2025 Annual Report

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Sauk River Watershed District

Cover: Little Birch Lake
Photo by Amy Rieland

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Our Mission: To apply our unique abilities and authorities in ways that protect and enhance our watershed's resources for today and tomorrow.

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President's Letter

Dear Residents and Conservation Partners:

I believe 2025 was another good year at the Sauk River Watershed District. At the annual Board reappointment, the board voted in the Executive Board as follows: Paul Hartmann as Vice President, Scott Klatt as Secretary, Kevin Lahr as Treasurer and myself as President. This group took on the task of the watershed budget and made a proposal to the general Board. They passed a very doable budget for the District. Please take a look at the watershed website for a list of all Board members.

Our administrator Jon Roeschlein continues to move the District and Board forward to achieve our values and our mission statement. He continues to build relationships with key players in our District and the general public. I have witnessed interactions with Jon and some upset landowners. After all is said and done, a mutual understanding of the situation is accomplished. I sincerely thank him for all the work he puts in to achieve our mission.

Stearns County appointed a new manager to the watershed Board. Jon Folkedahl was appointed by the Stearns County Commissioners to fill a board position. He brings experience from the Chain of Lakes area and the Sauk River Chain of Lakes Association. I'm looking forward to working with him.

I had the opportunity to attend a Water Fest. I was able to see for myself that these grade school children really want to learn about clean water. There were demonstrations by a number of the

MN DNR Departments, engineering firms, Stearns County Sheriff's Department, Stearns County

Environmental Services, a local college, and of course the Sauk River Watershed District. I have never seen so much excitement from these kids. Hats off to the watershed staff that go above and beyond to make this all happen.

The watershed district continues our outreach program at the radio station KASM. You can hear watershed staff talk about programs that are going on in the district.

I am looking forward to another challenging year at the watershed district and how we can live out our mission: "To apply our unique abilities and authorities in ways that protect and enhance our watershed's resources for today and tomorrow."

Stay healthy and safe

- Bill

Pleasant Lake

Administrator's Letter

Greetings from the desk of the Sauk River Watershed District Administrator.

2025 was a busy and productive year for the Sauk River Watershed District (SRWD). In addition to the continuing projects and programs of the SRWD, we added a few more.

Work continued working on the Alternatives Analysis project in partnership with the US Army Corps of Engineers and their Planning Assistance to States grant. Due to the Federal Government shutdown in 2025, the project was delayed and not completed in 2025 as was planned. Work will continue in 2026 with plans to have the report completed by mid-year.

There were several projects being worked on in 2025, which included the Crooked Lake – Guyette restoration and the Getchell Creek Restoration, both of which are funded with LSOHC grants. The Little Birch Lake Outlet Project received the final inspection with no issues found. The contract was closed out, and the grant report has been submitted with the final pay request.

Board workshops were continued in 2025 with the topics of 2024 Monitoring Report, LSOHC Phase 1 Grant Accomplishments, Rock Arch Rapids, Salary Schedule Maintenance, Freeport Municipal Waste Treatment Facility tour, and SRWD Rule Revision Process.

Staffing for the 2025 year remained stable with the 7 full-time positions. We did hire a seasonal technician to assist with field work and permit inspections. Brenna Moen was with us from mid-May through mid-August, when she returned to school. The seasonal technician position worked out so well that we are planning to continue it again in 2026. It was a busy year, and we are fully staffed with the best minds in the business!

All SRWD departments were extremely busy in 2025. I will refer you to other sections of this report for the details of their work.

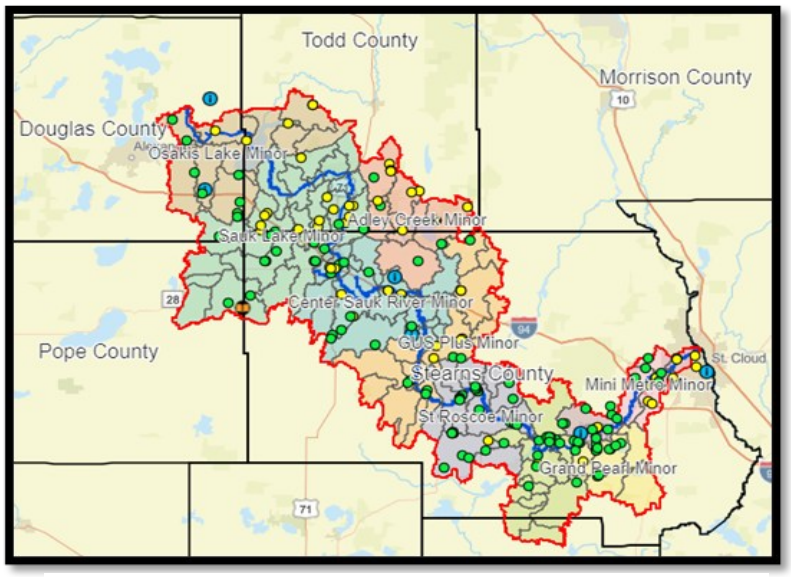
My thanks go out to everyone that has committed to working with the SRWD, including the dedicated Board of Managers, the strongly committed and well qualified staff, all the partners and fellow agencies, lake associations, the long list of volunteers, and most of all, our citizens. You all should be proud to be a part of one of the best Watershed Districts in the state. Our service and communication to the public is first and foremost in our minds.

Lake Sylvia
Photo by Ann Rieland

Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan

The Sauk River Watershed Collaborative includes technical staff, board managers, and supervisors from local units of government including Douglas Soil and Water Conservation District, Pope Soil and Water Conservation District, Todd Soil and Water Conservation District, Stearns Soil and Water Conservation District, Douglas County, Pope County, Todd County, Stearns County, and the Sauk River Watershed District. The Collaborative was established through Minnesota's Board of Water and Soil Resources One Watershed One Plan (1W1P) program in 2018 to draft and implement the 10-year Sauk River Watershed Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan (CWMP).

The Sauk River Watershed CWMP, approved in March of 2021, outlined the priority resource issues within the watershed with the intent of directing investments into projects and programs that will restore degraded resources and protect high quality resources. Upon the Board of Water and Soil Resources approval of the CWMP in 2021, the Sauk River Watershed gained eligibility for our first Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) appropriation, totaling $1,136,821.00. Through our first biennium workplan and funding award, our group has supported numerous projects (Image 1) such as stream and lake shoreline erosion control projects, ag-field water and sediment control basins (WASCOB), in-field and edge of field agricultural practices (cover crops, grassed waterways, buffers) wetland restorations, ag-waste storage, a stream restoration project on Getchell Creek, shoreline restoration projects, and a comprehensive lake sediment study of the headwaters of the Sauk River (Lake Osakis) to restore degraded water resources and protect existing high quality water resources.



SRW Collaborative Tracking Tool (each point indicates a project involving the Sauk River Watershed Collaborative)

In 2024, the collaborative was awarded their second WBIF in the amount of $1,212,865.00. Projects supported with this appropriation include a regulatory review of local zoning requirements and rules, Citizen Norm messaging campaign development and implementation, lakeshore protection, stormwater management, riparian restorations, wetland restorations, and more of the projects and practices noted for FY 22.

The collaborative was also awarded two CRP Incentive grants to incentivize folks to enroll marginal lands into the Conservation Reserve Program. The grant allows for an additional one-time payment per acre to landowners that enroll. Depending on the location of the property enrolled, landowners could receive anywhere from an additional $100 per acre up to $500 per acre if located in a priority planning area as identified in the Sauk River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan. The 2024 grant ($30,000) has been completely allocated with the 2025 grant ($100,000), about 30% allocated. Incentive awards are provided on a first-come-first-served basis. Landowners are encouraged to contact their local SWCD for participation in this program.

SRWD Projects

The Sauk River Watershed District owns three project sites within the Watershed District:

- The JD2 Sediment Retention Ponds upstream of Lake Osakis in Todd County
- The weir at the outlet of Krantz Lake in Grove Lake Township in Pope County
- The Rock Arch Rapids at the outlet of Little Birch Lake in Melrose Township in Stearns County

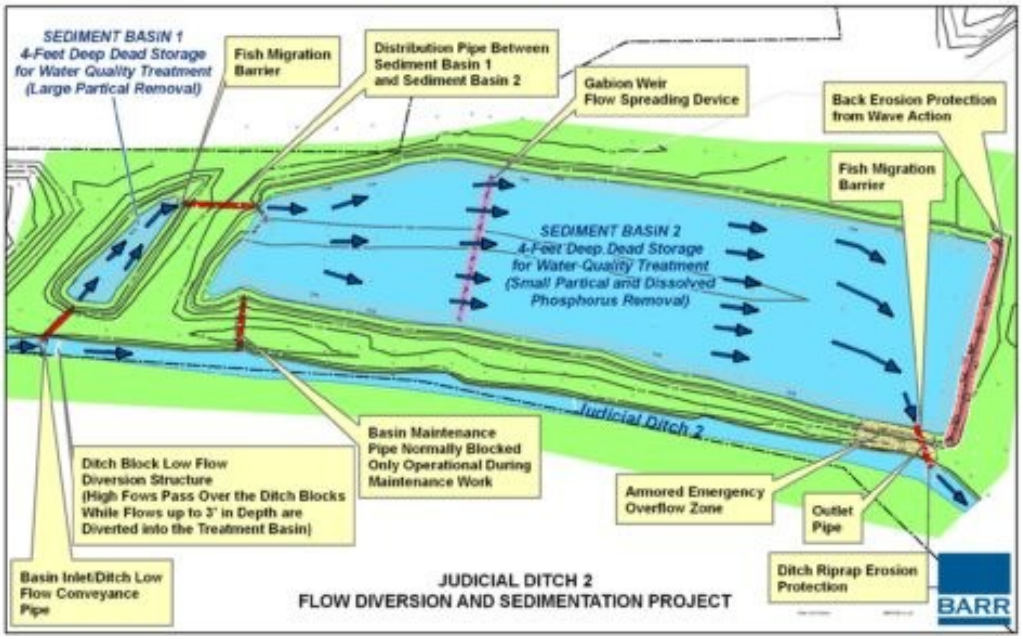
The latter two projects require annual inspections while the former project requires monthly inspections. Following is a synopsis of the management of the JD2 sediment retention ponds.

