

New structure, additional staff speed project implementation



Nearly two years after northwestern Minnesota soil and water conservation districts (SWCD) split the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area (RRVCSA) into two work areas, hired more engineering staff and streamlined administration, those SWCDs are completing significantly more projects, operating more efficiently and communicating more effectively.

The [restructuring](#) took effect Jan. 1, 2023. It resulted from a consultant-led, Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant-backed effort to prepare SWCDs for the anticipated increase in requests for service accompanying [One Watershed, One Plan](#) implementation.

“We’ve made large strides in technical and engineering assistance capabilities,” said Red Lake County SWCD Manager Tanya Waldo, whose district includes

“ The structure of the reorganization was important, but more important to me were the qualified staff that we were able to find and then hire.

— Peter Nelson,
Pennington SWCD manager



the Red Lake River and Clearwater River watersheds.

This year the Red Lake County SWCD was on pace to complete 12 projects — three times more than in years before the reorganization.

“We have excellent staff. They’re very impressive, the work that’s getting

SWCD managers and supervisors representing the North Pod on the Red River Valley Conservation Service Area Board met July 31 in Mahnomen for an update on workloads, project requests, personnel and financial reports. They are, from left, **back row:** East Polk SWCD Manager Rachel Klein, West Polk SWCD Manager Nicole Bernd, Norman SWCD District Technician Mark Christianson, Red Lake County SWCD Manager Tanya Waldo, Red Lake County Supervisor David Miller, Pennington SWCD Manager Peter Nelson, North Pod Engineer Logan Handyside, Roseau SWCD Supervisor John Gaukerud, Roseau SWCD Manager Scott Johnson; **front row:** Kittson SWCD Supervisor Joe Wilebski, Mahnomen SWCD Supervisor Pete Revier, East Polk SWCD Supervisor Scott Balstad, Pennington SWCD Supervisor Greg Hilgeman, North Pod Engineering Technician Justin Muller and Mahnomen SWCD Manager Aaron Neubert. **Photo Credit:** Brett Arne, BWSR

completed,” Waldo said.

Previously, the RRVCSA employed two engineering technicians and one consulting engineer who answered to a 16-member joint powers board representing each of the member SWCDs. Each SWCD within the region — also known as Technical Service Area (TSA) 1 — had its own priorities. Traveling to a project site could take four hours.



Waldo

Now, two engineers, two engineering technicians and a conservation technician serve 14 SWCDs. Clay and Wilkin SWCDs opted out of the new structure.

“What really makes this whole thing work is [Watershed-Based \(Implementation\) Funding](#), because TSA funding would not be adequate to fund all of those positions,” said Becker SWCD Manager Bryan Malone. “We’d have less staff or else we’d have to find other grants to keep them employed.”

Pennington SWCD employs an engineer, an engineering technician and a conservation technician who work in the nine-SWCD North Pod. In the five-member South Pod, Becker SWCD employs an engineer; West Otter Tail SWCD employs an engineering technician.

“Having the staff be district employees is a big deal,” Malone said. “They’re part of your SWCD team putting conservation on the ground. They aren’t sitting there on an island. That’s a huge benefit — just the coordination that follows between all the districts, having those shared agreements.”

The Becker and Red Lake County SWCDs have used the agreements as templates when hiring shared staff.



Becker SWCD-based South Pod Engineer Wes Drake staked tile lines and conducted post-installation surveys in August within the West Otter Tail County district where construction of a stabilization structure and water and sediment control basins was underway. Photo courtesy of Wes Drake

North and South Pod staff, funding sources

STAFF: Pennington SWCD-based engineer Logan Handyside, engineering technician Justin Muller and conservation technician Matt Sorvig work within the North Pod. Becker SWCD-based engineer Wes Drake and West Otter Tail SWCD-based engineering technician Mike Yrjo work within the South Pod. Becker SWCD-based GIS administrator Mary Steinlicht provides services to all 16 counties.

FUNDING: An annual \$370,000 Nonpoint Engineering Assistance and Enhanced Shared Services grant from BWSR (via General Fund dollars plus Clean Water Fund-backed Accelerated Implementation grants) provides the base funding for TSA staff, equipment and supplies. Additional funding comes from two Clean Water Fund sources



— Watershed-Based Implementation Funding and competitive grants — plus local capacity/SWCD aid dollars with other grant and local funds. When the PRAP assessment was complete in summer 2022, it projected the need for nine full-time-equivalent employees by 2026, based on WBIF work. An increase in two-year WBIF funding from \$49 million to \$79 million could increase that to 12 or 15, depending upon how much is spent on structural practices.

