



# CONSERVATION TODAY

Sibley Soil and Water Conservation District & USDA Natural Resources

August 2016



## The Minnesota Buffer Law

By Joel Wurscher, District Technician

The hot topic right now in the conservation office, here and around the state, revolves around the Buffer Law. This new law has led me, as well as others in the office, to conversations with many familiar and some new faces throughout the county. First, we need to clear up some of the confusion about the term “buffer” we hear in the office. A buffer, also known as a filter strip, is an area of vegetated land adjacent to a body of water such as a stream or lake. Buffers help to filter excess nutrients/sediment to prevent from entering into the water. Buffers also stabilize soil and protect riparian corridors.

Governor Dayton signed this buffer initiative into law in 2015 to enhance the protection of Minnesota’s waters, arguably the states best resource! The Governor claims this initiative will help by establishing 90,000 to 110,000 acres of buffers statewide.

Several key events led to the introduction of this law. In 2015, the MPCA published that they had found, no lakes and few streams in the Minnesota portion of the Missouri River Basin met the state standards for supporting aquatic life and were not considered recreationally fishable or swimmable. The agency’s report based its findings on the monitoring and assessment of water quality and aquatic life in four watersheds: Rock, Upper Big Sioux, Lower Big Sioux, and Little Sioux.

The Environmental Work Group (EWG), published that in 37 southern Minnesota counties 8,649 acres of 50-foot buffers were required. At that time, 6,364 acres were present (74 percent of what was required) and 2,285 acres (26 percent of what was required) were found to be absent.

Another ditch buffer study completed in 2014 by the Board of Soil and Water Resources (BWSR) determined that just 12 percent of chapter 103E drainage ditches had triggered the requirement for buffer strips. As it sits today, Sibley County is ahead of the game due to the

fact it has been working on the redetermination of benefits process. Currently, Sibley County has 30% of their re-determined ditch systems buffered.

### The Basics:

The law states that for all public waters a continuous buffer of perennial rooted vegetation must be in place with an average of 50-



Buffer along the mainstem of High Island Creek West of Arlington

## Office Staff:

### Sibley SWCD

Kevin Ostermann,  
District Manager

Joel Wurscher,  
District Technician

Ron Otto, Water Planner/  
Watershed Technician

### SWCD Board Members

Kathleen Theis - District 1

Paul Wiemann - District 2

Gary Schafer - District 3

Wayne Grams - District 4

Robert Nielsen - District 5

### USDA-NRCS

April Sullivan,  
District Conservationist

Chris Schmidt,  
Soil Conservationist

Leanne Langeberg,  
Soil Conservation Technician

Jessica Bolland  
Admin Assistant  
Contracted to NRCS

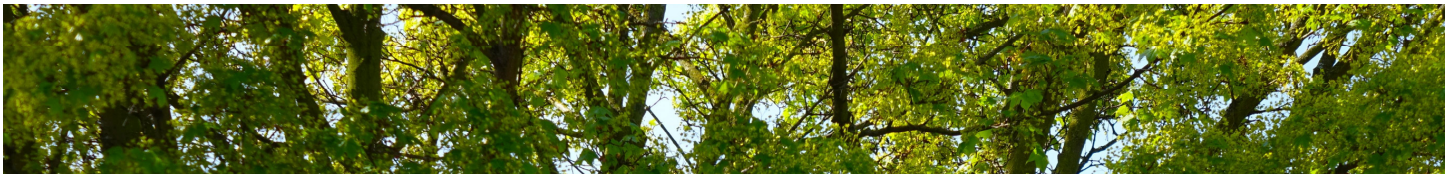
## Board Meetings

2nd Tuesday of each  
month 4:00 pm  
USDA Service Center

## Office Hours

Monday—Friday  
8:00 am—4:30 pm

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## Buffer Law, *Continued from page 1*

feet in width, minimum of 30-feet. This must be in place by November 1st, 2017. For **public ditches**, a 16.5-foot, or one rod, buffer of perennial vegetation must be in place by November 1st, 2018. To identify parcels you own or rent, view the finalized map completed by the DNR. One can do this by typing in the following, which will direct you right to the map: <http://arcgis.dnr.state.mn.us/gis/buffersviewer/>. If you do not have computer access feel free to stop by our office and Ron, Kevin, or I can help you through the process. On this map, waterways lined in green are the areas labeled public ditches while the areas highlighted in blue would be the public waters.