JD2 Sediment Retention Ponds

In 2001, the Sauk River Watershed District received a grant from the Board of Water and Soil Resources to install a sediment retention basin on the lower reaches of Douglas-Todd Judicial Ditch #2 (JD2). The JD2 watershed is approximately 44,000 acres, roughly half of the entire Lake Osakis watershed. The purpose of this sediment retention basin is to reduce the amount of sediments and nutrients (primarily phosphorus) entering Lake Osakis. Two ponds were constructed, a small (0.75 acre) primary basin and a much larger (10 acre) secondary basin. The primary basin is designed to settle out the larger sediments, and the secondary basin is designed to settle out the finer sediments.

The sediment ponds are owned and maintained by the SRWD. SRWD staff monitor the site on a monthly basis, performing duties such as measuring water levels, observing the condition of the weir and the inlet and outlet pipes, photographing the site, noting the presence of noxious weeds, ensuring that weeds are managed, monitoring and repairing any bank erosion issues, and maintaining the property in accordance with the Operations & Maintenance Plan; this includes filing a written inspection report.

When sediment levels reach 25-35% of the constructed capacity of the ponds, the basins are scheduled to be cleaned out. The most recent sediment cleanout was conducted in early 2019, which was the third cleanout of the primary pond and the first cleanout of the secondary pond. The cleanout resulted in the removal of 17,600 cubic yards of sediment, which carried with it the removal of 13,736 lbs of phosphorus. This equates to the removal of 1057 lbs of phosphorus per year from Lake Osakis. Lake Osakis has a five-year water residence time, which means it takes five years to see a change in phosphorus levels. Calendar year 2024 marked five years since the 2019 cleanout, and monitoring revealed that phosphorus levels were indeed lower, but continued monitoring is necessary to indicate whether this is an anomaly or a trend.



Digital model of JD2 Sediment Pond function and flow

SRWD Projects (Continued)

The SRWD continues to work with its contracted engineering firm to monitor the levels of the sediments inside the ponds. In spring of 2024, bathymetry data collected by SRWD staff via kayak using sonar equipment were analyzed, but the results were inconclusive. As a result, the engineering firm recommended that SRWD staff take survey data via GPS through holes in the ice during the winter of 2024-2025 and continue to collect bathymetry data via kayak with sonar equipment in spring 2025. A through-the-ice survey was conducted by SRWD staff and Osakis Lake Association volunteers in January 2025, and a bathymetry survey was again conducted by SRWD staff in spring of 2025. The decision was made to collect through-the-ice survey data in early 2026 and bathymetry survey data in spring 2026 in order to compile and compare all of this data before proceeding with removal of sediment from the ponds.

May 29, 2025: SRWD staff collect bathymetry (sonar) data of the depth of sediment in the primary pond.

Nov. 5, 2025: Drone photo of the JD2 ditch channel, the large secondary pond, and the small primary pond, facing upstream (west).

SRWD Projects (Continued)

Krantz Lake Weir

Nestled along what is now Pope County Ditch #6 (PCD6), Krantz Lake has long played a role in the natural drainage of the western regions of the SRWD. SRWD was granted an easement from Pope County Road 33 to just slightly east of the edge of Krantz lake in October of 1988. At this same time, the rock weir was set in place at the outlet of the lake at the confluence of PCD6 and Stearns-Pope Judicial Ditch #1 (JD1). The weir benefits the JD1 drainage system by preventing water from flowing upstream on JD1 and decreasing the efficacy of the JD1 drainage system.

Krantz Lake weir, summer 2025

Krantz Lake weir, fall 2025

Several maintenance activities have taken place on the lake and its outlet structure since the structure's initial installation, the most recent being in 2021 to restore the elevation of the existing sheet-pile weir after ice heaving pushed the weir upward a couple inches. Since this recent repair, the SRWD has had eyes and GPS equipment on the structure to determine if any further maintenance will be needed in the future.

Summer of 2025 experienced heavy rainfall, which was likely a factor in the unusually large volume of water pouring over the weir (see photo above right). As of autumn 2025, the weir is in the correct place and functioning as hoped (see photo on left).

SRWD Projects (Continued)

Little Birch Lake—Rock Arch Rapids Outlet

Little Birch Lake rock arch rapids

A Sauk River Watershed District (SRWD) project constructed in 1988, the previous Little Birch Lake outlet structure, was a low head pressure, concrete weir designed for the primary purpose of maintaining the pool elevation of the lake. Under most flow conditions, this structure presented a barrier to fish migration—further fragmenting and degrading aquatic habitat. Upon discovery of the deteriorating condition, the SRWD, Little Birch Lake Association (LBLA), and landowners rapidly responded, realizing the significant risk of a total dam failure and associated environmental and economic damage. Rather than pursuing a direct replacement or regular patch repairs, the Sauk River Watershed District with support of the LBLA sought to utilize the problematic outlet structure as an opportunity to enhance the ecological functionality of the outlet, while also maintaining the Little Birch Lake summer pool elevation and outlet hydraulic conveyance capacity.

Little Birch Lake outlets into Adley Creek, flowing roughly 5 river miles through lake Sylvia, before meeting the Sauk River east of the city of Melrose. Primary construction was completed by the end of September 2024, successfully restoring habitat connectivity between the Sauk River, Adley Creek, and Little Birch Lake.

Follow-up field work conducted in spring and early summer 2025 evaluated potential boulder settlement, structural movement, and sediment deposition following installation and the first high-flow event. The Sauk River Watershed District, with support from Houston Engineering, determined that the structure remained stable and that no adjustments were required.

With primary construction complete, this project has enhanced and reconnected aquatic habitat from Little Birch Lake to over 40 miles of river down to the Sauk River Chain of Lakes outlet at the Cold Spring Dam.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaEyJomSYC Construction time lapse #1
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-RugVZ84dg Construction time lapse #2

Grant Budget.

Budget Line Items	Original Funds	Expenditure	Difference (+/-)
Personnel	$ 5,000.00	$ 2,988.48	-$ 2,011.52
Contracts	$ 192,500.00	$ 112,865.00	-$ 79,635.00
Travel			$ 0.00
Equipment/Tools			$ 0.00
Materials/Supplies			$ 0.00
Fee Acquisition w or wo/ PILT			$ 0.00
Easement Acquisition			$ 0.00
Easement Stewardship			$ 0.00
Professional Services	$ 90,505.00	$ 89,872.79	-$ 632.21
Additional Budget Items			$ 0.00
TOTAL	$ 288,005.00	$ 205,726.27	-$ 82,278.73

Match Budget.

Budget Line Items	Original Funds	Expenditure	Difference (+/-)
Personnel	$ 5,000.00	$ 2,152.52	-$ 2,847.48
Contracts			$ 0.00
Travel	$ 0.00	$ 83.43	$ 83.43
Equipment/Tools			$ 0.00
Materials/Supplies			$ 0.00
Fee Acquisition w or wo/ PILT			$ 0.00
Easement Acquisition	$ 10,000.00	$ 5,412.50	-$ 4,587.50
Easement Stewardship			$ 0.00
Professional Services	$ 21,455.00	$ 15,210.02	-$ 6,244.98
Additional Budget Items			$ 0.00
TOTAL	$ 36,455.00	$ 22,858.47	-$ 13,596.53

Grant and match budgets comparison

Osakis Lake Alternatives Analysis

Osakis Lake is located in central Minnesota next to the city of Osakis. The lake has been identified as one of the 10 best fishing lakes in Minnesota. However, it has also been listed as impaired for nutrients as part of a total maximum daily load (TMDL) study in 2013 and is the recipient of flow from the Judicial Ditch 2 (JD2) public drainage system. JD2 was established around 1910 and is responsible for draining a historic shallow lake, Crooked Lake, from the Long Prairie Watershed to Miller Bay within Osakis Lake, a part of the Sauk River Watershed. Over the last 5 years, lake residents have begun to observe an increase in material deposition within Miller Bay.

Efforts have already begun to secure easements within the historic Crooked Lake Basin and a diverse collaborative has formed that is working to expand conservation easements and restore wetlands that will provide benefits to Osakis Lake. In addition, a project team has been formed to coordinate input from local residents, non-profits, county drainage authorities, as well as state and federal agencies. While strong collaboratives have been built within the focus area, there has yet to be a comprehensive assessment conducted to understand the current condition of Osakis Lake and how the JD2 drainage system and the remainder of the Osakis Lake watershed are influencing the overall function of Osakis Lake. Moreover, the groups collaborating to protect and restore Osakis Lake lack a framework for vetting alternatives which might support conservation efforts. In short, a comprehensive plan is needed to establish a range of alternative approaches that could support improvements in the overall function of Osakis Lake.

The Sauk River Watershed District (SRWD), through its unique authorities, has and intends to continue to act as a local project sponsor for this investigation, and will aid in the pursuit of constructing project alternatives that will work towards restoring and protecting Osakis Lake. The SRWD is the owner of sediment retention ponds just west of Osakis Lake, adjacent to JD2. In addition, the SRWD is the lead organization, among multiple collaborators, that is in the process of implementing several wetland restorations within the JD2 drainage system.

