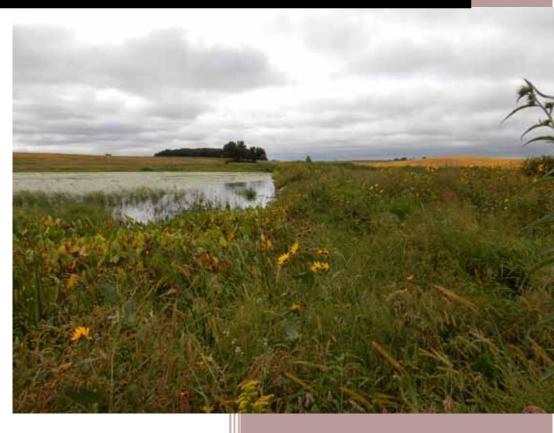
2021

Annual Report



Freeborn County
Soil and Water
Conservation District



Services Provided by Freeborn County Soil & Water Conservation District

- Engineering planning, layout, and construction supervision of conservation practices such as grassed waterways, water and sediment control basins, and grade stabilization structures.
- ❖ Administration of the State Cost-Share Program for conservation practices.
- ❖ Administration of the ReInvest in Minnesota (RIM) Easement Program.
- ❖ Administration of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) Easement Program.
- ❖ Administration of the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP).
- ❖ Administration of the Freeborn County Soil & Water Conservation District No-Till Drill Program.
- ❖ Farmstead and field windbreak design, species selection, tree sales, on site layout, and planting equipment rental.
- Assisting with the implementation of the Ag Best Management Practices loan program. These funds are made available through the State Revolving Fund and are administered by the MN Dept. of Ag.
- Assisting landowners with compliance issues with the Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act (WCA), which was passed in 1991. This may include reviewing maps to determine potential applicability of the Act or discussing alternatives in cooperation with the LGU and Technical Evaluation Panel (TEP) Membership. Also, assistance with the Soil loss ordinance.
- Conservation compliance planning and assistance with other aspects of the current Farm Bill.
- ❖ Consultations for the Rural Finance Authority Young Farmer Program.
- Assisting and working cooperatively with various conservation partners.
- Conservation education projects, demonstrations, and workshops.
- Sponsorship of the Local Workgroup for Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).
- Partnership with local producers and conservation partners through the Freeborn Area Soil Health Team.

Mission Statement

To serve the residents of Freeborn County by creating an awareness of soil and water resource concerns, by offering practical alternatives to manage these concerns, and by providing technical assistance (as local resources allow) to apply and maintain best management practices (BMPs) that impact water quality while sustaining soil productivity and land-user profits.

From the Chairman

As we moved into 2021 it seemed as though COVID19 was not going away anytime soon. Our staff again were tasked with working with producers creatively as the public was not allowed into our office building. That meant meeting producers in the field, outside the office building, and electronically.



We were able to add to our staff this year, and we are finally at full staffing capacity. Newer staff are busy learning tools they need to work with our producers and carry out our mission. This also helped our more seasoned staff to hone in on their skills instead of just putting out fires. We now have a certified wetland professional, a drone operator, and a certified conservation planner-will be completed early 2022.

It was another great weather year for getting projects installed. Several projects were completed including wetland restorations, waterways, basins, and cover crops. Our tree program was such a success with the drive through approach that we adopted that moving forward.

Staff kept on top of all our existing workload and programs including but not limited to; Conservation Reserve Enhancement (CREP) projects installed, and new applications taken, Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) sign-ups and certifications, One Watershed One Plan (1W1P) planning, MN Buffer Law compliance, ReInvest in MN site checks, and State Cost Share projects site checks. You can read more details in the articles that follow in this report.

New this year was the approved Cedar/Wapsipinicon Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan. This is a partnership of counties, SWCDs, and watershed districts in this planning area. What this means is the state's SWCDs, watershed districts, and counties align all their water plans into a watershed-based approach instead of multiple plans in the watershed. Each entity has a seat at the table and participates in prioritizing, setting measurable goals and desired outcomes. Public input is also welcomed in the planning process.

