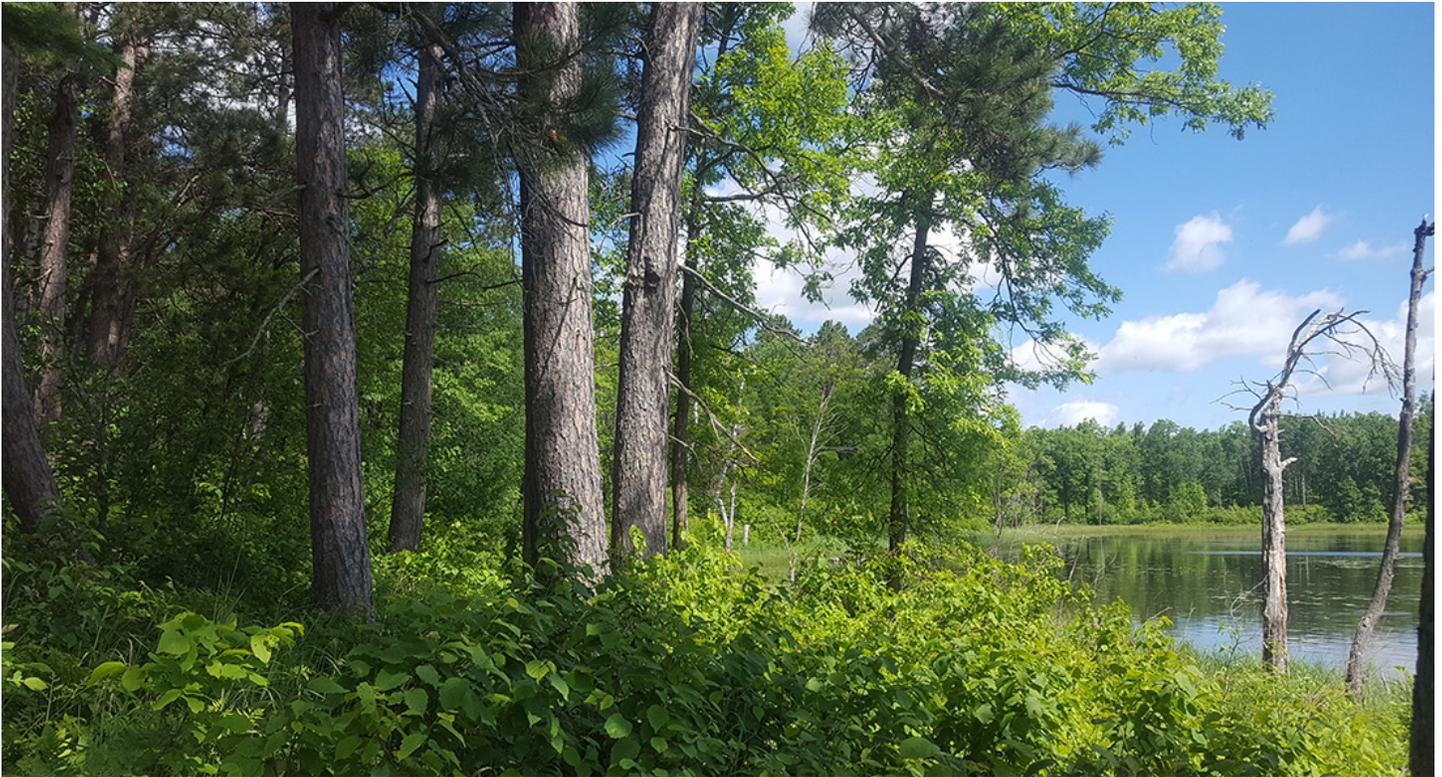


# Hubbard SWCD grows into watershed approach



With new staff members and increasing responsibilities, the Hubbard Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) is growing to fit a need sparked, in part, by a watershed-based approach to planning. At the same time, the newly augmented staff is adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Mathisrud**



**Jacobson**



**Gohmann**



The staff changes started in October 2019 when Hubbard SWCD hired Crystal Mathisrud as its new manager. An Air Force veteran, Mathisrud holds a bachelor's degree in English with an outdoor education minor, and a master's degree in creative writing. Her professional experience includes grant writing, customer service and research. She also worked as the assistant director of a local arts center.

