

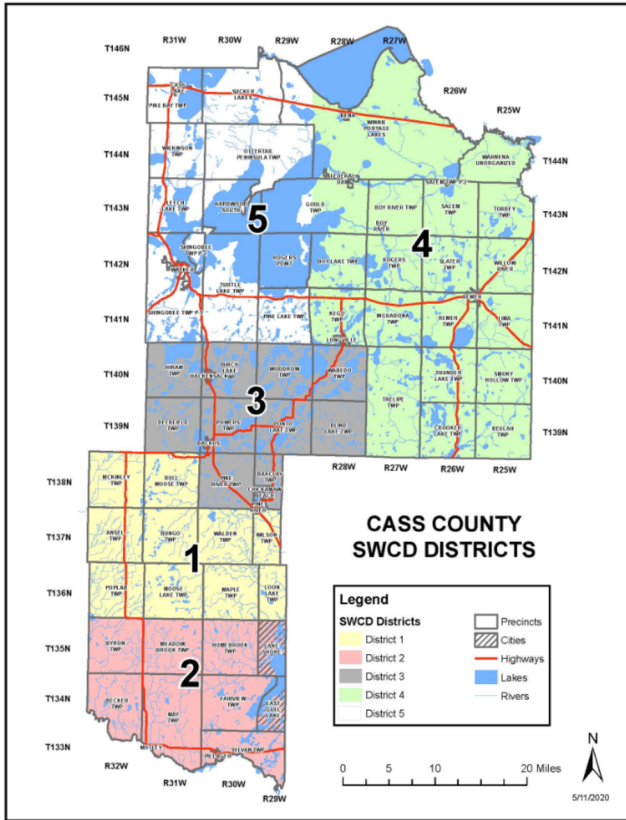


2025 Annual Report

Protecting the Heart
of
Minnesota's Lake Country



Board of Supervisors



District 1 Tom Kuschel



Why I Serve?
It is my way of ensuring that water quality and soil health are guaranteed for future generations.

Roles and Committee Assignments:

- Board Vice Chairperson
- Pine River Watershed Alliance
- Crow Wing Forage Council
- Leech Lake River Watershed Policy Committee

District 2 Ken LaPorte



Why I Serve?
To help implement voluntary conservation practices in Cass County.

Roles and Committee Assignments:

- Crow Wing River Watershed Policy
- MASWCD Area 8 (Director)
- Cass County Liaison Committee
- Cass County Planning Commission

District 3 Katy Botz



Why I Serve?
To preserve the planet for future generations.

Roles and Committee Assignments:

- Pine River Watershed Policy
- MN Association of Forestry
- Area 8 Envirothon

Board of Supervisors

District 4
Dave Peterson



Roles and Committee Assignments:

- Board Chairperson
- Policy Committee
- Mississippi Headwaters watershed Policy
- Upper Mississippi Grand Rapids Watershed Policy
- Cass County Liaison
- Cass AIS Program

Why I Serve?

To promote conservation through education, technical advice, and possible financial support. Help landowners improve or preserve our great resources in Cass County.

District 5
Jennifer O'Neill



Roles and Committee Assignments:

- Board Treasurer
- Board Secretary
- Policy Committee
- MASWCD Area 8 (Treasurer)
- Technical Service Area 8

Why I Serve?

The mission of Cass SWCD is to provide leadership, technical and financial assistance to landowners in the conservation and management of soil and water resources. It is a privilege to contribute to that mission to serve Cass County citizens.

Want to be an SWCD Supervisor? Candidate filing begins May of 2026.

Who should run? Minnesota citizens interested in influencing natural resources issues at the local level are encouraged to run for supervisor of their local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

How often do they meet and what do they discuss? Supervisors meet monthly to discuss the business of the SWCD, including state grant allocations to landowners, district conservation priorities, and coordination with other local units of government and state and federal agencies.

Are Supervisors paid for their time? Supervisors do not receive a salary, although they do receive compensation for attending meetings and are reimbursed for expenses.

Cass SWCD Staff

Dana Gutzmann

Conservation Manager 218-547-7246

My Purpose at Cass SWCD:

I commit my time and energy to Cass SWCD because I know we can make a difference. We can protect what needs protecting. We can help farmers increase the return on investment while improving soil health and decreasing run-off. We can re-establish native vegetation, shrubs and trees on shorelines so generations can continue to swim, fish, and otherwise enjoy the lakes and streams.

Steve Henry

AIS Technician 218-547-7324

My Purpose at Cass SWCD:

Growing up in Minnesota I was blessed to enjoy our wonderful forests, water, and lands. I am fortunate to be able to help others protect, preserve, and enhance our resources.



