



# SOIL & WATER

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## CONSERVATION DISTRICT

# 2025 ANNUAL ACTIVITY REPORT



*Photo by Gordy Lindgren (2025 Contest Winner)*

The mission of the Koochiching SWCD is to conserve and protect the soil and water resources by educating and assisting land users in Koochiching County in being good stewards of the land and its natural resources.

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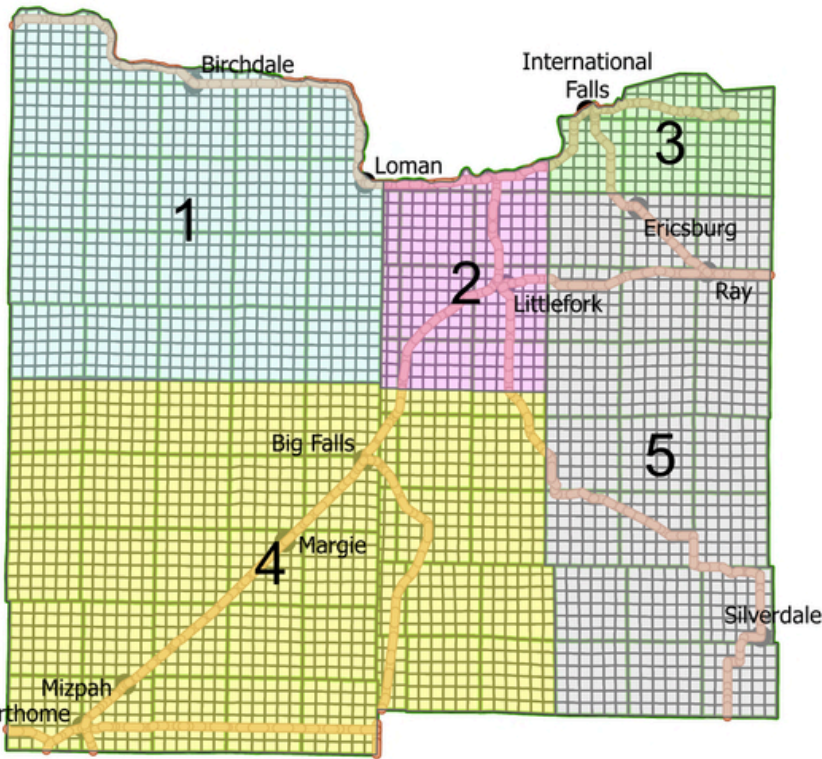


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# DISTRICT SUPERVISORS



**District I**  
**Ralph Lewis**  
*Vice Chair*

**Committees**  
 Budget,  
 Personnel



**District II**  
**George Aitchison**  
*Secretary*

Personnel,  
 Little Fork & Big  
 Fork River Boards



**District III**  
**Eldon Voigt**  
*Treasurer*

Budget, TSA 8,  
 MN SWCD Forestry  
 Assoc.



**District IV**  
**Mary-Jean Becker**  
*Member*

Education/Public  
 Relations, Big Fork  
 River Board



**District V**  
**Jody Reller**  
*Chair*

Education/Public  
 Relations, TSA 8  
 Laurentian RC&D, Little  
 Fork River Board



We've had some changes on our Board of Supervisors this past year! After years of valuable service, Richard Dreher stepped down from his District IV position—we thank him for all of his hard work serving his district. After a formal application process, we are excited to welcome Mary-Jean Becker of Big Falls as our new District IV Supervisor. Upon this change, we updated Area IV to include all of the community of Big Falls, as it was previously split between Areas II and IV.

Mary-Jean and her husband have owned property in the county for over 25 years. Prior to becoming a supervisor, Mary-Jean has connected with the SWCD throughout the years for advice on erosion control, tree planting projects, and native plant restoration. She appreciates the knowledgeable, helpful, friendly and hard-working staff that have helped her along with projects.

# DISTRICT STAFF



**Pam Tomevi**  
District Administrator



**James Aasen**  
Watershed Coordinator



**Austin Vinar**  
Clean Water Forester



**Austin Wallin**  
Resource Conservationist



**Jolen Simon**  
Program Coordinator

## 2025 BROUGHT ABOUT BIG CHANGE!

- We said goodbye to Sam Soderman, our longtime Water Resource Conservationist. We will miss him after 11 years!
- We welcomed our first ever Summer Youth Intern, Eve Hemstad!
- We restructured two staff positions to meet the SWCD's changing needs. Austin Vinar is our new Clean Water Forester and James Aasen is our new Watershed Coordinator



**Austin Vinar**  
*Clean Water Forester*

We are pleased to announce that Austin Vinar joined our team on October 6, 2025 as our new Clean Water Forester.

