2026 ANNUAL PLAN

FREEBORN COUNTY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Freeborn County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) is organized under provisions of Minnesota Statue Chapter 103C and is governed by a board of five elected supervisors.

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FREEBORN COUNTY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

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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.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Annual Plan is to outline the framework of the Freeborn SWCD's day-to-day activities and their relationship to the overarching goals set forth in the district's many applicable plans (Blue Earth River Watershed 1W1P, Cannon River Watershed 1W1P, Cedar-Wapsipinicon River Watershed 1W1P, Le Sueur River Watershed 1W1P, and the Shell Rock-Winnebago River Watershed 1W1P).

- **Objective 1:** Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Soil Resources
- **Objective 2:** Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Surface Water Resources
- **Objective 3:** Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Ground Water Resources
- **Objective 4:** Protect, Enhance, and Establish New Native Habitat
- **Objective 5:** Enhance Drainage through Conservation Practices
- **Objective 6:** Increase District Awareness and Promote Community Collaboration
- **Objective 7:** Maintain a Strong operating Structure that Adapts to Changes in the External Environment

Framework:

1. **Objective:** An objective is a board approach, strategy, or principle that steers our operations towards ultimately accomplishing goals outlined in various other plans. They encompass all dynamics of the Freeborn SWCD's operations. The Objectives presented here are not listed in a ranked order, they each carry equal importance.
2. **Strategies:** A strategy is an example of day-to-day activities that support the overlying Objectives. A strategy may be short or long term and may also be fixed or on-going.

OBJECTIVES & STRATEGIES

Objective 1: Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Soil Resources

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Address soil erosion and soil erosion concerns as identified in priority areas of 1W1P planning areas.
  - Work with land use decision-makers to identify areas of concern.
- Education and Outreach
  - Promote conservation practice installation through landowner education through: in-person conversations, outreach media, and field days.
  - Educate landowners and producers of financial and technical assistance available from local SWCD/NRCS Office.
  - Collaborate with the Freeborn Area Soil Health Team to promote the use of soil health practices on working land.
  - Offer affordable, quality trees through an Annual Tree Sale for landowners to establish windbreaks and other wind erosion control measures.
- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Provide basic concepts of soil erosion control measures and estimated cost to interested landowners.
  - Design, survey, and evaluation of conservation practices used to control soil erosion.
  - Maintain technical Job Approval Authority to implement Best Management Practices for soil erosion.
  - Assist landowners with tree species selection and planting guidelines for windbreaks and other wind erosion control measures.
  - Provide use of no-till drill and tree planter for practice installation of soil erosion control measures.
- Performance Assessment
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on projects outcomes to Watershed Tracking Tools.
  - Conduct site visits to assess existing cost-shared conservation practices during the contract lifespan to ensure continued function and effectiveness in soil erosion control.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outline in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.

Objective 2: Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Surface Water Resources

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Address surface water concerns as identified in priority areas of 1W1P planning areas.
  - Participate in farmer-led conversations to identify future areas of collaboration and focus.
- Education and Outreach
  - Promote conservation practices that reduce sediment delivery to surface waters by landowner education through: in-person conversations, outreach media, and field days.
  - Educate landowners and producers of financial and technical assistance available from local SWCD/NRCS Office.
- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Provide basic concepts of conservation practices that reduce sediment delivery to surface waters, cost estimates, and financial assistance opportunities to interested landowners.
  - Design, survey, and evaluation of conservation practices used to reduce sediment delivery to surface waters.

Objective 2 continued….

- Ensure staff are trained and certified with appropriate credentials to provide technical assistance.
- Acquire funding for programs that offer financial assistance to implement conservation practices that reduce sediment delivery to surface waters.
- Assist landowners in applying and becoming certified in the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP).
- Provide assistance to landowners to ensure compliance with the Minnesota Buffer Law.

- Performance Assessment
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on projects outcomes to Watershed Tracking Tools.
  - Conduct site visits to assess existing cost shared conservation practices during the contract lifespan to ensure continued function and effectiveness in soil erosion control.
  - Perform site visits to assess existing RIM, RIM/WRP, and CREP easements to ensure restoration efforts and structures remain effective.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outline in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.