“(Having) the additional (engineering) staff allows the other district staff more time to spend communicating with

landowners, finding projects and getting a project from the initial stages to a contract,” said Pennington SWCD Manager

Details

POD STRUCTURE, WATERSHEDS:

North Pod: Kittson, Mahnomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, East Polk, West Polk, Red Lake and Roseau SWCDs. Includes Two Rivers, Roseau River, Middle Snake-Tamarac River, Thief River, Red Lake River, Clearwater River, Sand Hill River and Wild Rice-Marsh River watersheds. **South Pod:** Becker, Grant, East Otter Tail, West Otter Tail and Traverse SWCDs. Includes Buffalo-Red, Wild Rice-Marsh, Otter Tail, Red Eye, Crow Wing, Pomme de Terre, Mustinka-Bois de Sioux and Chippewa river watersheds plus bits of the Long Prairie River and Mississippi River Headwaters watersheds.

TSAs: Technical Service Areas throughout the state provide the technical assistance to and through member SWCDs, in cooperation with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, BWSR, and other local, state and federal government units.

PRAP: The PRAP Program monitors and assesses performance of local water management entities statewide. Completed on a 10-year rotation, organizational assessments review performance standards and progress toward water/watershed plan goals; review the wetland program; and survey staff, board members and partners.

Peter Nelson.

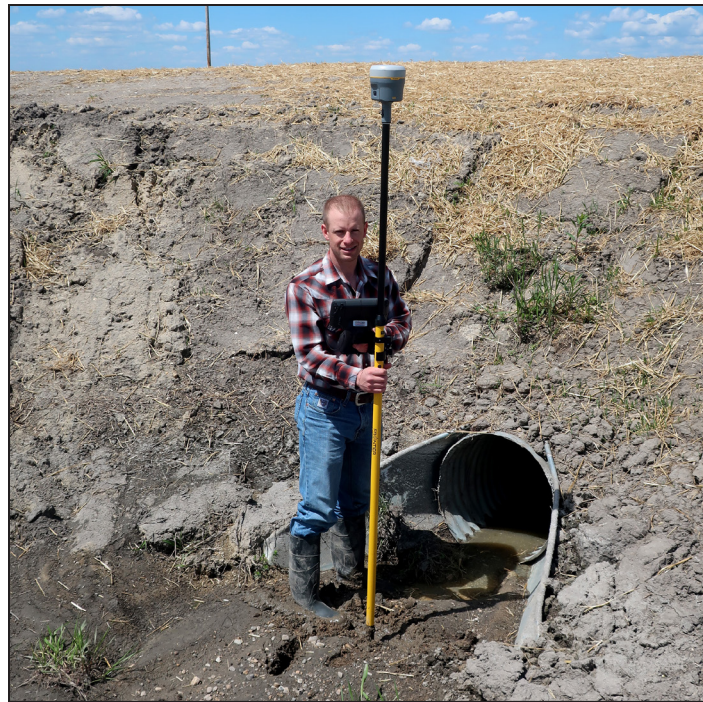
“The increased capacity has led to more landowners getting the engineering services and the projects constructed that they need completed. In return, that’s addressing more of the resource concerns,” Nelson said.

North Pod SWCDs submitted 128 requests for engineering services in 2023 compared with 53 in 2022. South Pod SWCDs submitted 299 requests in 2023 compared with 196 in 2022.

Those 2023 requests resulted in 45 constructed projects in the north and 77 in the south.

“We’re constantly looking at the list. Our world revolves around that list. We’re constantly checking, updating and doing our best to make sure all the districts are getting their fair share of our time. Any of those projects that come up as a priority for that district, we try to address those as soon as we can. It is a challenge,” said North Pod engineer Logan Handyside. “But the communication has been really good, which I think is definitely a key to why it has been successful.”

SWCD supervisors who serve on the TSA board receive periodic financial reports, and updates on workloads, project requests, equipment and personnel.



Pennington SWCD-based North Pod Engineer Logan Handyside works with nine SWCDs. He was hired as a TSA employee before the restructuring, and is seen here surveying a completed side-water inlet in Pennington County. **Photo courtesy of Logan Handyside**

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— Bryan Malone, Becker SWCD manager



One person from each SWCD typically serves as the contact, so engineers get to know their preferences.

An SWCD’s project request

starts the process. The engineer visits the site — usually with the landowner and the SWCD contact — and ensures the practice fits the landowner’s needs.

After surveying the site and producing preliminary design and cost estimates, engineering staff answer landowners’ questions before producing final estimates. They’ll ensure required permits are pursued. Once funding is in place, the SWCD may help landowners find a contractor. Engineers work with contractors during construction, and inspect the finished project.

“They use their time very wisely, and they make sure that they are meeting everyone’s needs to the best of their ability,” Waldo said.

On some projects, tapping the North Pod engineer and engineering technician cost the SWCD two to three times less than hiring private firms.

“We’re able to put that extra funding toward implementation of additional projects,” Waldo said.

North and South pods’ engineering staff also review each other’s plans, share ArcGIS and AutoCAD templates, and time-tracking and project-tracking spreadsheets. They attend trainings together, and train SWCD staff members who are earning [Job Approval Authority](#).

“It doesn’t make sense for us to recreate the wheel. If we can share those resources, we’re just all that much better,” Handyside said.



Projects involving North Pod engineering staff included a grade stabilization in Red Lake County. **Photo courtesy of Red Lake County SWCD**