

NOVEMBER 2026

WRIGHT SWCD NEWS

Fall Newsletter of the Wright Soil & Water Conservation District

2026 Outstanding Conservationist: Rockford Middle School

Wright Soil and Water Conservation District has recognized Rockford Middle School as our 2026 Outstanding Conservationist. Rockford Middle School has long stood out for its commitment to prioritizing outdoor environmental education. In 2012, teacher Jamie Madson reached out to Wright SWCD for ideas to manage stormwater in an environmentally friendly way, which resulted in two rain gardens being installed. He then saw an opportunity to convert 1.4 acres of turfgrass on a steep slope to native prairie, creating a pollinator habitat while reducing run-off and routine lawn maintenance, as part of a project undertaken in 2022. In 2025, the two existing rain gardens were enhanced by upgrading the stormwater conveyance, along with upgraded vegetation. Annually, their students participate in Educational Field Days and the Envirothon. Rockford Middle School continues to educate students and the Rockford community about the importance of water quality and conservation.





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Implementing Fall Cover Crops in Wright County

Fall cover crops offer farmers in Wright County an opportunity to protect soil, improve soil health, and reduce nutrient losses. With productive soils and a relatively short growing season, selecting the right cover crop and establishing it at the right time are essential for success.

Cereal rye is a popular choice in Wright County because it tolerates cold temperatures, establishes quickly, and can be planted after corn silage, soybeans, or other crops. Winter rye helps hold soil in place, scavenges leftover nitrogen, and provides living roots that support soil biology. Oats are another option following early harvests, although they typically winterkill and provide less spring cover. A mixture of cereal rye and other species may offer additional benefits when planting conditions and management goals allow.



Right: rye cover crop field near Granite Lake
Below: multi-species cover crop interseeded



Successful cover cropping depends on planting as early as possible after harvest. Late August through September is generally a favorable window for establishing cereal rye, although later planting can still provide some benefits. Cover crops can be seeded with a drill, broadcast or aerially seeded into standing crops or after harvest. Good seed-to-soil contact and adequate moisture improve establishment. Spring management is important to avoid conflicts with the next cash crop. Cereal rye can be terminated before planting or managed after planting, depending on the farm's equipment, weather, and cropping system. Farmers should consider the potential for nitrogen immobilization, soil moisture competition, and challenges with planting into heavy residue. Starting with a manageable acreage allows farmers to learn which practices work best on their fields.

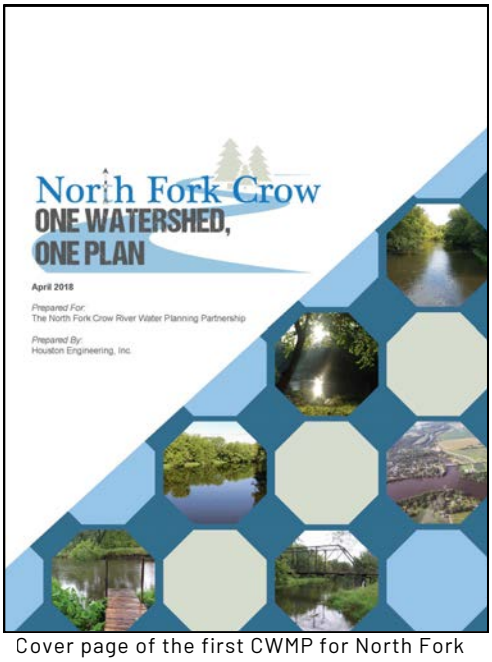
Farmers interested in fall cover crops should consider starting with fields that have early harvest dates, erosion concerns, or opportunities for manure application and nutrient management. Local guidance from University of Minnesota Extension, Wright Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service can help producers select species, determine seeding rates, and explore available technical or financial assistance.

North Fork Crow River Watershed Plan Renewal

Wright Soil and Water Conservation District and its watershed partners are updating the North Fork Crow River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan (CWMP) through Minnesota's One Watershed, One Plan program. The current 10-year plan was approved in June 2018 and adopted by Pope, Stearns, Kandiyohi, Meeker, McLeod, and Wright counties and soil and water conservation districts, as well as the North Fork Crow River and Middle Fork Crow River watershed districts. It was one of five pilot plans developed through the program. The update will reflect updated state requirements and methods for setting priorities.

The plan gives residents, local governments, and agencies a shared roadmap for improving water quality. It does not create new regulations. Most documented water quality improvements in the North Fork Crow River watershed come from voluntary conservation projects supported by Minnesota's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment and other local, state, and federal funding.

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT



Cover page of the first CWMP for North Fork Crow River Watershed.



Participants at the Plan Renewal Kickoff meeting held in Litchfield, September 22, 2026.

