Todd County is Leading in Ag Water Quality Certified Farms in MN

Four more Todd County producers were recently certified by the Minnesota Agriculture Water Quality Certification Program (MAWQCP) giving Todd County a lead up in the state with six total producers certified. The program is tailored to suit each individual farm, making it an option for all types of producers. One of the recently certified producers is Tom Williamson who practices reduced tillage and as part of his commitment to the program will be planting cover crops this season. Mike Stine raises grass fed beef and did not have to change anything he does to become certified. Another recently certified producer is Danny Peyton who has many acres of no till crop land, terraces and pastures to graze cattle. Danny has agreed to put in some exclusion fencing and provide an alternative water source for the cattle to meet his certification requirement. The most recently certified producer is Kevin Ehnes who has been no till for 7+ years in his fields and did not have to change anything to become MAWQCP certified.

What does it take to become a MAWQCP producer?

- Fill out the application at the SWCD office – five yes/no questions and your signature!
- Have a casual meeting with a trained certifier where you will talk about your farming practices, conservation practices, crop rotations, applications, soil nutrients, grazing plans, and goals for the next 10 years.
- Next the certifier will do a site visit to look at your farm, fields, and pastures. After the site visit, all the information gathered through the meeting and site visit is plugged into an assessment tool and your farm is scored. If you score an 8.5 or higher there is nothing you need to change! If you score lower, the technician will look at your farming practices and see what is needed to get you a certifiable score.
- Final step: meet with the certifier to go over alternative practices (if needed to get 8.5) and sign your contract. Your signed contract is then sent to the state for approval, this tends to take a few weeks. Once approved, you’re certified!

Why become MAWQCP certified?
- Regulatory certainty for new water quality rules or laws while certified
- Recognition for your good farming practices
- Priority for technical and financial assistance
- Priority for MPCA state feedlot permitting processes

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The quality of drinking water is an important issue for every well owner. Nitrate is the most common ground water contaminant in Minnesota. Nitrates can leach into groundwater drinking water from lawn fertilizer, animal waste, plant decay, septic systems and crop field inputs.

High nitrate concentrations can cause serious health effects in babies such as a condition called blue baby syndrome. Women who are pregnant, planning to be pregnant or infants should not consume water which has high levels of nitrates.

The map shows townships in Todd County which were evaluated by The Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Todd Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) for private well nitrate levels. If you have questions about your well results or if you were not included in the study and would like to have your drinking water tested for nitrates call the Todd SWCD office or stop in.

The history of wetlands in America has generally not been favorable to them. Early European settlers were greeted with approximately 221 million acres of wetlands, however as of the mid-1980’s only about 103 million acres remained. Today that figure is closer 100 million remaining. From colonization to the mid-20th century draining wetlands were often times either directly paid for or incentivized by the government. The early 20th century marked by two World Wars and a population boom further fueled demand for agriculture land, thus accelerating wetland losses. Public sentiment has evolved since that time, along with advances in science and technology proving the benefits and values that wetlands provide to society. It has long been known that wetlands provide habitat for important species but perhaps more important to many people are the mostly unseen benefits. Wetlands act as a sponge to keep water on the landscape consequently providing floodwater retention and filtering pollutants before entering streams and rivers.

Reacting to the public demanding cleaner water, Congress passed the Clean Water Act of 1972, regulating discharges of fill in wetlands as a result. In 1991, Minnesota passed laws which are more restrictive than Federal regulations to further protect wetlands from draining, filling and sometimes excavation with the Wetland Conservation Act aiming at no-net-loss of wetland functions and values.

The rate of decline has slowed but wetland losses continue to outpace wetland gains nationwide. If you have property with wetlands which have previously been drained or impacted and are interested in restoring the functions and values of those wetlands, please contact our office for help with possible cost-share projects or technical support.
Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Program

The AIS program is half way through its second full season of implementation in Todd County. The MN State Legislature authorized a new funding stream in 2014, the Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid, to be distributed to counties to stop the spread of destructive plants and animals like zebra mussels and Eurasion milfoil. The new funding will result in Todd County receiving over $160,000 per year in funds for AIS prevention during 2015 and 2016.