Objective 3: Conserve, Protect, and Enhance Ground Water Resources

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Address ground water resource concerns as identified in priority areas of 1W1P planning areas.
  - Collaborate with land use decision-makers to identify areas of concern.
- Education and Outreach
  - Support field demonstration events that display the infiltration potential for cover crops, conservation tillage, and other best management practies.
- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Ensure staff are trained and certified with appropriate credentials to provide technical assistance.
  - Maintain technical assistance and cost-share programs to implement best management practices for soil health.
  - Assist landowners in applying and becoming certified in the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP).
- Performance Assessment
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on projects outcomes to Watershed Tracking Tools.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outlined in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.

Objective 4: Protect, Enhance, and Establish New Native Habitat

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Expand and protect habitat using prioritization planning tools including RIM easement criteria and Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan priority zones.
  - Integrate planting of climate adaptive species into projects where possible.
  - Partner with other agencies to protect at-risk habitat.
  - Work with land use decision-makers to improve programs for native habitat and vegetation diversity.
- Education and Outreach
  - Communicate the importance of native vegetation and buffer strips to landowners along surface waters and in rural areas.
  - Educate landowners and producers of programs available for habitat restoration through the local SWCD/NRCS Office.
  - Offer affordable, quality trees to the community through an Annual Tree Sale.

Objective 4 continued…

- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Ensure staff are trained and certified with appropriate credentials to provide technical assistance.
  - Complete habitat restoration designs with a focus upon a diverse planting plan.
  - Assist landowners with tree species selection and planting guidelines that enhances wildlife.
  - Provide use of no-till drill and tree planter for habitat establishment.
- Performance Assessment
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on projects outcomes to Watershed Tracking Tools.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outlined in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.
  - Perform site visits to assess existing RIM, RIM/WRP, and CREP easements to ensure restoration efforts and structures remain in working order.

Objective 5: Enhance Drainage through Conservation Practices

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Address drainage concerns as identified in priority areas of 1W1P planning areas.
  - Partner with drainage authorities to identify conservation drainage improvement opportunities.
- Education and Outreach
  - Educate landowners on rules related to the Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act and USDA guidlines for drainage projects.
  - Include easement program opportunities in informational and educational programing.
- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Ensure staff are trained and certified with appropriate credentials to provide technical assistance for projects that increase water storage.
  - Continued membership in the Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) Technical Evaluation Panel (TEP).
  - Work with state, federal, non-governmental, and other local partners to promote and implement the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Programs (CREP).
- Performance Assessment
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on projects outcomes to Watershed Tracking Tools.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outlined in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.

Objective 6: Increase District Awareness and Promote Community Collaboration

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Maintain relationships with key figures in the community that are well recognized locally and share the District's values and mission and can advocate on our behalf.
  - Maintain key partnerships with federal, state and local agencies as well non-profits and watershed partners.
- Education and Outreach
  - Host outreach events annually with a specific demographic, land-use type, or resource issue in mind.
  - Prioritize several events annually that focus on collaborative learning, two-way dialogue, and active engagement with community participants.
  - Continue participation at local events to reach the broader community, ie Freeborn County Fair.
  - Participate in educational events with area schools such as envirothon, career days, and classroom visits.

Objective 6 continued...

- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Utilize existing and new forms of communication to bring services to landowners in the county.
  - Identify ways to showcase conservation stewards or impactful projects to the broader community.
- Performance Assessment
  - Track and reflect upon outreach events and communication effectiveness.
  - Ensure timely and accurate reporting on project outcomes to Watershed tracking tools.
  - Compare accomplishments to the goal metrics outline in the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans.

Objective 7: Maintain a Strong operating Structure that Adapts to Changes in the External Environment

Strategies:

- Planning and Prioritization
  - Adopt a District Strategic Plan, adapt and revise annually as needed.
  - Annually assess workloads for existing staff and identify if gaps exist.
- Education and Outreach
  - Maintain close relationships with the Area 7's SWCD and MASWCD representatives.
  - Connect with local and state representatives, communicate the District's successes and legislative needs on an annual (or more frequent) basis.
- Technical Assistance and Implementation
  - Annually review staff training accomplishments, training needs, and career growth path. Prioritize Job Approval Authority certifications where needed.
- Performance Assessment
  - Track progress and outcomes pertaining to pollution reductions, protection accomplishments, stakeholder outreach and engagement.
  - Asses staff wages, satisfaction, career growth, and other metrics annually.
  - Host board trainings and team-building events. Assess training needs annually.

DISTRICT PROGRAMS

Tree and Native Plant Program

Each year the Freeborn SWCD offers affordable, quality trees to be used for conservation and wildlife benefits. Native plant packs are available through this program that benefit pollinators, wildlife habitat, and water quality.

