Targeting Dobbins Creek

June 2015 Snapshots

Tucked into Mower County's Cedar River Watershed, Dobbins Creek is familiar to many of Austin, Minn.'s residents. Running along the northeast edge of the city, it flows through the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center before eventually entering the Cedar River. The creek's watershed runs through prime farmland known for producing high grain yields. Land-use changes, runoff from fields, and increased rainfall have affected the creek over the years, resulting in cloudy water that affects both water quality and wildlife habitat.

In March, 2014, the Cedar River Watershed District's Dobbins Creek Watershed was one of three selected as part of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' first Targeted Watershed Demonstration Program projects. The program focuses on watersheds where the amount of change necessary to improve water quality is known, the actions needed to achieve results are already identified, and work can be done within a four-year timetable.

Top: Dobbins Creek winds through the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center, a popular destination for Mower County residents.
Bottom: Mower SWCD, BWSR, and NRCS staff tour project sites.

Using the $1.5 million grant, the district is taking a "treatment train approach" to project implementation. Starting at the top of the watershed, staff are addressing field erosion, stabilizing streambanks, installing practices that hold water and sediment back from entering the creek, and treating nutrients before they enter the water. It's a sizable grant, but the district expects big results.

"We've been working on Dobbins Creek Watershed for the last 15-20 years, and studies and modeling have allowed us to pinpoint where the problem areas are and determine what practices will provide the most benefit and bang for our buck," says Justin Hanson, CRWD Project Coordinator and Mower SWCD Resource Specialist. Mower SWCD's staff are contracted to provide technical services to the watershed district. "This is work that's going to make a significant difference."

Dobbins Creek is a leading contributor of sediment to the Cedar River, so addressing the turbidity issues within the creek will also provide benefits further downstream where the two waterbodies meet. The District estimates that the Targeted Watershed Demonstration Projects will improve the water quality of the stream and result in a healthier population of fish and macroinvertebates in Dobbins Creek.

"None of this is possible without support from the community and local landowners," Hanson continues. "The work we've done one-on-one has allowed us to build trust, and we've been very pleasantly surprised by how willing folks are to

implement a variety of conservation practices on their land. They know the creek, and they know this is important, and they're making it possible for us to make this kind of progress."

As the Dobbins Creek Watershed project goes into the second of four years, there's still a lot of work to be done, but staff, community members, and other local organizations are committed to this holistic approach to reducing water pollution. The goal of the program is to demonstrate, using local priorities, that concentrated conservation practices can have a positive impact on water quality. The Cedar River Watershed District staff and the larger Austin community have rolled up their sleeves, working to do just that. Stay tuned.