The focus of Todd County’s AIS program is prevention. Even though AIS problems do exist throughout the state – the majority of lakes and streams have no AIS in them currently. Prevention is much less expensive than control and eradication efforts, which are costly and not even possible in many cases.

During the 10-year cycle, the MPCA and its partner organizations, work on each of the State's 80 major watersheds to evaluate water conditions, establish priorities and goals for improvement, and take actions designed to restore or protect water quality. When a watershed's 10-year cycle is completed, a new cycle begins.

The primary feature of the watershed approach is that it focuses on the watershed's condition as the starting point for water quality assessment, planning, implementation, and measurement of results. Mississippi River Brainerd and Sartell Watershed’s are some of the last watersheds to begin this cycle in the state. In partnership with state agencies, Todd SWCD has begun water quality monitoring on a number of lakes in the eastern part of the county. If you live on one of the lakes listed and would like to be involved, please contact the SWCD office at 320-732-2644.

Todd SWCD Tree Program

The Todd SWCD sold a total of 10,525 tree transplants, 200 one gallon potted stock and 31 flowering kits. This year there were 22 different tree and shrub species, as well as tree packets that were available for purchase.

Todd SWCD offers free technical assistance to landowners who are looking for field windbreaks and shelterbelts, and for choosing the right tree for your property. The 2017 tree order form will be ready in September. To be added to a mailing list, please contact Todd SWCD at 320-732-2644 or by sending an email to sarah.katterhagen@co.todd.mn.us

Mississippi Brainerd and Sartell Watersheds Start MN Pollution Control’s “Watershed Approach”

The MPCA employs a watershed approach to restoring and protecting Minnesota's rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Money to accelerate efforts to monitor, assess, and restore impaired waters, and to protect unimpaired waters was funded by the Minnesota Clean Water Legacy Act. There are 80 major watersheds in Minnesota. Intensive water quality monitoring and assessments will be conducted in each of these watersheds every 10 years.

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Todd County Walk In Access Program (WIA)

The goal of the Walk-In Access (WIA) program is to provide new hunting opportunities on private land that is already enrolled in existing conservation programs or lands with high quality wildlife cover.

The WIA program is entirely voluntary for landowners. Most landowners choose to enroll their property for two or three years. Enrolled lands are covered under the Minnesota recreational use laws that limit landowners' liability. DNR conservation officers handle trespass and hunting violations.

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An AIS committee comprised of commissioners, staff, and lake association representatives reviewed 2015 AIS program results and established a plan and budget for 2016 this past December and January. Boat inspections at Todd County boat landings are expected to meet or exceed the 6,539 inspections conducted last season. Boat inspectors will use internet capable tablets or phones to enter boat inspection survey results directly onto the DNR’s web site. These results can be analyzed for trends and to help direct the outreach and education work also planned. Outreach work will be similar to last year involving networking through lake associations, newspaper advertisements, radio spots, and presenting at outdoor schools.

Monitoring work for zebra mussels will be completed on at least 20 lakes during 2016. Last year zebra mussels were found in lakes to the west and to the south of Todd County so monitoring efforts have been intensified to allow early detection in the event zebra mussels are already here.

An added element for 2016 will be that 3 interns traveling with the Todd County Sheriff’s office will be trained as AIS inspectors. These individuals will then be able to inspect boats for AIS as they work with the Todd County boat patrol.

The Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid funding made it possible for Todd County to initiate an AIS program that we hope will help maintain the recreational and ecological values associated with our lakes.

