



# SAND HILL RIVER

## WATERSHED DISTRICT

### 2018

# Annual Report

The mission of the Sand Hill River Watershed District (SHRWD) is to serve the residents of the District by wisely and judiciously managing water resources in a manner which sustains and enhances the social, economic and natural resources of the District.



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# Congratulations

## Wilkins Retires after 40 years

By Brad Dokken on Dec 14, 2018 - *Grand Forks Herald*

FERTILE, Minn.—Dan Wilkins was in his 20s and recently married in 1969 when he and his wife, Pamela, bought a farm west of Fertile near the bottom of the Sand Hill River Watershed.

Flooding was a recurring problem, Wilkins recalls, and water as far east as Maple Lake at the top of the watershed would inundate farmland to the west.

Building a ditch system to alleviate the flooding presented challenges, Wilkins said.

"I researched drainage law, and there—it's kind of a voting operation—you've got to have a majority," he said. "Well, when you're the bottom end of 100 people, 99 to 1 isn't going to get you a project through the county system."



Dan Wilkins, Administrator of the Sand Hill River Watershed District, stands by a recently completed restoration project on the Sand Hill River near Fertile, Minn., on Tuesday, Oct. 23, 2018.

Somewhere along the line, Wilkins says he learned about a provision in Minnesota watershed law that gives watershed districts more authority to build ditch systems than a private citizen would have. Long story short, that finding led him to organize the Sand Hill River Watershed District in 1974.

The ditch system got built 10 years later, and flooding issues subsided.

That's just one of the hundreds of water stories Wilkins has accumulated as head of the Sand Hill River Watershed District,

which started as a makeshift office in his home. Now, nearly 45 years later, Wilkins, 75, is retiring as administrator; his last day is Monday, Dec. 31.

For a man who built a watershed district and worked to reduce flooding across the Red River Basin through organizations such as the Red River Watershed Management Board and the Red River Basin Commission, among others, stepping aside is going to be an adjustment.

A retirement party and roast in his honor is set for 5 to 9 p.m. Friday, Dec. 14 at the Duane-

Knutson Community Center, 101 S. Mill St., in Fertile. "I'm trying to handle this quitting stuff," Wilkins said. "Every day, I'm going to get up at 4 in the morning, have breakfast, and then I'll come on down here (to the office) just out of habit."

As friends and colleagues will attest, Wilkins has been the voice of the Red River Basin during his tenure as a water manager. In 1976, he helped organize the Red River Watershed Management Board, which provides a basin-wide perspective for managing water on the Minnesota side of the river.

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In later years, Wilkens served as chairman of the Red River Basin Commission from 2005 until 2007. Formed in the late '90s, the RRBC provides a unified voice for water managers in Minnesota, the Dakotas and Manitoba to work on flooding issues throughout the basin.

"Our Sand Hill Watershed has been fortunate to have Dan all these years," said Roger Hanson of Fertile, a member of the Sand Hill Watershed board since 1978. "He's by far the most knowledgeable guy in the whole valley in the water world."

April Swenby, who has worked with Wilkens for 17 years and will replace him as administrator, says he has been both a boss and a friend.

"He has taught me everything I know about water management, people and the passions water brings out," Swenby said.

Wilkens had a knack for keeping people's passions from getting too intense, said John Finney, chairman of the Red River Water Management Board.

At no time, perhaps, was that more apparent than the mid-'90s, when the "Red Board"—as the RRWMB often is called—sued the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for refusing to issue permits to build flood retention projects in the basin.

That set the stage for the Minnesota Legislature to set aside funding for the Red Board, state and federal agencies and several environmental groups to mediate an agreement for flood retention projects, Finney said.

Finney worked with Wilkens on the board for more than 25 years.

"As you can imagine, Dan was right in the middle of the discussion," Finney recalls. "I remember at one session, he held up a copy of the Audubon Society magazine with a picture of a track backhoe on the cover and thanked the Society representative for their nice photo of the Minnesota state bird." Even the Audubon rep had to laugh, Finney recalls. "Without Dan, I can't imagine just how intense things could have become," he said.

Chuck Fritz, executive director of the Fargo-based International Water Institute, said he was administrator of the Red Lake Watershed District and fresh

out of college with a master's degree when he met Wilkens in 1997. On the heels of the Red River Flood of 1997, it was a controversial time for the district, Fritz recalls.

"Dan was a great comfort and a mentor, and I learned a lot from Dan," Fritz said.

Wilkens definitely has a gift for gab, he says.

"You never want to sit next to him at a meeting because he'll talk your ear off," Fritz said with a laugh. "I don't even know where to begin. He's got more stories than anybody I ever met."

Wilkens also is a founding father of River Watch, a program launched in 1995 to get high school students in the Red River Basin engaged in water quality issues. As Finney recalls, "an ambitious young fellow" by the name of Wayne Goeken had started a water monitoring program for local students at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center in Fertile and approached the Red Board about expanding the program to other schools.