Osakis Lake, with a particular emphasis on Miller Bay, has been identified locally as an area of concern due to the accumulation of material in Miller Bay. There is concern that this material is impacting the overall performance of Osakis Lake and that the JD2 drainage system is responsible for much of the material. There is interest among multiple stakeholders to understand the origin of materials being deposited into Miller Bay and Osakis Lake and the associated impact of these materials on the water quality of Osakis Lake (i.e., the current condition). After establishing a current condition for Osakis Lake, there is additional interest among multiple stakeholders to identify alternatives that will lead to improvements in the overall health of Osakis Lake. The objectives of this Comprehensive Plan effort is to:

1) Establish a current condition for Osakis Lake that identifies the sources of materials being deposited in Osakis Lake as well as their impact on overall lake function; and
2) Identify concept solutions for improving the general condition of Osakis Lake. This effort will help set the stage for pursuing solutions for sedimentation and sources of funding for future actions by the SRWD.

Osakis Lake Alternatives (Continued)

The JD #2 Project Team (PT) has partnered with the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the SRWD to conduct an Alternatives Analysis project that will inform the development of a comprehensive plan to address the problems identified by the PT. The first task is to establish the current condition. This task will be completed to provide an understanding of the current hydrologic, physical, chemical, and ecological function of Osakis Lake and the landscape contributing to Osakis Lake. Task 1 will require close coordination of the data collection, assessment, and modeling to ensure all necessary data are collected and the modeling is complete. The following items will be established at the completion of this Task:

- Identify the amount (volume and mass) and type of materials deposited in Miller Bay
- Estimate the timeline over which those materials were deposited in Miller Bay
- Assess how materials in Miller Bay contribute to issues within the Bay and Osakis Lake
- Understanding of how lake levels impact the function of the current condition
- Quantify the sources of material within Miller Bay
- Understanding the function/design of JD2 sediment pond relative to other sources

Outcomes from this task will include:

- A Lake Response Model that can be used to predict how different management actions will impact the overall function of Miller Bay and Osakis Lake
- Mass balance assessment of sediment and nutrients

Upon completion of Task 1, the next step (Task 2) will be an exercise to establish goals and alternative approaches for the Comprehensive Plan. This task will be completed to help the SRWD establish management goals for Osakis Lake, establish metrics for evaluating the performance of alternatives that can make progress towards the management goals, help SRWD determine the types of alternatives that are locally acceptable for implementation, identify a wide range of alternative opportunities, and conduct a preliminary assessment of the alternative benefits. The Corps and SRWD will work together to discuss and set project goals, and USACE will assist SRWD and the PT in identification of alternatives.

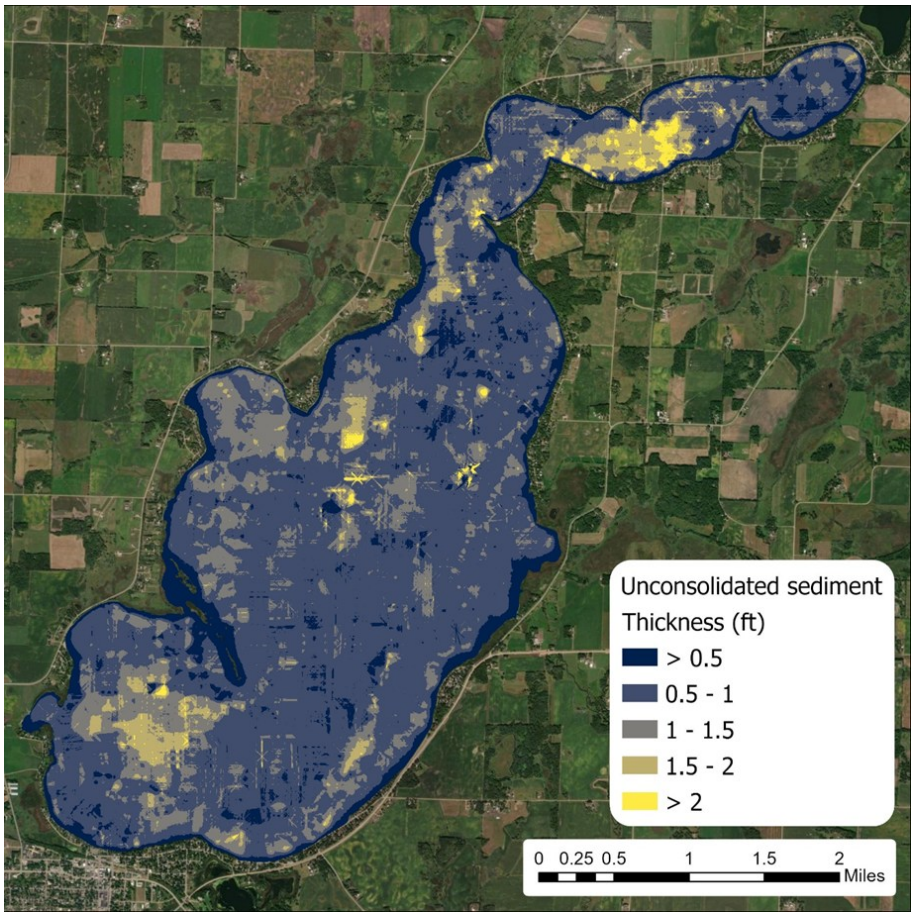
Task 3 will result in an assessment of alternatives that are intended to make progress towards the resource management goals established under previous tasks. The outcomes from this task will include refinement of alternatives, field survey to assess alternatives, and an assessment of the cost and benefits of alternatives. SRWD will lead, and the USACE will assist the field survey effort. Both partners will work closely to draft and review the alternatives in the comprehensive plan.

Task 4 will be to develop the final Comprehensive Plan. The information for the Alternatives Analysis will be drafted into a Comprehensive Plan. This Comprehensive Plan will include information on all completed deliverables from prior tasks as well as documentation of input received from the local stakeholder group that includes all members of the PT and other key players. The Comprehensive Plan will be used to identify funding needs to potential project implementation.

Osakis Lake Alternatives (Continued)

Due to the federal shutdown in fall 2025, the original project timeline has been delayed while the USACE gets back on task. Task 1 is complete. Task 2 was completed in 2025 with the involvement of the community and partners in a workshop to identify potential alternatives that would improve Osakis Lake. From that workshop, a couple additional potential sources of degradation were voiced, those being shoreline erosion and septic system contribution to the nutrient load of the lake. Additional analysis and modeling were conducted, and the results were provided to be used in the Lake Response Model. Task 2 was completed in 2025. Task 3 is underway, and the development of the final report (Task 4) is also beginning with the drafting of the introduction and documenting the survey and analysis work that has been compiled. The project is expected to be completed by summer 2026.

Funding for this project has been provided through the Planning Assistance to States and Tribal Governments grant program, administered by the USACE. Matching funds for this project have been provided through the State of Minnesota Watershed Based Implementation Funds (by the Sauk River Watershed Collaborative). Total budgeted cost for the project is $480,000 with the two funding sources committing $240,000 each.



Results of Osakis Lake bathymetric survey and sediment analysis.

Upon completion of the Comprehensive Plan, work will begin on determining the feasibility of the alternatives outlined in the comprehensive plan in an effort to implement those that will provide the largest return on the investment. Work will then shift to secure funding for and implement alternatives that will achieve the goals identified for Osakis Lake. The implementation schedule will be dependent on the capacity of implementing organizations and agencies, as well as available funding. It is anticipated that implementation will be over a longer period of time (several years) but will produce positive results desired for Osakis Lake.

Long (Higgins) Lake Flood Control Project

Long (Higgins) Lake is located in portions of Sections 18, 19, 36, 24, and 13 of Birchdale Township in Todd County, MN. Beginning in the early 2000s, landowners have experienced frequent surface water fluctuations, often flooding residences and out-buildings for extended durations as high as 5 feet above the MNDNR Ordinary High-Water Level (OHW).

Map of Big Sauk Lake/Sauk River in relation to Long (Higgins) Lake.

The lakeshore owners held initial discussions with local and state governments including Todd County, SRWD, MNDNR Ecological and Water Resources Division, the MNDNR Area Hydrologist, and State Legislative Representatives. Discussions focused on solutions to manage lake levels and next steps in the overall process. Following initial discussions, Widseth Engineering was contacted by the lakeshore owners. Widseth provided a proposal which included a lake-shed study and feasibility report for a gravity outlet conveyance with 2 route options to Big Sauk Lake that would lower and stabilize Long (Higgins) Lake's surface water elevations. The feasibility report was completed in November of 2020. Upon completion of the study, landowners worked with State Representative John Poston to secure $1.4 million from the 2023-24 legislative session, appropriated to the Sauk River Watershed District stated as: "*For a grant to the Sauk River Watershed District to design, construct, and equip a gravity outlet conveyance system, including an upstream control structure at the outlet location, to direct water from Long Lake in Birchdale Township in Todd County to Sauk Lake in Todd County to mitigate issues caused by high water levels in Long Lake.*"

The Watershed District Board of Managers, operating under Minnesota Statutes 103D, required a landowner petition and bond posted of $265,000. Lakeshore owners provided the SRWD Board with a petition and required deposit at the regular Board Meeting on June 18th, 2024. The SRWD Board approved the findings and ordered to initiate the project. Later in 2024, the SRWD held a coordination meeting with all regulatory and landowner stakeholders. In this meeting, we were informed by state regulators that this project would not be permittable due to the recent discovery of zebra mussels in Long Lake, but were also informed of permittable options including irrigation, pump & filtration system, and ground infiltration. SRWD, with assistance from Widseth Engineering, began exploring these alternatives with emphasis on infiltration and irrigation due to overall costs associated with a pressure & filtered system. In 2025, SRWD contacted the owner of a nearby depleted gravel pit with the proposal to utilize the basin for storage and infiltration. SRWD and Widesth proceeded to determine whether this site would be feasible to store and infiltrate sufficient volume to maintain water levels in Long Lake.

