

# MOWER

SWCD Soil and Water Conservation District

Cedar River in Austin Township



# 2016 Annual Report

*Mower SWCD  
finishes busy year  
from soil health  
to buffers to  
planning for  
Root, Cedar  
watersheds.*

Wild Indigo SNA state trail in Lansing Township



# 2016 Mower SWCD Board of Supervisors



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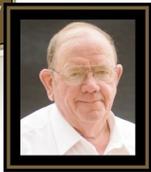
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*Mower SWCD staff in September check a flooded bridge over Dobbins Creek's north branch in Red Rock Township.*

## Partnerships key to Mower SWCD work

*By Justin Hanson, District Manager*

Mower SWCD had a great 2016 year, and a large part of that success was rooted in our incredible partnerships.

Not even the September 2016 flood hampered our year. The flood event served as a reminder of the importance of conservation work and our ongoing projects with partners to reduce flooding and improve water quality.

As an SWCD, our mission is to work with agricultural partners to support their conservation needs. We also are charged with tackling challenging water-resource issues and creating a better landscape for future generations. This is a task that's far bigger than us.

Our 2016 year was a benchmark for aligning ourselves with the people and programs that will help us all be successful. Mower SWCD continues to leverage state and federal funds to deliver critical practices on the ground. We also have been able to expand the conservation footprint through private landowner partnerships.

Mower SWCD also has connected with unique partners, such as The Hormel Foundation, to leverage private funding for community improvement projects. As always, we try to remain innovative to our landowners' needs and lead initiatives that will accelerate the implementation of projects in Mower County.

This report highlights projects and initiatives not being done statewide. This is possible only through our extensive network of partners working with our dedicated board and staff to protect and enhance Mower County's natural resources.

## Mower SWCD staff



**Justin Hanson**  
Administrator



**Jeanne Crump**  
Admin. Assistant



**Cody Fox**  
Project Manager



**James Fett**  
Watershed Tech



**Steve Lawler**  
Resource Specialist



**Aaron Gamm**  
District Tech



**Tim Ruzek**  
Public Outreach



**Larry Callahan**  
District Tech

**Mower SWCD**

**1408 21st Ave. N.W., Austin, MN, 55912**

**507-434-2603**

**Check us out online:**

**Website**

[www.mowerswcd.org](http://www.mowerswcd.org)

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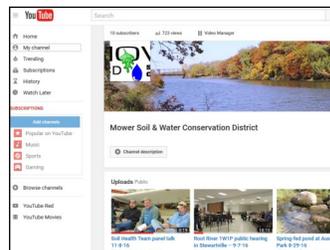
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# Mower SWCD helps landowners with new state buffer law

Mower SWCD staff made extensive efforts in 2016 to inform and assist Mower County landowners with the new state law for vegetative buffers.

In coordination with the Farm Bureau organization, Mower SWCD led two public meetings in February and July for landowners to learn about the buffer law as well as ask questions and express concerns.

Prior to the meetings, Mower SWCD conducted a mapping inventory of buffers in Mower County along public waterways and public ditches. Staff found that nearly 95 percent of Mower County's public waterways already had adequate buffer and almost 100 percent on public ditches. Private ditches are exempt from the law.

Heading into 2017, Mower SWCD district technician Aaron Gamm, the local buffer coordinator, planned to send letters to about 300 landowners in Mower County to establish perennial vegetation on nearly 280 acres of cropland along public waterways before the state's Nov. 1, 2017, compliance deadline. Most just need a small section land to comply with the law.

Gamm and other Mower SWCD staff plan to help landowners needing more buffer with considering the various con-



*Justin Hanson, Mower SWCD district manager, speaks (left) on the buffer law to a Twin Cities Public TV crew in spring on the North Branch of Dobbins Creek. (Right) Aaron Gamm, a district technician for Mower SWCD who coordinates the local buffer effort, speaks in July at a buffer informational meeting in Blooming Prairie.*



servation and farm program options for doing it. Landowners notified by Mower SWCD need to take steps by this fall to address their buffer needs or risk eligibility for future programs.

Buffers are areas or strips of land kept in permanent vegetation – not farmed – to slow water runoff and help filter out pollutants, such as phosphorus and nitrogen, as well as sediment. They also provide wildlife habitat and stabilize land along water.

Mower SWCD has adjusted its programs to make staff more available in 2017 for assisting landowners with buffer compliance.

