BWSR Snapshots

May 2012

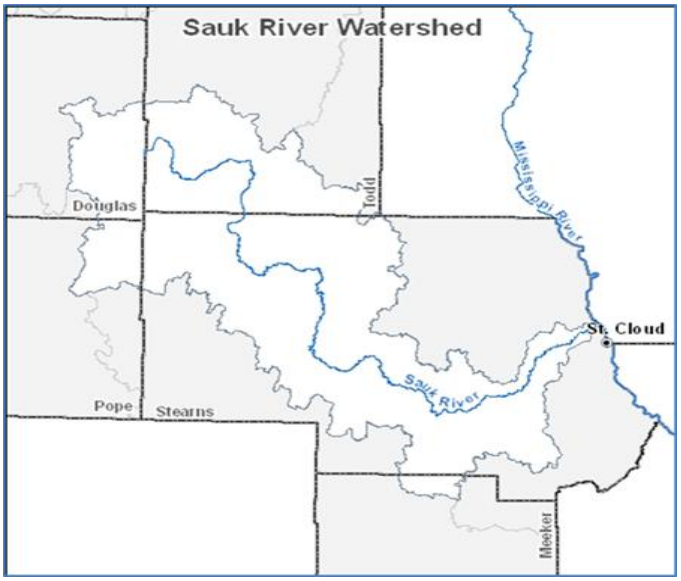
Watershed-based PRAP Pilot Project

By Don Buckhout, PRAP Coordinator

BWSR's 5-year old Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) is testing a new approach to local water management performance review with a pilot project in the Sauk River watershed in central Minnesota. This approach will focus on the collaborative efforts of all local water management entities that operate within the same major watershed.

Watershed-based local water planning is receiving increased attention in Minnesota. The recently enacted omnibus environmental policy bill clears a path for even more collaboration on local water planning and creates a new, yet-to-be-defined "comprehensive watershed management plan," to be developed and implemented locally. In recognition of this trend, this new PRAP methodology will assess the extent to which local governments operating in the same watershed have a "watershed focus" and are collaborating on plan implementation and program delivery.

Until now, PRAP has focused on individual local government unit performance, completing 34 such reviews since 2008. This new multi-LGU approach to PRAP will serve in place of the standard performance review process. BWSR has selected the Sauk River watershed for this pilot project because the watershed is well-defined, there are multiple organizations, including a watershed district, which are already top performers.



BWSR has contacted lead staff from the eleven different local governments to notify them about the project. The process will be initiated with an information meeting scheduled for early July. During the remainder of 2012, these organizations will be implementing and testing the new concept, process, schedule and methodology.

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The Elk River Watershed Association: A County Crossing Watershed Collaboration

By Jason Weinerman, Board Conservationist

Watersheds have a tendency to ignore geo-political boundaries. This can result in uneven management as governing entities have different priorities within the same watershed. In recognition of the management efficiencies gained through greater collaboration, Benton and Sherburne County came together, through a specific effort to coordinate their water plans, to form the Elk River Watershed Association (ERWA), a joint powers board consisting of county commissioners, SWCD board members, and citizens at large. Since 1994, the ERWA has worked to understand and improve the water quality across county boundaries.

The diversity of land use within the Elk River Watershed Association means that efforts to improve water quality encompass a variety of activities requiring a broad base of technical skills. The SWCD and county staff provide outreach and technical assistance to farmers, exurban residents, lakeshore residential owners, and urban residents. In addition to technical assistance, many landowners received financial assistance through a 2011 Clean Water Fund grant.

In addition to using Clean Water Fund dollars, the SWCDs from both counties prioritize the use of their State Cost Share dollars to projects that occur within the watershed. Long term voluntary collaborations are difficult because funding can be intermittent, partner interest can move to other priorities, and support can vary with the wishes of local elected officials. However, the Elk River Watershed Association demonstrates that long term voluntary partnerships can be successful and result in real improvements in local water quality and management efforts. The ERWA website is: http://www.sherburneswcd.org/ERWSA/ERWS.htm

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State and Federal Agencies Working Together on Wetland Training

By Lynda Peterson, Metro Wetland Specialist

For the past two years BWSR and the Corps of Engineers (Corps) have partnered to train wetland staff from both agencies. Wetland staff primarily review wetland delineations submitted by private wetland consultants, but we seldom do wetland delineations. This partnership resulted in having Corps and BWSR wetland staff do actual on-site delineations.

In 2011, two training sessions were held in Brainerd and Farmington. First, delineations were completed, then wetland staff defended why they chose a particular wetland boundary. In 2012, two more sessions are scheduled. At a recent session in Willmar staff from both agencies reviewed aerial photographic slides of agricultural fields throughout the past 20 years and determined whether aerial photography showed evidence of hydrology. Then the staff from both agencies went on-site and completed wetland delineations for the areas that showed hydrology. Ten project managers from the Corps and five BWSR wetland specialists attended this session.

