

One-stop service boosts buffer work

Marshall SWCD staff members gained the necessary equipment, skills and support to assist landowners with planting buffers, other conservation seeding



WARREN — Marshall Soil & Water Conservation District’s (SWCD) three-person staff has positioned itself to help landowners plan, plant and fund the buffers required on drainage ditches and public waters.



In addition to buffer cost-share and implementation Clean Water Fund grants made available by legislative appropriations distributed by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the SWCD now spends half of its annual local capacity grant on buffers.

“All we’re looking for is to get landowners in compliance” said SWCD Programs Manager Darren Carlson. “It takes a lot of time for a lot of small acreages. We’re going out and doing 1 acre at a time.”



In Marshall County, farm operators commonly run 10,000 to 15,000 acres. A typical field is a quarter-section: 160 acres. Equipment is sized to handle large tracts of land — not small buffer plantings.

The SWCD is equipped with two tractors and three drills. The smallest of the three, an 8-foot seeder, is ideal for planting the 16.5-foot-wide strips the buffer law requires on

Top: The Marshall SWCD functions as a sort of technical resource. Because SWCD staff works with the same seed distributor and equipment, employees know how to calibrate the drill and make necessary repairs. Darren Carlson, Marshall SWCD programs manager, explained the arrangement in July in the SWCD’s shop. **Left:** The SWCD owns three drills, which staff operates. Rarely, landowners will use the equipment themselves.

Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

drainage ditches. Under its longstanding policy, the SWCD purchases the seed, provides the equipment and plants the buffer (or other conservation seeding). Rarely, landowners will use the SWCD's equipment to plant buffers or conservation acreage themselves.

"We're a one-stop shop for seeding buffers, CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) or any grass seeding," Carlson said.

The SWCD functions as a sort of technical resource, helping landowners get buffers installed. Because SWCD staff members work with the same seed distributor and equipment, they know how to calibrate the drill and make necessary repairs. The result is greater efficiency and cost savings.

The buffer law affected a significant part of Marshall County. The greatest need was in the eastern third of the county, where ditches run east-west and north-south — sometimes bordering roads on both sides.

"(Marshall County) had a significant workload to start with on public ditches, primarily because of their size and topography. They're working through that process," said BWSR Resource Conservation Section Manager Tom Gile, whose section handles buffer law administration and implementation. "They were definitely one of the Top 5 counties in terms of amount of work that needed to be done when the law came into effect and have made great progress so far."

As of Nov. 1, 2018, buffers or alternative practices are required on public ditches



Three to four weeks after planting, this is how a Marshall County buffer looked. **Photo Credit:** Marshall SWCD

and public waters. Statewide, compliance on all waters is more than 98 percent.

Marshall SWCD is working with landowners to help bring them into compliance. Well over half are absentee landowners.

"Especially as we get closer to the Red River, just because of recent floods, past floods, people have moved, got up and left," Carlson said.

A single operator may work with 80 individual parcels. SWCD staff discovered the most efficient way to reach landowners was to contact the farm operators. Some choose the buffer option. Some choose an alternative practice, which allows a narrower buffer strip.

Here, side-water inlets are the most common alternative practice. In late July, the SWCD's list of landowners interested in pursuing side-water inlets included more than 100 names.

"We're getting more requests for side-water inlets than we can do," Carlson said.

On average, the SWCD receives about one new request a week. It works with a Red River Valley Conservation Service Area (CSA) engineer who designs the projects and provides cost estimates.

Because of the availability of state cost share, the SWCD is able to cover 75 percent of the cost for

these side-inlet structures.

Marshall SWCD received a \$364,700 grant to provide buffer cost-share — its piece of the Legislature's one-time, \$5 million allocation. (Up to 20 percent of the county's 25 percent share can be used to cover the SWCD's technical assistance costs.) The SWCD receives about \$45,000 a year in buffer implementation funding from the Legislature's biennial allocation. It spends about half of its annual \$100,000 local capacity grant on buffer-related expenses.

"With the buffer cost-share, it's been nice to have some ready money," Carlson said. "It's nice to at least offer that assistance to them."

With Red River Valley CSA assistance, Marshall SWCD has installed 40 to 50 side-water inlets a year. Without the cost-share funding, Carlson estimated the number would be closer to 10 a year.

Outreach efforts continue in Marshall County. The SWCD promotes its buffer-related services in its twice-a-year newsletter.

A conversation about buffers sometimes begins with a landowner who is upset. But that conversation often leads to a discussion about other services the SWCD offers — such as tree planting or well sealing.

"A majority of the time when they leave, they're pretty satisfied. Maybe we helped them with their buffer questions. Or maybe we offered them assistance on something else that we can do. Maybe we can send them over to the federal guys and help them with cover crops," Carlson said.