



Albright



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Freese



Quast

Whiskey Creek restoration

Landowners. Leveraged funds. Partnerships.

A \$10M Wilkin SWCD, Buffalo-Red River Watershed District project with clean water, wildlife habitat, drainage solutions taps \$2.9M NRCS award, MPCA pilot



GOALS: Create stable stream conditions, improving water quality, natural waterways' drainage and wildlife habitat while reducing flooding's frequency and severity

BRECKENRIDGE — A \$10 million Whiskey Creek restoration project slated to resume this summer will produce clean-water and wildlife habitat benefits — and fix drainage problems that for decades have affected the 200-some landowners within the watershed.

A Red River tributary, 30-mile-long Whiskey Creek drains 157 square miles in Wilkin and Otter Tail counties.

“The creek is the lifeblood of this area. If the creek doesn’t work, everything else will eventually fail,” said Buffalo-Red River Watershed District



Administrator Bruce Albright.

Six drainage ditches outlet directly into the creek. Its channel has filled with sediment over the years, which causes water to slow, and then back up into fields

after a heavy rain or spring melt. Gullies send more sediment and nutrients downstream. Whiskey Creek is impaired for turbidity and bacteria.

Leveraged funding, longstanding partnerships,

Top: Thirty-mile-long Whiskey Creek lies within Wilkin County. Its 157-square-mile watershed stretches into Otter Tail County. **Left:** Wilkin SWCD technician Kim Melton puts into perspective an eroded field inlet. With a BWSR Clean Water Fund grant, the SWCD in 2016 targeted and prioritized projects.

Photo Credits: Ann Wessel



From left: Evidence of spring flooding remains in August 2019 along a county road in Connelly Township. Flood debris collected at a Whiskey Creek road crossing near U.S. Highway 75 and the city of Kent. Wilkin SWCD Manager Don Bajumpaa and technician Kim Melton leave an eroded field inlet.

landowners’ support — and a similar restoration that’s working well on nearby Wolverton Creek — helped to move the project forward.

“I think (farmers) see it as an opportunity to be good stewards and do what’s right and what’s beneficial to not only them but their neighbors downstream,” said Jon Quast, Breckenridge-based soil conservationist with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Whiskey Creek was the only Minnesota project to receive an NRCS National Water Quality Initiative award in 2020. The \$2.9 million NWQI award will be made available over four years.

“Typically, NRCS’ strength is the technical expertise. In this instance, it’s the financial assistance,” Quast said. “The strengths of the (Buffalo-Red River) Watershed District are local funds plus the engineering side of it. We’re able to leverage everybody’s strengths to make the project successful.”

Drawing from a \$320,000 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, Wilkin County Soil & Water Conservation District staff last fall worked with landowners to install 11 grade-stabilization structures that fix gullies

Whiskey Creek Project Elements

NWQI DETAILS: A partnership among NRCS, state agencies and the EPA, the National Water Quality Initiative provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds where conservation practices can make the most difference. Allowed practices include grade stabilizations, diversions, cover crops, nutrient and pest management, residue and tillage management, critical-area planting, riparian herbaceous cover, streambank and shoreline stabilization.

along the creek.

The Whiskey Creek restoration also leverages a Minnesota Pollution Control Agency small watershed pilot project award totaling about \$1 million over four four-year cycles. The first four-year award is \$270,000.

Now, the BRRWD is seeking \$2 million in Outdoor Heritage Funds from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and \$1.6 million to expand Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) easements on 250- to 750-foot wide buffers.

The BRRWD would levy \$1.4 million. It would create a

MPCA GRANT: The Section 318 Small Watersheds Focus Program aims to restore impaired waters, prevent degradation and provide long-term funding to make measurable progress for targeted waters in focus watersheds. Whiskey Creek and the nine other watersheds selected were prioritized for grant funding for four four-year cycles starting in 2020. The watershed’s NWQI project, its Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (WRAPS), and its One Watershed, One Plan work helped it qualify.

water management district to generate \$700,000 over time.

Creating a watershed management district would establish a funding and maintenance mechanism. The 200-some landowners benefiting from the project would be charged a fee, spread over a period of up to 10 years. In the Wolverton Creek watershed, charges were based on properties’ sediment and runoff contributions. Under the maintenance agreements, the SWCD would be responsible for the MN CREP easements buffering the stream — an arrangement Albright said was far more

palatable to farmers working seven days a week and running 30,000 acres.