Jenny Blue

Administrative Technician 218-547-7399

My Conservation Drive:

“You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” – Jane Goodall

Aly Bergstrom

Resource Conservationist 218-547-7407

My Conservation Drive:

The concept that thoughtfully managed agricultural production systems can be the solution to bringing our natural systems back into sync is exciting to me. I enjoy working with producers to improve the functionality of their operations, while also protecting our shared natural resources.

Ryan Carlson

Resource Conservationist 218-547-7280

My Conservation Drive:

I am passionate about everything Minnesota. I love the lakes, the diverse habitats, the outdoor culture, and the people. Through my work, I'm fortunate to pursue these endeavors in order to help preserve the environment for future generations.

Priority Concerns

The priority concerns in Cass County have been developed through the One Watershed One Plan process. Each comprehensive watershed management plan addresses **specific** priority concerns and goals for protection, enhancement, and improvement in those watersheds. However, there are **common** themes and goals to be addressed among all the plans and they include the following:



1) Agricultural land management - implement agricultural best management practices for soil health and surface water protection.



2) Drinking water protection - implement agricultural best management practices and well sealing.



3) Landscape protection - permanently protect land through conservation easements and Sustainable Forest Incentive Act (SFIA).



4) Forest and plant health - implement forest management best practices and forest management plans for private forests.



5) Shoreland management - implement lakeshore/riparian enhancement and promote preservation of natural shorelines. Prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species.



6) Nutrient reduction - reduce phosphorus in surface water through agricultural best management practices, shoreline enhancement, and stormwater run-off control.



7) Connectivity enhancement - replace barriers to fish passage (dams, road crossings, culverts).



8) Resiliency - build resiliency into all projects implemented where possible.

Cass SWCD contributed grant funds and technical expertise to its partners to accomplish the work listed here. The majority of the grants and technical staff time are paid for by the Clean Water Land And Legacy Amendment. The District paid \$432,000 from a variety of grants. Property owners, local government units, and other entities contributed \$115,000. According to a report by the USDA, \$1.81 is generated in the economy for every \$1 spent on conservation. This means the conservation projects completed in Cass County in 2025 generated \$984,600.



Implemented 15 agricultural best management practices on 1,512 acres for drinking water and surface water protection.



Sealed five abandoned wells to protect ground water.



Developed 27 Forest Stewardship Plans covering 2,758 acres, promoting active forest management and enrollment in long term protection programs such as the Sustainable Forest Incentive Act (SFIA) and conservation easements. Additionally, 15 conservation easements were processed on priority properties to ensure lasting protection of key forest lands.



Completed 8 shoreline restoration and stabilization projects on 812 linear feet of shoreline. Conducted site visits and plan designs for an additional 78 shoreline properties. Inspected 26,362 boats to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species.



