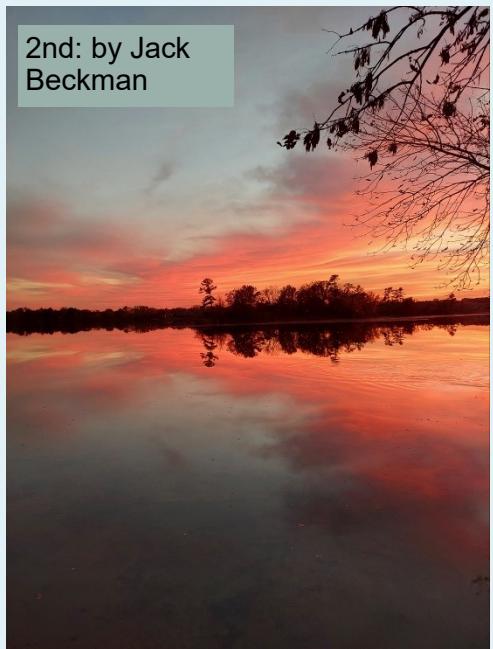
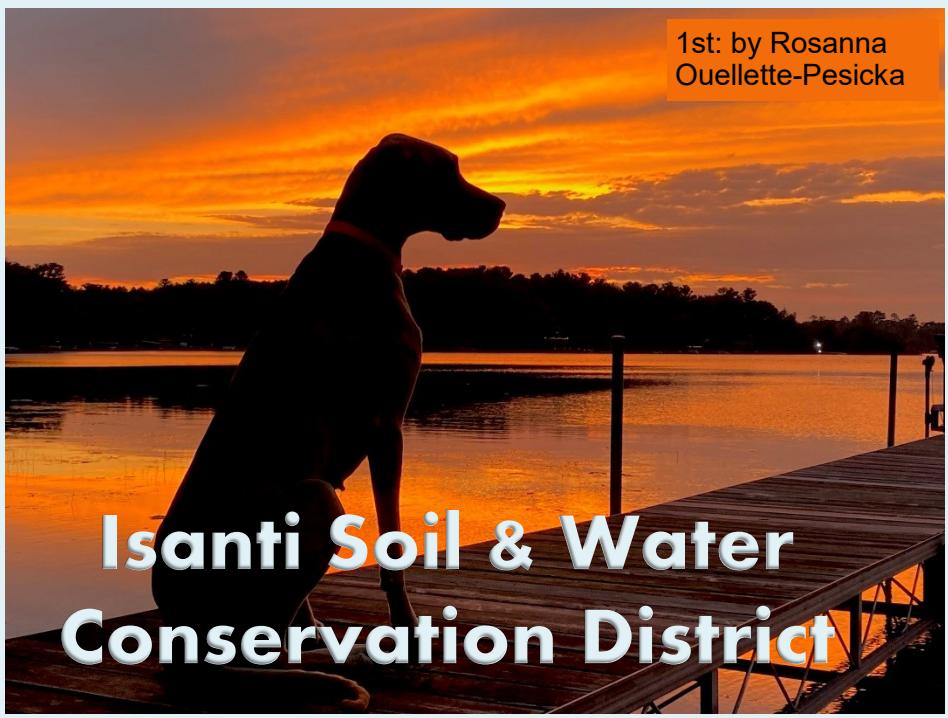


1st: by Connie Thorp

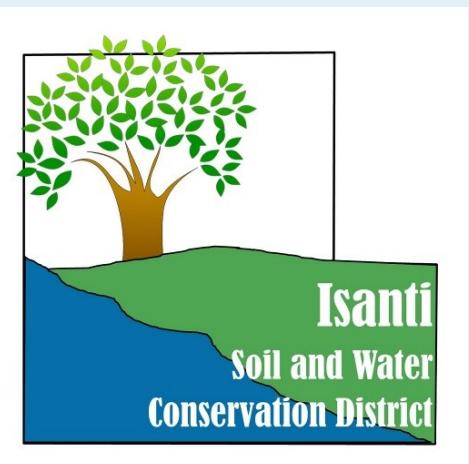


2nd: by Jack Beckman



1st: by Rosanna Ouellette-Pesicka

2023 Annual Highlights



The Isanti Conservation District is a legal Subdivision of State Government organized under provisions of Minnesota Statute 103C. The District is governed by a Board of Supervisors composed of five members elected by the voters of Isanti County, and who are responsible for directing all District activities. The board meets monthly on the third Wednesday of the month.

