goals and actions. Sherburne SWCD Senior Water Resource Specialist Dan Cibulka volunteered — "not entirely knowing what it entailed."

When the Excel spreadsheet proved unwieldly, he taught himself ArcGIS Online to build interactive surveying forms and database dashboards.

The resulting online tracker displays dashboards on 151 different actions related to achieving the overarching goal. For example, reducing phosphorus loading by 2,500 pounds is one 10-year goal related to improving water quality of impaired lakes and streams.

"How do you do that? In a watershed such as the Rum that has a great variety of different land-use types and habitats and a wide degree of different stressors to the water resources within the watershed, in some areas that might be soil health initiatives. In some of the more urban areas (it might be) shoreline restoration (or) stormwater management," Cibulka said. It might involve managing in-lake phosphorus. "There are action IDs that relate to that overarching goal of restoring our surface water, and in different areas that looks different."

Cibulka said the list of 151 action items is manageable across the large partnership.

And it plainly shows the variety of natural resources and natural resources needs.

"This is a watershed that's very highly valued by the people in the community, with many waters that are in great condition that we're working to protect. (It's) a watershed that directly impacts the drinking water quality of those downstream, so it's very significant … from that perspective," Cibulka said.

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