His primary responsibilities are writing forest stewardship plans, leading the water sampling program, developing forestry projects, and operating drones. Austin was raised here in Koochiching County and was previously employed in logging, construction, and natural resource management. He is excited to continue serving the community in this position. In his free time, Austin enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife and family.



**Eve Hemstad**  
*2025 Summer Youth Intern*

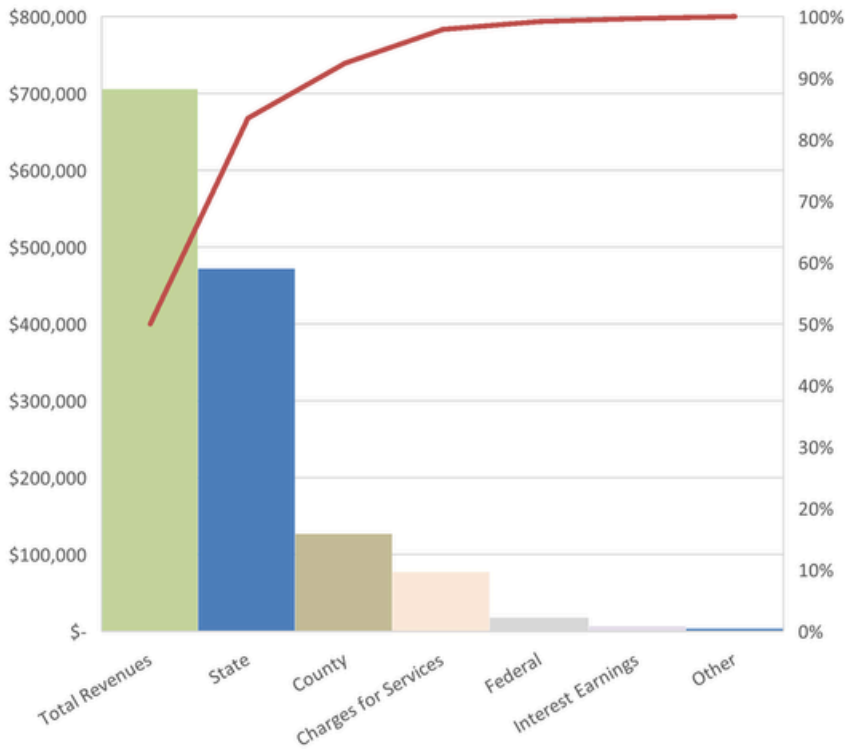
Over the summer of 2025, we were pleased to host Eve Hemstad, our first ever Summer Youth Intern!

Eve is a high school student in International Falls. Last summer she was able to gain a variety of hands-on experiences in natural resource management working along side Koochiching SWCD staff.

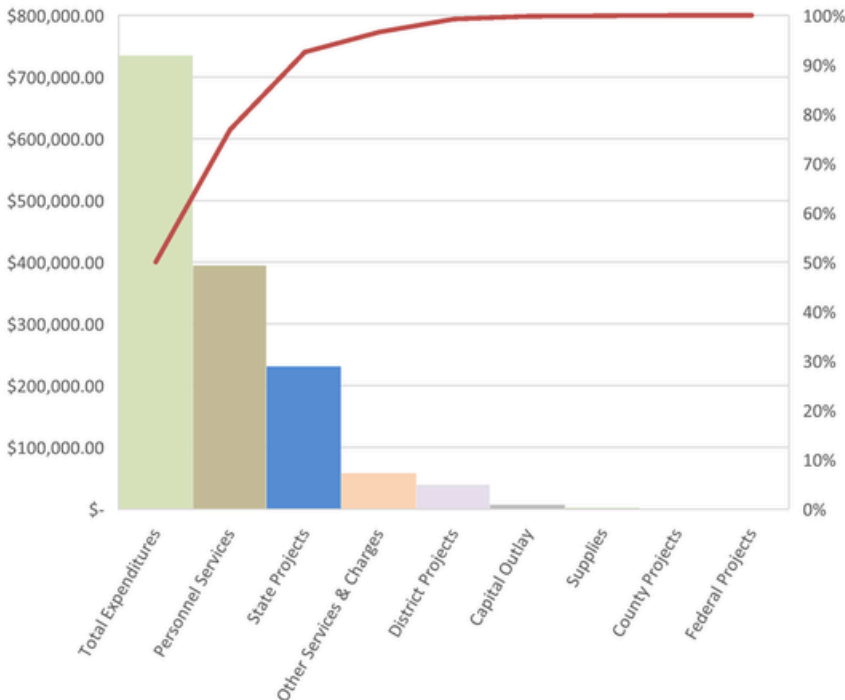
Eve plans to continue her education in environmental science. In her free time, she enjoys canoeing, camping and just being outside with family and friends.