Pictured are the 2023 Photo Contest Winners

Our Mission

To provide guidance, to inspire action, and to bring innovative resources to the table so that people can become leaders in keeping land and water healthy for future generations.

Staff and Supervisors



**Al Koczur,
Treasurer**
Cambridge Twp



**Dave Medvecky,
Chair**
North Branch &
Isanti Twps



**Clark Anderson,
Vice Chair**
Spencer Brook,
Wyanett & Stanford
Twps



Val Anderson
Maple Ridge,
Stanchfield,
Springvale & Dalbo
Twps



Tom Anderson
Bradford, Athens &
Oxford Twps

Staff (Left to right):

Todd Kulaf, District Technician
Todd.Kulaf@mn.nacdnet.net

Lydia Godfrey, Outreach Assistant
lgodfrey@isantiswcd.org

Linda Gehrking, Administrative Assistant
lgehrking@isantiswcd.org

Tiffany Determan, District Manager
Tiffany.Determan@mn.nacdnet.net

Matthew Remer, District Technician
Matthew.Remer@mn.nacdnet.net



Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Brian Steffen, Acting District Conservationist Team Lead
brian.steffen@usda.gov

Betsy Riley, Soil Scientist Betsy.riley@usda.gov

The SWCD is co-located with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This ensures our office can help coordinate technical assistance and funding programs for landowners.

Local Programs & Technical Assistance

There are fees associated with some of the services we offer. Please contact our office for more information.

Water Monitoring

Lake and stream monitoring provides the data necessary to manage the health of Isanti County's lakes, rivers and streams for recreation, wildlife, and consumption. Upon request, the SWCD contracts with lake groups and other organizations to provide water quality monitoring services, including monitoring plan development, water monitoring and summary reports.

- Lakes: 7 lakes in Oxford Township, and volunteers were trained to provide monitoring for Green, Blue, and Skogman Lakes.
- Streams: South East Blue Lake inlet (Tiger Street Basins), and tributaries draining into Skogman Lake
- Groundwater: 11 groundwater observation wells
- Precipitation: 4 manual precipitation gauges (volunteer program)



Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS)

County Assistance: Isanti County implements the States AIS Prevention Planning at the local level. The SWCD assists the County with early detection, monitoring and education. All AIS efforts in 2023 were detailed in an [AIS Annual Report](#).

In 2023 the SWCD 1) inventoried 12 recreational lakes for new AIS infestations; 2) Contracted with CLIMB Theatre to provide 3 performances that had 87 attendees; 3) Presented at the 5th Grade Conservation Day about AIS prevention and taught 145 students 4) Hosted Starry Trek for 2 volunteers; 5) Provided materials to be used for outreach including a [YouTube video](#) and an Isanti County AIS Handout; 6) Various other AIS outreach including social media posts, newspaper and newsletter articles, and organizing volunteers.

Local Programs & Technical Assistance—*continued*

Tree Program

The tree sale is an important annual program that supports small backyard habitat projects as well as large forestry restoration projects. The sale originated in order to provide landowners with an affordable and convenient way to purchase trees and shrubs for conservation practices such as windbreaks, shelterbelts, living snow fences, scenic buffers, wildlife habitat, and more.

In 2023 nearly 20,000 trees were sold.



Rural and Urban Outreach and Education



Through education, people develop the skills necessary to understand complex natural resource problems and, more importantly, what they can do to protect natural resources for future generations. The SWCD incorporates education and outreach in all of its programs through a variety of efforts such as presentations, one-on-one conversations, workshops and field days.

This past year, we hosted 5 in-person events: Lakeshore Restorations on Skogman Lake (15 attendees), a Soil Health Field Day (42), a Conservation Tour (15), a Small Lakes Hybrid Webinar (23), and an Agriculture Lunch & Learn (36). We also participated in a variety of other events hosted throughout the community and by our partners such as Fall Fest, a Lower St. Croix workshop for elected officials and community leaders, and a workshop educating realtors about lakeshore properties.