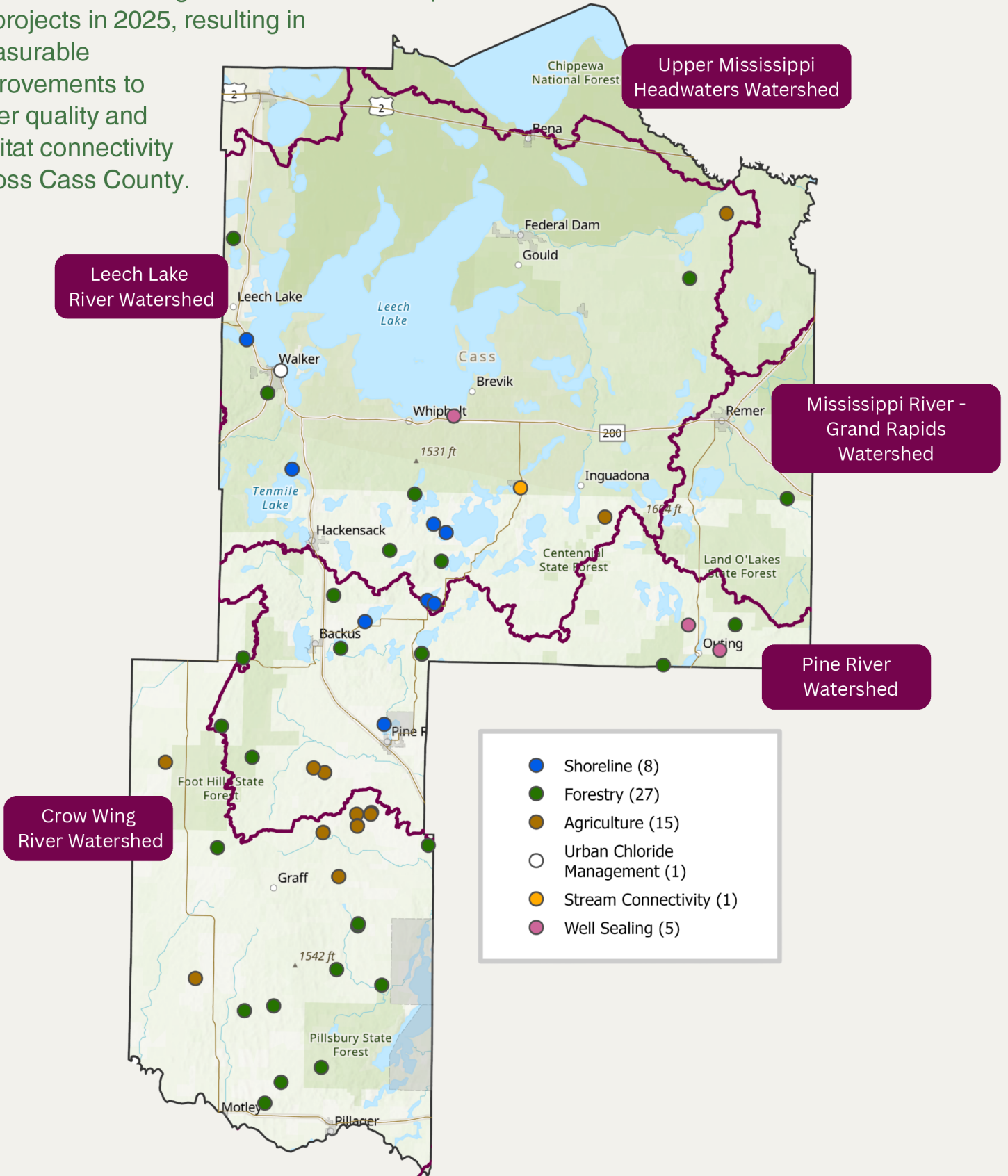
The outlet at Girl Lake to the Boy River was modified to have a rock arch rapids; the 7 tier rock arch rapids reconnected 54 miles of the Boy River. This project was funded by The Conservation Partners Legacy Grant, a Forest Service Grant, and The Nature Conservancy.



Retrofitted two trucks in partnership with the City of Walker for brine application on roads and sidewalks within the city limits. Walker sits directly on the shore of Leech Lake.

2025 Project Locations

Cass SWCD leveraged state funds to complete 57 projects in 2025, resulting in measurable improvements to water quality and habitat connectivity across Cass County.