# 2025 FINANCIALS

**2025 Total Revenues \$705,960**



**2025 Total Expenditures \$735,791**



## FUNDING PARTNERS



# 2025 COSERVATION BY THE NUMBERS

We were very busy in 2025! Here's a glimpse into our activities throughout this past year.



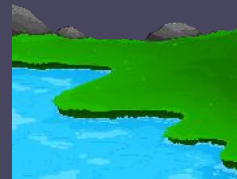
**164 Water Quality Monitoring Samples Collected**



**764 Acres of Woodland Stewardship Assistance**



**12,985 Sq. Ft of Native Plants and Seed Coverage Distributed**



**52,035 Sq. Ft of Shoreline Restoration Practices**



**23.2 Acres of Trees Planted**



**20,181 Trees and Shrubs Distributed**



**612 Youth Participants in Environmental Education Events**



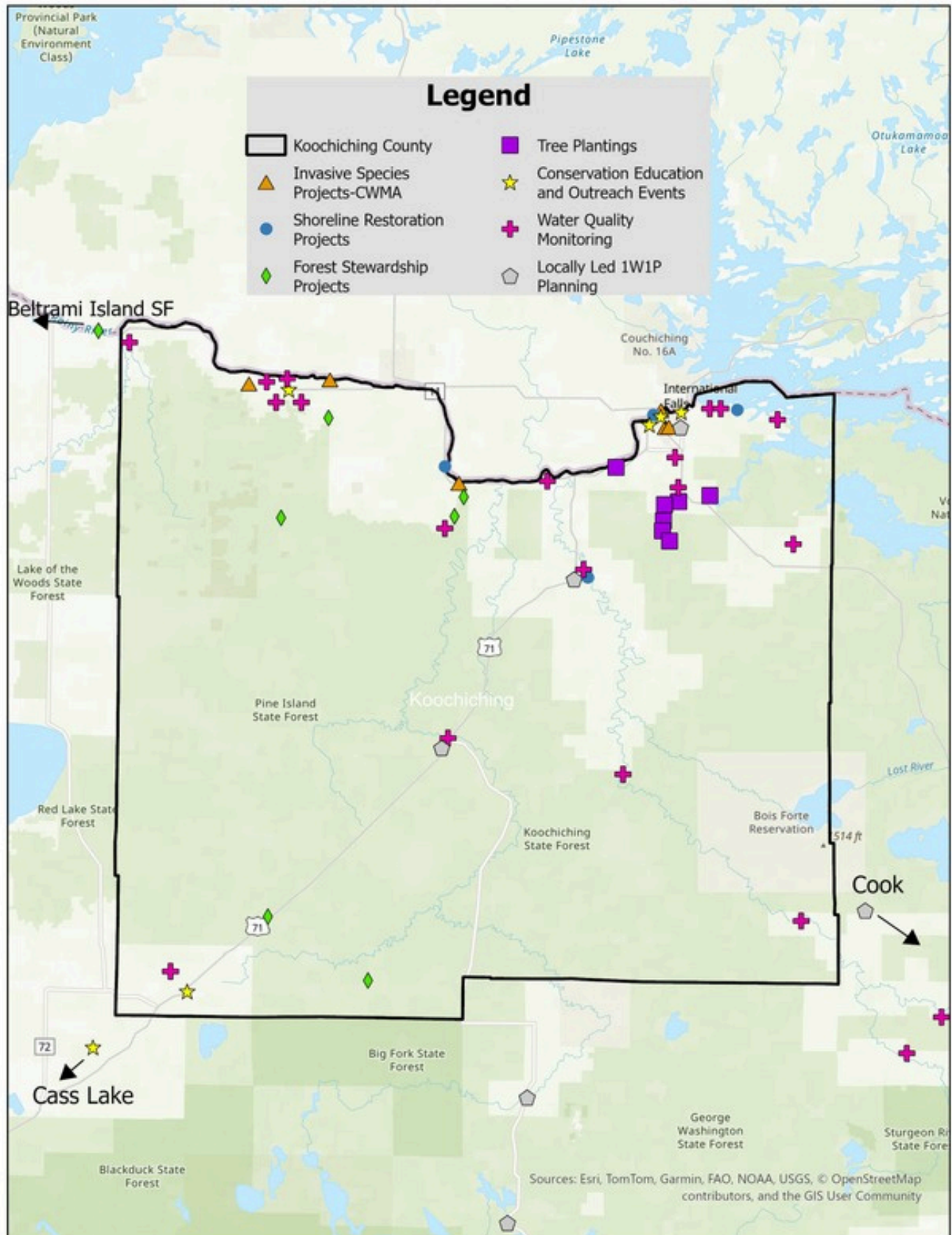
**250 lbs of Wild Rice Seeded**



**40.23 Acres of Invasive Species Treated**

# 2025 COSERVATION OVERVIEW

## 2025 PROJECTS MAP



# FORESTRY

## FOREST STEWARDSHIP PLANNING

- 764 acres



# FORESTRY (CONTINUED)



2025

## Northern Landscape Plan

A Regional Plan to Guide Sustainable Forest Management



## NORTHERN LANDSCAPE COMMITTEE COORDINATION & FORESTRY EDUCATION

### 2025 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Completed the update to the Northern Landscape Plan
- Hosted a Black Spruce top training
- Attended statewide meetings
- Hosted a peatland tour



*Peatland tour hosted in Beltrami Island State Forest attended by Northern Landscape Committee members. Topics included peatland restoration and resiliency as well as harvest techniques to improve habitat.*

# FORESTRY (CONTINUED)



*Black Spruce Top Training held in recently harvested and regenerated spruce sites. The focus of this training was sustainable harvest methods for decorative spruce cuttings. This training supported the TSA8 Training Team initiatives but included county lands & forestry and DNR foresters.*



23.2 ACRES OF TREE PLANTINGS

# TREE SALE



**20,181  
TREES DISTRIBUTED!**

This includes trees sold for local projects utilizing state and federal cost share programs.



# NATIVE PLANT SALE

## 12,985 ft<sup>2</sup>

### of seed/plant coverage in 2025

In addition to our annual Native Plant Sale where customers pre-order their plants, we decided to also try a “pop-up sale” ... and it was a hit! Almost everything sold on the first night, so we look forward to conducting this event annually.