The SWCD has also continued our outreach through quarterly e-newsletters, meeting attendance, newspaper

District No-till Seeding Program

The SWCD owns a seed drill suitable for planting native grasses and wildflowers. The drill is rented to landowners.

In 2023 the drill was used to plant 108 total acres. This consisted of 48 acres of native grasses, 10 acres of pasture, and 50 acres of alfalfa.



Local Programs & Technical Assistance—*continued*

Buffer Law Compliance Assistance

Minnesota's Buffer Law was signed into law by Governor Dayton in June 2015. The law requires 50-foot average width buffers on public waters and 16.5 foot buffers on public drainage systems. The SWCDs role in the law is to provide technical assistance to ensure that landowners are meeting the requirement and to review 1/3 of the parcels in the County each year for compliance. Isanti County enforces the law. Based on 2023 reviews, 100% of the parcels remained compliant.



Wetland Conservation Act (WCA)

The Isanti SWCD serves as a wetland technical representative for Isanti County. In 2023 staff fulfilled SWCD duties associated with WCA as follows:

- 1) 4 Technical Evaluation Panels
- 2) 6 site visits
- 3) 10+ wetland consultations with Isanti County landowners
- 4) 5+ aerial reviews for potential projects or violations



Studies and Plans

Subwatershed Assessments (SWA)

The SWCD completes subwatershed assessments to map and model how much rainwater runoff makes it into our lakes and streams untreated. This modeling uses advanced computer applications to calculate the amount of rainwater that becomes runoff. The outputs of these studies are used to target the use of grant funds. Ideal project locations are then identified to maximize benefits while minimizing costs. The SWCD has completed SWAs for: Fannie Lake, Green Lake direct watershed, Blue Lake, North Brook and Wyanett Creek (Green Lake Tributaries), Spectacle Lake, Long Lake, Skogman Lake including a shoreline update, and Rum River discharge points in the City of Cambridge and Isanti.



In 2023 the SWCD finished updating a portion of the Skogman-Fannie Chain of Lakes SWA that was completed in 2014 by Anoka SWCD. The update targeted the nearshore landscape adjacent to Skogman Lake as well as the rural areas of the watershed.



One Watershed One Watershed One Plan

The 1W1P program is part of a statewide initiative aimed at aligning local water planning with major watershed boundaries and enhancing collaboration between upstream and downstream partners. The planning program results in comprehensive watershed plans that are prioritized, targeted and measurable.

Isanti County is part of 3 major watersheds: Lower St. Croix, the Rum River and the Snake River. In 2023, the Rum River Watershed Partnership began implementation. The Lower St. Croix was in its third year of implementation. Due to the small size of the watershed within the county, the SWCD is not actively involved in the Snake River 1W1P.



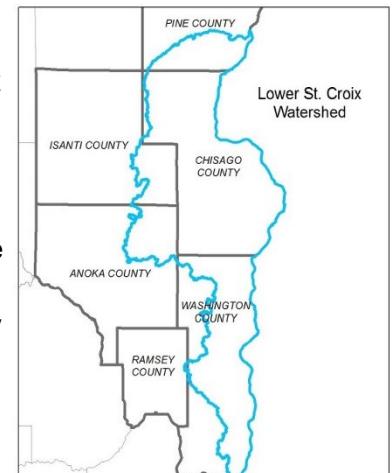
Studies and Plans—*continued*

Lower St. Croix 1W1P (www.lsc1w1p.org)

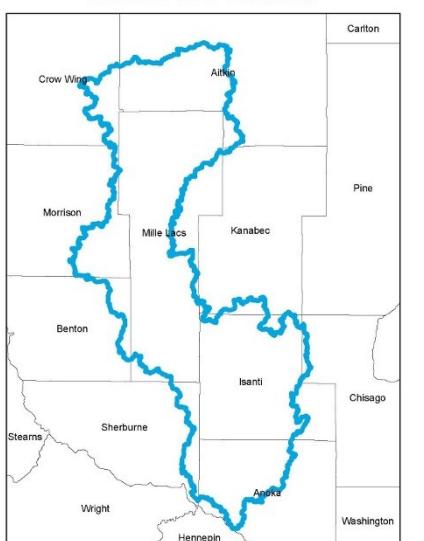
In 2019, the Lower St. Croix 10-year Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan was approved by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. In 2023, local partners received \$1.4 million in state funding to implement priority projects and programs outlined in the plan or years 2023-2025.