The project partners worked with Representative Mike Weiner to institute a language change in the statute that authorized the funding. As it was initially passed, the project alternative of infiltration would not be fundable due to the zebra mussel presence in the lake. Therefore, Representative Weiner is willing to introduce legislation that would adjust that language to allow for funds to be used to develop a legally acceptable alternative for this project.

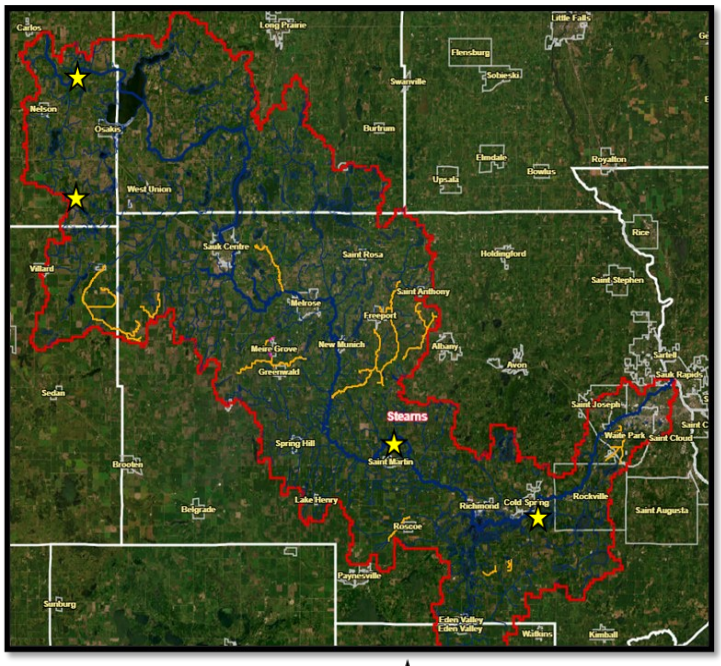
Through this investigatory stage, all results have been positive, and we continue to work with landowners and stakeholders to advance to engineering and design of the project. Significant progress is expected in 2026 to include a final design, obtaining the necessary land rights, securing the state funds via an executed grant contract, and obtaining required permits.

Outdoor Heritage Program

The Sauk River Watershed Habitat Protection and Restoration Program (SRWHPR) is a partnership-based program consisting of the Sauk River Watershed District (SRWD), Minnesota Land Trust (MLT), Pheasant Forever (PF), and Great River Greening (GRG) along with technical support provided by Soil and Water Conservation Districts from Todd, Douglas, and Stearns County, as well as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) Wetlands Unit, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

This partnership has been awarded five Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund (LSOHF) grants starting with the ML2019 (MN Legislative) award of $2,946,000, which expired June 30th, 2024 followed by the ML2020 award of $3,926,000, which expired on June 30th, 2025.

Three LSOHF grants were active in 2025 with the ML2021 award of $4,034,000, the ML2022 award of $4,091,000, and the ML2024 award of $3,965,000. Protection and restoration sites target top priority habitats, such as existing high quality or easily restorable wetland complexes, upland forests, floodplain forests, and prairies, were prioritized. Prioritized sites were protected to preserve and enhance critical habitat for waterfowl and other important wildlife species with additional water storage and quality benefits.



Sauk River Watershed Project Location
https://srwd.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer

Amongst the numerous sites protected and restored through these 5 grants, some of the greatest program highlights include the restoration of wild rice between six landowners along the Sauk River near St. Martin (ML2020 Phase 2), and the 68 acre Gary Ellis wetland complex restoration (ML2020 Phase 2 & ML2021 Phase 3) located upstream of Lake Osakis in the upper reaches of Judicial Ditch 2, which is the ditch that drained and diverted the historic Crooked Lake from the Long Prairie River Watershed into the Sauk River Watershed. In 2025, downstream of the Ellis wetland directly in the footprint of drained Crooked Lake with ML2022 Phase 4 funding, the Sauk River Watershed has completed 90% design and has begun securing permits for the 70-acre wetland enhancement project, with an operable outlet and construction planned for the summer 2026.

The establishment of the new Chain of Lakes Stearns County Park is in the running to qualify for this program's title of the Flagship Project. Pheasants Forever, with ML2020 & ML2021 funding to acquire this site, donated the land to the Stearns County Parks Department and provided additional funding for restoring the 298 acres which was most recently in a corn/soybean crop rotation. The Chain of Lakes County Park, which opened to the public in fall of 2025, provides excellent outdoor recreational opportunities within minutes of the St. Cloud Mini Metro with trails for walking and biking, as well as archery hunting and fishing. To learn more about this recently open to the public County Park, visit the Stearns County Parks website at https://www.stearnscountymn.gov/1770/Chain-of-Lakes-County-Park.

Permitting Program

The Sauk River Watershed District is required by Minnesota State Statute Chapter 103D to promulgate administrative rules with the intent to effectuate the purposes of the District's Watershed Management Plan.

The current Administrative Rules were first adopted on February 16th, 2010, and details the activities which require a District Permit or are exempt from regulation. Within the Administrative Rules, it is noted that the District's rules are intended to fill gaps within existing federal, state, and local regulations and not intended as a duplication of existing regulations. The Administrative Rules recognize that, within the watershed, there are other political subdivisions with regulations that are equally as - or more - stringent than the District's regulations. This provides an opportunity to enter into an agreement with these subdivisions in order to reduce duplicative efforts. An example of this is the memorandum of agreement the SRWD has with the city of St. Cloud so that the SRWD does not have to issue permits for projects within the city limits of St. Cloud because the city is responsible for monitoring compliance. Unlike county planning & zoning regulations, the District's rules generally do not regulate what land uses are permittable but, rather, lays out what water quality standards are required based on the potential level of impact of a land use. In 2025, the SRWD Board of Managers began the process of revising these Administrative Rules; tentative plans are to complete the revision process by the end of 2026.

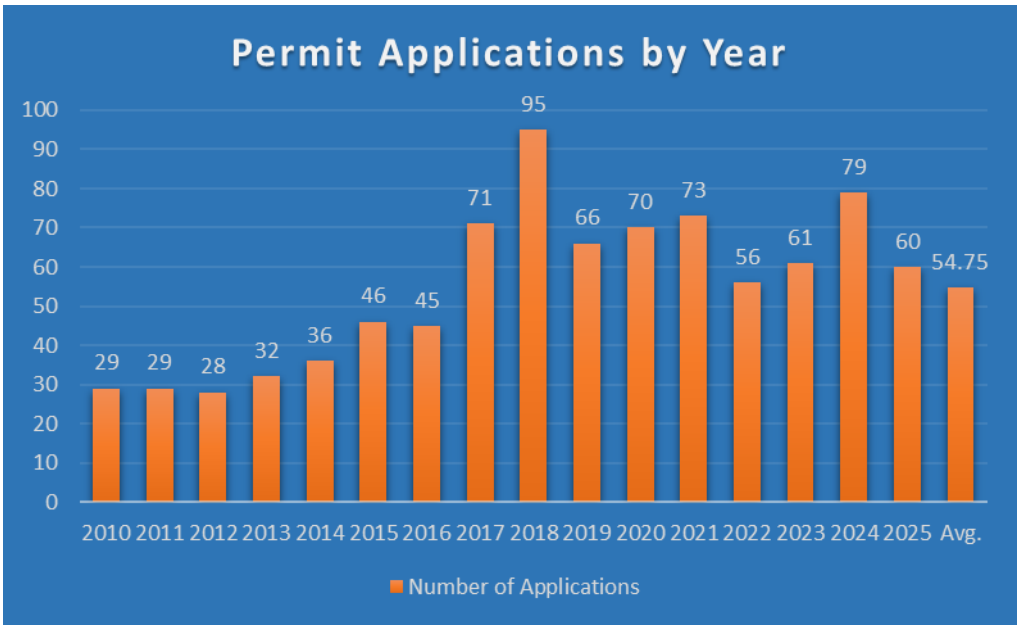
In 2025, as in years past, the Ditch & Permit Manager position spends 50 percent of the time managing the SRWD Permit Program. In addition, an Environmental Technician, whose position was re-established in 2023, assists the Permit Manager by performing permit site inspections in addition to other duties. Furthermore, a Seasonal Environmental Technician, whose position was re-established in 2025, also assists the permit manager in a similar manner as the full-time Environmental Technician.

Within the SRWD Administrative Rules, there are 4 main sections for which a given activity having the potential to impact water quality may be permitted:

1. **Stormwater** - Activities relating to the increase in stormwater runoff, most commonly related to the creation of impervious surfaces such as parking lots.
2. **Erosion Control** - Activities relating to the exposure of soils to erosive forces within 500 ft of any waterbody including wetlands (normal agricultural and horticultural activities are exempt). This is the most common type of permit issued.
3. **Drainage** - Activities (primarily agricultural) relating to the drainage of surface waters and also work located within or relating to a public drainage system.
4. **Waterbody Use** - Activities relating to the intentional flooding of land/enlargement of a wetland, the construction/alteration of water control structures, and the diversion of water to an area outside of the originating sub-watershed.

Permitting Program (Continued)

A total of 60 permit applications were received during the 2025 calendar year. The table below shows the number of applications submitted each year since the adoption of the current regulations in 2010.