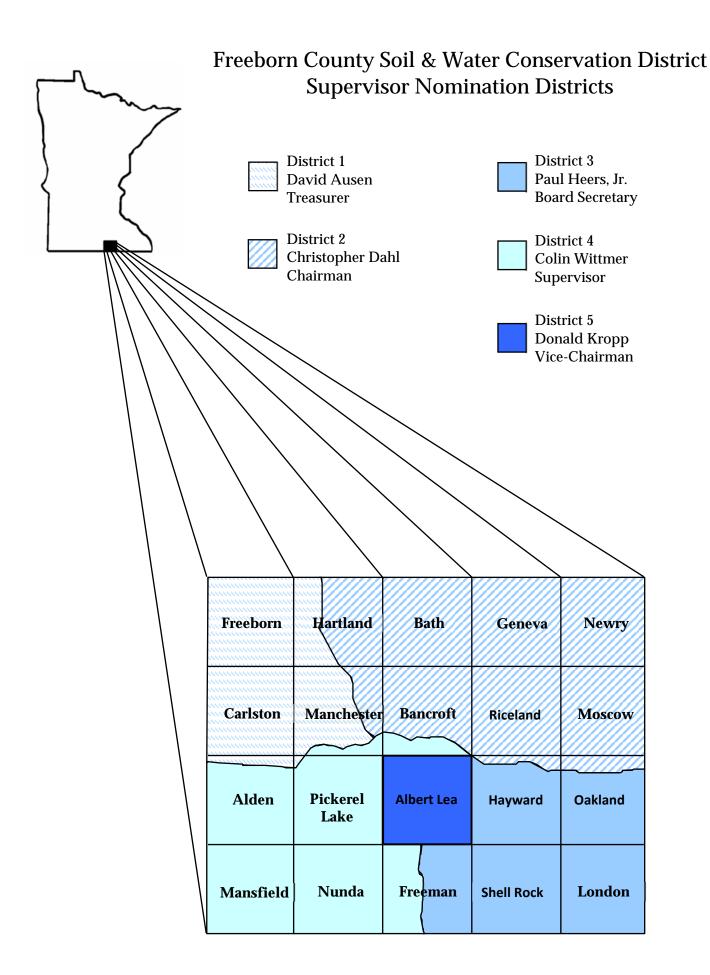
This funding was not meant to replace, but rather enhance current cost share options available to producers. This additional funding source not only helped to fund projects but also has allowed us to share staff to get more conservation projects on the ground, and to promote conservation practices in the planning area. We are excited to work with these partners and have already funded three cover crop contracts, one structure, and a well sealing. Our SWCD has five watersheds and is currently working on two more of these plans, one is in the Shell Rock River and Winnebago watersheds and the third one is in the LeSueur watershed. A fourth one in the Blue Earth watershed will be worked on in the next two years. Freeborn County and SWCD opted out of the Cannon watershed as it is a very small part of our county.

Our board took the initiative of creating a new local SWCD cost share. This cost share is to help fund projects that couldn't be funded by other sources. We currently are working on one project with this funding.

On behalf of our SWCD Board of Supervisors, I would like to thank all the local agencies, organizations, other local units of government and individuals that work in cooperation with us to deliver conservation programs and "put conservation on the land" in 2021. They include the following:

- Landowners & operators
- Freeborn County Board of Commissioners
- Freeborn County Environmental Services
- Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR)
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)
- SE Tech Support Joint Powers Board
- Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA)
 Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, MN Waterfowl Assn., MN DNR, US Fish & Wildlife, Shell Rock River
 Watershed District, Turtle Creek Watershed District, Cedar River Watershed District, Mower SWCD, Dodge SWCD, and others.
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA)

We hereby submit the following Annual Report of Soil and Water Conservation Activities for calendar year 2021.