2023 was the third full year of implementation. Two shared outreach staff were able to offer additional outreach throughout the basin and in Isanti County. Notably, the watershed offered a workshop for elected officials and community leaders, assistance organizing soil health field days, led the Small Lakes Webinar, offered support promoting behavior changes, and participated in multiple Isanti SWCD events.

In Isanti County, \$10,000 was allocated for non-structural agriculture projects that were implemented in 2023. It included a three-year contract for 53 acres of a multi-species cover crop and a one-year contract for 89 acres of no-till.



Rum River 1W1P Boundaries



Rum River 1W1P (www.millelacsswcd.org/1w1p/rum-river-one-watershed-one-plan/)

In 2022 the Rum River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan was approved by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), and was adopted by the Isanti SWCD as well as 12 other partners to form the Rum River Watershed Partnership (RRWP). In 2023 the RRWP received \$1.1M of state dedicated funds to implement priorities in the approved work plan. Most of the funds have already been encumbered for projects throughout the watershed.

In Isanti County, funding will be used for: A wetland restoration in the Green Lake Watershed; An update of the Subwatershed Assessment for Skogman Lake to help locate project sites for future water quality improvement efforts; Shoreline restorations on Skogman and Blue Lake; Agricultural non-structural projects such as cover crops, no-till, and buffer strips; Build a list of wetland restoration sites to be funded in the future.

Isanti SWCD is also acting as the Watershed Coordinator and providing basin-wide outreach to achieve plan goals.



Programs and Partnerships

The SWCD partners with a variety of local, state and federal government agencies and non-government organizations. These partnerships enhance our ability to deliver technical and financial assistance for projects and programs as well as educational opportunities.

Reinvest in Minnesota Rum River Easement Program

In 2023 Isanti SWCD continued to partner with SWCDs along the Rum River and the Board of Water and Soil Resources in an effort to protect the health of the Rum River—permanently. Collectively, the partnership received an additional \$2.2 million legislative allocation of Clean Water Funds in 2022 to make permanent easements an option for willing landowners within the nine-county Rum River watershed.

The SWCD spent time working on 3 easements covering 11,923 ft of shoreline along the Rum River. One of them included 33 acres of native grasses planted for restoration.



Harvesting Sunshine Cover Crop Program

Using our partnership with the Nature Conservatory we pursued an initiative aimed at increasing the use of cover crops in Isanti County. In 2021, we installed 612 acres of cover crops using the program. 352 of those acres were 3-year cover crop contracts making 2023 their final year of planting. The cover crops were implemented in a variety of production types such as after corn chopped for silage, interseeded into beans, interseeded into corn, and planted after small grain harvest.

As part of the program the SWCD is measuring soil health, infiltration rates, and biological activity in the soil before and after installation. We are also using the program to identify barriers to planting cover crops and to find ways to help our farmers overcome them.

Soil Health Cost Share

In 2023 the Isanti SWCD received a \$15,000 Clean Water Fund Soil Health Grant to provide agriculture cost-share and outreach. The grant allows us to cost-share agricultural non-structural best management practices such as cover crops, prescribed grazing, nutrient management and tillage management. Funding also went towards organizing our annual Agriculture Lunch and Learn and Soil Health Field Day events which allow us to connect with more farmer.



Programs and Partnerships– *continued*

Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

The NRCS and the SWCD have a unique partnership that provides an efficient use of taxpayer dollars. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance for various conservation practices such as: grassed waterways, ag waste storage structures, nutrient management, wildlife habitat plantings and windbreaks. Financial assistance is provided through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Program and Conservation Stewardship Program.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): EQIP is available to all eligible agricultural producers and provides technical and financial assistance for specific environmental and conservation practices. Common practices include no-till, cover crops, grazing systems and high-tunnels.

In 2023 the NRCS received 18 applications for the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) program, 17 were funded. The funded contracts included 1,177 acres of Cover Crops, 849.2 acres of no-till, 6 high tunnels, 5 grazing system and pasture seeding/management. EQIP's new 2023 contract obligation totaled \$318,752 and \$80,509 was paid to 9 existing contracts.