The Mower County Board of Commissioners has committed resources to Mower SWCD to ensure landowners seeking buffer help can get it this year.

With buffers, Mower SWCD staff can provide technical assistance for measuring, staking, seeding and layout designing to landowners. There are numerous conservation programs available to help landowners offset the loss of productive cropland, including the new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for Minnesota.

Passed in 2015 by the Minnesota Legislature and revised in 2016, the buffer law requires each parcel to have a 50-foot buffer along public waterways and a minimum width of 30 feet. Adequate buffers on public waterways are required by Nov. 1 this year.

Public ditches are required to have at least a 16.5-foot buffer – private ditches are exempt – but Mower County has nearly 100 percent compliance.

## Gebhardts' farm approved for 'alt practice' to buffer law

In December, one Mower County farm – possibly the state's first – was certified for "alternative practices" that satisfy the new state buffer law's requirements.

A study determined the conservation field practices that have been in place for the past three decades on a 150-acre parcel of the Gebhardt family's farm in Waltham Township benefit water quality more than what would be provided by a 50-foot buffer required by the law.

That includes five sediment-and-water control basins; several grass waterways; and two pieces enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

Mower SWCD worked with the Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources to confirm the study's findings meet the buffer law's intent for the parcel along Roberts Creek north of Brownsdale. Only a small number of Mower County landowners, however, could even be considered for alternative prac-

tices — the Gebhardt parcel had a high number of basins and land much steeper than most in the county.

Minnesota Soybean Research & Promotion Council led the study with assistance from Houston Engineering to develop a framework for determining if landowners are or can become compliant with the buffer law through alternative practices.

To prove the framework is viable, the soybean group sought a farmer willing to work with a local SWCD and use the framework to get alt practices approved.

The Gebhardt brothers – Jim, Mike and Bob – agreed to the study. They grow corn and soybeans on 118 acres of the studied parcel. The land needed more buffer along Roberts Creek, which flows into the Cedar River north of Austin.



*View of Gebhardts' conservation practices, such as basins and grass waterways.*

# Looking Back on 2016



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service



## 2016 Best Management Practices

<u>Project</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Federal/State funding assistance paid to landowners</u>
Cover crop	4,403 acres	\$266,004
EQIP waterways	8 contracts	\$50,137
CRP waterways	13 contracts	\$74,095
Grassland CRP	2,376 contract acres	\$854,000
Sediment basins	2 basins	\$20,713
Windbreaks	3 windbreaks	\$1,030
Nutrient management	81 acres	\$4,755
Easement establishment	31 acres	\$6,531
Brush control on conservation	71 acres	\$8,937
Ag BMP low-interest loan program	13 loans	\$291,101
<b>Total State &amp; Federal Dollars</b>		<b>\$1,577,303</b>
Land treated for water quality	4,509 acres	
Land treatment for wildlife	2,478 acres	



Mower SWCD's James Fett and Michelle Janssen of Farm Service Agency work with a landowner on a CRP signup.

Mower SWCD partnered in 2016 with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency to enroll 2,376 acres in Mower County in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for buffers and wetlands. This was similar to the 2015 total, which had increased from 175 acres in 2014.

CRP helps reduce nutrient runoff; provides flood-control benefits; and creates wildlife habitat. CRP involves annual contracts to take environmentally sensitive land out of farm production to plant species that improve environmental quality. Many CRP acres also were re-enrolled in 2016. CRP rental rates have increased due to elevated crop and land prices in recent years. Higher payment rates led to more CRP participation. Mower SWCD helped promote CRP and get landowners to sign up.

Mower SWCD also assisted USDA by writing many conservation plans and contracts; doing GIS mapping; and hosting technical meetings with landowners. Low crop prices have made CRP a stronger option.

## Annual tree program successful

Mower SWCD's annual tree and shrub program in April 2016 proved to be another boost for conservation.

Landowners purchased more than 11,000 trees and shrubs from Mower SWCD during the 2016 program.

Trees and shrubs were distributed at Mower County's fairgrounds. In 2017, the pickup will be at the Austin Runnings store's east side.



Mower SWCD staff work in April for the tree program.