Freeborn County Soil & Water Conservation District

SWCD Board Members (Left to Right)

Christopher Dahl - Chairman Paul Heers Jr – Board Secretary Donald Kropp – Vice-Chairman David Ausen - Treasurer Colin Wittmer - Supervisor



SWCD Staff (Left to Right)

Lindsey Zeitler – Resource Conservationist Brittany Dawson – District Technician Mark Trnka – Conservation Technician Chad Billat – Private Lands Biologist Brenda Lageson – District Manager



NRCS Staff

Gary Kurer – Area 19 Customer Service Team Lead (Pictured) Samuel Jameson – Agricultural Engineer Karen Stensrude – SiNew Clerk Barbara Marshall – Farm Bill Technician



Technical assistance was provided to the district by NRCS MN

Rick Berscheid, Assistant State Conservationist, FO Nicole Sternquist, Area Engineering Jim Fritz, Area Resource Conservationist Daniel Nath, Area Resource Soil Scientist Charlie Blackburn, Civil Engineering Technician Christiane Roy, GIS Specialist Aaron Janz, Area Program Specialist Kyle Welch, ITS Lisa Ihlenfeld, Area Admin. Coordinator

Annual Report Highlights

Honoring the 2020/2021 Conservationists of the Year

On Tuesday, December 14, 2021 Bruce and Stuart Ness of Albert Lea were honored at the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Annual Convention and Trade-Show in Bloomington.

The Nesses were chosen as the Freeborn County Soil and Water Conservation District Conservationists of the Year, but due to COVID the 2020 Annual Convention and Tradeshow were modified to a virtual platform which did not allow for the recognition of those individuals chosen as Conservationists of



The Nesses are pictured at the MASWCD convention displaying their sign indicating they are Freeborn County's Outstanding Conservationist of the year.

the Year. The Freeborn County SWCD Board of Supervisors and staff decided to keep the Nesses as the Conservationists of the Year for 2021, so they had the opportunity to be honored and recognized for their hard work and dedication to conservation efforts at the 2021 Convention.

Bruce and Stuart utilize no-till and vertical tillage in a corn/soybean rotation, which helps minimize soil erosion and loss from wind and water. In addition to their tillage practices the Nesses use cover crops which helps improve soil health by increasing diversity and maintaining living roots in the ground as well as minimizing the impacts to surface water and groundwater.

We want to thank Bruce and Stuart as well as their families for taking the time to attend the Convention and commend them on all their hard work to conserve and improve our soil and water resources in Freeborn County.

Representative Meetings and Legislative Briefing

On March 17, 2021 Freeborn County SWCD Supervisor Paul Heers Jr., SWCD Manager Brenda Lageson, and District Technician Brittany Dawson joined the Mower County SWCD via Zoom for a meeting with area Representatives. The meeting was led by Justin Hanson, Mower County SWCD Manager and attended by Representative Bennet and Representative Mueller. Topics that were discussed included the importance of continued support for Capacity Funding, overviews of the Mower County SWCD's Annual Report and Freeborn County SWCD's 2020 Accomplishments. Representative Bennett asked about the differences between Watershed Districts and SWCDs, the origins of SWCDs, and why SWCDs were created. This discussion provided Representatives Bennet and Mueller with a better idea of the work SWCDs complete on agricultural lands and how they assist with the conservation of soil and water. Representative Mueller, as a new Representative, gained a better understanding from this discussion on the type of work SWCDs do. Although the meeting was brief Hanson was able to emphasize the importance of projects SWCD Staff are a part of and the work they complete.

March 18, 2021 provided the opportunity for Heers Jr, Lageson, and Dawson to attend the virtual 2021 MASWCD Legislative Briefing. The briefing kicked off with MASWCD President Paul Krabbenhoft welcoming everyone which was followed by updates from Senator Rudd and Representative Ecklund. The focus was on funding and policy updates during the 2021 Legislative Session. Sheila Vanney presented on the MASWCD Legislative Platform and how these topics have been addressed by committees and legislators. Angie Becker Kudelka, BWSR Assistant Director, updated attendees on the Governor's Budget and policies. A discussion on messaging with Legislators and the logistics of communication provided insight into understanding the importance of conveying MASWCD and SWCD message when talking to legislators. After some closing comments from Krabbenhoft the meeting was adjourned.