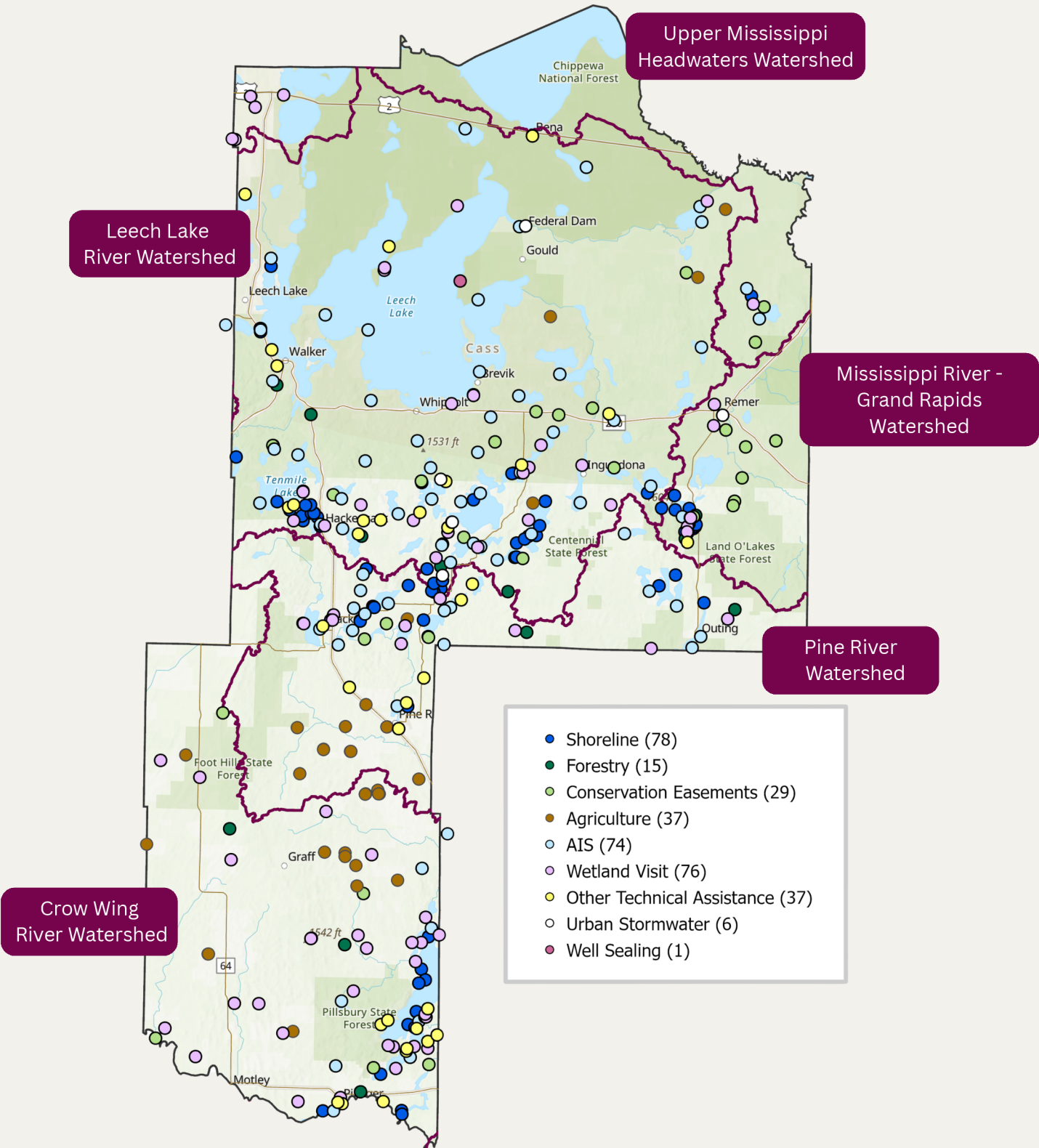




2025 Site Visits



The map below illustrates the fieldwork completed by Cass SWCD in 2025. The Cass SWCD staff diligently engage with property owners to explore solutions that enhance soil and water health for the benefit of all people in Minnesota.





2025 Land Protection



Above: View of easement-protected shoreline on the Joselyn property, east of Backus (1,157 feet of shoreline).

Cass SWCD works with landowners interested in implementing conservation easements on their properties to support watershed protection goals. The Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Act was enacted in 1986 to protect sensitive lands which offer protection for water quality and support fish and wildlife habitat.



Above: Current owners; Mark, Eric, and Joselyn.

Landowner Testimonial:

When our parents died, my brothers and I inherited the 120 acres of forested woodland in Lake Ponto Township, southern Cass County, that they had bought in the 1970s. Newcomers to the state from the prairies of northeast Nebraska, our folks fell in love with Minnesota’s north woods. We grew up visiting there all seasons. We were lucky kids.

Every spring, my dad would order seedlings from the Minnesota DNR. He was into restorative forestry, and planted mostly Red and White Pine – the forest that had been there pre-settlement. In the fall, he would bud cap or cage the little seedlings to protect them from deer browse. Now those seedlings are mature 30-foot pines, tall enough to walk under. To sit with your back against in the shade.

Minnesota’s RIM Conservation Easement Program offered my brothers and I a chance to ensure that the forest my father tended would continue to be healthy for generations to come. There is nothing more satisfying than to sit in the shade of trees you have planted – except, perhaps, to know that the landscape will be protected forever.

Securing a RIM conservation easement on our family woodlands is the accomplishment of a lifetime, not only because I know it would make our dad proud, but also because I believe it is the greatest good our family can gift to the future. The diligent, knowledgeable, and dedicated staff at Cass County Soil and Water Conservation District offered tremendous help and encouragement along the way.

- Bernadine Joselyn



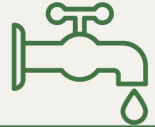
2025 Results
High Priority Landowner Contacts - 118
Easements Started - 16
Total Habitat Protected - 976 acres
Shoreline Protected - 15,033 feet



Above: Three generations—Joselyn, her son, and her father, the original owner—planting trees in the spring of 2005.



2025 Agricultural Projects



MASWCD 2025 Outstanding Conservationist Finalist: Flying W Ranch

Dustin and Cody Wiese of Flying W Ranch represent the fourth generation of a ranching legacy that began in 1945. Managing 3,000 acres and 300 cow-calf pairs of Registered Black Angus cattle, they combine deep tradition with innovative soil-health practices such as no-till forage seeding, cover crops, and rotational grazing. Through leadership on regional and national committees, the Wieses continue to champion sustainable ranching and soil stewardship for future generations.