2025 Community Native Plant Pop-Up Sale

# COOPERATIVE WEED MANAGEMENT AREA



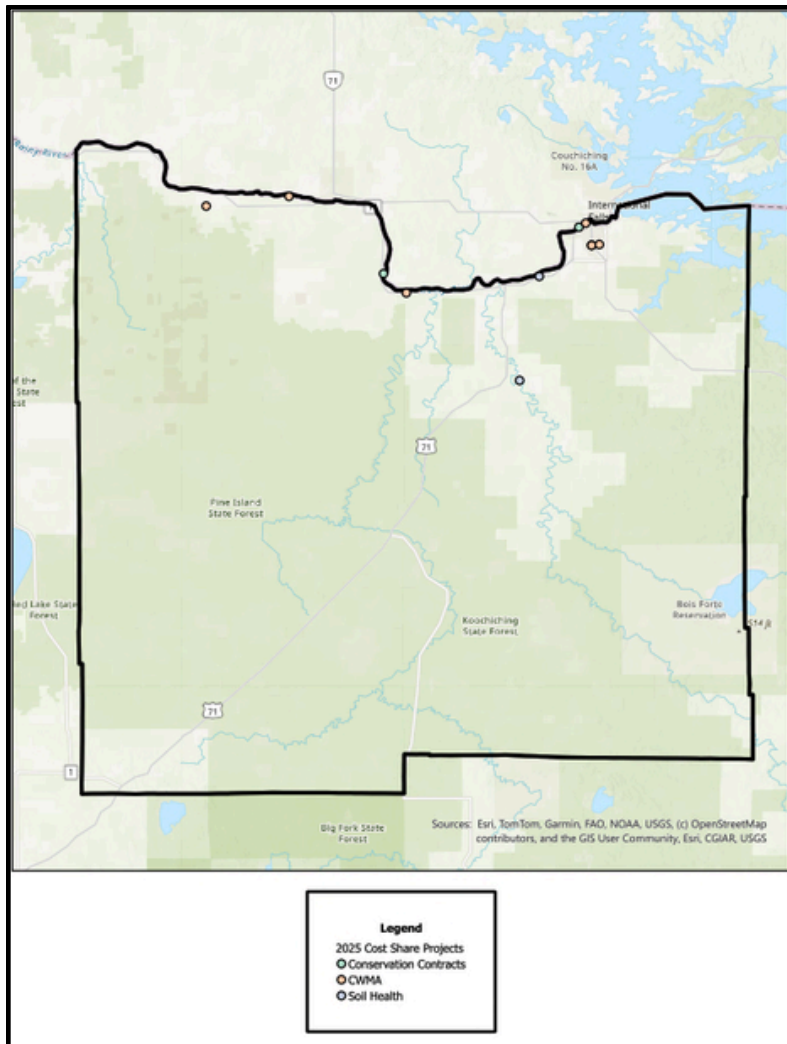
## INVASIVE SPECIES TREATMENT- BUCKTHORN AND WILD PARSNIP

40.23 Acres treated

### INCLUDING:

- 3 wild parsnip treatments in 7 locations
- 1 buckthorn removal project on a priority shoreline

# COST SHARE PROJECTS



The Koochiching SWCD is proud to administer and offer technical assistance for a wide variety of cost-share programs that assist landowners with the installation of best management practices on their lands that in turn benefit the sustainability of our shared natural resources. Each grant focuses on specific environmental conditions, improvement goals, or priority areas.

The Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Soil Health program assists with projects that improve or maintain productivity while providing essential functions such as regulating water, filtering and buffering pollutants, and cycling nutrients without resulting in soil degradation or otherwise harming the environment. Eligible projects include but are not limited to cover crops, hay and pasture seeding, native plant restoration, tree planting.

The Conservation Contracts grant opportunity assists landowners with planning and implementation for practices, projects, or systems targeting erosion or sedimentation control, improvements to water quality or water quantity, habitat enhancement, plant biodiversity, energy conservation, or climate adaptation, resiliency, or mitigation.

In 2025, we were proud to be included as a partner on the Clean Water Funded Forest Stewardship Program with the Minnesota DNR Forestry Division (DNR), BWSR, and other SWCDs in offering cost-share for forest improvement projects that promote absorb rainfall, reduce runoff, and improve infiltration while protecting forests for the future. These projects include but are not limited to things like tree planting, forest stewardship planning, timber stand improvement, and forest health prescriptions.

In 2025 we began offering a special funding opportunity for landowners in the Rat Root River minor watershed for a variety of ecological improvement practices. This program was made possible through a Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Nine Key Element small-watershed grant. This program aims at working with landowners in this area to improve aquatic life water quality standards for total suspended solids (TSS) and dissolved oxygen. So far we've planted 22 acres of forest adjacent to the river to secure vulnerable shoreline, worked with a landowner to design a shoreline stabilization project, and begun engineering to remove a 100+ year old degraded rail bridge that creates log jams and erosion problems.

