

2017 Annual Watershed District Award goes to Cedar River WD



Pictured (left to right) are CRWD's project manager Cody Fox; administrator Justin Hanson; board member Mike Jones; and Luke Skinner with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Established in 2007, the Cedar River Watershed District has taken an accelerated implementation effort in the past decade to establish goals and start implementing strategies to address those goals. The Cedar River Watershed District is in South-Central Minnesota, primarily in an agricultural watershed, with small communities that make up parts of the district's overall 435 square miles of land.

CRWD has worked through the growing pains of establishing levies and rules that were not in place prior to the district's creation. CRWD, however, has been dedicated to connecting with the community and maintaining a high level of transparency in the work being done as well as the goals it is striving to address. This community confidence has resulted in a high stakeholder level among the public and involvement in programs that involve the district's participation. CRWD's community leadership has involved working with and receiving grant support from The Hormel Foundation on several CRWD projects. The current total of committed community funding is \$3.5 million for CRWD projects – which is funding outside of the district's regular levy appropriation.

CRWD's success is tied back to dedicated employees who have worked extensively to connect with landowners for project development. The district has implemented voluntary practices in small targeted watersheds. To be successful, the work requires buy-in from nearly all the involved landowners. CRWD staff have dedicated themselves to understanding all facets of the farm operations in targeted project locations. These relationships often have been fostered through weekend family events, meetings in the combine or a standing breakfast date to stay connected and involved with how the district can work best with those ag partners. Landowner participation has increased dramatically in these areas.

The district board has a diverse background and bring trained expertise to the district. The background includes; Attorney, City Administrator, local business and agriculture background. They lead with strong beliefs, but also with a unified approach to delivering the mission of the district.

The board leadership, dedicated staff and strong community support have made the Cedar River Watershed District successful in 2017 and set up to continue these efforts into the future.

Water Regulation:

- Cedar River Watershed District adopted a permit program in 2011 that targets several regulatory standards for drainage, floodplain activity, development, water body alterations and erosion control. The District manages
- About 40 permits are processed annually by CRWD.
- CRWD prioritizes communication and outreach into the delivery of its permit program to ensure transparency and connection to those who require permits in the district.

Water Quality Improvement Projects over the past year:

- Implementation of \$2.5 Million in the Dobbins Targeted Watershed Project in Dobbins Creek
- Constructed 31 clean water projects over the past year, in the targeted Dobbins Watershed
- Implemented Alternative Drainage Water management grant. Projects included
 - o 2 Drainage water management structures
 - o Grade stabilization and saturated buffer project
 - o 7 Targeted Rock inlet projects

Water Monitoring Program:

- Maintained 10 water-monitoring stations in the Cedar for long-term chemistry data
- Current 319 project investing \$700,000 to establish comprehensive biological monitoring sites and edge of field monitoring in targeted Dobbins Creek Watershed.
- Establishes edge-of-field monitoring to show effectiveness on water chemistry and runoff reduction
- Biological IBI index to track living organism response to project progress.
 - o 13 IBI sites for fish
 - o 6 IBI sites for Macroinvertebrates

Flood Damage Reduction:

- CRWD has developed and maintains a Hydrologic and Hydraulic model for the watershed. This model is comprehensive and utilizes a number of land specific criteria, including individual information on each public culvert in the district.
- The CRWD has used the H&H to track program progress and develop the Capital Improvement Plan for projects in the Cedar
- Implementation of the plan began in 2017, with the first 4 projects completed, of the overall 25 project plan.

Community Engagement

- The Cedar River was voted by the citizens of Austin as one of the priority community improvement developments in their "Vision 2020." The CRWD has been a leader in developing the action plan and project implementation of those community projects through the Vision 2020 Waterways Committee and, as desired by community leaders, will provide this committee

in January 2018 with a permanent home through a newly revamped Citizens Advisory Committee for the watershed district.