The update process will take more than a year. It will assess progress under the current plan, review priority natural resources and concerns, and update the plan's goals. Residents will have opportunities to provide input. Local partners, agency staff, consultants, and elected boards will also help develop and review the plan before it is submitted for state review and approval. Staff have begun organizing information and outlining the updated plan, and the first round of public input was gathered at a kickoff meeting on September 22. The updated plan is expected to be completed in spring 2028.

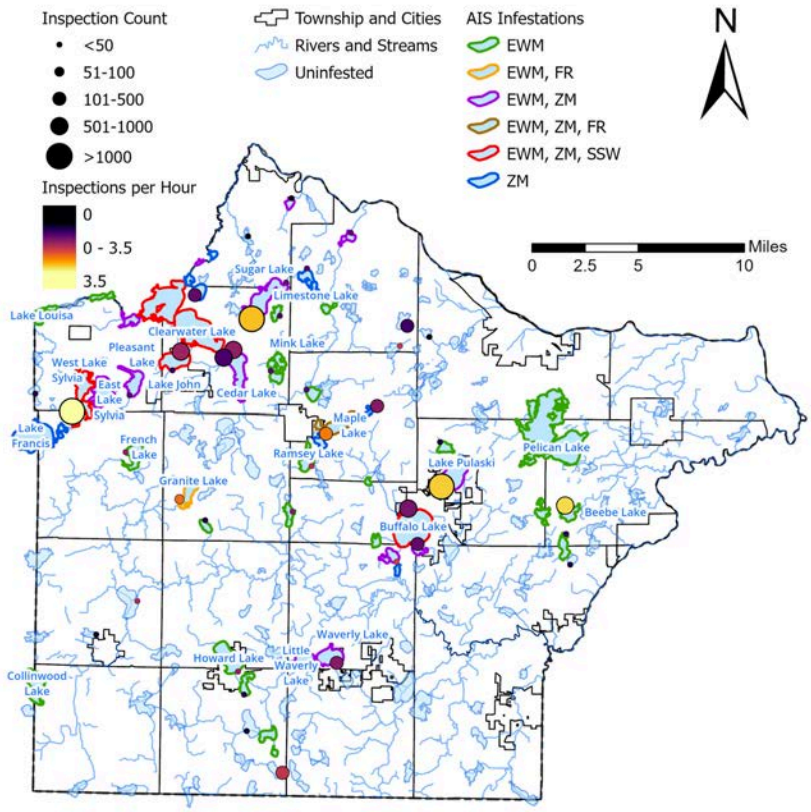
We want to hear from you. Residents, landowners, businesses, community groups, and other interested individuals or entities are invited to share comments throughout the planning process. Please tell us which water or natural resource issues matter most to you, what is working well, and where improvements are needed. Watch for upcoming opportunities to review materials and provide feedback. https://www.northforkcrowriverwatershed.org

2026 AIS PREVENTION PROGRAM

The Wright County Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Prevention Program continued protecting local lakes in 2026 through inspections, boater education, and prevention efforts. Despite budget challenges and reduced resources, the program maintained coverage at high-risk accesses and reached thousands of recreational users.

Inspectors conducted 15,738 watercraft inspections at 47 public accesses and encountered 7,687 unique license plates, a 1% increase in unique boater contacts from 2025. The program averaged 2.1 inspections per hour, with 92% of inspection hours focused on 15 high-priority accesses. Lake Sylvia was the busiest location, followed by Sugar Lake South and Lake Pulaski.

Education remained central to the program. Inspectors found aquatic plants, animals, or water, mud, etc. on 6.3% of watercraft and observed drain plug violations during 10.9% of entering inspections. No zebra mussels were found on boats entering uninfested lakes. Boaters reported previous use on 495 Minnesota lakes and waters in 16 other states and Canada, underscoring the importance of prevention.



Locations of inspections by Wright SWCD in 2026. A larger circle indicates more inspections were done; a lighter circle indicates a higher number of inspections per hour. ZM = zebra mussels, EWM= Eurasian watermilfoil, SSW=starry stonewort