Yearly permit applications since 2010

The SRWD Administrative Rules, permit applications, fee schedule, and guidance documents are available online, in office, and by request. Calendar year 2023 was the first year that applications could be submitted via the website's online permit application program, and in 2024 and 2025, the vast majority of applications were submitted through that medium. Applications are still able to be submitted to the SRWD in-person or via mail or email.

Moore Engineering, SRWD's contracted engineer, provided technical review for applications and assisted in responding to technical questions. The permit manager continued to hold bi-weekly meetings with Moore's staff to ensure the applications are kept in-process in order to avoid delays in the commencement of construction activities.

Inspections for this season included active construction sites that were permitted this year and last year, and included completing final inspections of sites relating to older permits. Our Seasonal Technician was extremely helpful by conducting most of these site inspections and preparing the reports needed to formally close out outstanding permits from completed projects. The Permit Manager and Environmental Technician provided the Seasonal Technician with a district tour in April 2025 that was an orientation to the watershed district in general and the permit program in particular. In May, June, and July 2025 the seasonal technician visited approximately 130 previously-permitted sites to conduct in-progress or final inspections; final inspections were conducted for the purpose of closing out the outstanding permits.

Permitting Program (Continued)

The following are photos from active permit sites:

The Seasonal Environmental Technician Brenna Moen inspects a permitted construction site on 7/29/25 following a rain event. Erosion control structures are lacking. Following this inspection, the Permit Manager contacted the landowner, and a silt fence was installed promptly.

The infiltration basin pictured on the left was constructed as part of a solar project. It is failing to function as an infiltration basin because it is full of water rather than being drawn-down within 48 hours of a rain event. The wetland vegetation growing around its perimeter is further evidence of failure to draw-down. This photo was taken in August 2025, and the basin was pumped dry in October 2025. By the end of the year, it was not yet functioning as designed.

Our rules require that all projects creating one acre or more of new impervious surface must obtain a stormwater permit from the SRWD. The most common and preferred way to treat the stormwater runoff from a site is through an infiltration basin (see bottom photo). The material in the bottom of the basin is usually an organic substrate layered on top of sand; the organic material filters pollutants out of the stormwater, and the sand allows the treated stormwater to draw down through the pond within 48 hours of a rain event.

Permitting Program cont.

Another way to treat stormwater runoff is through a filtration basin, not to be confused with an infiltration basin. Infiltration basins are preferred because water slowly percolates through soil, which filters out pollutants. In areas where it is not possible to infiltrate stormwater due to close proximity to the water table or non-conducive soils, a filtration basin may be employed. A filtration basin percolates stormwater through a substrate into an underlying drain tile and outlets the stormwater into a waterbody or storm channel. As a result, it tends to capture fewer pollutants before the stormwater exits the site, yet it is still a very functional stormwater treatment method.

Pictured at left is a filtration basin on 8/21/25. Note the overflow outlet lined with riprap and the exposed soils in the upper right corner of the photo where the drain tile was installed to outlet into Stearns County Ditch #15.

Education and Outreach

The Sauk River Watershed District is fortunate to have its own Education & Outreach Department, which is not common among watershed districts in the state. In 2025, Abi Parker (now Borgerding) transitioned from the Education and Outreach Coordinator role to the Environmental Monitoring Manager. With this change of roles at the Watershed District, there was a staff position open. Kory Klebe was hired to fill the Education and Outreach Coordinator Position. He started in this role at the end of January.

Classroom visits are a substantial part of the Sauk River Watershed District's robust education program. We offer a wide variety of programs for elementary, middle school, and high school-aged classes. Some highlights from the year include Battle Point Park field days (outside of Osakis) with a paddle in a 34-foot canoe, Sauk Centre High School field days with a trout release, and regular education programming at local summer childcare programs. We visited several summer school programs (including Osakis, Sauk Centre, and Melrose) on a bi-weekly basis as well as spending a full day working with the Cold Spring summer school program. In total, we worked with over 3000 students through classroom visits and field events in 2025.

A few quotes from teachers involved in these programs:

"Our students have an absolute blast at the Battle Point Field Trip each May. They explore water and soil through hands-on experiences like testing soil samples, learning about farm water usage, studying macro-organisms, identifying invasive species, and even canoeing. Every student leaves with a meaningful learning experience and a big smile on their face."

Justin George
Osakis Public School
4th Grade Teacher

"The Sauk River Watershed District's education programs have made environmental learning meaningful and engaging for my students. Through hands-on activities and real-world connections, students better understand how their choices impact our local water resources. These experiences spark curiosity and help build lifelong stewardship of our watershed."

Heidi Kuechle, Eden Valley – Watkins

"The Sauk River Watershed District transforms our students from passive observers into active stewards. The SRWD is always excited to come to our classrooms with materials and lead hands-on river seining and macroinvertebrate sampling at our local river to measure its biodiversity, engaging students in authentic science. Our students are always left inspired to treat the Sauk River not just as a landmark, but as a crucial part of the ecosystem."

Jake Pundsack
Life Science Instructor
Melrose Area Public Schools

Macroinvertbrate sampling at Frog Town Park

Education & Outreach (Continued)

Water Festivals are a field trip opportunity, usually for fourth graders, that bring together local organizations and businesses to teach students about water resources. The SRWD hosts four of these events per year. These events provide students the opportunity to learn about water quality, the natural resources in our watershed, and have a fun time doing it! The stations are hands-on and interactive, making it a day full of applied learning and activities. For this year's Middle Sauk Water Festival, which hosts Sauk Centre, Melrose, and Freeport students, we celebrated the 25th year of this program. Students are able to attend water festivals at no cost to the school. Thanks to volunteers and the financial support from our partners, we can offer this free event and even cover transportation costs for schools if needed. Each of these events involves around 100 volunteer presenters, chaperones, and station helpers to make the event possible for 1,281 students. In addition to the water festivals that we organize and host, the SRWD also presents at large environmental science days put on by other partner organizations (county SWCDs).

Middle Sauk Water Festival at Sauk River Park in Melrose

Science Connections is an outreach program that is offered for science teachers in the watershed district to learn about and share how to teach students about natural resources and environmentalism. This is an opportunity for networking and professional development. The Sauk River Watershed District hosts six network meetings per school year for teachers to share ideas, collaborate on curriculum, and engage with local resource professionals. The program includes presentations, networking, professional development opportunities, and a light meal. Teachers are given tools and resources to bring the topics of water quality and environmental education into their classrooms. Topics ranged from a tour of Cold Spring's Municipal Water treatment plant to a presentation on nano-bubble technology. There are always new resources out there, so teachers should have the opportunity to learn, too!

Thoughts from a participating science teacher:
"There are two things I truly value about Science Connections. First, it exposes us to a wide range of science topics and hands-on opportunities. One experience that continues to impact my classroom is learning about the trout program. I am now in my fourth year of raising trout with my students, and it has become an incredible addition to our learning activities. Without Science Connections, I would have never discovered this opportunity.
Second, Science Connections provides meaningful collaboration with other science teachers in the area. We rarely get the chance to connect with colleagues from different schools, and this program creates the perfect space to share ideas, learn from one another, and grow together as educators."

Mike Ellens
Sauk Centre High School
Biology Teacher

Education & Outreach (Continued)

In addition to education programs, the SRWD also does outreach to the public. A popular in-person community education opportunity that has been offered through the SRWD has been the Cold Spring Beer & Blooms garden tour. This was again the case in 2025. The tour showcased different types of gardens around the Cold Spring area with a focus on native plants and native shoreline stabilization. After touring several gardens, we ended the evening at Third Street Brewhouse for a light dinner, trivia, and door prizes. A total of 23 people attended this event.

Another ongoing outreach program that we promote is **Adopt-a-Drain**, which is now available throughout the entire watershed. Adopt-a-Drain is a community-based volunteer program that invites and encourages people living in urban or suburban settings to "adopt" local storm drains and volunteer to clear debris and sediment away from them, keeping those materials from ending up in nearby waterbodies. Stormwater is rarely filtered, so whatever ends up getting into storm drains flows straight into our local lakes and streams. You can go to mn.adopt-a-drain.org to claim your drain.

There are many moving parts to how a watershed district functions, so having consistent communication with the public is essential. One way the SRWD does that is participating in Aunt Sarah's Party Line on the local 1150 KASM Radio station. We have a conversation on the air once a month to talk about general watershed updates, the projects we have going on, and upcoming events. Tune in to Aunt Sarah's Party Line next time you have the chance!

County Fairs are another way that we interact with the public. In 2025, we attended the Todd County, Stearns County, and Douglas County Fairs. These community events are an excellent way to interact with the public and have great conversations with people to answer any questions they might have about the watershed district. This year, we also had furs and skulls displayed to help draw people to our booth and talk about watersheds as a valuable habitat and resource that we need to take care of for a wide variety of plants and animals (not just humans).

SRWD booth at the Stearns County Fair.

In 2025, we staffed a table with information at eight **Lake Association annual meetings**. This included Pleasant, Osakis, Fairy-Lily-Long, Big Sauk, Little Birch, Grand, Sauk River Chain of Lakes, Big Birch, and COLA (Stearns County Lakes Association). The SRWD also gave presentations at the Osakis and Fairy-Lily-Long Lake Association meetings.

The District utilizes an electronic messaging platform called **Constant Contact** to update those signed up on our e-mail lists about certain topics and projects. We have seven subscription lists: General SRWD News & Events, Birch Lakes Area, Lake Osakis Area, SRWD Meeting Minutes & Agendas, Getchell Creek/CD15 & CD26, Long/Higgins Lake, and Drainage Authority Updates. People can pick and choose which e-mail listings they would like to sign up for, whether it be one or all of them! They can opt out at any time, and they are not for marketing purposes. E-mail addresses are kept confidential and are not shared by the SRWD.