Once these “magic” compliance dates approach and pass, we at the SWCD will determine whether or not each parcel is compliant. This may put quite the strain on us, so please have patience. To ensure compliance statewide, BWSR may withhold funding from a local water management authority or SWCDs if there is failure to implement buffers in their county.

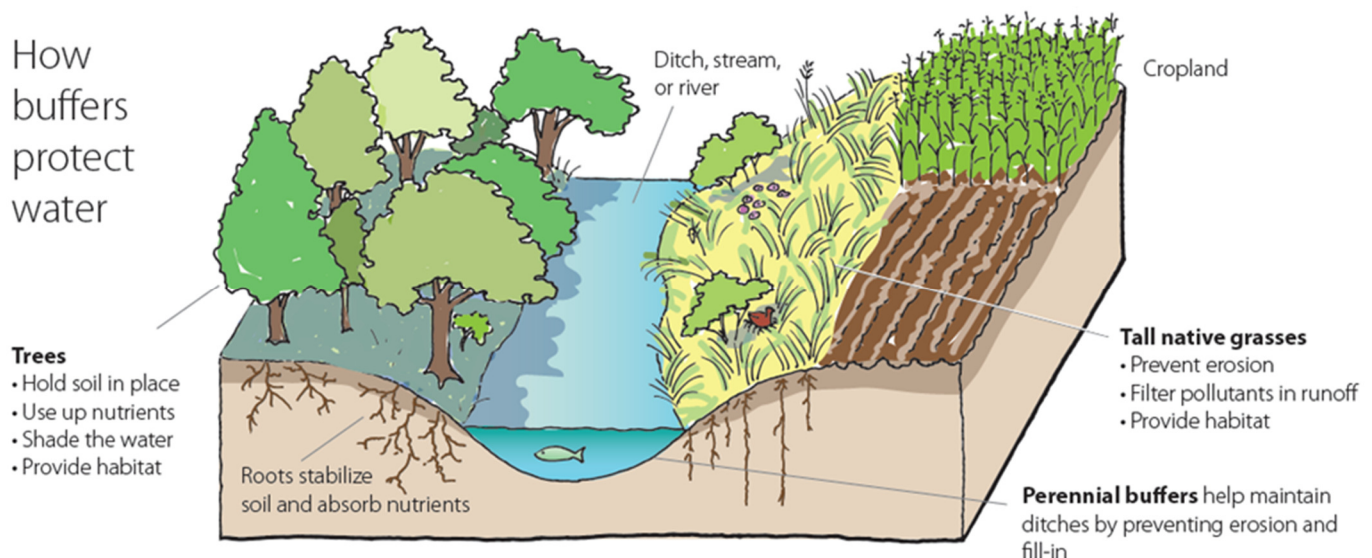
In order to track compliance, a Cloud-based internet tool developed by BWSR will be utilized. The tool should help simplify and streamline the process a bit. As we monitor, we may find parcels that would require corrective action, those cases will be passed to those with jurisdiction to form action plans or fines. These corrective action plans or fines are still a bit of a grey area and have not been completely hashed out yet at the state level.

One way to meet compliance is to request technical and financial assistance through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This program offers eligible landowners/producers yearly rental payments to set aside land like these buffer strips. CRP contracts also provide some cost share opportunities for activities towards establishment and management, making this a very viable option for bringing your buffer into compliance with the law. The minimum width for this program is 30-feet with a max of 120-feet, unless additional water quality benefits can be shown to go wider. The contract length can be anywhere from 10-15 years. Sibley County has seen quite the explosion of interest in CRP which could be attributed to the increase in rental payments we have seen recently. If you or someone you know are interested, stop by the USDA service center for more information.

The SWCD and County plan on hosting public informational meetings around August/September (before harvest) and then again mid-winter. The goal of these meetings is to get the word out about the law and help answer any of the questions you may have. Also at these meetings, we plan to have breakout sessions providing computer access to help determine the size of buffer you need. Stay tuned, because these dates have not been set but will be announced shortly.

It's a very busy but exciting time in conservation right now. I look forward to working with you on implementing these buffer strips on your property! If you are unable to participate in the informational meetings or would just like some technical assistance, please contact our office at 507-237-5435 ex. 3.

### How buffers protect water







## NRCS Update

Congratulations to April Sullivan, District Conservationist. She and her husband Joe welcomed their third child, Luke Joseph, on May 19, 2016. During her maternity leave, I have and will continue to be the acting District Conservationist until she returns in early August. I have worked for NRCS for over 10 years now. I spent almost nine years in Le Sueur County as a Soil Conservation Technician, working with producers planning, designing, and implementing conservation practices. In August of 2014, I was hired as a Soil Conservationist in the Gaylord Field Office, covering Sibley and Nicollet counties. As I reflect on my two years in Sibley County, I'm impressed with the work and effort of Sibley County producers and landowners and have enjoyed meeting and working with you. I look forward to continued successful conservation.