Top Row (from left): Dave Peterson (SWCD supervisor), Dana Gutzmann (SWCD staff), Jenna Wiese (Flying W Ranch), Cody Wiese, (Flying W Ranch), Amy Wiese (Flying W Ranch), Tom Kuschel (SWCD supervisor), Ken LaPorte (SWCD supervisor)
Bottom Row (from left): Aly Bergstrom (SWCD staff), Katy Botz (SWCD supervisor)



Above: The Wiese family moving a herd of cattle between paddocks as part of a rotational grazing system that improves pasture productivity, supports long-term profitability, and protects water quality.

Below: Bale grazing during the winter keeps cattle on pasture longer, reducing feed and labor costs while naturally returning nutrients and organic matter to the soil. This practice improves soil health, increases water infiltration, and supports healthier forage growth in the following grazing season.



Right: Beef cattle grazing during a field tour highlighting rotational grazing practices. Cass SWCD has the technical expertise to assist farmers interested in starting rotational grazing or implementing other practices that are beneficial to their livestock, their bottom line, and the environment.



Left: Pasture plantings can help improve soil health and plant diversity, decrease noxious weeds, and minimize erosion.



2025 Shoreland Projects



Right: A double layer of coir logs was installed along the shoreline of a property on Child Lake to reduce erosion from wave action and give dogwoods and other native plants time to establish.



Above: A landowner installed a retention basin to capture nutrient and sediment run off from their driveway and the county road. This project reduced the nutrient and sediment load into Ponto Lake.

Right: Cass SWCD partnered with a landowner to install a 30ft deep buffer along the Pine River resulting in a reduction of 0.75 lb of phosphorus run off every year.



Shoreline Restoration Process

This is how the process worked for one client.

Step 1:

The client contacted Cass SWCD for a shoreline site visit to discuss options. Cass SWCD sent the client a report following the site visit, detailing options they could consider to preserve their shoreline.



Step 2:

The client called vendors and received quotes for the installation. After choosing a contractor, the landowner contacted Cass SWCD to apply for financial assistance. The Cass Soil and Water District approved a 75% cost share based on the available grant funds and recommendation of the watershed technical team.

The client scheduled the installation for late spring / early summer of the following year.

Step 3:

The contractor installed the shoreline buffer and erosion control structures. Cass SWCD inspected the installation ensuring it met NRCS standards.



First Summer:

The stage after installation is called "sleep." Seeds begin to germinate.

Step 4:

The landowner filled out a reimbursement voucher supplied by the Cass SWCD. The Cass Soil and Water Conservation District approved reimbursing the landowner 75% of the project cost as noted in the original signed contract. The landowner received their reimbursement check later that month.



Second Summer:

The stage after installation is called "creep." Plants germinate, take root and begin to stabilize the shoreline.

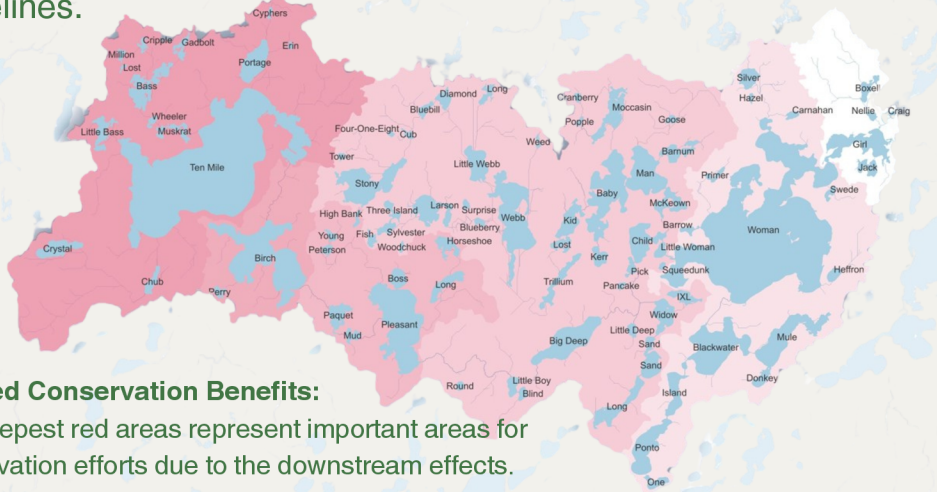


Third Summer:

The stage after installation is called "leap." Plants are now in full bloom.

Lake Steward Program

Minnesota's lake chains create unique opportunities for watershed protection, as conservation on upstream lakes benefits those downstream. Birch Lake, the second lake in the Boy River chain, participates in the Lake Steward Program to recognize natural shorelines that support the entire system. The program aims to shift cultural norms by highlighting the value of protecting natural shorelines.



Stacked Conservation Benefits:

The deepest red areas represent important areas for conservation efforts due to the downstream effects.