Annual Tree Program

The Freeborn County Soil & Water Conservation District's annual tree program provides local, urban, and rural landowners an opportunity to obtain good quality trees at an affordable price. The SWCD offers 30+ species of trees that are suited for conservation practices such as shelterbelts and wildlife plantings. Along with trees, the SWCD offers tree mats, fertilizer, and tree tubes to help increase planting success. For large shelterbelts or windbreak plantings, the SWCD has a tree planter available for rent. The SWCD offers landowners planning assistance that includes site specific tree species recommendations, spacing recommendations, and maintenance advice.



Bare root trees packaged for SWCD tree order pick-up.

11,873 trees and shrubs were planted throughout the Freeborn County area through the SWCD's tree program in 2021. The SWCD sold many bare root and potted trees, which included both evergreen and deciduous. Each of the trees sold will provide financial, aesthetic, wildlife, soil, water, and air quality benefits for years to come.

One Watershed One Plan (1W1P)

Freeborn County is a little unique as it has five major watersheds while some counties may only have as few as one, so we are participating in three current planning efforts.

The Cedar River – Wapsipinicon Watersheds, Shell Rock River – Winnebago River Watersheds, and the Le Sueur River Watershed. The Shell Rock River and Winnebago River watershed are being combined into one planning area. This does not mean the two watersheds are combining, just the planning area for funding priority concerns. The Blue Earth watershed will be addressed soon and has yet to start the planning process.



Freeborn County Major Watersheds.

Each of these three 1W1P efforts are currently at different stages in the process.

The Cedar – Wapsipinicon 1W1P has started to fund projects with contracts being approved for the implementation of three years of Cover Crops and one for a Grassed Waterway.

The Shell Rock – Winnebago 1W1P is nearing completion and is heavy into the planning stage, addressing priority concerns, and how to fund those concerns.

Le Sueur River 1W1P has started the planning process and held a kick-off event on September 16 to get public input.

Once these plans are implemented, they will replace individual water plans and are good for ten years. Funding for priority areas and projects will be a non-competitive grant and is available to all partners without creating a new unit of government.

Volunteer Rain Gauge Network

The State Climatology Network helps sponsor our local rain gauge reporting program. We have 20+ volunteers that take daily rain totals, tally them up, and send them in to our office. Our staff then records these totals on the State Climatology web site. https://climateapps.dnr.state.mn.us/hidenannual/

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Freeborn Area Soil Health Team

The Freeborn Area Soil Health Team is made up of local producers, private businesses, and government organizations interested in promoting soil health techniques. Team meetings were held monthly in 2021 virtually via ZOOM. The COVID-19 pandemic again proved to be problematic for education and outreach activities.

The 2021 winter workshop was cancelled because of the pandemic. However, once conditions began to improve the team was able to hold 2 separate field days at farms in Freeborn County and Steele County. There were approximately 30 attendees at each event where discussions focused on soil health demonstrations, the rainfall simulator, equipment, and practices each producer was implementing.



Producers gather around a rainfall simulator at a local soil health event to learn about the importance of keeping the soil covered.

Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA)



GBERBA Watersheds and County Coverage

The Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA) is a joint powers organization consisting of ten Counties and SWCDs in the Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Watonwan River Watersheds. GBERBA helps facilitate the sharing of ideas among local government units (LGUs) through technical meetings, policy meetings, and guest speakers.

GBERBA has continued to be a valuable organization for applying and receiving grants that the Freeborn SWCD and landowners can utilize for conservation projects. SWCD staff work with landowners in the GBERBA area to identify potential conservation issues and work towards solutions. Proposed solutions may use GBERBA cost share funds to implement Best Management Practices (BMPs), such as grade stabilization structures, grassed waterways, and cover crops.