With 2016 well under way, it is proving to be another busy, yet, productive year for soil and water conservation in Sibley County. On behalf of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Sibley Soil and Water Conservation District we appreciate working with dedicated stewards and take pride in finding solutions to your natural resource concerns. The NRCS Field Office transition into a dual county process with Nicollet County is now in full swing. We understand that our time is spread a little thinner, and appreciate you checking in with us on items that may be requiring a response.

Sibley County continues to see a positive response to the increased soil rental rates for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Your commitment to conservation has not slowed down since last winter, and we continue to process a high volume of new CRP contracts and re-enrolling expiring CRP contracts. Our office is thrilled to observe the expansion of water quality and wildlife habitat benefit throughout Sibley County.

Sibley County continues to see a strong interest in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) as well. There are now 59 outstanding conservation producers active in the CSP program within Sibley County. Their conservation leadership provides endless benefits to future generations of farming operators. We look forward to meeting with more of our Sibley County conservation stewards in the future.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is great opportunity for landowners and producers looking for options to improve their soil, water, air and animal conservation efforts. The past EQIP sign-up provided technical and financial assistance to seal wells, close animal waste pits, construct new animal waste facilities, develop certified Nutrient Management Plans, and incorporate strip tillage and cover crop to corn and soybean rotations. The next EQIP application cut-off will be August 19, 2016.

Thank you for considering and practicing the best soil and water conservation efforts. Please stop by the office to inquire where we may be of further help to you.

*Chris Schmidt, Acting District Conservationist*



### United States Department of Agriculture

#### Conservation Financial Assistance Programs:

**CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program)**

*Continuous Sign-up*

*Now Accepting Applications for FY 2017 Funds*

**WRE (Wetland Reserve Easements)**

*Continuous Sign-up*

**EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program)**

*Continuous Sign-up*

*Now Accepting Applications for FY 2017 Funds*

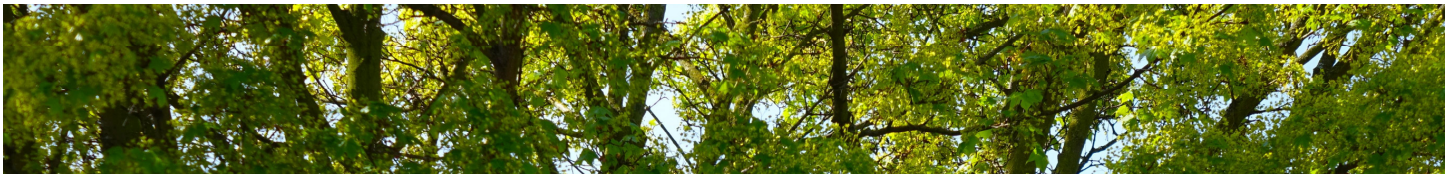
**CRP (Conservation Reserve Program)**

*Continuous CRP Signup*

For more information contact the NRCS Office at **(507) 237-5435 x3**

Natural Resources Conservation Service, 111 6th Street, PO Box 161, Gaylord, MN 55334

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## Tips on Seeding Native Grasses

The most important part of establishing a successful stand of native grasses and forbs is seedbed preparation. By following the guidelines below, landowners can save time and money. It is very important that you have a firm, level seed bed with minimal surface residue. The steps below will help guide you through the process. The procedure for site prep will vary on the current state of the field, equipment available, and weather conditions.

### Soybean Stubble

Soybean stubble is the most economical ground to seed native grasses and flowers because it requires the least amount of soil preparation and provides the best situation for seeding.

- No soil cultivation needed. Minimal Leveling of ruts
- Seed with conventional or no-till prairie grass. Drill ¼-inch or less in depth.

### Corn Stubble

Corn stubble requires more soil preparation steps, but is also a good bed for seeding.

- Rake/bale stalk residue.
- Seed with conventional or no-till prairie grass drill ¼-inch or less in depth.

### Corn Stubble Option 2

- Cultivate to a normal soil preparation for crops.
- Ensure soil is firm enough for your footprints to sink less than one inch. Either through your cultivation process or rolling.
- Seed with conventional prairie grass drill ¼-inch or less in depth.