# COST SHARE PROJECTS (CONT'D)



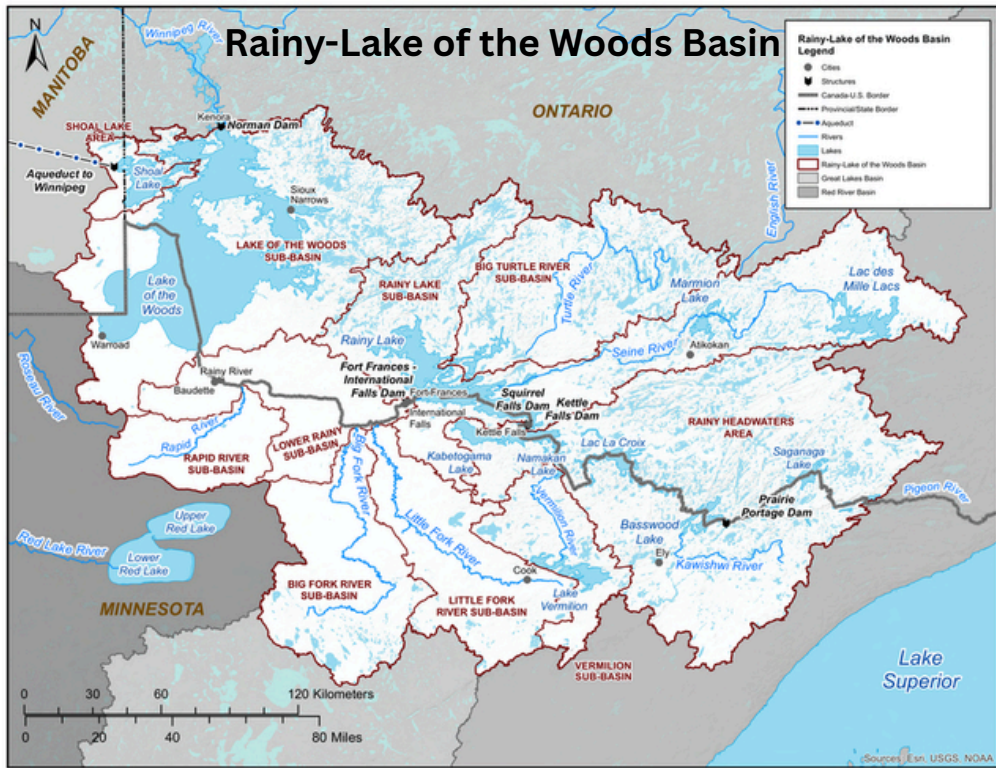
## SHORELINE RESTORATIONS 4 Projects Totaling 52,000 Sq Ft

The Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment funded 1 Watershed 1 Plan program pulls together a collaboration of local and state entities to identify water quality concerns and implement solutions for each HUC 8 major watershed in Minnesota. The Koochiching SWCD is currently coordinating public projects with government partners in the Rainy River-Rainy Lake watershed (RR-RL) as well as offering cost-share for water quality projects for private landowners. In addition to assisting with on-going projects in RR-RL, in 2025 we worked closely with partner stakeholders to plan for funding in the Big Fork River and Little Fork River Watersheds which will be coming up in the next few years.

The Koochiching SWCD is proud to be able to contribute to shared efforts with government partners and private landowners in our county who are committed to maintaining and improving our natural resources. The excellent woods and waters of northern Minnesota are critical to our communities, economy, and the identity of our region.