Conservation Stewardship program (CSP): CSP offers options to enhance or improve current practices and producers choose the enhancements that best fit their operation. Common enhancements include pollinator habitat, cover crops, advanced nutrient and pest management, pasture management and extensive wildlife habitat enhancements. The NRCS received 4 applications for CSP in 2023 with 3 being funded for a total of \$108,647. Payments totaled \$56,640 to existing contracts.

Invasive Species Management



Upland invasive species management is typically not an activity the SWCD prioritizes due to limited staff capacity. However, our board does advise the staff to play a supporting role when possible.

Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve (CCESR): In 2020, The SWCD Received a DNR Conservation Partners Legacy Grant to complete invasive species management in the Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve. We contracted with Anoka Conservation District to conduct invasive species early detection and rapid response to treat invasive species and enhance habitat on 92 acres. Isanti SWCD provided limited technical support for this grant. Invasive species treated included glossy buckthorn, common buckthorn, Siberian peashrub, reed canary grass, and Canada thistle. The grant total was \$115,250 with a match of \$16,215. Pictured is the project area outlined in red.



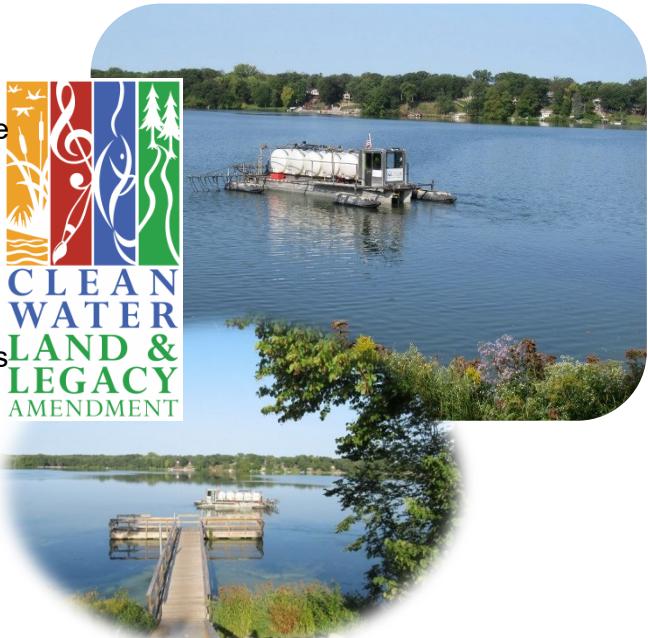
Projects and Grants

The SWCD seeks funding and prioritizes projects based on priorities in plans such as the Rum River and Lower St. Croix Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans and Subwatershed Assessments (SWAs). Water quality monitoring data and local involvement help push projects and programs forward.

Blue Lake Alum Treatment

In 2022, we secured a Clean Water Fund Grant to perform an alum treatment on Blue Lake. The Blue Lake Improvement District (BLID) provided the necessary 25% grant match. This is Phase 2 of a larger goal to protect Blue Lake which diagnostic data suggested was at risk of impairment. Phase 1 was dealing with the external sources of phosphorus through conservation projects in the area. An alum treatment was identified as the next most cost-effective way to protect Blue Lake.

While many lakes in Minnesota have undergone this treatment, this is the first lake in Isanti County to be eligible. The treatment will occur in 2 doses: One completed in 2022 and the second in 2024. In 2023 we took sediment cores and water quality data on Blue Lake to measure the first dose's effectiveness.



Protecting Spectacle Lake

In 2020 the SWCD received \$93,532 from the Clean Water Fund in the interest of protecting Spectacle Lake, also referred to as the “gem of Isanti County”. While the lake is currently healthy, it is under developmental pressure. Therefore, it is important to protect Spectacle Lake now.

This year we installed the final projects under the grant. The most cost-effective nutrient reduction projects within the land that drains to the lake were chosen. In total, 5 raingardens and two shoreline restorations were installed. Combined together these projects will prevent 19.82 pounds of phosphorus from entering Spectacle Lake. We were able to meet our protection goal for Spectacle Lake through this work!