### Seeding Tips:

- Seeding should occur between May 15-June 30.
- When seeding, keep the drill 1/3 full to ensure consistent seed flow.
- If broadcast seeding, use 1.5 times the normal seeding rate and roll or cultipack again after seeding.
- Many vendors operate on a “first come, first served” basis, so plan ahead while ordering seed. If in a program, ensure seed mix meets standards.
- Either 5-7 days prior or 5-7 days post seeding apply a glyphosate herbicide to any emerging weeds within the field. Be sure not to apply any chemical with residual characteristics.



Photo Credit McLeod SWCD

**Truax native grass drill, just one type of drill that will work for seeding.**

### Management after Seeding:

#### Year 1 – Seeded by June 30th

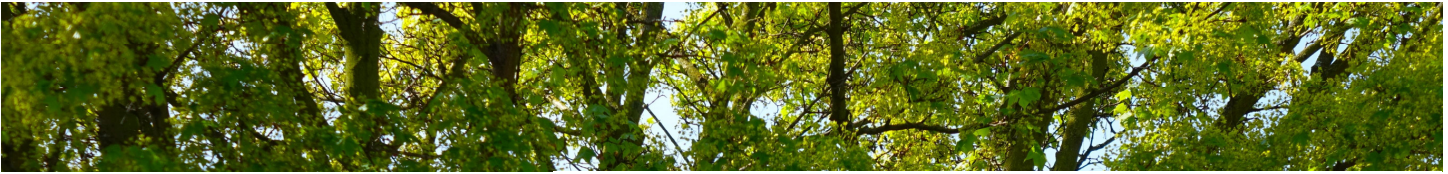
- Keep the planting clipped to a height of 6 to 10 inches until August 15th. This ensures that sun light can reach the new seedlings, and helps control annual weeds.
- Do not be concerned with sites that appear to be weedy with little grass emergence during the 1st year.

#### Year 2

- Spot mow any areas of heavy weed infestations prior to flowering throughout the growing season.

*Continued on page 5*





**Switchgrass, one of the more common native grasses used for buffer plantings.**

## **Native Grass Seeding**, *Continued from page 4*

-If Canada Thistles or other undesirable weeds exist on the planting, spot spray with Milestone prior to flowering. **Do not broadcast over the whole field.** It is best to consult PF Biologists, SWCD or NRCS techs with concerns prior to spraying.

### **Year 3**

-As needed, spot mow/spray any areas of heavy weed infestations all growing season.

### **Years 4+**

-For CRP contracts, follow your Schedule of Operations for Mid-Contract management operations.

-If not in CRP, then manage your grassland every 3-5 years to keep the native grasses and flowers rejuvenated and to keep the volunteer trees from encroaching.

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## **A Day Out With the Kids**

On July 14<sup>th</sup>, Ron Otto, Water Planner, and Coletton Draeger, HIC/RR Watersheds Coordinator, spent the morning at the Winthrop City Park explaining the water cycle and effects on soils to first through sixth graders attending the Minnesota Valley Learning Center Explorer Program. Presentations were made to three groups of 10 – 20 students. Most of our program was a visual presentation using the EnviroScape.

EnviroScape is a model landscape showing different features of land including farmland, pastures, factories, urban housing, storm sewers, highways, creeks, rivers and a lake. Powdered hot chocolate is sprinkled on the landscape to simulate soil and water is sprinkled on the landscape to simulate rain.

The students observed as water started to move the soil around the landscape. The instructors explained how pollutants stick to soil and water particles. The students asked many questions about soil, water and pollution. Students left the session with a much greater appreciation of soils and water and the importance to work together to keep pollution under control.







## **Introducing the new Sibley County Executive Director (CED)**

Daniel Mahoney grew up on a cash crop farm near Kensington, MN. He worked for multiple farmers in West Central Minnesota including eight seasons with Old Mill Honey as a commercial beekeeper. Dan was fortunate to spend two seasons working in California assisting with migratory pollination of Almonds in the Salinas Valley. He graduated with a Political Science degree from the University of Minnesota Duluth. After graduation, Daniel and his wife, Leah, served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Botswana from 2012-2014. He worked in partnership with the US and Botswana Government as a Community Capacity Builder focusing on agriculture and health. Upon his return, he began working at the Minnesota State Farm Service Agency Office until he began his previous position as a County Operations Trainee based in Carver and McLeod Counties. Dan is now working as the County Executive Director for the Sibley USDA Farm Service Agency in Gaylord, MN.