2025 Statewide Community Conservationist

A Legacy of Stewardship and Leadership

Kathy Wagner's conservation ethic is rooted in personal action and community leadership. From restoring an eroding lakeshore on her family's former Wolf Lodge Resort property to advancing sustainable shoreline practices countywide. Kathy has been a tireless advocate for clean water and healthy lakes. Through decades of volunteer service, including leadership with local lake associations, water quality monitoring with the MPCA, and support for AIS prevention and science-based solutions.

Kathy has helped protect Cass



Kathy's passion is clear, and her message resonates with all of us: **we are all connected by the water, and protecting it is everyone's responsibility.**

County's waters while inspiring others to take part in stewardship. Her statewide recognition reflects a lifetime commitment to conservation, collaboration, and community.





2025 Large Projects



In the fall of 2025 the outlet at Girl Lake to the Boy River was modified to have a rock arch rapids. Prior to the modification there was a narrower shoot with high velocity flows that impeded fish passage. This project re-connected 54 miles of stream.

The watershed supports approximately 55 fish species, including several state-listed species of concern: pallid shiner (endangered) and species of concern including hornyhead chub, least darter, weed shiner, pugnose shiner, and northern sunfish.



Above: View of the top of the rock arch rapids. This project matched the historic elevation at the Girl Lake Outlet.



Left: The new structure consists of seven tiers of boulder weirs which focus low flows into the middle of the channel to facilitate fish passage even under drier conditions.



2025 Chloride Reduction Projects



Cass SWCD, along with our partners in the Upper Mississippi Headwaters Watershed, hosted a Smart Salting training focused on municipal winter maintenance practices. The event, part of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Smart Salting program, was held in Bemidji and brought together 25 municipal staff and partners to learn strategies that improve road safety while reducing chloride runoff to lakes and streams.



Cass SWCD leveraged Clean Water Funds to purchase brining equipment for the city of Walker. One truck was outfitted with BOSS Legacy 500 Brine Equipment; this setup gives the City of Walker a reliable way to apply liquid brine for winter anti-icing and de-icing, helping crews treat roads proactively before snow and ice events. Liquid brine is more effective at preventing ice bonding than traditional rock salt alone and can cut overall salt use significantly, which not only reduces material and labor costs but also lessens the amount of chloride entering local waterways like nearby Leech Lake. By pretreating the roadways and alleys, the city is working to protect this valuable fishery while maintaining safe winter roads for residents and tourists.









2025 Outreach

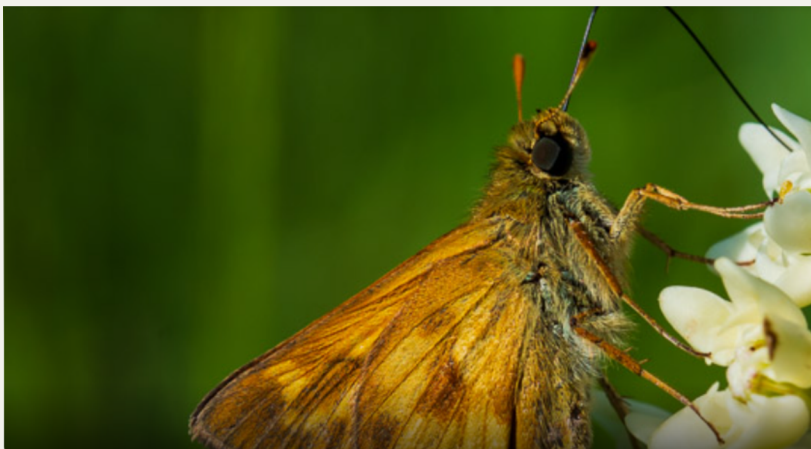


Cass SWCD continued a quarterly newsletter in 2025 as well as a Facebook and Instagram posts. You can sign up for our newsletter or follow us on Facebook to get more up-to-date information on our upcoming outreach events!

Campaign name	Opened	Clicked
 Cass SWCD Winter Newsletter 2025	198	22
 Cass SWCD Fall Newsletter 2025	200	27
 Cass SWCD Summer Newsletter	170	31
 Cass SWCD Spring 2025 Newsletter	169	46



Sign up for our
Newsletter @
www.cassSWCDmn.gov



Join us on Facebook



Cass Soil and Water Conservation District

81 followers • 36 following





2025 Outreach Events



Cass SWCD invited property owners to learn about the various programs that enhance the water quality and soil health in Cass County. We held two shoreline events (one in Hackensack and the other in Longville), one forestry event in Walker, Smart Salt Training in Bemidji, worked with SFA to host a pasture walk in Pine River, and spoke at four lake association meetings.