The BRRWD aims to hold public hearings by Sept. 1. First, it must obtain a DNR permit to work in protected waters. Although altered, Whiskey Creek is classified as a natural stream. The BRRWD board has authorized an environmental assessment worksheet, a first step in seeking the permit.

“This summer we’ll get the plan done,” Albright said in April. Having a plan allows action when funding sources align.

When Wilkin SWCD staff learned of the NWQI award, the sign-up deadline was only one week away.

But landowners had been involved with the planning. Wilkin SWCD’s work through a \$103,100 Clean Water Fund accelerated implementation grant from BWSR in 2016 had identified priority projects.

The first projects funded through the NWQI award could begin late this summer. They center on four landowners with five parcels bordering about 2 miles of Whiskey Creek, starting at the headwaters in Otter Tail County. Planned work includes 23 grade-stabilization structures,



Whiskey Creek is the outlet for this retrofitted legal ditch system, where a 1-rod buffer is in place.

16,050 linear feet of channel restoration, 15,240 linear feet of shoreline protection, 42 acres of riparian cover and 61 acres of critical-area seeding.

Wilkin SWCD Manager Don Bajumpaa summarized the Whiskey Creek restoration:

“Ultimately, we’re going to create a stable channel, a two-stage channel similar to Wolverton Creek. It’ll have a deeper center, which will convey the flows pretty much year-round. The second stage will be a broader floodplain. That area will accommodate in a safe manner the higher flows. Adjacent to it will be this wide riparian zone that will be (planted) to native grasses and flowers. Some of the sinuosity will be restored where it makes sense and where we can.”

About \$7 million of the budget relates directly to the stream corridor and tributaries. The remaining \$2.9 million covers upland conservation practices.

Success of large-scale projects hinges on landowners’ support.

“It’s easy to go out and say, ‘OK, we’ve got 225

“ Landowners all over the county want it because they’re familiar with it. They see it works. ... The problems we’re trying to fix, they’re multi-generational. They’ve literally been problems for 50, 60, 70 years. ”

— Don Bajumpaa, Wilkin SWCD manager

landowners to work with,” Albright said. “The hard part is bringing them on board as ‘You are my partner. You are my friend. You are a project supporter.’ That takes time. It takes effort. It takes education. It takes communication. It takes perseverance.”

In the case of the BRRWD, it starts with getting landowners involved when the water management plan is developed, by asking what problems exist, and by making information available.

Pat Freese, 61, is among the farmers who support the Whiskey Creek project.

He raises about 1,200 acres of spring wheat, corn, soybeans and sugar beets on the farm where he grew up. Whiskey Creek runs for about three-quarters of a

mile through a corner of his Nordick Township home site.

While the straight-line ditches that empty into Whiskey Creek were routinely cleaned out, Freese said excess sediment was never removed from the creek.

“As the water from the east comes in at full speed, it hits Whiskey Creek and then it starts to slow down. When it slows down, it spreads out, and when it spreads out it kills more crops,” Freese said. “What needs to be done is to clean Whiskey Creek so it can flow at its rate that it should be able to flow if you’re going to dump all this other water into it.”

While standing water affects his yield and crop-insurance rating, the need to maneuver around water-filled ditches when doing field work is a

bigger issue for Freese.

“Whiskey Creek, just can’t handle what it’s being asked to handle,” Freese said.

Freese has seen pictures of the Wolverton Creek restoration, and likes the looks of the streambank stabilization. On his property, erosion has widened the Whiskey Creek banks by as much as 5 feet.

“We’re going to basically mirror what’s been done on Wolverton Creek,” Quast said. “What we’ve heard from landowners on Wolverton Creek is they’re happy with it. They’ve seen less issues with flooding. They’ve seen less runoff. Anything that may run off gets filtered through a grass riparian herbaceous buffer. It’s been a win-win. They’re not losing crop.”

Meanwhile, the SWCD has identified 200 active gullies within the Whiskey Creek watershed. Similar issues exist in watersheds throughout the county, including the South Branch Buffalo River.

“Even when Whiskey Creek gets done, there’s still work to do,” Bajumpaa said.



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission is to improve and protect the state’s water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners.
Website: www.bwsr.state.mn.us.



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