Before Mathisrud started her new job at the SWCD in November, she attended two Leech Lake River

Comprehensive Watershed Plan meetings. Watershed planning and a broader easement protection effort would require more SWCD staff time going forward.

The Leech Lake River watershed is dominated by lakes and forests, which attract many seasonal residents and absentee landowners. Those landowners play an important role in long-term watershed protection. But reaching them requires more effort than sending newsletters or contacting media with news releases. Having

*A typical natural lakeshore in northern Hubbard County reflects what Hubbard SWCD aims to protect through forest stewardship, easement work and One Watershed, One Plan protection goals.*

**Photo Credit:**  
Crystal Mathisrud,  
Hubbard SWCD

face-to-face conversations with landowners available only intermittently or on weekends requires more staff time.

In addition to Watershed Based Implementation Funding, the Leech Lake River plan partners joined a Pine River Watershed Partnership-led effort, which will receive nearly \$2.5 million in forest easement protection dollars from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund.

The watershed partners include Cass and Hubbard counties and their corresponding SWCDs. The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) approved the plan in March 2019 — it was the first one completed after the original One Watershed, One Plan pilot plans were approved.

Funds became available in July 2019. The partnership evaluated staffing needs. It then developed an agreement to guide implementation, developed bylaws and a specific work plan for the first two-year installment of watershed-based implementation funding. The work plan was approved and the grant agreement executed in March 2020.

With only two staff members on board in early 2020, Mathisrud made the case to the SWCD board that the watershed-based funding and other opportunities allowed — and indeed required — more hands on deck to accomplish the activities identified in the plan.

The Hubbard County portion of the watershed has the greatest concentration of livestock on pasture systems. It also includes a



*Alicia Gohmann, Hubbard SWCD water quality resources technician, collects a soil sample near Kabekona in May 2020. Photo Credit: Hubbard SWCD*

trout stream and several high-quality lakes. The plan envisioned an expanded effort to work with livestock producers, and to find forest protection opportunities within the lake watersheds. Those goals would require additional landowner contact and communication, which the current staffing levels could not attain.

The combination of available funding and recognition of future needs allowed the SWCD to identify skills that would build for the future instead of maintaining the status quo. In April, the SWCD hired Alicia Gohmann, a full-time technician with a farm background. In May, it hired water quality and easement specialist Pete Jacobson, a retired Minnesota Department of

Natural Resources fisheries scientist.

The new team was putting a strain on office space. At the same time, COVID-19 workplace restrictions forced the Hubbard SWCD, and many others, to adapt to a situation for which none of them could have planned.

In this case, the work adaptations forced by COVID-19 made office space less of an immediate concern. Mobile computing and connectivity allowed many functions of the SWCD to continue relatively unscathed.

Hubbard SWCD turned one adaptation addressing safety concerns and workplace restrictions into an opportunity for new staff to

become familiar with the area.

Typically, the SWCD designates a day or two when everyone picks up their orders from the annual tree sale at a central location. To maintain social distancing, staff delivered the trees this year.

The Technical Service Area 8 GIS analyst mapped addresses of those who had purchased trees to find the most efficient delivery route. Tree delivery required several long days of windshield time, which allowed for philosophical reflection on new challenges, new situations, new programs and new opportunities.

Mathisrud summed it up in a conversation with SWCD Board Chairman Lynn Goodrich:

“Whenever there is significant pressure applied, such as during a pandemic, organizations and individuals have a brief window of time in which they may choose to adapt and expand or retract and collapse. We are in one of those moments. Are you ready?”

For Goodrich, who also chairs the Leech Lake River One Watershed, One Plan Policy Committee, the heart of the statement boiled down to: “Yes I am, and yes I can.”

Managing water by watershed, instead of by political boundaries, is in its infancy. Watershed partners will adapt and find new ways to overcome the challenges and embrace the opportunities that it brings. The Hubbard SWCD has taken the first steps along that new path.