Projects and Grants—*continued*



Federal 319 Grant for Green Lake

Green Lake was accepted into a 16-year granting program administered by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The goal of the grant program is to remove Green Lake from the impaired waters list. The SWCD received \$284,000 in 2021 to begin the process of installing projects that will reduce the amount of nutrients entering Green Lake. The Green Lake Improvement District (GLID) will provide a portion of the required 40% match. 2023 was the third year of funding.



Here's what we did with the funding in 2023: planted 215 acres of cover crop, installed a rain garden, and planned a wetland restoration. We also continued our outreach to the area to lead to more projects.

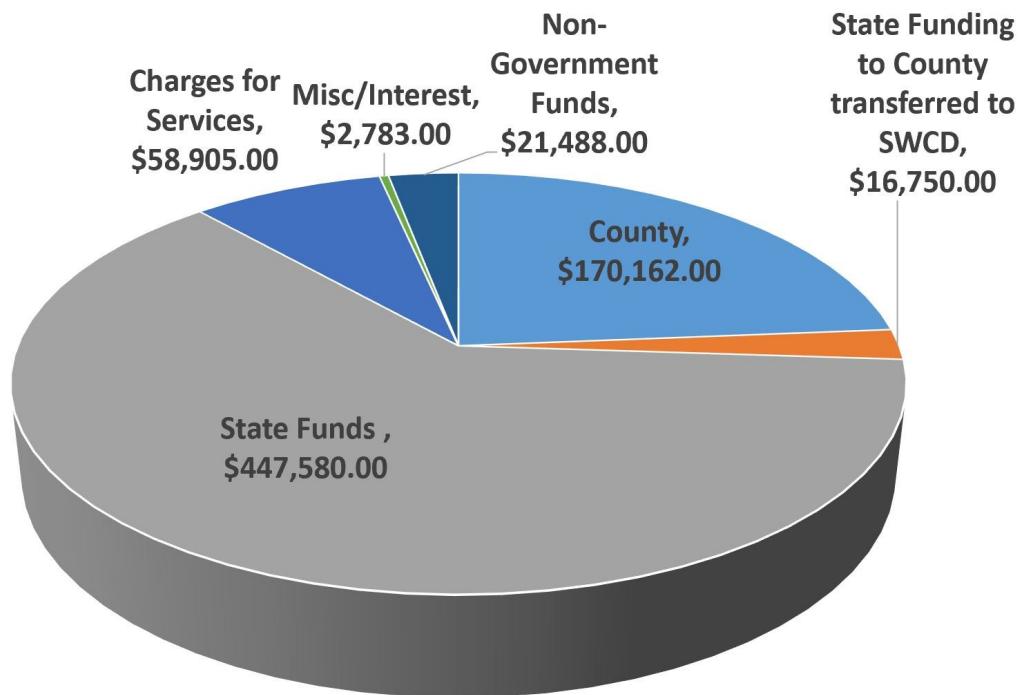
The projects installed so far will reduce phosphorus loading into the lake by 100 lbs per year (that's 50,000 lbs of algae!).