CD3 Waterless Cleaning Station

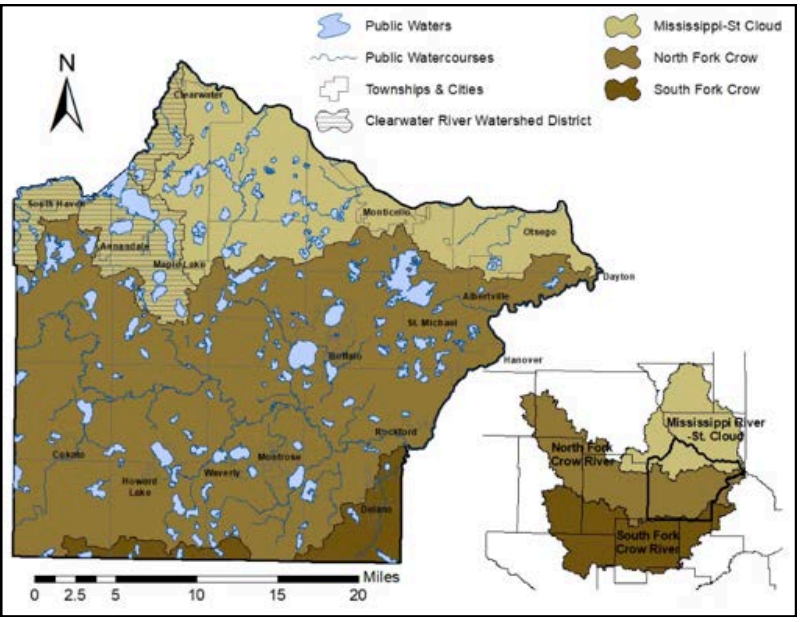
Due to a reduction in state program funding that led to budget constraints, the decontamination program was discontinued in 2026, reducing total expenditures to approximately $215,000. State AIS aid and local lake association contributions continued supporting inspections, training, and coaching.

Five CD3 Waterless Cleaning Stations and multiple basic tool stations provide free equipment for cleaning boats and trailers. Through inspections, education, cleaning stations, and partnerships, Wright County remains committed to protecting its waters for future generations.



UNDERSTANDING WATERSHEDS: WHY EVERY PROPERTY MATTERS

After a rainstorm, water from your yard, farm, road, or neighborhood doesn't simply vanish—it follows a path determined by the local watershed. A watershed is an area of land where all water drains to a shared point, such as a lake, stream, river, or wetland. This process is similar to how water in a bathtub flows toward the lowest spot. The terms "watershed" and "drainage basin" are often used interchangeably, though a basin typically refers to a collection of smaller watersheds.



Wright County sits within the Mississippi River Basin and is divided into three sub-watersheds: Mississippi River-St. Cloud, North Fork Crow River, and South Fork Crow River. Most of the county's water drains into the Crow River system, which ultimately feeds the Mississippi River.



Above: Wright County watersheds
Right: Aerial image of the Crow River (right, lighter) meeting the Mississippi River (left, darker).

Protecting water quality starts with understanding how water moves across the landscape. Take time to observe your property: Where does water come from? Where does it collect? Does it carry soil, fertilizers, or other pollutants as it flows? These observations can help identify opportunities to reduce runoff and protect local waterways.

Even small actions can make a meaningful difference. Planting native vegetation, maintaining healthy soil, and reducing bare ground can help slow runoff, filter pollutants, and improve water quality. Every property owner plays a role in protecting our lakes, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater.

Water quality protection begins upstream, and every property matters in keeping our water clean.

WETLAND CLUES HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

When people think of wetlands, they often picture cattail marshes or areas covered with standing water. However, wetlands are not always wet year-round. In many cases, water may be present only during certain times of the growing season. That's why wetland scientists look for hydrologic indicators: field-observable features used to determine whether an area meets the hydrologic conditions required for wetland classification.

Hydrologic indicators are often the most direct evidence that an area experiences periodic flooding or soil saturation. Some common examples include:

- Surface water or ponding
- Saturated soils near the ground surface
- Water marks on trees, fence posts, or other objects
- Sediment deposits left behind by moving water
- Drift deposits such as leaves, stems, or debris carried by flowing water
- Surface soil cracks

These indicators help tell the story of how water moves through an area, even when water is not present during a site visit. Given hydrology indicators are just one aspect of defining an area as being a wetland or not, they must be taken into context with other factors such as soil characteristics and the plant community.



Photo taken by Wright SWCD staff during a site visit on Victor Township, Wright County. Although this area was dry at the time, numerous hydrologic indicators were present confirming the recent presence of water. When taking into account the presence of wetland plants and soils as well, this area meets the technical definition of a wetland.



Don't let leaves litter lakes

Article from Minnesota Pollution Control Agency - Published October 20, 2026

The crunchy red, gold, and brown leaves fluttering to the ground this autumn might not look all that formidable, but they contain a wallop of nutrients that can hurt Minnesota's lakes.

In a natural setting, leaves decompose on the ground where they fall and help restock the soil with nutrients and organic matter. The small amounts of leaves that naturally drop into lakes from surrounding trees don't have much of an effect.

But when leaves fall on streets, sidewalks, and other hardscapes in urban areas, they wash into municipal stormwater systems and end up in lakes and rivers where the leaves' nutrients feed algae growth. The algae then decompose and use up oxygen that fish and native plants need. When leaves from whole cities or neighborhoods wash into a lake, river, or stream through a storm sewer system, the volume of organic matter can overwhelm that body of water. Don't "leaf" it up to someone else to solve this problem! Here's what to do with your autumn leaves so that they nourish the soil and not unwanted algae.



