

Sand Hill River Watershed District: 50 Years of Leadership, Innovation, and Impact

Celebrating a Legacy of Excellence in Watershed Management —
1975–2025

Proudly commemorating its 50th anniversary, the Sand Hill River Watershed District (SHRWD) stands as an exemplary model of stewardship, community engagement, and forward-thinking water management in Minnesota. For half a century, the SHRWD has redefined what it means to protect and enhance our water resources, consistently setting the bar for watershed districts statewide.

A Distinctive Landscape, Met With Vision

Situated in the heart of the Red River Valley, the Sand Hill River Watershed is approximately 495 square miles and features a unique blend of landscapes: the expansive, flat Lake Agassiz glacial lake plain with heavy soils, the moderate slopes and lighter soils of the escarpment region, and rolling terrain dotted with numerous lakes and wetlands. This patchwork of topography supports a land use pattern dominated by agriculture, yet it is also enriched by a wealth of natural resource amenities—including Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Management Areas and lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The SHRWD has leveraged these diverse natural assets, transforming landscape challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth, agricultural prosperity, and ecological stewardship. By recognizing the value of both productive farmland and protected habitats, the District has fostered a dynamic environment where economic success and conservation go hand in hand. This thoughtful approach ensures that local communities benefit from the region's agricultural productivity while also enjoying recreational opportunities and thriving wildlife populations, reinforcing the SHRWD's commitment to balancing development with long-term sustainability.

Fifty Years of Transformative Projects

- **Public Drainage Systems:** The SHRWD's commitment to robust drainage infrastructure has been vital to the region's agricultural success and to date is the drainage authority for 103 lineal miles of public drainage systems. By modernizing century-old systems and overseeing the Sand Hill Ditch Flood Control project, the SHRWD has protected local farms from flooding and ensured long-term economic

viability. Their proactive approach to drainage upgrades and resilience planning is a testament to their leadership in adapting to environmental and economic change.

- **Flood Control and Retention:** With flagship projects like the Bear Park Dam and innovative flood control initiatives in Climax, MN and rural farmstead ring dikes, the SHRWD has safeguarded communities, farmland, and critical infrastructure. Their visionary SH River Ecosystem Project Team comprised of township officials, landowners and state/local government agencies continues to pioneer solutions that address both local and basin-wide flood challenges.
- **Water Quality and Habitat Enhancement:** The SHRWD has capitalized on state funding and local partnerships to create thriving environments for agriculture and wildlife. Projects such as constructed wetlands, sediment basins, and buffer strips have reduced erosion, improved fish passage, and promoted soil health — proving that economic and ecological goals can go hand in hand.
- **One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P):** By spearheading the 1W1P Comprehensive Plan with county and agency partners, the SHRWD has established a unified, data-driven strategy for watershed management. The District's ability to secure and deploy implementation funds demonstrates their agility and commitment to advancing shared goals for Minnesota's waters.
- **Monitoring and Adaptive Management:** The SHRWD sets the standard for accountability and transparency by continuously gathering and applying quality data. Their ongoing studies ensure that every decision is rooted in sound science, with a clear focus on long-term resource stewardship.
- **Community Outreach and Education:** The SHRWD goes above and beyond statutory requirements, engaging local residents through workshops and educational initiatives. Their open-door approach fosters trust, empowers citizens, and ensures that watershed priorities are shaped by those who know the land best.

Honoring Our Champions

The District's legacy is forged by the dedication of visionary board members, managers, and volunteers. The appointed board members bring a diverse range of expertise and local insight, ensuring that the District's governance is both responsive and forward-thinking. Their leadership is complemented by an advisory committee, whose members provide essential feedback and guidance on technical and community matters, further strengthening the District's decision-making process.

Equally important is the unwavering support of our constituents—local residents, landowners, and agricultural producers—who actively participate in workshops, meetings, and educational outreach. Their engagement ensures that every project and partnership

reflects both scientific rigor and common-sense values, rooted in firsthand knowledge of the land. Together, these groups embody the collaborative spirit that defines SHRWD, guiding its growth and ensuring that stewardship of the watershed remains a shared and lasting commitment.

Collaborative Success

The SHRWD's achievements are built on a foundation of strong partnerships — from local landowners to state and federal agencies. This collaborative spirit has unlocked technical expertise, funding, and community support, fueling meaningful improvements across the watershed.

- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)
- United States Army Corp of Engineers (USACOE)
- U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- County governments, townships, SWCDs
- Local landowners and agricultural producers
- Regional and community organizations

Looking Ahead: Stewardship for the Future

As the SHRWD celebrates five decades of unparalleled leadership, it remains committed to meeting tomorrow's challenges with innovation, collaboration, and integrity. With changing climates and evolving community needs, SHRWD will continue to pioneer solutions that protect Minnesota's water, land, and way of life for generations to come.

“The story of the Sand Hill Watershed is one of cooperation and commitment. For 50 years, we've worked together to protect our land, our water, and our way of life. As we move forward, that spirit of partnership will continue to guide us.”

— Stuart Christian, Board Chair

To commemorate this historic milestone, the SHRWD is hosting an open house on November 6, 2025 for the public from 1-4 PM at the district office. Please use the new entrance on Washington Avenue directly across from Opdahl's Donuts!