



Mower County buffer compliance about 94 percent

SWCD verifies amount of farmland meeting state's 50-foot rule on public waterways

AUSTIN, Minn. – Monday, March 14, 2016 – About 94 percent of Mower County's agricultural land already complies with the state of Minnesota's 50-foot buffer requirement along public waterways, including the Cedar River.

Extensive mapping work by the Mower Soil & Water Conservation District has confirmed that 94.4 percent of the county's farmland already satisfies the new Minnesota buffer rules. Nearly 100 percent of public ditches in the county also meet the state's 16.5-foot buffer requirement.

"A vast majority of Mower County's farmers and ag landowners have been proactive on buffers over the years and great for our SWCD staff to work with on an array of field practices that reduce and filter stormwater runoff," Mower SWCD manager Justin Hanson said. "We appreciate their efforts and look forward to working soon with the others who mostly need to buffer small tracts of land."

SWCD staff will contact those landowners about non-compliant land in the coming months along with options for how they can correct it, Hanson said.

Mower SWCD staff led by district technician Aaron Gamm – the county's lead on the state buffer plan – conducted their own mapping of buffers along public waterways and ditches. Staff then compared those maps to new state buffer maps.

Overall, Mower County has 445 miles of public waterways, including 21 miles of public ditches – with about 280 acres not in compliance with the buffer law. Once all is in compliance, about 5,223 acres will be buffered in Mower. In the Cedar River Watershed District's portion in Mower County – nearly 234 miles of public waterways – about 95 percent are properly buffered.

In 2015, the state Legislature passed a law seeking to establish riparian (the area between land and a river or stream) buffers and water-quality practices to protect water resources from erosion and runoff pollution; stabilize soils, shores and banks; and provide habitat and riparian corridors.

Statewide, the law seeks to establish 110,000 acres of vegetative buffers of up to 50 feet along lakes, rivers, streams and ditches to help filter out phosphorus, nitrogen and sediment. The buffer width will be an average of 50 feet on public waters and at least 16.5 feet on public ditches. Private ditches no longer are required to be buffered.

Buffers need to be in place for public waterways by November 2017 and on public ditches by November 2018.

Mower SWCD and all other SWCDs in Minnesota are implementing the state's buffer requirement, including by planning; providing technical assistance to landowners; reviewing alternative practices for approval; and tracking and reporting progress. By July, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources expects to finalize buffer protection maps.

During recent years of higher crop prices, Hanson said, incentives offered by the Cedar River Watershed District and Turtle Creek Watershed District – both managed by Mower SWCD staff – helped keep a lot of expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) farmland enrolled and, in turn, buffer in place along waterways. In 2015, the number of Mower County CRP buffers and wetland enrollments increased to 2,474 acres compared to 175 acres in 2014.

Under the federal CRP land conservation program, farmers sign contracts for 10 to 15 years to remove environmentally sensitive land from farm production and to plant species to improve environmental health and quality.

Staff at Mower SWCD have been working to educate the ag community and general public on the state buffer plan, including presentations at events organized by the Mower County Farm Bureau and Austin Izaak Walton League.

Buffers provide a lot of benefit for water quality as well as for flood control and habitat opportunities, Hanson said, but they aren't going to solve the issues with the state's waterways on their own.

"Our staff continues to work with farmers and rural landowners on many other types of projects – including cover crops, stormwater detention and saturated buffers – that reduce runoff and improve water quality," Hanson said.

Mower SWCD helped establish about 11 miles of grass waterways in 2015, he said, with a goal for another 20 miles this year. In 2015, about 1,200 acres of cover crops also were planted, with another 3,000 acres planned for 2016.

For more buffer information, go online to www.dnr.state.mn.us/index.html and www.bwsr.state.mn.us/buffers. Questions also can be directed to Mower SWCD's Aaron Gamm at 507-434-2603.

Mower County by the numbers

445 miles of public waters (includes 21 miles of public ditches)

234 miles are in Cedar River Watershed

94.4 percent public waterways compliance

Nearly 100 percent public ditches comply

Media contact

Tim Ruzek, Water Plan & Outreach Coordinator

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

507-434-2603; cell: 507-993-2518

tim.ruzek@mowerswcd.org

Website: www.mowerswcd.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/mowerswcd

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

Since 1953, Mower SWCD has provided land and conservation services to Mower County landowners to help manage lands in a way that promotes a sound economy as well as sustains and enhances natural resources that are key to the state's environmental health. Mower SWCD is one of Minnesota's 91 SWCDs each are governed by an elected board.

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

1408 21st Ave. N.W.

Austin, MN, 55912

(507) 434-2603

www.mowerswcd.org