### Mower SWCD/NRCS

1408 21st Ave. N.W., Austin, MN 55912  
507-434-2603 [www.mowerswcd.org](http://www.mowerswcd.org)

#### 2016 Staff

**Justin Hanson**, District Manager  
**Jeanne Crump**, Administrative Assistant  
**Cody Fox**, Project Manager  
**James Fett**, Watershed Technician  
**Steve Lawler**, Resource Specialist  
**Aaron Gamm**, District Technician  
**Tim Ruzek**, Water Plan & Outreach Coordinator  
**Larry Callahan**, District Technician  
**Andrea Horsman**, NRCS District Conservationist  
**Jessica Bakken**, NRCS Ultima Employee

#### 2016 Board of Supervisors

**Jim Gebhardt**, Chair  
**Randy Smith**, Vice Chair  
**Jon Erichson**, Secretary/Treasurer  
**Rick Gehling**  
**Jim Kellogg**

## 2016 Highlights & Events

- Completed countywide buffer inventory.
- Led water monitoring in Root River's South Branch headwaters.
- Facilitated first Mower-Fillmore Soil Health Team meetings.
- Filed eight Mower County applications for state's Ag Certainty program.
- Provided administrative and technical services to the Turtle Creek and Cedar River watershed districts.
- Received grant to start Cedar River One Watershed, One Plan.
- Completed Root River One Watershed, One Plan pilot planning project.
- Initiated soil-health partnership with Riverland Community College.
- Awarded first Mower SWCD science fair awards for Austin schools.
- Facilitated Mower's Volunteer Nitrate Monitoring Network.
- Assisted with Targeted Drainage Water Management grant.
- Co-led presentation on SWCD outreach strategies at MASWCD state convention with MN Board of Water & Soil Resources.
- Started social media and monthly staff column for area newspapers.
- Resource specialist Steve Lawler nominated by state and federal agency peers for "Outstanding District Employee of the Year" for 2016.
- Mower SWCD staff and Mower County landowners featured in statewide buffer stories by Star Tribune and Twin Cities Public TV.

# Root River 1W1P completed; Cedar 1W1P begins

Mower SWCD and partners made much progress in 2016 toward developing watershed-based management plans as required under a new state initiative.

In late 2016, Mower SWCD and other local government units with the Root River One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) pilot project received approval of the final plan. Root River 1W1P now moves into an implementation phase after about a two-year planning process.

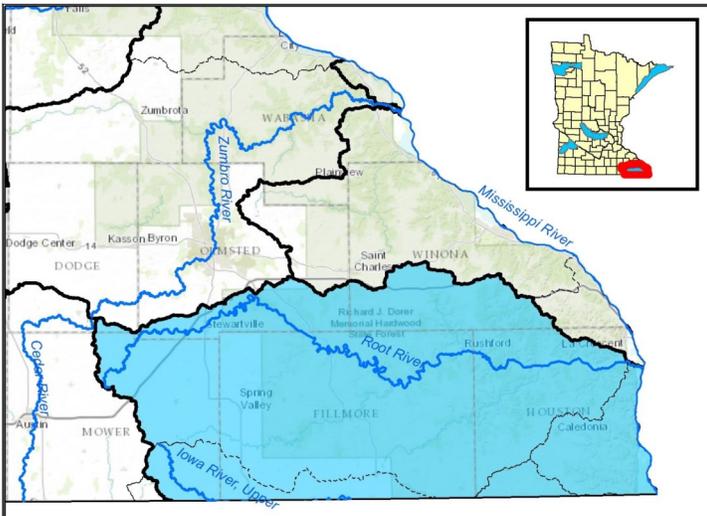
Just as Root River 1W1P was entering its final phase, Mower SWCD was awarded a grant from the Minnesota

Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR) to start the Cedar River 1W1P planning process. Mower SWCD will serve as the fiscal agent for the process. Dodge SWCD will lead.