Freeborn SWCD Local Pilot Program

The SWCD Local Pilot Prgoram is available to landowners and producers for conservation practices that meet NRCS standards when other funding options are not available. A project may qualify if all the following apply: the practice is not eligible under current state funding program policies, other funding sources (such as EQIP) are unable to provide assistance, the project would create a significant financial burden for the landowner without assistance, while providing meaningufl benefits to soil health, water quality, or wildlife habitat. This program helps support worthwhile conservation projects that might otherwise go unfunded.

STATE PROGRAMS

Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Grant Programs
The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is a state agency that assists local governments to manage and conserve their irreplaceable water and soil resources. BWSR accomplishes this mission by providing financial, technical, and administrative help to local governments throughout the state of Minnesota. The Freeborn SWCD is currently administering the following grants:

- FY2024 - CRP State Incentives Pilot Program
- FY2025 - CRP State Incentives Program
- FY2025 - Soil Health Delivery
- FY2026 - Soil Health Delivery

Buffer Program
The Minnesota Buffer law was passed in 2015 and requires landowners to install buffer strips along State Protected Waters and Public Drainage Ditches. It is the responsibility of the Freeborn SWCD to provide notifications that a parcel may be deemed non-compliant and to work with landowners to gain compliance. It is the responsibility of the Freeborn SWCD to track compliance each year in BuffCAT, the Board of Water and Soil Resources tracking tool, and provide technical assistance to landowners in an effort to meet compliance. The Freeborn SWCD is not the regulatory agency for the Minnesota Buffer Law and does not provide enforcement of the Buffer Law.

The Freeborn SWCD has grant programs available for land located along surface waters impacted by the Minnesota Buffer Law to implement best management practices that reduce sediment delivery to those waters. The Freeborn SWCD is currently administering the following grants:

- FY2023-Buffer Law
- FY2024-Buffer Law
- FY2025-Buffer Law
- FY2026-Buffer Law

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
CREP is a voluntary program aimed to retire environmentally sensitive land. It is a combination of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Reinvest in Minnesota program (RIM). Administered by the USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Freeborn SWCD Staff assist landowners with everything from easement interest and sign up to a restored closed easement.

DNR Observation Well Monitoring
Freeborn SWCD staff monitor wells for depth and ground water trends. 5 wells are monitored, and data is used by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

MN Agriculture Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP)
The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program is a voluntary program that provides the opportunity for farmers and landowners to take the lead in implementing conservation practices that protect our surface and ground water. Certified farmers are deemed to be compliant with any new water quality rules or regulations during their 10 year certification. Certification is a three-step process; application, assessment, and certification. The Freeborn SWCD assists the farmer with the application and assessment, and a licensed certifier completes the certification process.

Minnesota State Cost Share/Conservation Contracts/Conservation Delivery
The state cost-share program was established in 1977 to help share the costs with landowners and producers to implement conservation practices used for erosion and sedimentation control or water quality improvement. The Freeborn SWCD is currently administering the following grants:

- FY2023-State Cost-Share Fund
- FY2026/2027 - Conservation Contracts
- FY2026/2027 - Conservation Delivery

One Watershed One Plan
The One Watershed, One Plan process was developed to transition water planning from a county basis to a watershed basis in 2014 with a focus on prioritizing and targeting the most important resources on a larger, watershed scale. As of 2026, Freeborn County SWCD is operating under four 1W1P for the: Blue Earth River Watershed, Cedar-Wapsipinicon Watershed, Le Sueur Watershed, and Shell Rock-Winnebago Watershed.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a collaborative initiative between USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) that provides funding opportunities to SWCDs to implement soil health practices.

Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM)
RIM is a voluntary program aimed to retire environmentally sensitive land. Administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Freeborn SWCD Staff assist landowners with everything from easement interest and sign up to a restored closed easement.

Watershed Based Implementation Funds (WBIF)
WBIF funds are available to implement Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans that originate from 1W1P. The funds are administered by partnering agencies and aim to implement activites described in the plans. In 2026, the Freeborn SWCD is eligible for WBIF funds in the Blue Earth River Watershed, Cedar-Wapsipinicon River Watershed, Le Sueur River Watershed, and Shell Rock-Winnebago River Watershed.

Wetland Conservation Act (WCA)
The Freeborn SWCD is a member of the Technical Evaluation Panel that reviews all projecst that may impact a wetland. The Wetland Conservation Act is administered by Freeborn County.

FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Federal Programs
The Freeborn SWCD assists with activities of the 2018 Farm Bill including: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The Freeborn SWCD attends local work group meetings for local priorities in USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service funding.

PARTNERSHIPS/COMMITTEES/ASSOCIATIONS

Area 7 Technical Service Association (TSA) | Joint Powers Board (JPB)
The Area 7 TSA is an entity created by the 11 SWCD's located in southeast Minnesota. It currently employs 5 staff who's workload is prioritized by the SWCD members. The TSA provides engineering and specialized technical assistance to the SWCD in Area 7.

Freeborn Area Soil Health Team
The Freeborn Area Soil Health Team is made up of local businesses, SWCD employees, NRCS employees, local regenerative farmers, and other agricultural professionals who's mission is to facilitate local collaboration that encourages, educates, & demonstrates how to improve our soil health & water quality while improving productivity, profitability, and sustainability of our natural resources.

Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance (GBERBA)
The Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliance is a Joint Powers Organization consisting of ten member Counties and SWCDs encompassing the Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Watonwan River Watersheds who's mission is to lead in the implementation and promotion of economically viable watershed activities through the combined efforts of local partners and the Greater Blue Earth River Basin Alliances.

Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) | Area 7
The Area 7 MASWCD provides opportunities for education, communication, cooperation, and coordination between and among its member districts and affiliated partners in Southeast Minnesota.

Minnesota Association of Conservation District Employees (MACDE) | Area 7
The Area 7 MACDE provides opportunities for communication, cooperation, and coordination between conservation district employees in the 11 county area of southeast Minnesota.

National Association of Conservation District (NACD)
The National Association of Conservation Districts is a nonprofit organization that represents America's conservation districts. Their mission is to promote responsible management and conservation of natural resources on all lands by representing locally led conservation districts and their associations through grassroots advocacy, education, and partnership.

Southeast Minnesota Area 7 Envirothon
The Envirothon is an outdoor learning competition for high school students in grades 9-12. It is one of the states largest environmental education initiatives. The top three teams from the southeast area 7 competition advances to the Minnesota State Envirothon competition. A representative from the Freeborn SWCD participates in the planning and implementation of the area competition.

FREEBORN COUNTY SWCD 2026 BUDGET

Expenditure Account	2026 Budget
Equipment Purchases	$3,000
Audit Expense	$5,000
Education & Promo	$2,500
Employee Education & Training	$10,000
Fees & Dues	$17,100
Insurance (MCIT)	$9,000
Misc. Other Services & Charges	$200
Office Rent	$8,156
Shed Rent	$540
Postage	$600
RIM/CREP Reimbursable Expenses	$100
Supervisor Expense	$2,000
Telephone/Internet Expense	$1,440
Vehicle Gas & Maintenance	$5,000
Employee Salary	$327,600
Supervisor Compensation	$12,000
PERA (7.50%)	$24,570
FICA (6.2%)	$20,311
Medicare (1.45%)	$4,750
Medical & Dental Insurance	$35,491
Health Saving Account	$15,000
Life, Accidental Death, Disability	$800
Minnesota Paid Leave	$3,800
Payroll Expense	$2,200
Field Supplies	$1,000
Office Supplies	$1,000
Misc. Project Expense	$100
Newsletter Expense	$1,650
Soil Health Expense	$2,500
Tree Expense	$40,000
Drill Expense	$150
State Project Expense	$34,088
Total Expenses	**$591,647**

Income Account	2026 Budget
County Appropriation	$183,000
Wetland Conservation Act (WCA)	$5,000
Dept. of Revenue - SWCD Aid	$100,000
BWSR Conservation Delivery	$19,145
BWSR Easement Delivery	$7,450
BWSR State Conservation Contracts	$19,271
BWSR Buffer Law	$25,000
BWSR CRP Incentives	$0
BWSR Deffered Revenue	$25,000
BWSR Soil Health Delivery	$100,000
Tree Sales	$50,000
Tree Planter/Drill Rental	$1,800
Tree Mats, Fertilizer Pkts., Tubes	$1,100
DNR OBWELL (observation well assist.)	$780
Interest Earnings	$8,000
Other Misc. Revenues	$100
MAWQCP workload reimbursement	$15,000
NRCS Technical assistance	$12,000
Technical assistance for other projects	$1,000
WBIF Technical assistance	$18,000
Reserves	$0
Total Income	**$591,646**