Above: Cass SWCD partnered with the Birch Lake Association to award 43 lake steward signs in 2025.



Above: Cass SWCD presenting at a shoreline and watershed event in Hackensack targeting priority lakes in the Leech Lake River watershed.



Above: Cass SWCD hosted the second annual Woodlands for Wildlife event in Walker, where landowners heard from a local landowner about his experience implementing timber harvest and forest regeneration practices on his 40 acres.



Above: Cass SWCD worked with the Crow Wing River Basin Forage Council's chapter of SFA to host its annual Grazing School to learn about all things rotational grazing.



2025 Clean Water Council Tour

Cass SWCD helped organize tour stops in north-central Minnesota for Minnesota’s Clean Water Council. The tour included a stop in Walker to discuss countywide chloride reduction strategies, a visit to Ten Mile Lake focused on landscape-scale clean water approaches, and a stop at Birch Lake to highlight strategies to ensure natural shorelines continue to support the clean water that tourists and residents enjoy.



Scan the QR code to learn about how your Clean Water dollars are working across the state to keep Minnesota the special place we all love.





Aquatic Invasive Species Program



In 2025, there were 6 new AIS infestations confirmed by the MN DNR in Cass County. As of December this year 19 of the 103 publicly accessible lakes in Cass County have zebra mussels. Over 90% of the 513 lakes in Cass County DO NOT have any aquatic invasive species.

2025 Inspection Statistics:

- Inspection hours – 13,094.75
- Inspections done – 26,362
- 111 Inspection days from May 9th to September 21st
- Inspectors - 38

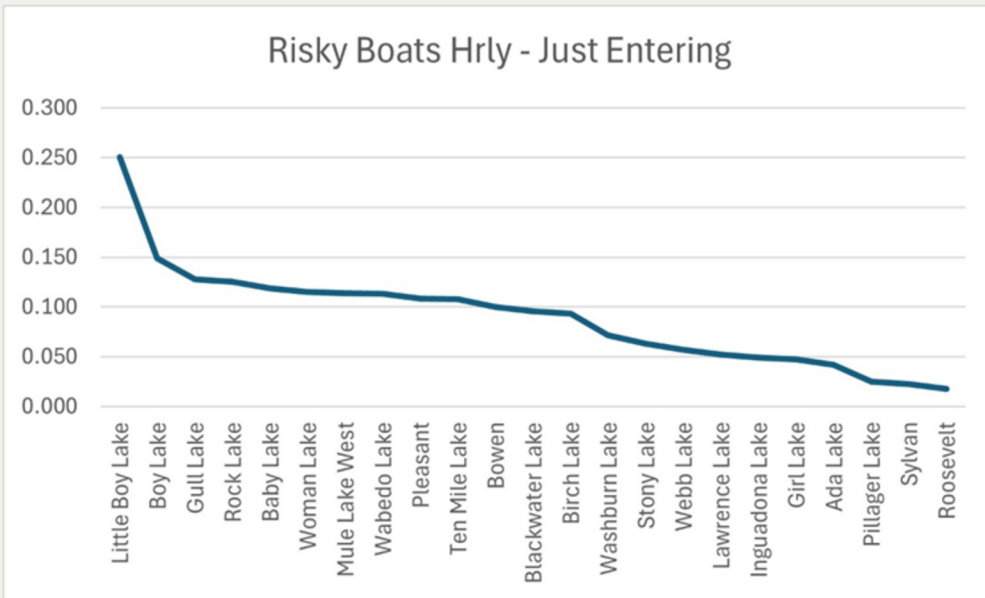
Major Accomplishments and Activities 2025:

- Thunder Lake Starry Stonewort Management: Hand-pulling of a small, localized starry stonewort patch in Thunder Lake has occurred since 2022. In 2025, starry stonewort was not detected at the management site during five separate surveys conducted throughout the season.
- USFS Grant Implementation: Completed \$12,750 in project work funded through a \$64,000 U.S. Forest Service grant to support detection, mapping, and management of invasive aquatic plants.
- Aquatic Plant Surveys and AIS Projects: Supported aquatic plant surveys, AIS control, monitoring, and research projects on Bowen, Leech, Thunder, Townline, Washburn, Roosevelt, Leavitt, and Lawrence Lakes, with several projects coordinated with Minnesota DNR Fisheries and Parks and Trails.

Prioritizing Inspection Locations

To target high-priority access sites, high-risk boater movement patterns were analyzed, with emphasis on watercraft arriving after being out of the water for less than one full day. These rapid lake-to-lake transfers pose an elevated risk for AIS spread, particularly from infested to uninfested waterbodies.

For the 2026 season, inspector hours were prioritized using modeled hourly rates of risky boater traffic, including both entering and exiting watercraft.