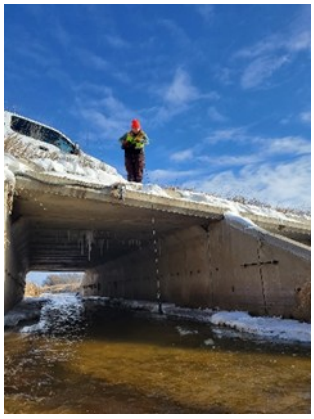
Environmental Technician Report

Sediment sampling on Osakis Lake (2025.01.27)

This was the first FULL year that Allison Schugel filled the role of the Environmental Technician. As she becomes more familiar with the operations and structure of the SRWD, the to-do list continues to grow. From the annual inspections and monitoring needs to preliminary permit work, GIS mapping and inspection of capital improvement BMP projects, the year was full of a variety of experiences and tasks.

2025 kicked off with several trips to the Osakis Lake area, the first being for a sediment survey on both the JD2 Sediment Ponds and the City of Osakis's stormwater ponds on January 15th. Thanks to subzero temps, we had plenty of ice on SRWD's JD2 Sediment Ponds to conduct a survey of the sediment volume in the ponds through the ice. January ended with additional sediment core sampling for the USACE Alternatives Analysis study on Lake Osakis. It was a challenge at times to capture quality samples at the deeper depths on the lake. Multiple attempts were made to get the best quality cores possible for the study.

Ashley Creek near PCD 6 (2025.06.30)



1st sampling of the season after a warm front moved through and water opened up (2025.03.06)

Later in the winter season, Allison was introduced to a new Tracking Tool that the Watershed Collaborative needed some assistance with. She mainly helped with the gathering and entry of SRWD's stormwater permit data into the tool. Unfortunately, there were many pieces of data that needed additional information prior to entry into the tool. By the time March rolled around, we were able to get out in the field for a monitoring check-in after a warm front moved through and opened the water up. With the warmer temperatures, the drone was able to take flight and check some areas on the ditches that landowners had expressed concerns about over the winter. After becoming more familiar with the Trimble GPS equipment, Allison assisted with staking out several proposed projects within the SRWD for visualization purposes between March and August.

Preliminary staking on Getchell Creek (2025.05.05)

M9 Flow measurement techniques lesson with Heather from MPCA (2025.04.04)

Once the waters on the Sauk River and its tributaries opened up at SRWD's monitoring sites, Allison worked with the Environmental Monitoring Manager (EVM) with starting water quality sampling for the year. The technician assisted with collection of water samples, flow measurements, and site re-establishment from April to October. A collection of lakes are also sampled each year on a bi-weekly schedule, for which the technician assisted the EVM with. Even with two staff, lake sampling can fill up an entire day's work.

First lake sampling day of 2025, on Little Sauk (2025.05.07)

Environmental Technician Report

(Continued)

With the number of events and classroom visits that the Educations & Outreach Coordinator leads, it can be a lot for one staff to handle. Thus, the District's technician often assisted/led groups to ensure the SRWD can reach as many youth as possible and teach about the watershed and the natural resources we need to protect.

At the end of May, an additional sediment survey using a Lowrance and kayak was completed on the JD2 Sediment Ponds with the help of both technicians and the Ditch & Permit Manager. This survey confirmed that another winter survey would be necessary in 2026 to provide the best elevation data of the sediment accumulation in the ponds. With maintenance required to manage unwanted vegetation on SRDA's 12 legal drainage systems, both technicians rotated and helped the Ditch & Permit Manager with spraying maintenance over the summer months.

Another task that comes with field season are the annual inspections of SRWD's Hayed Buffer contracts. The SRWD established over 25 agreements with landowners in the watershed between 2015-2019. Each of these projects require an annual inspection, and this process is made much more efficient with the use of SRWD's drone. All of the 2025 inspections were complete and ready for payments to be issues by the end of November. The rest of the fall season was filled with infiltration tests for permit projects and a mix of youth education events on the southeast end of the watershed.

Once the snow fell in late November, it was time to work on putting together/organizing all the reports and details that were collected over the field season. Allison also attended the Minnesota Watersheds Conference in early December. It is always a great opportunity to learn about the watershed happenings across the state and be aware of any new concerns that others are facing.

Assisting the Monitoring Department with flow measurement collection on Ashley Creek (2025.06.11)

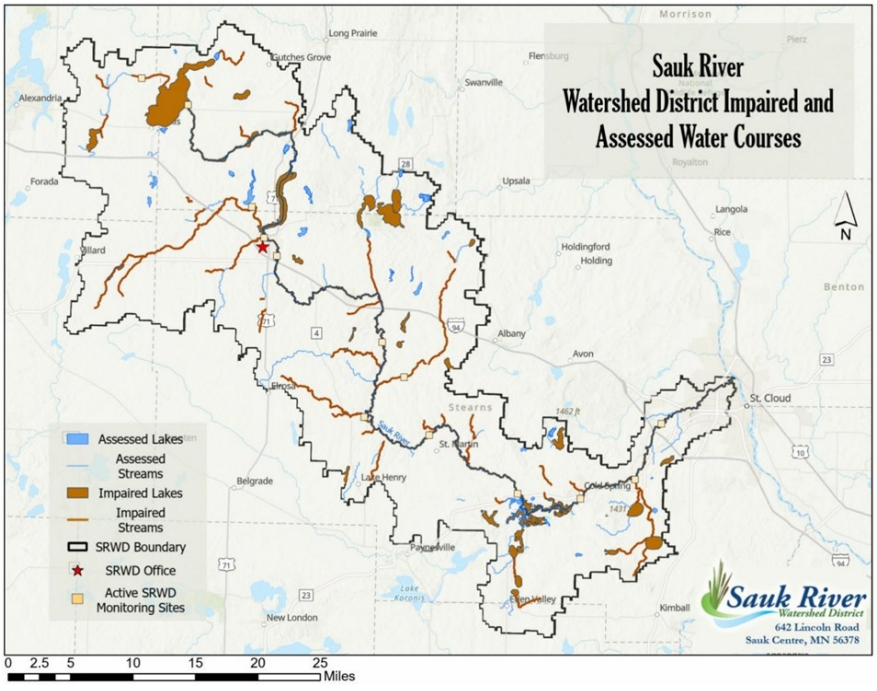
Bank/Tow sediment survey on the JD2 Sediment ponds, in prep for the 2026 Ice survey (2025.11.21)

Monitoring

As most will recall, 2025 experienced a lot of rain, especially during the growing season. While the winter of 2024-2025 did not produce a large amount of snowpack, that was made up for with spring precipitation. March came like a lion with a blizzard on the 4–5. A rain system also came through the area on March 14–15, delivering just over an inch of rain in 48 hours. There was a late-season surprise of snow with a weather system later named the "April Fool's Winter Storm." This storm, spanning parts of three days, delivered wet, heavy snow to much of Minnesota with moderate to heavy rains in the southern part of the state. About 40% of the state received accumulations of 6 inches or more, and several stations in west-central MN recorded a foot or more of snow. By early July, 63% of Minnesota was free of any drought designation due to June being quite a wet month. The total accumulated precipitation for the 2025 monitoring season, based on the weather station in Melrose, was 28.3 inches, which is 5.51 inches higher than normal years. However, it was a dry fall in 2025. On top of that, it was the second warmest fall in Minnesota history, averaging nearly 6°F above normal.

Water quality sampling and flow (discharge) measurements were collected on the mainstem of the Sauk River and select tributaries to the Sauk River. Samples are taken every 2 weeks from ice-out to the end of September and are analyzed for phosphorus, nitrogen, suspended solids, and twice annually for chloride and hardness. During the 2025 sampling season, water quality measurements were collected from seven sampling locations along the mainstem of the Sauk River: **Osakis Lake Outlet (Osakis), Sauk River's Edge (Sauk Centre), SR 30 (New Munich), SR 12 (St. Martin), Richmond (SR at Richmond), Cold Spring (SR at Cold Spring)**, and **SR 121 (St. Joseph)**. The tributary sites we monitored were **Judicial Ditch #2 (JD2 @CR3), Ashley, Hoboken, Getchell, Unnamed,** and **Mill Creek.**

The first day of sampling and field work was at the end of January collecting through-the-ice sediment core samples on Lake Osakis. This was in support of the US Army Corps of Engineers Alternatives Analysis being done on the lake and surrounding watershed. This analysis ultimately produced a Lake Response Model that can predict how different management practices and projects will affect the health of Lake Osakis. Another update for the monitoring department is that one of the streams we monitored has been proposed to be removed from the state's Impaired Waters List (IWL)! An unnamed creek near Spring Hill that feeds directly into the Sauk River was listed as impaired for turbidity in 2008. The SRWD started monitoring the stream in 2018. After recent review by the MN Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) of the collected data over the years, they have found turbidity levels on average have fallen below the state standard, meaning it is not consistently reaching impairment levels. After a public comment period, the stream section will likely be excluded from the 2026 IWL.