At the end of May another session will be held in the Cloquet area to teach the staff from both agencies about the red clay soils that are dominant in the Northeast Region of the State.

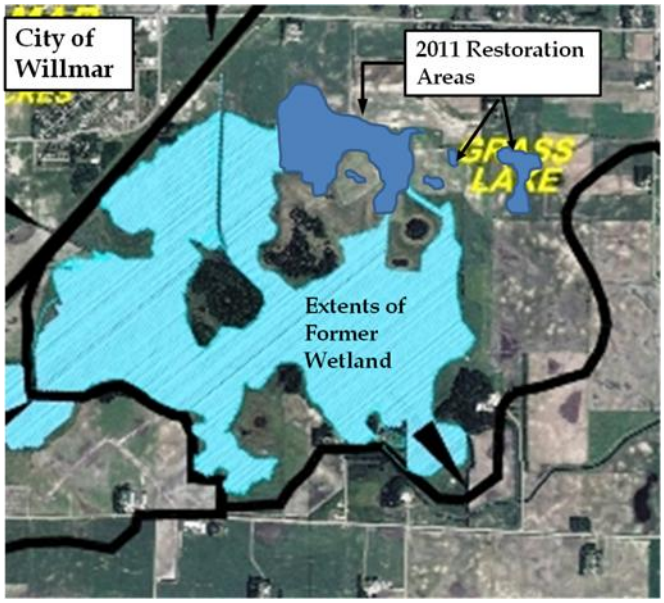
This combined training has given both agencies a comfort level with each other and involved technical abilities to provide better and more efficient program delivery and public service.

Wetland or not? That is the first Question. Second Question: where is the boundary?

Grass Lake Restoration – Recent Phase

By Tom Wenzel, Senior Water Resources Engineer

In the fall of 2011, another phase of the Grass Lake Prairie Wetland restoration project was constructed. This phase of restoration involved a cooperative venture between the state's Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program and the USDA's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), along with a private landowner's need to develop a suitable wetland replacement site for recent wetland impacts within the city of Willmar. The work was completed in the northeast corner of the Grass Lake Project area and included the restoration of several drained wetlands with one large wetland area approximately 80 acres in size.



Historic Grass Lake and 2011 Restoration Areas

The Grass Lake Prairie Wetland is approximately 1,200 acres in size and is located just to the southeast of the city of Willmar in Kandiyohi County. Drainage of the lakebed began in 1885 for farming purposes. Beginning in the early 1990s, a combination of several factors including above normal precipitation cycles, increased runoff from upstream watershed areas and inadequate drainage capacity of the ditch system through the area, caused significant crop losses within the lakebed.

As a result of these marginal farming conditions, most of the landowners within the basin have enrolled just over 1,300 acres of the lakebed into perpetual conservation easements, primarily through RIM Reserve. These easements were secured for the purpose of restoring the drained lakebed to a shallow prairie wetland and its surrounding shoreline to native prairie to the extent practicable.

Recent restoration efforts within the lakebed have been limited to smaller, isolated areas where outcomes could be feasibly attained as the restoration of the larger project is still being planned through the coordinated efforts of state, federal, and local government agencies along with conservation groups and the project landowners. The phase of work completed this past fall is located within a separate, isolated area of the lakebed with the restored wetlands all being at elevations higher than what is currently being considered for a larger, main basin. The work was in an area where a new RIM-WRP easement for 243 acres was recently secured.

Prior to its restoration, this area of the project contained a variety of former wetland habitats all extensively drained by subsurface tile and open ditches. A branch of a county ditch system was successfully abandoned in the project area through a petition and hearing with the Kandiyohi County Board, the local drainage authority. One large 80-acre shallow wetland basin was restored via installation of a steel sheet pile structure across a drainage ditch.

Primary Sheetpile Outlet Structure

A 1,000-acre-plus drainage area contributes runoff to this restored wetland. In addition, five other smaller, tile drained depressional wetlands were restored. The restoration work also involved raising and protecting a field access road, outletting and protecting an upstream functioning subsurface drainage tile, and constructing several embankments to help manage and control wetland runoff.

In total, the cost of construction for this phase of work was approximately $290,000. The majority of these costs were covered by the adjoining private landowner in their work to restore wetland areas on their property as part of a wetland replacement plan. This restoration plan was completed by BWSR staff with the assistance and support of the local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Restoration efforts within other areas of the Grass Lake Project are continuing, with additional construction work scheduled for this fall.

Recent View of 2011 Restoration Area

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