Experience leads to SWCD success

Relationships built through the years

By Carol Stender

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DETROIT LAKES, Minn. — Brad Grant has worked 35 years at the Becker County Soil and Water Conservation District based in Detroit Lakes.

His four-person staff have a combined 70 years of experience with SWCD and no one plans to leave.

They all like working with landowners, farmers and lakeshore groups as they implement conservation programs to meet the county’s diverse topography. The district’s efforts were recognized when it received the 2005 Minnesota Association of SWCD’s Outstanding District Award.

“We’ve had a strong program for more than 30 years,” said Grant, who has been the district’s administrator since 1978. “We’ve taken on new responsibilities and the program seems to keep building.”

Grant credits the district’s success on strong working relationships with everyone.

“Some of the most rewarding parts I have had in this job has been in meeting the people of the county,” he said. “The people have been a big part of what I have enjoyed about my job.”

Grant and his staff work with farmers and landowners and other conservation groups to maximize conservation and cost-share programs.

“The work can be costly,” he said. “The cost-share programs help producers implement their conservation plan and address conservation issues.”

Staff works closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to optimize cost-share funds. The two agencies work on the Conservation Reserve Program, Environmental Quality Incentive Program, Wetland Reserve Program and the continuous Conservation Reserve Program.

The SWCD also works closely with the Pelican River Watershed District and the Buffalo-Red River Watershed District.

“Connecting with others helps us get the cost-share dollars we need to implement many of the projects,” he said.

Becker County SWCD received the third-highest cost share allocation in the state in 2003 when it got $34,768 to work with landowners.

Becker County has 918 CRP contracts totaling 35,457 acres with an annual payment to landowners of more than $1.5 million.

The SWCD offers engineering assistance to landowners to design conservation practices for the West Central Minnesota Joint Powers Board, which covers a nine-SWCD area.

Becker County implements many conservation programs to meet the county’s diverse topography.

“The county is so diverse,” he said. “There’s farming in the northwest part of the county and lakes, wetlands and wildlife refuges in the middle and eastern areas. It has everything you could want.”

Grant said he was a “greenhorn” about the district’s programs when he started in 1970. He was simply an Audubon High School graduate looking for a job. When he got the SWCD position, he was eager to learn and, through hard work and study, was named the district’s administrator.

He’s seen shifts in the conservation programs during his tenure with the district.

When dairy was a big industry in the county, the SWCD designed ag waste systems for farms. The district is applying for and receiving grants now to close those same systems as dairy farms close, he said.

A greater focus has been placed on lakeshore development and water quality as more lake homes and cabins are built. The district is working with the county’s planning and zoning commission on water quality monitoring programs and septic and water systems around the lakes.

“Water is an important resource for the county for recreation, irrigation and human consumption. The county has 412 lakes within a 25-mile radius of Detroit Lakes, he said.

“The lakes make this a very attractive area in the state,” Grant said. “But we also have major agricultural production in the northwestern part of the county with 300,000 acres plus we have two national wildlife refuges and vast public lands and forests … if it is in the state of Minnesota, it has to be in Becker County.”