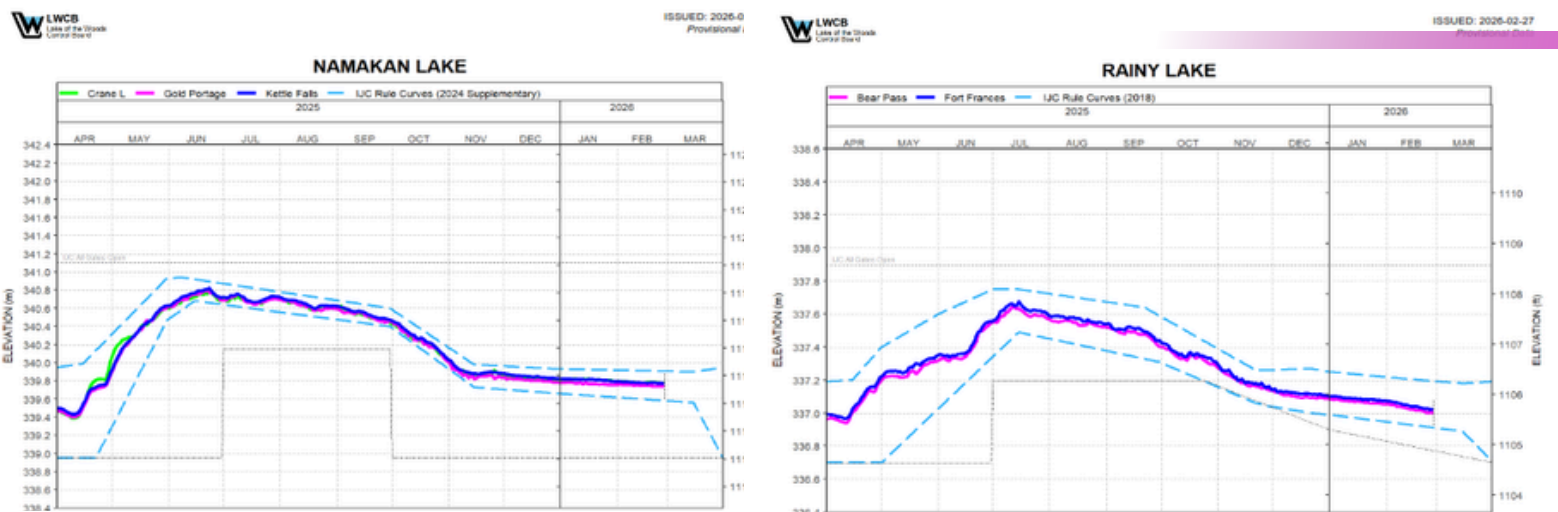
# 2025 RAINY AND NAMAKAN WATER LEVELS



As a public member of the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed Board (IRLWWB), the District Administrator serves on the Water Levels Committee (WLC). The WLC is tasked with ensuring that International Joint Commission (IJC) Orders for the operation of the dams on the Rainy River and outlets of Namakan Lake are followed.

Below is a snapshot of water levels throughout 2025 - the dotted blue lines indicate the upper and lower boundaries of the established rule curves for Namakan and Rainy Lakes.

## 2025 Rainy and Namakan Water Levels



# WILD RICE SEEDING



After 9 acres of hybrid cattails were removed in North Jackfish Bay area near Rainy Lake, wild rice was seeded to restore native plant life and improve habitat conditions.



Hybrid cattail removal finished in fall 2024. Wild rice was planned for seeding that year, but the statewide crop was extremely limited.

In fall 2025, we collected/purchased native wild rice and SWCD staff were able to seed approximately 250 pounds in North Jackfish Bay covering the nine acres previously inundated with the hybrid cattails. A second seeding is planned for fall 2026.

# BENEFICIAL REUSE OF WOOD ASH

The partnership between Packaging Corporation of America (PCA), Koochiching SWCD and DH Hauling continues turning wood ash into a helpful resource for farmers. Since 1997, farm fields across the area have benefitted from this soil amendment, applied under careful guidance and permits, by adjusting lower pH levels. The environment also benefits by keeping nutrients on the landscape and out of landfills.

Here's a brief look at the 2025 permits and how the program continues to grow.



## 2025 PERMITS

### Goal:

100 permits per year  
4,000 acres per year

### Actual:

115 permits  
2,869.5 acres\*

\*More permits were completed, but in smaller acreages

## 2025 ASH HAULED TO SITES

### What was completed:

143 fields hauled  
3,825 acres

### What this means:

**23,568** tons of  
wood ash saved  
from landfills in  
**2025!**

# PHOTO CONTEST

HERE ARE THE WINNERS OF OUR 2<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL PHOTO CONTEST!  
THIS YEAR WE HAD 85 ENTRIES FROM 20 PHOTOGRAPHERS!

2026  
Winners!



*Julie Fandel*



*Gordy Lindgren*



*Marlys Grindall*

# OUTREACH AND EDUCATION



Above: 2025 Envirothon teams and their coach, Jim Schneider, from Northome pose together after the event.



Left: Koochiching SWCD staff poses next to an education station at the Leech Lake Earth Day event, promoting clean water in the Big Fork River Watershed, partnering with Itasca SWCD.

## A TOTAL OF 612 YOUTH PARTICIPATED IN 2025 ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION EVENTS!

- Envirothon event at Bemidji State Park
- Outdoor Education Days at Voyageurs National Park Headquarters
- Earth Day STEM event at Falls Elementary School
- Earth Day educational event in Cass Lake