State Cost-Share

Landowners were paid a total of \$49,252 in State-Cost Share dollars in calendar year 2021. Practices installed include 2 Grassed Waterways and 5 Cover Crop Contracts.



WASCOB installed with State Cost Share funds.



Aerial applied Cover Crop implemented with State Cost Share funds.



First year inspection of WASCOBs installed with State Cost Share funds.

A summary of RIM, RIM/WRP, WRP, and EWP Easements closed to date 12/31/2021

Perpetual Easements		
Five (5) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Riparian Easements	318.0	acres
Six (6) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Marginal Ag Land Easements	87.1	acres
Eleven (11) Permanent Wetland Preserve (PWP) Easements	221.8	acres
Twelve (12) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Wetland Restoration Easements	304.5	acres
Nineteen (19) Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)	612.0	acres
Thirteen (13) Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP II)	557.0	acres
Twenty-one (21) Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP III)	1,623.1	acres
Fifty-one (51) RIM / WRP Wetland Restoration Easements	4,073.0	acres
Forty-four (44) Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) Wetland Restoration Easements	2,853.6	acres
Five (5) EWP Emergency Watershed Protection	250.2	acres
Total	10,900.3	acres

Minnesota Buffer Law

Freeborn SWCD staff kept busy working with landowners to help them ensure they were complying with the Minnesota Buffer Law and to help bring those out of compliance into compliance with the Law. Alternative practices were taken into consideration for specific landowners, which included using filter strips, reduced tillage (no till or strip till) and cover crops, side inlet drainage, and negative slopes on the ditch bank.

SWCD staff is completing yearly monitoring on a third (1/3) of the parcels that are impacted by the buffer law. Landowners out of compliance with the buffer law can contact SWCD staff to work towards compliance, otherwise the county will send out enforcement action letters.



Establishment of a Filter Strip along public waters to ensure compliance with the Buffer Law.

Capacity Funding



Great Plains No-Till Drill

In 2021 the Capacity Funding continued to help assist landowners with cost share. Capacity funding also kept staff busy with project inspections, CRP plans, tree customers, soil health, buffer assistance, and water planning. The no till drill was used to seed native grass, pasture, and no-till soybeans. Approximately 210 acres of land were seeded with the drill in 2021. The SWCD again thanks legislators for the capacity funding as it has allowed Freeborn SWCD to take a big step toward meeting our goals and accomplishing our mission.

MAWQCP

It continued to be a challenging year and we had to modify our approach to meet with producers who were interested in being certified through the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP), obtaining endorsements, or were up for review. There continues to be interest in the program throughout Southeast Minnesota with 33 producers certified in 2021. Freeborn County had 2 producers certified in 2021, 4 producers had amendments to their certifications, and eleven producers were up for review. As of January 3, 2022, there were 1,156 Certified Producers across the state.

MAWQCP takes a whole farm approach to conservation and improving water quality by assessing all owned and rented tracts and evaluating them on various categories. Producers who become certified are guaranteed Ag Certainty, which is 10 years where they are deemed in compliance with any new



MAWQCP sign posted by a producer's field.

State water quality regulations. The program is non-regulatory, and certification is completed on a voluntary basis. A signed application is an invitation for staff to contact the producer and from that initial contact a meeting is set up to gather the relevant information. Financial and technical assistance are available for certified and producers actively pursuing certification.

Conservation Easements

Freeborn Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP): There was construction completed on 4 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 530 acres. We closed 1 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 135 acres. There was native seeding completed/vegetation established on 4 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 465 acres. Also, restoration was completed on 6 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 650 acres. (Construction completed/vegetation established)

Photo of a restored appropriation aggregate

Photo of a restored conservation easement during a site inspection.

<u>Steele Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)</u>
<u>Assisted by Freeborn SWCD:</u> There was construction completed on

2 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 250 acres. Native seeding was completed/vegetation established on 1 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 35 acres. Also, restoration was completed on 3 RIM/CREP easements of approximately 285 acres. (Construction completed/vegetation established)

NRCS Update

Gary D. Kurer, Team Lead 19, USDA-NRCS

CONSERVATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (CTA) AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

Environmental Quality Incentive Program: Eighteen (18) conservation plans were developed and eight (8) were accepted for financial assistance in FY 2021 for EQIP totaling \$149,042.