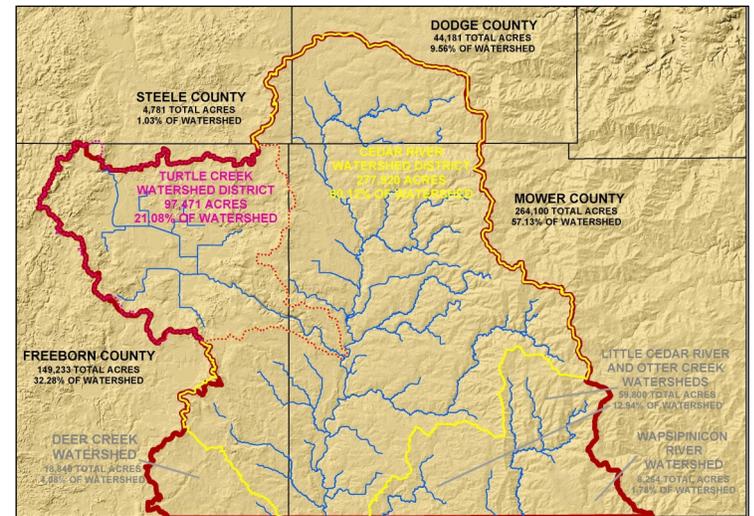
Under 1W1P, the state aims to create water-management plans based on watershed boundaries rather than smaller, political boundaries.

This aims to ensure that the most-significant threats to a watershed's water resources are addressed with practices providing the greatest environmental benefits. The plan will not add a new layer of government.

## Root River 1W1P planning area



## Cedar River 1W1P planning area



# Field to Stream accelerating in Root headwaters

Despite snow, crews finished in late December the first of many water-quality projects expected in the headwaters of Root River's south branch in eastern Mower County.

Mower SWCD led construction of a two-basin terrace system to control water and sediment on a Clayton Township farm field as part of phase two of the Root River Field to Stream Partnership led by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Work involved building two berms – each berm at least the length of two football fields – to hold and filter stormwater running off about 20 acres of crop land.

“This project is a great example of things to come from Field to Stream,” said Aaron Gamm, Mower SWCD district technician. “We’re excited to work closely with landowners in the Root on projects tied to extensive monitoring.”

With the basins, sediment and phosphorus losses are expected to be reduced by more than 50 percent from the 20-acre field, said Kevin Kuehner, project lead with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Six other basins could be built in the next two years in the 2,800-acre watershed study area in Mower County. Thousands of feet of grass waterways also are planned for 2017.

Started in 2009, Field to Stream uses innovative equipment and technology to monitor sediment and nutrient runoff from farm fields and to study streams receiving that



Crews work (left) in December on Field to Stream's first basin project in Mower County. (Right) SWCD's Larry Callahan maintains a water-monitoring station.

stormwater. Information collected in the project's initial six years (phase one) gave farmers baseline data to better understand the effects of their existing conservation practices. Monitoring continues at these sites as phase two begins.

Mower SWCD monitors and maintains three water-sampling stations for the project in Mower County's Bennington Township, north of LeRoy.

Under the project, the stations sample surface and tile runoff water from the field edge along with water in a ditch at the outlet of the headwaters study area. Sampling has continued into this winter.

# Mower County's first Ag Certainty families honored

Four farm families in Mower County received recognition in September for being certified by a new state program.

State officials with the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) honored the families — the first in Mower County — during a soil health field event at Cotter farm in Austin Township.

Together the Mower County families are enrolling more than 2,200 acres into the certification program.

Those honored for water conservation efforts were:

- James Anderson
- Michael and Tom Cotter
- Bruce and Jackie Barnum
- Arvid and Jon Jovaag

Also referred to as “Ag Certainty,” MAWQCP is a voluntary program that works with famers and local soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) to identify and fix risks to water quality on a field-by-field, whole-farm basis.



*Farm families from Mower and Freeborn counties gather with state agricultural leaders in September after being certified through the Ag Certainty program.*

Producers who treat all risks to water quality on their farm are certified and deemed compliant for 10 years with new water quality rules and laws.

Mower County landowners interested in the Ag Certainty program should contact Mower SWCD at 507-434-2603 or go online at: [www.mda.state.mn.us/awqcp](http://www.mda.state.mn.us/awqcp)

## Cotters recognized for conservation efforts

Tom & Michael Cotter and family received Mower SWCD's 2016 Conservationists of the Year award for their numerous efforts on their Austin Township farm.

The Cotters were honored in August during the Mower County Fair's opening awards ceremony. They also were recognized in December at the state convention of the Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts.

Dating back 140 years, the Cotter farm today operates 1,100 acres in Austin Township for corn, soybeans, hay and canning vegetables as well as raise beef cattle. Tom Cotter also is a local leader with cover crops.