# NEW 2025 PLAT MAP BOOK

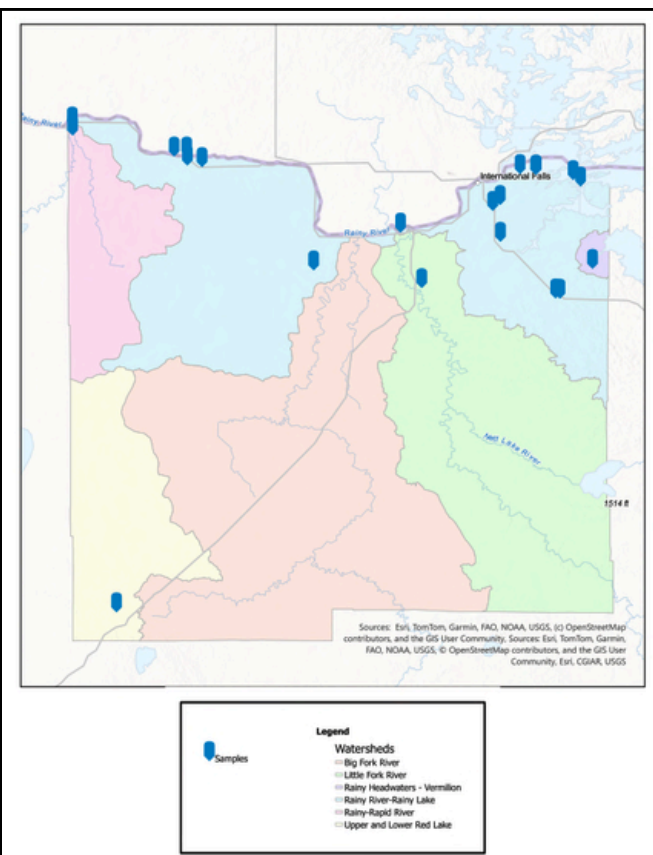
In the summer of 2025, Koochiching SWCD staff created an updated Koochiching County Plat Map Book. Built directly through the GIS system, it can now be refreshed much more often. A downloadable version will be available soon on our website, and printed copies are offered in the SWCD office for \$35.



# ONE WATERSHED, ONE PLAN

## RAINY-RIVER RAINY LAKE

Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) – provided through the Clean Water Land & Legacy Amendment as an alternative to the traditional project-by-project competitive process often used to fund water quality improvement projects. This funding allows collaborating local governments to pursue timely solutions based on a watershed's highest priority needs.



### 2025 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Well testing clinic (see map left):

22 nutrient testing participants

14 arsenic testing participants

4 extensive lab sample participants

Drone Services:

An agricultural drone was purchased to provide light on the land spraying and seeding services.

A LIDAR drone was used to begin a shoreline erosion risk assessment along Rainy River.

### PLANNED FOR 2026

- Keep It Clean Program: Waste stations during ice season
- Agricultural drone best management practices (BMPs)
- Tree plantings
- Well testing clinic
- Ravine stabilization with the City of International Falls

# ONE WATERSHED, ONE PLAN

## LITTLE FORK AND BIG FORK

Early in 2025, new partnerships began preparing to develop comprehensive watershed management plans for the Little Fork River and Big Fork River watersheds. Led by the Koochiching SWCD, the Little Fork River Watershed planning partnership has a signed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) and includes Koochiching SWCD, Koochiching County, North St. Louis SWCD, St. Louis County, Itasca SWCD, Itasca County City of Littlefork, and City of Cook. Also invited to join the planning partnership is the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa.



Led by the Itasca SWCD, the Big Fork River Watershed planning partnership has a signed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) and includes Itasca SWCD, Itasca County, Koochiching SWCD, Koochiching County, and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. Also invited to join the planning partnership is the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, and the City of Big Falls.

### FOR BOTH PLANS,



# WATER MONITORING



## Watershed Pollutant Load Monitoring Network

Staff working on this program sample at 5 sites to deliberately capture moderate and high-flow conditions when watershed runoff to each stream site is at its peak, resulting in the highest amount of pollutants being carried downstream.

### 164 Samples collected



# BUCKTHORN DAUBERS

Funding to purchase commercial buckthorn daubers is scarce...so we came up with our own solution...and wound up taking unnecessary waste out of the system!



We partnered with our local VFW and a local restaurant to obtain their empty bingo daubers and reuse them!

**And...“Buckthorn Be Gone!” was born!**



*Invasive European Buckthorn*



*Koochiching SWCD repurposed bingo dauber as a buckthorn dauber*



*Utilizing a buckthorn dauber on a cut stump*

Daubers are loaned out free of charge from the SWCD to those seeking to help control Buckthorn on their property.

# CONSERVATION PARTNERS

We thank our dedicated partners who have worked with and supported us over our 75+ year history!

Thank you!