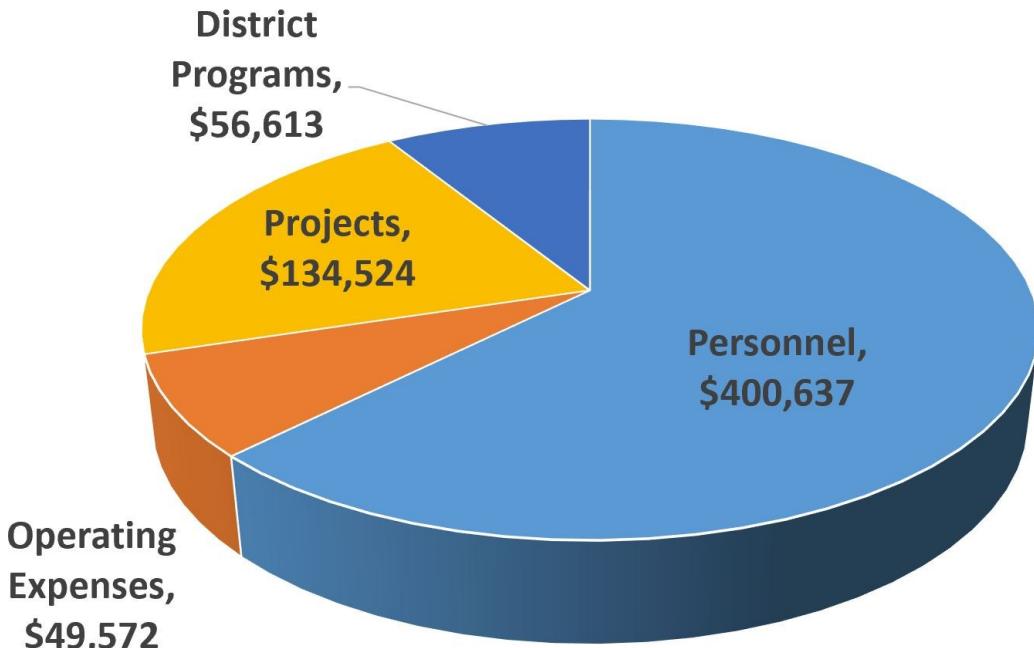
Financials

The Isanti Soil and Water Conservation District finances its day-to-day operations through a variety of revenue sources. Although governed by an elected board of officials, Conservation Districts do not have levy authority and must secure funds from many sources to maintain programs and services.

2023 Revenue



2023 Expenses



Other News and Updates

Rare Plants Found in Oxford Township Lakes

In August, we assisted the DNR in conducting a rare species survey on five of the small, natural environment lakes in Oxford Township (Hoffman, Upper Birch, Lower Birch, Horseshoe, and Horseleg Lake). This survey informs us about the remarkable biodiversity in these natural environment lakes by telling us if there are any uncommon or rare species. These species are important indicators of the health and diversity of the lakes, and they may have unique adaptations or ecological roles.

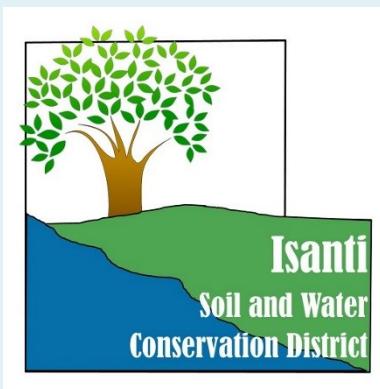
Multiple uncommon, under-reported, and even rare species were found during the aquatic plant survey. One species found in multiple lakes has the potential to be very rare and is currently awaiting expert assessment in New York. Another species found in one of our lakes may be the first specimen ever collected in Minnesota! An emergent plant of special concern in Minnesota was collected, as well as another that hasn't been recorded in Isanti County before. A common thread among all the surveyed lakes was that they had a rich variety of aquatic plant species. Plant diversity is vital for maintaining the health of small lakes, and they provide a great ecosystem. The findings from the survey confirm that Oxford Township is home to multiple remarkably healthy and biodiverse lakes. The data collected from the aquatic plant survey will help us understand how to protect these lakes long term.



New Community Organizer and Forestry Coordinator for the Rum River Watershed

The Rum River Watershed Partnership hired a shared Watershed Wide Community Organizer and Forestry Coordinator, Molly Clyne, in December. This new position is housed in the Mille Lacs SWCD office and will help with watershed wide forestry service coordination and provide outreach support.

Molly is a proud graduate of St. Cloud State's Biological Sciences Master of Science program and with an undergraduate degree in ecology from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She grew up in Minnetonka and currently resides in Elk River. Her passion lies in implementing conservation measures to ensure the thriving health of our environment. Beyond work, she's an avid fantasy novel reader, enjoys playing video games, and enjoys spending time with my family and friends. Molly looks forward to contributing to the incredible work already underway in the Rum River Watershed.



Thank you to our Conservation Partners!

We would like to send out a special thank you to all of the Federal, State, and Local partners who support our programs and priorities! Our partners include but are not limited to: Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Isanti County, The Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), all Isanti County Lakes groups (you know who you are), The Nature Conservancy, The MN Department of Natural Resources, Pheasants Forever, the MN Pollution Control Agency, and all Soil and Water Conservation Districts!

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