*Cotter family on their Austin Township farm.*



*Mower SWCD resource specialist Steve Lawler, a soil scientist, works last fall with Riverland Community College ag students at Cotter Farm in Austin Township.*

## Riverland, Mower SWCD partner on soil health

Riverland Community College and Mower SWCD forged a new partnership in 2016 focused on agricultural education and research, especially related to soil health.

Steve Lawler, a soil scientist and resource specialist for Mower SWCD, worked extensively starting in fall with students enrolled in Riverland's growing agricultural program based in Austin.

Lawler led several field days with students, including studying cover crop soil near Austin.

Mower SWCD and Riverland are continuing to explore other ways to collaborate in areas related to soil health, water quality and more.



Mower-Fillmore Soil Health Team talks cover crops in fall with Riverland Community College ag students. (Right) Rain simulation demo for cover crops at Mower County Fair.

# Mower producers start Soil Health Team

Agricultural producers from Mower and Fillmore counties launched a new Soil Health Team in early 2016 to learn from each other as well as help raise awareness about cover cropping and reduced tillage systems.

Staff with the Mower and Fillmore SWCD offices help facilitate meetings of the Mower-Fillmore Soil Health Team along with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff from both counties.

They also offered several demonstrations using a rainfall simulator, including at the Mower County Fair.

Mower County producers on the team in 2016 included Bruce Barnum; Tom Cotter; Tom Finnegan; Cindy & Terry Hamilton; and Travis Hamilton.

Mower-Fillmore Soil Health Team, which also includes agricultural professionals, is committed to providing one-on-one outreach to other area producers seeking to learn more about cover cropping and reduced tillage systems along with other management practices.

Heading into 2017, Mower and Fillmore counties each planned to start its own county Soil Health Team.

# Prescribed burns help Mower conservation sites

Through a first-time initiative, controlled burns in spring 2016 helped conservation land sites in western Mower County that are under permanent easements.

Conservation Corps Minnesota (CCM) conducted successful burns – at no cost to the landowner thanks to state Clean Water Legacy funds – starting in mid-March on 19 different properties covering more than 652 acres. All sites are under permanent or perpetual easements in which the land cannot be farmed or developed in other ways.

Mower SWCD worked with the CCM to set up the first-time arrangement. Mower SWCD staff worked in advance to get landowner approvals. CCM planned and conducted the burns.

“This was an excellent opportunity for Mower County landowners to get maintenance on their native prairies at no cost,” said Mower SWCD’s James Fett, who oversaw the burns.

Some sites never had received a prescribed burn, including properties under an easement for 15 years or more. Ideally, permanent easement sites should get a prescribed burn every five years but the process can be costly to the landowner.

All 2016 sites were in the Cedar River Watershed but Mower SWCD and CCM plan a similar partnership on prescribed burns in 2017 for permanent easement sites in eastern Mower

## Mower County prescribed burns

**652 acres**

**19 permanent easements**



One of the prescribed burns in 2016 at a permanent easement site in Lyle Township.



Conservation Corps Minnesota crew after a prescribed burn last year in Mower County.

## AIS survey finds invasive snails

Mower SWCD led the first year of work in Mower County to detect and raise awareness about aquatic invasive species.

Funded entirely by AIS funds from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the work in 2016 included survey work on the Cedar River (Austin Mill Pond) and Dobbins Creek at East Side Lake.

Chinese Mystery Snails were found along the southwest and north access



*Chinese Mystery Snails found in Austin.*

sites to Austin Mill pond.

They are AIS but don't lead to an "infested waters" designation by the DNR.

More AIS surveying is planned for 2017, including the Ramsey Mill Pond area.



*Mower SWCD's Aaron Gamm and summer intern David Wick survey Austin Mill Pond, part of the Cedar River, in July for aquatic invasive species.*

## Mower SWCD promotes upland storage statewide

Upland storage of storm-water should be getting more attention statewide as a water-quality practice due to Mower SWCD's efforts at a state event.

Mower SWCD board chair Jim Gebhardt presented a resolution on upland storage in De-

ember at Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts' annual convention. The resolution — which was approved — called for MASWCD to work with state agencies to start a statewide program to fund and support upland storage detention in watersheds to improve water quality and reduce flooding.

Mower SWCD is involved extensively in upland storage, especially for the Cedar River.

## SWCD gives first science fair awards



*3rd-4th grade division recipient  
Austin Public Schools*



*5th-6th grade division recipient  
Austin Public Schools*

### Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

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