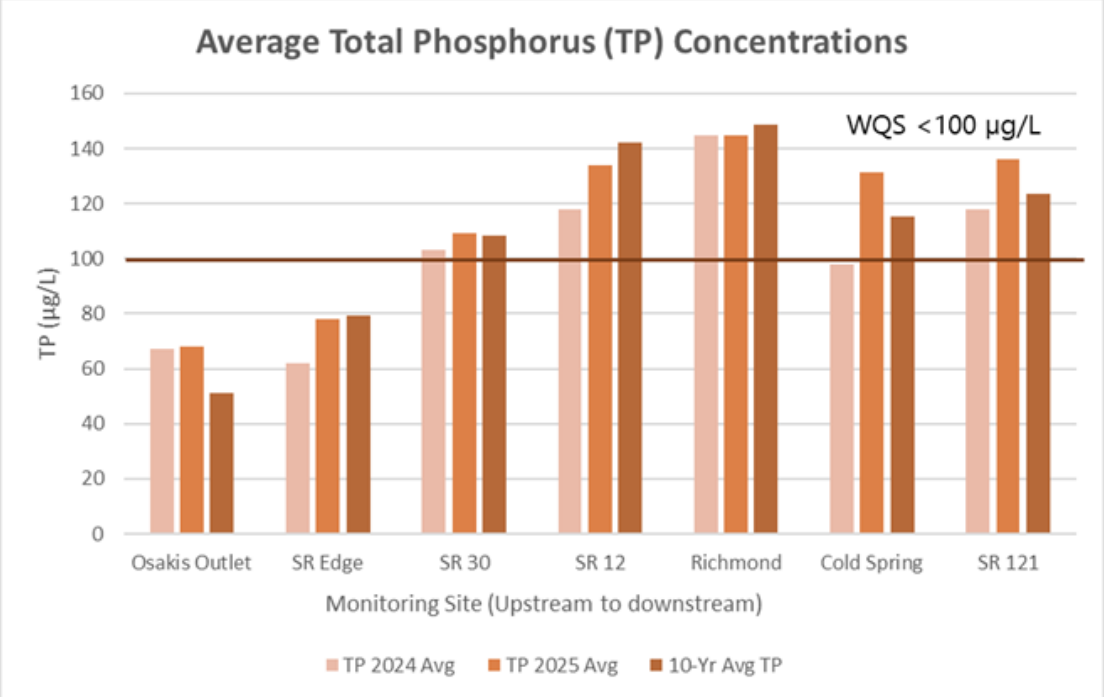
Impaired waterways and active SRWD river and stream monitoring sites

Monitoring (Continued)

Another potential update to the IWL is the addition of Prairie Creek near Grey Eagle that flows into Little Birch Lake. The Little Birch Lake Association has been sampling Prairie Creek since 2012, and *E. coli* levels have more recently become a concern. In 2024–25, all historical Prairie Creek data was reviewed by MPCA's chemistry assessment staff as an opt-in request. MPCA staff concluded that Prairie Creek was consistently not meeting the state standard, so they proposed that it be listed as impaired. The impairment would only be for the 1.85-mile section south of Hennessy Lake, and only for *E. coli* (stream ID #07010202-593). The section will be listed on the draft IWL, which will be released for public comment in early 2026.

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the conditions in the GUS Plus subwatershed, the Stony Creek monitoring site was re-established and added to the sampling routine. The monitoring site was last sampled by the SRWD in 2013 and is located at the 325th Ave. crossing near the Spring Hill County Park. This stream is on the state's impaired waters list for *E. coli*, TSS, poor macroinvertebrate bioassessments, and poor fish bioassessments. Since the site has not been monitored for over 10 years, the goal is to determine if the water quality has improved over the years in light of the best management practices (BMPs) that have been implemented in the area.

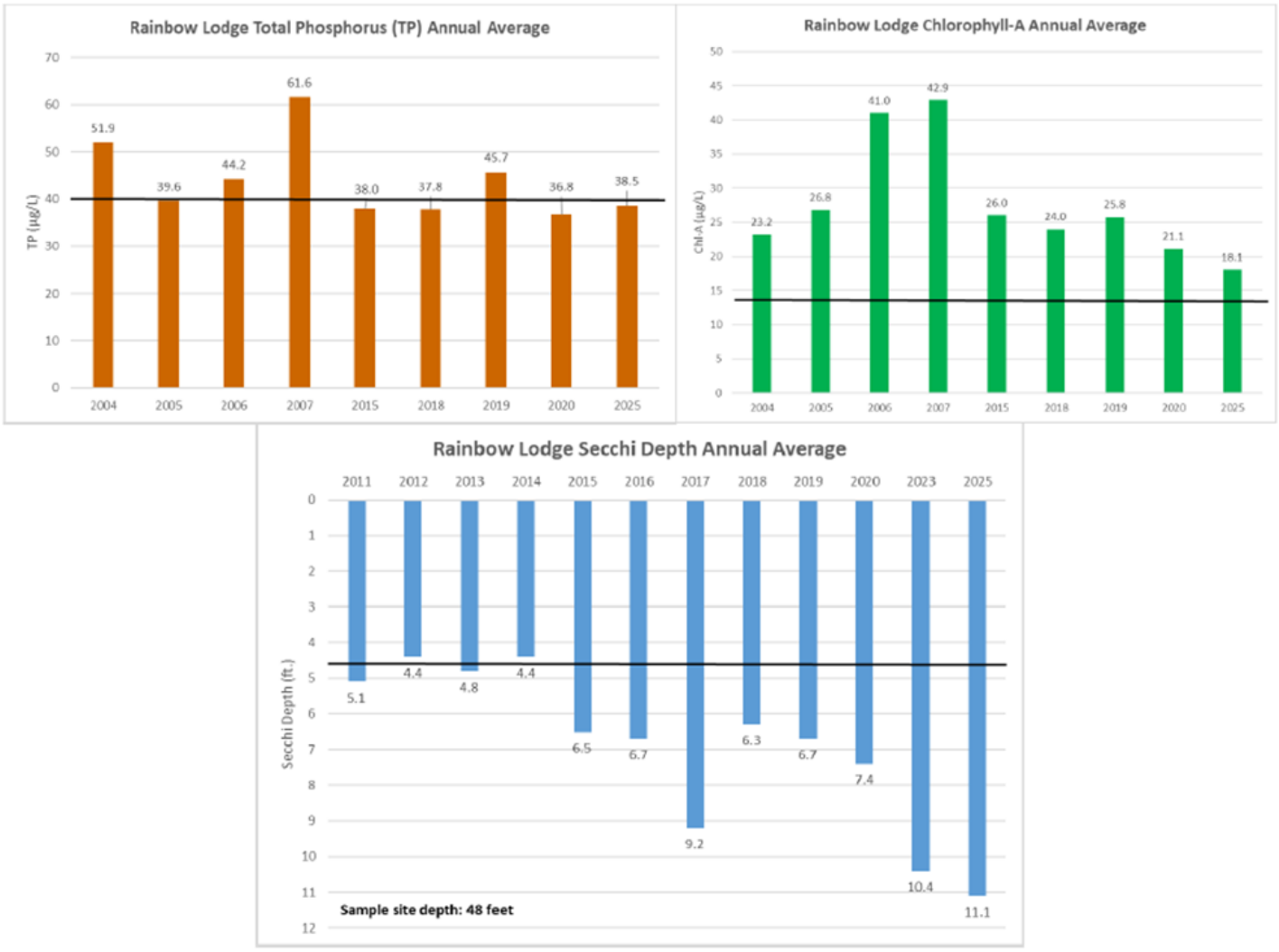
Many stretches of the Sauk River are listed as impaired for excessive nutrients, particularly phosphorus. The graph pictured below presents the average total phosphorus (TP) concentrations at the mainstem Sauk River sites for 2024, 2025, and the 10-year average. The 2025 annual average TP concentration was above the 10-year average at Osakis Outlet, SR30, Cold Spring, and SR121. Compared to the previous year, 2025 annual averages were above the 2024 averages at all sites except for Richmond. Only the Osakis Outlet and Sauk River's Edge sites fell below the state standard of <100 µg/L for TP.



Annual average TP levels on Sauk River monitoring sites

Monitoring (Continued)

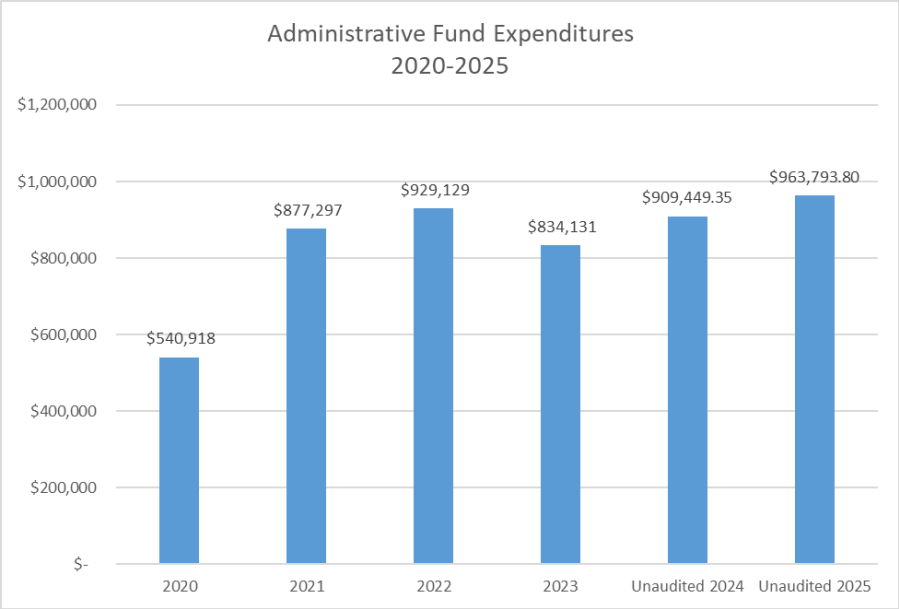
The SRWD monitoring department also collects lake water quality samples within the watershed on a 5-year rotating basis. Of the approximately 371 lakes in the watershed, 28 are considered priority lakes for monitoring data to be collected. These lakes are chosen based on both their impairment status and their connectivity to the Sauk River. The lakes sampled in 2025 were Big Sauk, Guernsey, Little Sauk, and Juergens Lakes. The 2025 SRWD Lake Report detailing the data collected on these lakes that can be accessed on our website (www.srwdmn.org/monitoring/). As detailed in the report, there have been significant water quality improvements on Big Sauk Lake since the early 2000s! It is possible to detect and track these improvements since there is a long history of monitoring on this lake and the surrounding area. In addition, the Little Birch Lake, Sauk River Chain of Lakes, and Osakis Lake Associations collected water quality samples in 2025. Their lake monitoring reports are also posted on the monitoring page of the SRWD website.