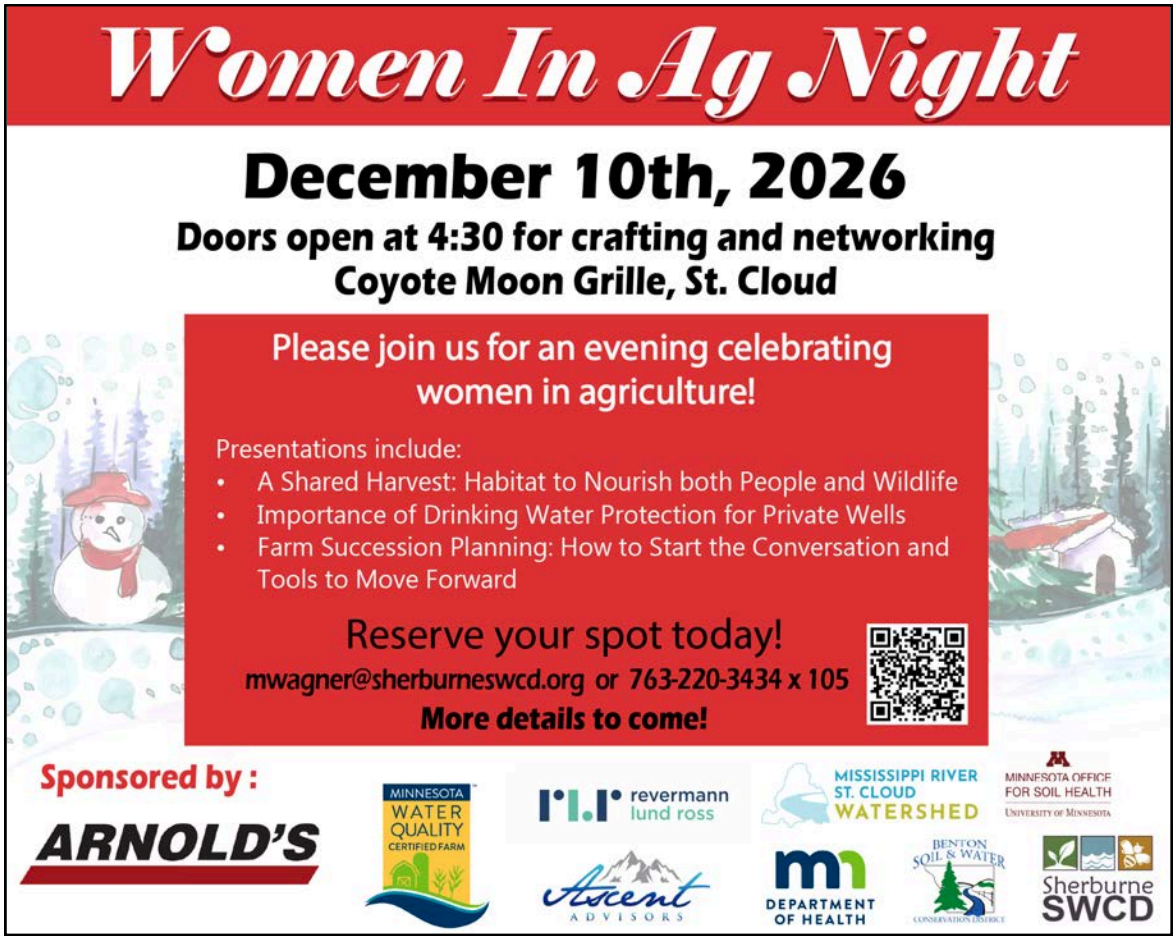
Caption: Stormwater impacts to water bodies.

Break out the rake
Rake up the leaves that accumulate along your curb and sidewalk and in your alley several times during the fall. Street sweeping in late fall helps keep a lot of leaves from entering the water. If your city doesn't already do this, encourage it to start! However, street sweeping can't be the only solution. Rake when you see leaves start to build up to keep them out of the storm drains. Never rake leaves into the street, even when you know the street sweeper is coming.

Broaden your impact
Consider adopting a storm drain or two in your neighborhood. Adopters sweep up leaves, trash, and other debris off the surface of their assigned drain throughout the year and report on how much debris they pick up. Keeping the drains clear not only cuts down the pollution going into lakes and rivers, but it also helps prevent localized flooding. Visit the Adopt-a-Drain web site to find storm drains around the state that are waiting to be adopted.

Composting is best
If you compost at home or in a community garden, you can use leaves in your bin. Whole or shredded leaves also can be used as mulch. Mulch benefits the soil and reduces weeds. In garden beds, leaves provide a protective layer of insulation for perennial gardens and shrubbery, either bagged or loose. Read these additional tips for mulching from Minnesota Extension.

Upcoming Events



Wright Soil and Water Conservation District

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