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One of the topics discussed at "Boot Up!", the 2016 Todd County Feedlot Meeting, was land application of manure. Todd County farmers are doing well in adhering to the rules and setbacks outlined in Minnesota 7020 rules for the application of manure. Depending on the animal species, the size of the farm, the landscape, and the equipment owned by the farmer, manure handling methods will vary. The general public should expect to see a variety of practices, timing and equipment being used across the County.

Some things Todd County livestock producers can do to prevent further complicated regulations from being developed, top down, is to file their land application events and records with the feedlot officer. One way to do this is to "phone a friend" - here at the SWCD office: 320-732-2644. A number of farmers email or call into the office to report manure spreading locations and timing. Farmers are exempt, out of necessity, from ambient air quality standards for seven days following the pumping of a pit, cleaning of a barn or lot, and other associated manure handling. (MN Statute 116.0713) However, if the feedlot officer is not notified ahead by the farmer and a reasonable odor complaint comes in, she is obligated to respond and will conduct an inspection.

MN 7020.2225 Subp. 5 A. “Any person applying or receiving manure...from a facility capable of holding 100 or more animal units shall maintain records...” Of course, the rule is expounded upon further in the book. For the purpose of simplification, a second way for Todd County farmers to be pro-active in their industry was designed by the Todd County Feedlot Officer with input from local farmers.

At this time, this is the most simplified reporting form designed (see photo to left). While it does not have all the information required, if a full inspection were to be conducted, it goes a long way to reach reporting requirements and keep Todd County livestock farmers compliant. No one wants the County to be targeted for further rules, regulations, or programming for failure to keep records, especially when we know the majority of farmers are indeed already strategically and methodically applying manure to fields at appropriate agronomic rates. Get credit where credit is deserved. Stay compliant. Report.

Since the feedlot meeting to date, the Todd County SWCD has already received more land application records than in any other year, either in the form of the “Todd County Spreader Record” or other formats designed by the producer themselves. All farmers are encouraged to report their land application, however, it is most critical for farmers registered for 100 animal units or more.

What happens when a farmer reports? The information provided is simply inserted into the farm’s hard copy file as well as scanned into the farm’s electronic file at the SWCD. If a farm is drawn up for inspection in the future, these records will aid in the farm site receiving a full compliance rating (this is a really good thing). Without these records, if a farm is inspected and no records are produced, the farm in its entirety is marked non-compliant in the STATE database. YIKES! So a farm could be the purest (in terms of water quality), well managed farm, maybe even having installed conservation practices in the past, and still get a rating of “non-compliance” simply for not reporting land application records. That may not seem fair, but with the current State data system used for inspection reporting, that is how it stands.

In closing... to Todd County livestock farmers, keep up the good work! Be pro-active, and continue sending or calling those records in! To request a “Todd County Spreader Record” postcard, contact SWCD at 320-732-2644 or email deja.anton@co.todd.mn.us.

Pending Change to Feedlot Registration Due Dates

Along with the state feedlot rules, Todd County Ordinance requires all feedlots/ farm sites with ten or more animal units to register with the Todd County SWCD at least once every four years. This results in the processing of over 1,000 feedlot registrations by the SWCD office as livestock owners learn the requirements and benefits of registration.

Due to an increase in data entry responsibilities coinciding with a recent change in the state feedlot system, Todd County SWCD is revising registration deadlines. This change will allow us to better balance and manage our annual workload.

Please note that livestock owners may be asked to re-register in a different year or season than in previous years. Farms will remain covered by registration during this time. We simply ask livestock owners, at the time of receipt of re-registration forms in the mail, to return the updated form as promptly as possible in order to merge into the new cycle. We appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

Did you know...On May 31, 2016, the Governor signed amendments to Chapter 168; section 160.27 requiring a property owner to now apply to the DOT for a permit for temporary placement of a pressurized flexible force main (tow hose) to transport manure in a state right-of-way? Regarding county and township right-of-ways, written notice must be provided at least one business day to the local authority before placement and use of the tow hose as previously required.