

# BWSR lauds Prior Lake-Spring Lake's Dick for forging connections, bringing joy to work



“ Emily continuously inspires and motivates district staff in a joyful and fun-spirited manner. ”

— Joni Giese, Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District Administrator

## ABOUT THE WATERSHED:

Established in 1970 to manage and conserve the watershed's waters and natural resources, the Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District is a special-purpose unit of government in Scott County.

**N**ISSWA — On paper, Emily Dick's biggest achievement during her two years at the Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District (PLSLWD) may be securing an \$850,000 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency grant, which will pay for 90% of a flood resiliency project to restore aging infrastructure at the Prior Lake outlet.

In practice, it's the relationships she's built with Scott County farmers, Scott Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff, elected officials, and co-workers that have made voluntary conservation projects possible — and enjoyable.

“I'm very proud of the relationships I've built. That's the thing I'm most proud of, is that I've only been here two years and I do feel like I genuinely know a lot of people. Where their home farm is. Fields they work. And that's important to people,” said Dick, PLSLWD water resources project manager.

**Above:** BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson presented Emily Dick, center, with the 2024 Outstanding Watershed Organization Employee award Dec. 5 during Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference in Nisswa. Prior Lake-Spring Lake Watershed District Administrator Joni Giese nominated Dick for the award. **Photo Credit:** Ann Wessel, BWSR



**Left:** PLSLWD Water Resources Specialist Danielle Studer, left, and Dick hefted an invasive carp on Prior Lake. **Photo Credit:** Tony Havranek

“I always like to figure out what's most important to people. What are their dreams?” Dick said. “Where do they see the property going? What would their dream be? Because I think — and I've really had experiences that tell me — unless you're going to make it fit

with that vision or be aligned, it's going to be a battle the whole way and it's so worth making it everyone's dream."

Dick worked with landowners and SWCD staff on a recently completed [Buck Stream stabilization](#) that will reduce bank erosion and curb phosphorus-loading to Buck Lake. She also is involved with an ongoing [iron enhanced sand filter project](#) on Swamp Lake, necessary improvements to the PLSLWD's [ferric chloride treatment facility](#), and a pond dredging project that is in the design stages.

PLSLWD Administrator Joni Giese highlighted the projects and Dick's approach when she nominated Dick for the [2024 Outstanding Watershed Organization Employee](#) award.

"Emily demonstrates excellence through her leadership style, ability to affect positive change, and effective communication style. Emily continuously inspires and motivates district staff in a joyful and fun-spirited manner. At the same time, she is developing new operational approaches that improve data management and increase team efficiency, while also supporting team members' growth, success and job satisfaction," Giese wrote in her nomination. "She has an incredible ability to communicate complex concepts and proposed paths to goal achievement in a manner that is easily understood."

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson presented Dick with the award Dec. 5 during Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference at Grand View Lodge in Nisswa.

"The resource outcomes



*Dick, at center holding green folder, led a field day workshop for fish farmers in rural Zambia as traditional chiefs looked on. Photo Credit: Katey Hulewicz*

are just an outcome of people work. It's people work first, and then we get to outcomes," Hanson said during the presentation.

Dick's duties include leading capital improvement project planning, implementation and close-out; guiding education and outreach and the Citizen Advisory Committee programs; and leading strategic planning and innovation of the district's water resources. Her biggest strength, Giese said, is her ability to work with landowners.

"She really has that knack to engage with them, help them to see the project and secure buy-in. Most of the projects that we need to implement are located on private property. So partnering with landowners is crucial for us to meet our water quality and flood resilience initiatives," Giese said.

It's a skill Dick has employed while living and working in seven states and three countries — including two years she spent in the Peace Corps working with rural fish farmers in Zambia.

"I had to put myself aside and think about how the person I was talking to was going to receive what I was

saying," Dick said.

In Zambia, that meant speaking the language and, in keeping with the culture, using metaphors to tell stories. Thinking about things from someone else's perspective has translated well to project management.

"You have to (relay) what you're trying to accomplish, why it matters," Dick said. "All of my work experience has been working with the public in some fashion in a voluntary way — meaning no one was forced to work with me or participate. I had to figure out how to make it compelling or fit in their life."

In the office, co-workers said Dick makes work fun and collaborative. Everyone is welcome to contribute ideas, or to join in on project site visits.

"When she's in the office there is laughter," Giese said. "But they're still getting work done."

PLSLWD administrative assistant Patty Dronen was among those who interviewed Dick for the job. She said Dick immediately came across as smart, confident and upbeat.

"I think she truly loves what she does for a living," Dronen

said. "She always has a smile on her face. She would come back from landowner meetings where they maybe didn't go very well, but she always found the bright side."

Water Resources Specialist Danielle Studer joined the PLSLWD about 18 months ago. It's her first job in the field, and her first in Minnesota.

"As a mentor, I feel like she gives me a lot of space to hone in on my own skills. She's pretty flexible with me in figuring out what my interests are — and my strengths — and allowing me to ask for help when I need it. She doesn't micro-manage."

For example, Studer may take the lead on landowner interactions, but Dick will be there to answer questions.

Dick supported Studer's lead on Watershed Week activities in July. The first-time endeavor introduced people to the PLSLWD and showcased some of its projects during a local cycling group's weekly ride, on a wellness walk via Three Rivers Park District, and through a paint-and-sip event with local artist at a wine bar where artwork featured watershed scenes.

"I personally just think life is harder when you're not having fun. So you have a choice of whether to show up and make life fun and enjoy each other or to not. I do think that I find ways to make things joyful. But here right now at Prior Lake-Spring Lake, that is definitely the default on the team," Dick said.

*Each year, BWSR celebrates local government staffers' conservation work. Kay Gross of the Cottonwood SWCD was named [2024 Outstanding Soil and Water Conservation District Administrator](#).*