

Watershed prioritizes outreach to connect landowners, resources



The Sibley SWCD used a Watershed-Based Implementation Funding grant to partially fund a new full-time position. The Clean Water Fund supports WBIF.

The Sibley Soil & Water Conservation District’s (SWCD) most recent full-time hire will focus on connecting landowners to conservation programs and resources within the Lower Minnesota River-West watershed planning area.

Conservation technician Tara O’Brien joined the SWCD on June 5. She will spend most of her time on outreach and education, such as meeting one-on-one with landowners, hosting field days and promoting district initiatives online and via direct mailings. O’Brien plans to connect with producers on topics such as cover crop implementation, drainage solutions and opportunities to improve water quality.

“I really want to get to know the landowners and learn what works for them, what doesn’t work for them, and why,” O’Brien said. “Reaching one

person at a time and taking small steps — that works.”

O’Brien graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato, in May with a bachelor’s degree in recreation, parks and leisure services. Before joining Sibley SWCD, she interned with the University of Minnesota’s Water Resources Center, where she assisted with outreach programs, projects and events. She also has worked as a park and trails associate for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources at Flandrau State Park near New Ulm, and for New Ulm’s park and recreation department.

O’Brien’s position, which is permanent, was funded in part by Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

WBIF is an alternative to project-

High Island Creek winds through a portion of the Lower Minnesota River-West watershed planning area in Sibley County. Approximately 70% of the planning area lies within Sibley County.

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based, competitive grants. BWSR awards WBIF grants to partnerships with an approved comprehensive watershed management plan developed under BWSR's One Watershed, One Plan Program (1W1P) or under the metro surface water and groundwater frameworks. With this approach, instead of competing for grants, collaborating local governments — called planning partnerships — pursue projects and programs based on a watershed's priorities.

To date, BWSR has distributed \$69.1 million in WBIF to 36 greater Minnesota partnerships and 27 metro-area partnerships. Funding for WBIF comes from the Clean Water Fund.

The Lower Minnesota River watershed is split into east and west 1W1P planning areas due to its size. The BWSR Board approved the Lower Minnesota River-West watershed's comprehensive watershed management plan in March. The partnership received an initial \$596,617 WBIF grant (which requires a 10% match) to pursue plan priorities; \$100,000 of that grant will be used for outreach and education. The balance will be used to support best management practices, provide technical assistance to landowners, and plan administration and coordination.

O'Brien became the Sibley SWCD's fourth staff member.

"As a planning group, we decided (O'Brien's) position would be really key to our success," said Sibley SWCD District Manager Joel Wurscher. "We were



Conservation technician Tara O'Brien viewed best management practices in Sibley County shortly after joining Sibley SWCD's staff.

discussing our strengths and weaknesses, and determined we had a lack of time to do these outreach efforts, and it would be really ideal if we could hire someone to take on a lot of that and give a full commitment to that effort. Now we're empowered through WBIF to be able to act on it."

Wurscher said degraded surface water quality and altered hydrology are the top two resource concerns identified in the Lower Minnesota River-West watershed comprehensive management plan. Altered hydrology includes changes to natural channels due to ditching and tiling, flooding and floodplain issues. One way to address this concern is to implement water control structures, which help with drainage water management. The Sibley SWCD is planning a demonstration event in August to show producers how these structures work.

"Those structures hold back water at key times of the year within patterned tile systems," Wurscher said.

"It helps with water quality and storage, but also helps farmers with their crops during droughts."

Drainage water management helps during droughts because those systems can retain water and some nutrients in the soil profile, making them available for uptake instead of being released uncontrolled through drain tile.

Wurscher said about 70% of the Lower Minnesota River-West watershed planning area falls within Sibley County.

"Probably the most notable feature of our watershed is the high-quality productive soils we have," Wurscher said. "We have some of the most prime farmland in Minnesota, so at times it can be challenging to sell conservation because of that."

One solution that doesn't require farmers to give up productive cropland is implementing cover crops. Sibley SWCD runs a cover crop incentive program that offers per-acre payments

to participating landowners through one-, two- or three-year contracts. Incentives increase if producers plant multiple cover crop species. The district also offers technical assistance to farmers, such as developing seed plans. O'Brien plans to raise awareness about the SWCD's cover crop assistance options and answer farmers' questions about getting started.

"There's a lot of people who want to dabble in cover crops, but don't want to take the risk," Wurscher said. "These incentives reduce a lot of that risk."

Still, Wurscher said transitioning to cover crops can be a tough sell since it requires specialized equipment and new approaches to seeding and termination.

"We want them to know what resources are available and that we're here to support them," O'Brien said. "Change is scary for some people, and for some it can be a big risk. It's about letting (producers) know that we hear them, but at the same time getting them to understand that what we're doing is important."

With dedicated outreach staff, Wurscher said he hoped the district could continue to build relationships with local landowners and earn their trust.

"As an office, we've talked about how nice it would be (to have this sort of position) for years, and how it could be a key part of success for our district," Wurscher said. "We didn't have the funding before, but now we do — watershed-wide. I'm really excited to see where it takes us."