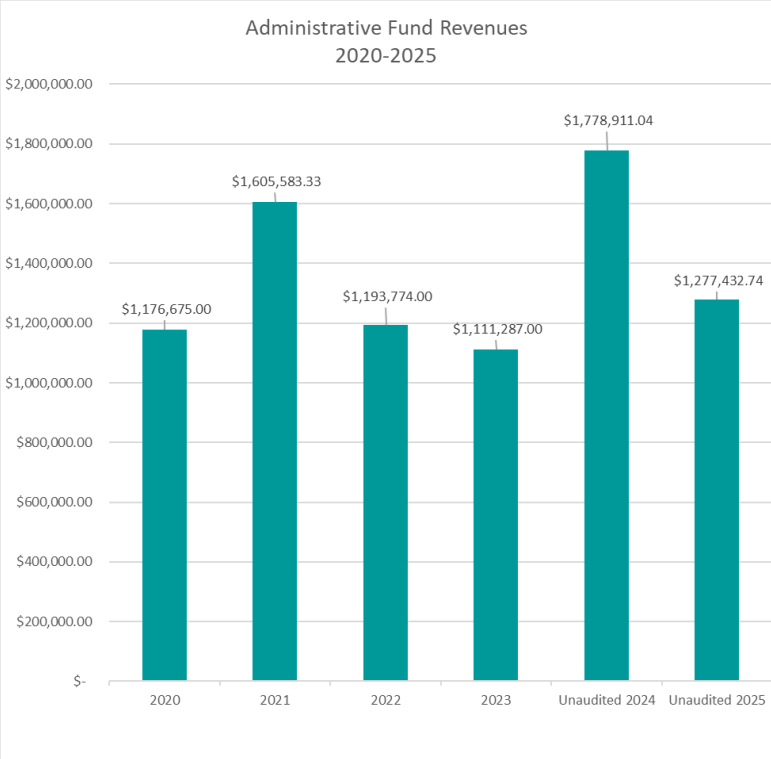
Annual averages on Big Sauk Lake at the Rainbow Lodge monitoring site.

Financial Summary

Minnesota Statute 103D provides watershed districts with the authority to levy property taxes for general administrative expenses (employee salaries, supplies, utilities, etc.) and for the construction, implementation, and maintenance of projects of common benefit to the watershed district and its citizens. These account for the majority of the annual budget for the SRWD. Property tax statements include the levy amount, under special taxing districts. The budget is developed annually by the Budget Committee, which consists of the administrator, finance manager, and the Executive Board. After comments are received at a public hearing, the budget is reviewed by the entire Board of Managers and fully approved.



Annual administrative expenditures since 2020



Annual administrative revenues since 2020

This is a draft summary of the SRWD's financial activities for the fiscal year ending December 31st, 2025. The District has historically and continues to maintain a strong financial position. The Board establishes and maintains separate funds for general operations and for multiple projects and programs, including Water Fests, Sauk Lake Aquatic Plant Project, JD2 Sedimentation Reduction Project, and all drainage systems under their authority. The District is statutorily required to be audited every year. Due to the timing of the Annual Report and scheduling of the audit, a full financial report will be available after the audit is complete. *Note, due to the overcapacity of our regular auditing firm, our audit for 2025 was not able to be completed. A new auditing firm was secured in October of 2023. The 2024 Audit is underway with the 2025 Audit to follow.*

Drainage Authority

The Sauk River Watershed District has been delegated and is authorized through Minnesota Statute Chapter 103E to serve as the Sauk River Drainage Authority (SRDA) for twelve (12) public drainage systems, consisting of mostly open drainage systems and a small amount of tiling within these systems.

- Pope County Ditch #6
- Pope County Ditch #11 (out-letting to PCD6)
- Stearns-Pope Judicial Ditch #1 (out-letting to PCD6)
- Stearns County Ditch #9
- Stearns County Ditch #11
- Stearns County Ditch #15
- Stearns County Ditch #17
- Stearns County Ditch #19
- Stearns County Ditch #24
- Stearns County Ditch #26
- Stearns County Ditch #51
- Stearns County Ditch Zion Munson

Many of these 12 systems were constructed in the late 1800s to early 1900s. After construction, there does not appear to have been a consistent assessment placed on those properties benefitting from the systems to be used for future maintenance and repairs. Over time, many of these systems fell out of repair, lacking the funds and/or political will to repair them. In the early 2000's, the responsibility of these systems was transferred to the SRWD from the corresponding counties they are located in. The SRDA has the challenge of balancing the financial burden placed on taxpayers with the statutory requirements to maintain these systems.

Per MS 103E and the SRDA Drainage Policy (originally adopted in 2017 and updated 9/21/2021), the SRDA administers the inspections, repairs, and maintenance of these public drainage systems with the objective of keeping them functioning as originally intended while achieving channel stability. Property owners of the benefitted lands pay for the construction and maintenance of public drainage systems.

The Drainage Authority members consist of the SRWD Board of Managers, which meet every third Tuesday of the month. This meeting is open to the public and usually takes place at the SRWD office. This year, as in years past, the Ditch & Permit Manager position spends 50 percent of their time managing the SRWD 103E Drainage Program.

Drainage Authority

The year 2025 began with beaver dam removal on PCD6, SCD26, and SCD9 while the ground was frozen in the wetlands where the dams were located. Ditch channel cleanout was also conducted on SCD26 Branch 3 through a wetland that required frozen ground to carry the weight of excavation equipment. Vegetation removal continued on SCD15 in spring as soon as conditions allowed. Spoils were leveled and seeded on SCD26, SCD15, and SCD Zion-Munson in spring; SCD26 and Zion-Munson underwent vegetation removal in fall 2024.

By May, the SRWD hired a summer intern to assist, in part, the drainage inspector with field work such as surveying channels & buffers, spraying weeds and trees, inspecting drainage systems, and marking buffer strips. June and July 2025 experienced unusually heavy rainfall (**see photos on the middle of the following page for examples**), which prompted SRWD's Environmental Technician to fly the drone over most of the ditch systems in 2025 to inspect them for bank sloughing, obstructions to flow such as beaver dams & overgrown vegetation, and overall condition. The drone video from the inspection of SCD17 in particular revealed the presence of significant deadfall of trees; this, coupled with a request from a landowner to clean out parts of SCD17, prompted the Drainage Authority to begin the process of conducting a repair of SCD17 according to Minnesota Statute 103E. By late fall 2025, tree removal and channel survey were scheduled on SCD17 for early 2026.

The Drainage Inspector, summer intern, and Environmental Technician took turns going out in two-person teams on several drainage systems to spray weeds and trees in summer 2025. Frequent heavy rains and deep water in places made it impossible to spray all drainage systems in 2025. Systems sprayed include JD1, PCD6, SCD11, SCD15, SCD26, and SCD Zion-Munson. Priority will be given in 2026 to systems not sprayed in 2025. Having SRDA staff conduct the spraying in 2025 resulted in a substantial cost reduction compared to contracting out the spraying in 2024.

In July, the Drainage Authority passed a new private crossing policy. Previously, the maintenance and repair of private crossings that benefitted only one or two landowners were the responsibility of the respective landowners. This often led to repairs that involved incorrectly-sized culvert pipe, incorrect culvert pipe elevations, and incorrect installation (such as steep faces at the inlet and outlet, which are prone to erosion). Under the new policy, culvert crossings are the responsibility of the drainage system rather than individual landowners. The policy specifies that the crossing shall have a 30-ft top width, and the Drainage Authority will determine the proper pipe size and elevation. SRDA staff are to be on-site during pipe placement to ensure the elevation is correct. Costs will be assessed to all benefitting landowners on the drainage system. Two culvert crossings were repaired in fall 2025 under this new policy, with two more scheduled to be repaired in 2026.

Summer and fall inspections revealed the recent construction of beaver dams on PCD6 Branch 2, SCD9, SCD26 Branch 3, and SCD26 Main Trunk. Beavers were trapped, and the beaver dam on SCD26 Branch 3 was removed in fall 2025; the removal of the dams on SCD26 MT and SCD9 were delayed until early 2026.

A late summer inspection of SCD19 revealed that sections of it were out of repair. A survey was scheduled for early 2026 to determine the amount of sediment in the channel. Following the results of this survey, the Drainage Authority will decide how to proceed in 2026.

Drainage Authority

Sauk River Drainage Authority

SCD17

3/17/25: The entire SCD17 drainage system was inspected via drone. In various places along the channel, trees were overgrown along the 16.5 ft buffer strips and lying across the channel as shown in the photo to the left.

SCD15

7/24/25: A culvert collapsed underneath a township road following a heavy rainfall event. The culvert was replaced four weeks later.

SCD26

7/3/25: SCD26 is overflowing its banks adjacent to Hemker Zoo following a heavy rainfall event.

SCD15

Sep/Oct 2025: A relatively new product called InstaTurf was installed where culvert outflow had previously eroded the ditch bank. InstaTurf is a synthetic mat that allows vegetation to grow through it, which allows roots to anchor the soil and also provides a natural appearance. It offers long-term erosion control as an alternative to rock riprap. The left photo was taken 7 days after installation, and the photo at right was taken 27 days after installation.