

PRAP grants support local government staff, conservation delivery



Local government units (LGUs) across Minnesota are using the [Performance Review and Assistance Program](#) (PRAP) to improve their organizations' operations. Participating LGUs throughout the state have received more than \$360,000 in PRAP grants since 2012. The grants fund organizational improvement activities such as updating personnel policies, hiring consultants and completing strategic plans and assessments.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Board established PRAP as a way to systematically review an organization's performance to ensure effective operations.

The program aims to help the 238 LGUs that manage the

state's land and water resources work as efficiently as possible. These LGUs include soil and water conservation districts, watershed districts, watershed management organizations, and the county departments that handle water management. BWSR assesses about 10% of the LGUs a year. Priority is based partly on timing — focused on those whose last assessment was 10 years ago or longer — and partly on input from BWSR staff. BWSR staff conducts these assessments with input from LGU boards, staff and partners. BWSR uses performance standard checklists, conducts internal and external surveys, evaluates Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) performance and delivery, and reviews the LGU's progress toward its comprehensive

watershed management goals.

Along with recommendations for improving organizational performance and implementing comprehensive watershed management plan goals and objectives, the assessment also details what it is that organizations meeting high-performance standards are doing well.

PRAP also provides grants to LGUs seeking to become more efficient in carrying out their goals. Following a review, LGUs can apply for assistance grants to fund projects identified in the recommendations. Those who propose projects related to recommendations made in the review receive priority, although LGUs do not need to have been the subject of a PRAP

Doug Thomas, senior project manager at Houston Engineering, Inc., facilitated a planning session at a TSA 8 meeting in 2022 at Ruttger's Bay Lake Resort in Deerwood. Thomas shared information about the assessment process and the final recommendations.

Photo Credit: Melissa Barrick, Crow Wing SWCD

performance review to apply for assistance grants.

The Crow Wing Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) has worked with three PRAP grants since 2019.

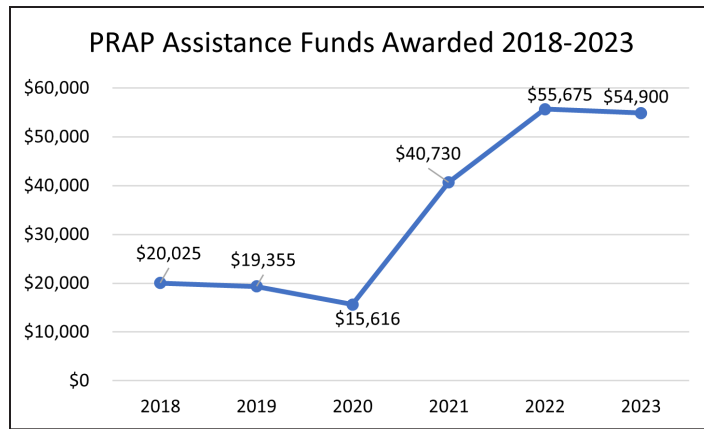
“I applied for these PRAP grants because we needed financial assistance and technical assistance for a third-party facilitator or contractor. I also needed the expertise to help support the board and staff conversations around these topics,” Crow Wing SWCD Manager Melissa Barrick said.

The Crow Wing SWCD received a \$10,000 PRAP assistance grant in 2019 to complete a strategic assessment for the SWCD and Crow Wing County. The grant request was in response to a recommendation made during a PRAP performance review.

“The strategic assessment process gave us the data, expertise and knowledge to better focus on the SWCD’s strong suits,” Barrick said.

The PRAP grant helped the SWCD to develop a services agreement with the county to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each entity. The partners also developed a document that summarized Minnesota state statutory responsibilities and identified the different roles SWCD and county staff play in implementing conservation.

Barrick received a \$20,000 PRAP assistance grant in 2022 on behalf of North Central Minnesota Technical Service Area 8 (TSA 8) to complete a strategic assessment. The aim was for TSA 8 to develop an operational plan for the well-organized delivery of services to member districts using Watershed-Based Implementation Funding. The



A graph offers a snapshot of PRAP assistance grants awarded from 2018 through 2023. From 2012 through March 2024, over \$360,000 in PRAP assistance grants have been awarded. **Graphic Credit:** BWSR

PRAP grant made it possible to hire a consultant, who conducted the assessment and facilitated discussions among those involved with the TSA — including the nine SWCDs that are part of the joint powers board.

“The PRAP grant greatly improved the TSA 8 efficiency and effectiveness. Through the process, the TSA 8 had tough conversations and got everyone on the same page regarding where we were going,” Barrick said.

The Crow Wing SWCD received a \$9,500 PRAP assistance grant in 2022. The SWCD has seen continued growth in recent years, including an increase in the number of staff, workload and funding. Its board wanted to make sure the organization was positioned to successfully implement its statutory requirements and its comprehensive watershed management plan.

To set the SWCD and its staff up for success, the SWCD hired a human resources consultant to review best management standards, including paying staff a comparable wage, and ensuring personnel policies were up to date. SWCD staff and the consultant reviewed

staff job descriptions and pay scales to make sure staff are paid appropriately.

According to Barrick, the SWCD was able to better articulate pay with new hires and other staff and set realistic employee expectations thanks to the updated policy and pay scale.

“I am always concerned about spending money on consultants and the cost versus the benefits of these processes. In all three cases, the (PRAP) process was super helpful at all levels of the organization. Through this process, supervisors and staff are required to take time to meet, talk, plan and think about the future. All three PRAP grants were successful,” Barrick said.

Other SWCDs have used PRAP as a tool to improve organizational operations.

“The PRAP grant is a tremendous tool to help improve foundational pieces of an SWCD, or any other organization,” said Swift County SWCD District Manager Andy Albertsen.

The Swift County SWCD has received two PRAP grants, which were used to hire consultants to assist with its operations.

The Swift County SWCD received a \$1,250 PRAP assistance grant in 2018 after the SWCD and the Swift County Environmental Services department underwent organizational assessments. The grant, requested in response to recommendations from those assessments, was used to hire a consultant to conduct a one-day strategic planning exercise. During the session, staff, board members and other partners discussed the SWCD’s direction. Supervisors’ and staff members’ roles and responsibilities were also reviewed during the session. They also updated the SWCD’s mission statement and identified various communication and outreach ideas for their conservation work.

The \$10,000 PRAP assistance grant the SWCD received this year was in response to recommendations from a strategic planning session held in spring 2023. Those funds will be used to hire a consultant to facilitate updating personnel policies, updating employee pay scales based on market analysis, developing pay-step increases for staff, and reviewing employee compensation and classification.

“The overarching goal of this process is to provide employees peace of mind that they are fairly compensated based on their job duties and that they have legal protections through an updated personnel policy. An easy-to-follow handbook that is updated to reflect new law changes will be an extremely useful tool for the staff, and allows the board to know the most up-to-date information is being implemented,” Albertsen said.