<u>Conservation Stewardship Program:</u> Three (3) CSP renewal applications were approved for a total of

\$600,501 obligated for a 5-year period on ,730 cropland acres. One (1) new classic CSP application was approved for 2021 for a total of \$170,00.

<u>Conservation Reserve Program:</u> Sixty-five (65) CRP plans were completed for re-enrollments and new enrollments. On-site eligibility investigations for continuous CRP practices such as windbreaks, grassed waterways, filter stirps, native habitat for pollinators, and wetland restoration were completed. 100% spot checks for CRP status reviews and practices certification were conducted and all deemed in compliance.

<u>Outreach:</u> Coordinated the outreach and preparation of a local work group meeting for Freeborn County SWCD in May 2021.

USDA prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex (including gender identity and expression), marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance.

Estimated Level of Conservation Assistance for Calendar Year

Reported by Gary Kurer – NRCS Area 19 Team Lead

ITEM-EQIP PRACTICES	PLANNED IN 2021	APPLIED IN 2021	EXPENDED FUNDS 2021
Cover Crops	2,769 ac	2,699 ac.	\$127,732
Grassed Waterways	0.8 ac	0.8 ac	\$4,064
Subsurface Drain	1,700 ft.	1,700 ft.	\$3,247
Seasonal High Tunnel for Crops	1 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Residue Management-No-Till/Strip Till/Mulch Till	0 ac.	0 ac.	\$0
Grade Stabilization Structures	0 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Prescribed Grazing	35 ac.	0 ac.	\$0
Heavy Use Area Protection	40 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Livestock Pipeline	2550 ft.	0 ft.	\$0
Fence (perimeter and/or interior)	16,000 ft.	3,750 ft.	\$1,650
Watering Facilities	1 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
CNMP-CAP's	0 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Water & Sediment Control Basins	2 ea.	2 ea.	\$8,313
Underground Outlets	1,750 ft.	1,750 ft.	\$9,750
Diversions	0 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Critical Area Planting	0.8 ac.	0.8 ac.	\$400
Animal Mortality Facility	2 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Water Wells	0 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Pumping Plants	0 ea.	0 ea.	\$0
Brush Management	10.3 ac.	0 ac.	\$0
Wetland Restoration CP-23A sites for CRP	101.87	101.87	
Farmed Wetland and Buffer CP-27/28 sites for CRP	17.67	17.67	
Filter Strips CP-21 for re-enrolled CRP	209.80	209.80	
Farmstead Windbreaks/Shelterbelts CP-16-CRP	0.9	0.9	
Grassed Waterways CP-8 for CRP	10.70	10.70	
Engineering Requests Submitted	5 ea.	N/A	N/A
TOTALS FOR 2021 CRP:	1,006 contracts	11,609.38 acres	\$3,143,011
TOTALS FOR 2021 EQIP:	See Above	See Above	\$228,450
TOTALS FOR 2021 CSP:	3,730 ac.	3,730 ac.	\$600,501

Revenues and Expenses

Freeborn County SWCD

Revenues and Expenses January through December 2021 Unaudited

	Jan - Dec 21
Revenue	
Charges for Services	162,685
Intergovernmental Rev - County	188,000
Intergovernmental Rev - State	210,913
Misc. Revenue Interest	2,186
Misc. Revenue Other	83
Total Revenue	563,867
Expense	
Dist. Op. Capital Outlay	31,508
Dist. Op. Serv. & Charges	40,318
Dist. Op. Personnel Services	340,892
Dist. Op. Supplies	2,860
Project Expense - SWCD	33,512
Project Expense - State	32,767
Total Expense	481,857
Excess of Revenues over (under) Expenses	<u>82,010</u>