Left: Graph of hourly entry of risky boats into different area lakes. Risky boats are moving from an infested waterbody to an uninfested waterbody within the survival window of that invasive species, evaluated for 4 unique AIS. Those boats have not drained and dried for 5 days or more, some boats relaunch within a few hours of exiting an infested waterbody.

AIS Inspections and Decontaminations

- Inspectors were positioned at 39 lake accesses that service 28 different lakes.
- Inspectors stopped 68 boats with plants or water present and inspectors assisted those boaters in coming into compliance.
- Watercraft inspectors found zebra mussels on several boats attempting to launch onto area lakes and numerous watercraft and lifts exiting infested waters. Inspectors helped boaters come into compliance if possible or denied launching privileges.
- Partnering lake groups funded 620 hours of supplemental inspection staffing using funds donated by residents to their lake associations. This totaled \$15,767.66 in contributions from the lake associations in 2025.

Education and Engagement

- Inspectors handed out 800 pairs of UV blocking sunglasses with a custom printed AIS message. Inspectors also provided decontamination maps, grabbers, boat drying towels, and other AIS educational materials to partner organizations and to anglers at the accesses.
- Provided bait bags, handouts for anglers, and posters to local bait retailers and resorts encouraging anglers to practice Clean, Drain, Dry and Dispose.
- Supported social media campaigns by the Mississippi Headwaters Board-Minnesota Traditions and Leighton Broadcasting with 800,000 audience impressions recorded.

**90% of Cass County lakes
DO NOT have AIS!**




Help Stop Aquatic Invasive Species

Clean, Drain, Dry, Dispose

\$ Cost Share Program Summary \$

Cass Soil and Water Conservation District considers high-priority projects first. If you have a project you're interested in completing where financial assistance would help, call us at 218-547-7241 to learn more about applying for a cost share program. Below are the 2026 maximum reimbursement rates for common cost share projects.

Agricultural Soil Tests	100% up to \$200/year/applicant
Cover Crops Basic (single species)	\$72.72/acre (80 acre max or ¼ of row crop acres)
Cover Crops Complex (multi ple speceis)	\$77.93/acre (80 acre max or ¼ of row crow acres)
No-till planting for cropped acres (drill available to rent)	\$24.29/acre (80 acre max or ¼ of row crop acres)
Pasture and Hay Planting - Row crop conversion	\$163.16/acre (40 acre max.)
Pasture and Hay Planting - Reseeding	\$108.78/acre (40 acre max.)
Annual Forages for Pasture Revitalization	\$60.40/acre (40 acre max, requires multiple species)
Permanent Interior Fence	75% of labor and materials, \$5,000 maximum
Temporary Electric Fence	75% cost of materials
Livestock Watering Systems	75% of materials and labor
Grazing Management	\$30/acre (\$3,000 max)
Well-decommissioning	\$300
Private Forest Management Plans for SFIA/Easements/BMPs	up to 75% of current DNR rate
Private Forest Management plans for 2C	up to 25% of current DNR rate (\$500 cap)
Forest Management Practices for Water Quality	75%
Shoreland Restoration or Buffer Planting	75%



How Can We Help You?

Cass Soil and Water Conservation District offers both technical and financial support. Below are just some of the things we can help you with, and the best staff person to contact for assistance.

Aly Bergstrom
218-547-7407
aly.bergstrom@
casscountymn.gov

Designs for agricultural BMPs, including:

- Cover crops
- Pasture/hay plantings
- Rotational grazing plans
- Livestock fence and watering systems to support rotational grazing and surface water exclusions

Ryan Carlson
218-547-7280
ryan.carlson@
casscountymn.gov

- Shoreland buffer plantings or restoration designs to prevent or stop erosion
- Conservation Easement Plans
- Education Events

Dana Gutzmann
218-547-7246
dana.gutzmann@
casscountymn.gov

- Forest stewardship plans
- Wetland Conservation Act questions, applications
- Well Sealing
- General cost share applications

Steve Henry
218-547-7324
steve.henry@
casscountymn.gov

- AIS cost shares for lake associations & other partners
- Watercraft decontamination locations and information
- Watercraft Inspector Program
- Education Events





www.CassSWCDmn.gov

218-547-7241

swcd@casscountymn.gov

MISSION

We provide leadership, technical, and financial assistance to landowners in the conservation and management of soil and water resources.

VALUES

Conservation, Collaboration, Stewardship, and Integrity

Mailing Address

PO Box 3000
Walker, MN 56484

Physical Address

303 Minnesota Ave West
Walker, MN 56484

Sign up for our Newsletter @
www.cassSWCDmn.gov

Join us on Facebook