- The Hormel Foundation dedicated \$3.2 Million toward water-quality and flood-control projects mainly upstream of Austin for the purpose of watershed management and community improvement. Funding will implement the CRWD's five-year Capital Improvement Plan.
- 1,395 "Likes" for CRWD's Facebook page while also posting updates, pictures and videos to a Twitter account and YouTube channel (which is under Mower SWCD).
- In 2017, CRWD led a 16-week photo contest to gather images showing the Cedar River and other waterways within the watershed district. The "Cedar Scenes" contest drew 59 participants and more than 300 images, with a free kayak sponsored by a local business given to one of the participants whose name was drawn in October.
- CRWD outreach coordinator has worked to provide outreach tools and tips to other watershed districts and SWCD's by presenting at the 2016 annual convention of the Minnesota Association of Soil & Watershed Districts and at the upcoming 2017 BWSR Academy training.
- CRWD has given numerous presentations to the public and local service clubs about the district's work/projects; history of the Cedar River State Water Trail; soil health; and other topics.
- CRWD partnered in 2016 with the City of Austin to successfully apply for a grant that covered most of the cost of an interactive watershed demonstration table for use in working with people of all ages.
- In 2016, CRWD led a month-long art gallery at an Austin nonprofit art center displaying various pieces of art submitted by community members or local government/nonprofits showing water from within the Cedar River Watershed District.
- CRWD staff have contributed significantly to the growing awareness and interest in cover crops and other soil-health practices in southern Minnesota with a regional outreach approach and efforts under a Cover Crop Champion grant awarded to the staff for working with two farmers who operate within the watershed district. This included about 90 people attending a free cover crop field day that bused participants to three Mower County farm sites.
- CRWD staff have helped lead the administrative effort of the Cedar River One Watershed, One Plan process, including leading the public kickoff in June 2017.
- In the summer of 2017, a CRWD-led project was completed to construct a rock surface canoe-kayak access on the Cedar River State Water Trail in Austin in collaboration with the City of Austin and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.
- As part of the Austin Vision 2020 community improvement initiative, CRWD has provided leadership to the initiative's Waterways Committee and, as desired by community organizers, will transition that committee into a newly revamped version of CRWD's Citizens Advisory Committee to be launched in January 2018.
- Under Austin Vision 2020, CRWD staff successfully requested a nearly \$100,000 grant from The Hormel Foundation to use for leading a three-year study on cover crops/soil health on potentially 45 plots in Mower County farm fields – about half in the Cedar River Watershed.
- Since 2011, CRWD has led an annual volunteer cleanup effort of the Cedar River and its tributaries under its own version of the state's "Adopt-A-River" initiative, which has removed more than 1,100 tires from the Cedar River mainly by the work of volunteers and partnering with the Conservation Corps of Minnesota.

- In 2011, CRWD successfully led an effort to get legislative approval to name the Cedar River as an official “state water trail” under the Minnesota DNR program. CRWD staff has worked with the DNR and other agencies to promote and enhance the Cedar River State Water Trail, including identifying and removing navigational hazards; adding water access; improving water trail maps and online info, and much more.

Watershed Planning:

- CRWD is providing leadership in the Cedar River One Watershed One Plan (1W1P) process.
- The plan development started in 2017 and partners the County, WD, SWCD and stakeholders from 11 different entities in the planning efforts
- CRWD has been a local leader the development of the Cedar River WRAPs effort, providing local input and drafting portions of the plan. Specifically, the district developed the implementation strategy and tables for goals. The WRAPS was developed in 2017 and is pending final approval
- CRWD provided leadership in the TMDL process and provided local data on the development phase and monitoring. The Cedar TMDL is scheduled to be complete in 2017.
- Over the past five years, the Cedar has sponsored a series of water quality models, in support of the planning efforts. Those include:
 - o Cedar River Soil and Water Assessment Tool
 - o Cedar H&H Model
 - o Dobbins Creek Watershed Gridded Surface Subsurface Hydrologic Analysis Model (GSSHA)
 - o Dobbins Ag Watershed Restoration Study
 - o Cedar River Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)

Nominee:

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Nominated By:

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