## **USDA NRCS Welcomes New Staff**

Jessica Bolland joined the conservation office on May 31st as an administrative assistant contracted to NRCS. She has a degree in Commercial and Technical Art from South Central College in Mankato and previously worked for 13 years as a graphic designer with McLeod Publishing, Inc., in Glencoe, which publishes The McLeod County Chronicle and Arlington Enterprise.

Jessica is a Glencoe native who resides in Brownton with her husband, Jeremy, and two children. Jeremy, and Jessica's dad, both serve on the McLeod County Soil and Water board. Jessica's two children are very active in FFA and 4H. Jessica is excited to learn more about conservation practices and be a part of the conservation efforts in Sibley County.



## **Introducing the new Sibley-Nicollet Farm Bill Technician**

Max Rykhus is a Minnesota native, and was born and raised in Mankato. A recent graduate from Minnesota State University Mankato, Max graduated a double major in the field of Recreation, Parks, and Leisure services, emphasis in Resource Management and Leisure and Planning. Max has a passion for all types of outdoor recreation. Some hobbies he enjoys are fishing, hunting, and many different sports. Max is excited to work with landowners applying his knowledge, and also learning more about the use of our natural resources, to improve water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat.



## Farmers Flock to FSA for CRP

With changing rental rates and the new Minnesota Buffer Initiative, Sibley County FSA has witnessed a veritable explosion in interest in the Conservation Reserve Program. The timing is coincidentally appropriate considering we just celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CRP. It was signed into law in 1985 and it only seems to be becoming more popular with landowners. In exchange for a yearly rental payment, farmers enrolled in the program agree to remove environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts for land enrolled in CRP are 10-15 years in length. The long-term goal of the program is to re-establish valuable land cover to help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and reduce loss of wildlife habitat.

Whether you currently have CRP or are interested in exploring your options, there are a few things that you should know. Producers who currently have CRP administered in Sibley County must certify their acreage prior to July 15 each year. Participants in the program are required to annually report to their local FSA service center existence and maintenance of the cover on their CRP contracts. New provisions will allow a one-time continuous certification of acreage that will rollover for subsequent years beginning with the 2017 crop year. However, it is extremely important to continue to communicate with the office regarding the status of a contract. Any changes in ownership must be reported timely to the office. Changes in ownership include both revocable and irrevocable trusts as well as estates. A safe rule of thumb for anyone with land in the Conservation Reserve Program is: If something changes or you want to conduct an activity on CRP land, contact your local FSA office.

Maintenance of CRP acreage is essential to ensure the environmental benefits of the conservation practices. Contract holders are required to maintain cover in accordance with a conservation plan. This plan includes the need for a mid-contract maintenance activity that often includes burning, mowing or a release of trees. Noxious weeds must be controlled and maintained on all land enrolled in CRP. Brush and volunteer trees must also be controlled in order to remain compliant. If you are looking to conduct mid-contract management, spot spray, or mow your CRP please contact the local FSA office for prior approval. It is doubly important that activities are not conducted during the primary nesting season from May 15th to August 1st of each year.

Sibley County has a number of CRP contracts expiring during the 2016 crop year. If you have land that you are interested in either enrolling or reenrolling, please don't hesitate to contact the Sibley Farm Service Agency located in Gaylord to make an appointment. As a final reminder all existing CRP contracts must be timely certified prior to July 15, 2016. For questions and assistance, please contact the Sibley Farm Service Agency at 507-237-2948.



## Sibley County Subsurface Sewage Treatment System (SSTS) Loan Program

Looking to manage your subsurface sewage? The Sibley County Ag BMP loan program may be an option for you if there are no other programs that fit your situation. Sibley County administers the loan program through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Additional requirements include a completed application, an approved septic plan, and a septic system permit. Taxes on the property cannot be delinquent. A loan can be up to 10 years in length with a 3% interest rate on any unpaid balance. Stop by the SWCD Office or call Ron Otto at 507-237-5435 ext. 3 for any questions or to pick up an application.

Sibley SWCD and NRCS  
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## SIBLEY SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

### Upcoming Dates:

August 10th, 2016 – Sibley SWCD Board Meeting  
September 5th, 2016 – Labor Day—Holiday (Office Closed)  
September 13th, 2016 – Sibley SWCD Board Meeting  
October 10th, 2016 – Columbus Day (Office Closed)  
October 11th, 2016 – Sibley SWCD Board Meeting

**Conservation Today** is published by the Sibley Soil and Water Conservation District and the USDA NRCS-Gaylord 111 6th Street Gaylord, MN 55334. For more information regarding this newsletter, contact (507) 237-5435 Extension #3.

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