Wilkens found \$200 a month for the program, and River Watch today includes several hundred students from more than 25 schools in Minnesota and North Dakota and 22 schools in Manitoba.

"I'm pretty proud of that," Wilkens said. Today, he serves on the board of the International Water Institute, which administers River Watch.

"Thanks to Dan, that program has had a profound effect on a lot of people's lives," Fritz said.

Looking back on his career, which includes being named Watershed District Employee of the Year in 2015 by the Board of Water and Soil Resources, Wilkens says it's tough to single out what he wants to be remembered for as an administrator.

When posed with the question during the recent Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts convention, he came up with this answer:

"I said, 'What is your definition of community?' " Wilkens said. "They looked at me kind of dumb, like, 'What kind of an answer is that?'"

"Well, I said, let me tell you this: Most people—or an awful lot of them—their definition of community is 'me.' For some, it's their church; for some, it's their township.

"I chose to bite off the Red River Basin, which includes Minnesota, North Dakota, Manitoba and two country borders. I said I thought that was a big enough piece to bite on—and all I've ever tried to do is make it better."

**“I am pleased to follow in Dan’s footsteps and am thankful for his example for the past 17 years.”**



Swenby honors Wilkens for his years of service on December 14, 2018

# Sand Hill Hires New Administrator

After many years of succession planning and gathering information from the Sand Hill Advisory Committee, constituents, and landowners the board of managers began the process for hiring an Administrator to fill in the shoes of Daniel Wilkens, who has been with the district since its origination in the late 1970’s.

In December of 2018, April Swenby was hired to take over as Administrator of the Sand Hill River Watershed District beginning January, 2019.

April Swenby comes with over 17 years of watershed experience.

She began her work for the district in 2001 as a part-time assistant to Wilkens. Over the past several years, Swenby has been on staff full time serving the district.

In addition to her watershed experience, she brings to the table education highlighting software and technology, communications, and financial management.

Swenby says that her plans for the district are to continue to move forward in the same direction. She says she does not intend to fix things that are not broken, and is thankful for being handed a clean slate to work with. Swenby knows

she cannot fill Wilken’s shoes with his 45 years of experience, but she intends to make new ones where she can.

Because of her already 17 years of service, Swenby has built network of colleagues; many have already expressed their willingness to support and provide assistance to the Sand Hill River Watershed District during their transition period. Additionally, Wilkens although retired, has promised to be of service through his retirement to ensure the success of the district.

Swenby is looking forward to the construction season of 2019 and is ready to begin her first year in her new role.

## Property Tax Decrease

The Sand Hill River Watershed District board of Managers, at their March 23, 2018 special meeting, voted to withdraw from the Joint Powers Agreement. As a result, taxes for property owners in the Sand Hill River Watershed District will decrease and the levy for the Red River Watershed Management Board will not be invoked. The minutes from the board meeting highlighting their decision can be found at our web-site at [www.sandhill-watershed.org](http://www.sandhill-watershed.org).

As a member of the Red River Watershed Management Board, an ad valorem tax of .04836 percent of taxable market value was levied on all taxable property within the Sand Hill River Watershed District. One-half of this levy was credited to the district's construction fund and was used for local efforts such as the development, construction, and maintenance of proj-

ects and programs of benefit to the district to include, but was not limited to, a permitting system, flood control studies, water quality studies, flood control projects, bank stabilization, beaver damage control, benchmarks, stream gaging, watershed hydrologic analysis, rivers, and lakes; the other one-half was forwarded to the Red River Watershed Management Board for funding the development, construction, and maintenance of projects and programs of benefit to the Red River Basin.

In lieu of the Red River Watershed Management Board levy, the Sand Hill River Watershed District board of managers will implement M.S.A. 103D.905, Subd. 3, petitioned by the Polk County Board of Commissioners. As a result, local water management efforts remain the same, while significantly decreasing the watershed tax for 2019.

## Ditch # 80

Polk County Ditch 80 is currently undergoing an improvement and establishment of two laterals. All hearings have been completed, and the SHRWD made order to move forward with the proposed work on August 23, 2018. Construction bids were opened on the project on October 2, 2018. A total of nine prospective contractors submitted bids to complete the work, and was ultimately awarded to Davidson Construction, Inc. at nearly 25% under the anticipated costs. Work is expected to begin in the spring of 2019, and completed by the fall of 2019.

## Project # 5

On April 4, 2017 the SHRWD Board of Managers made a motion to appoint viewers to assign benefits to Project No. 5 as required by MN Statute 103E.351, Subdivision 2. Viewers to establish benefits for parcels from Project No. 5. These benefits and damages will then be used to draft the Viewer's Report to document the level of benefits and damages for each parcel, used to levee future assessments. As required in MN Statute 103E.021, Subdivision 1, redetermination of benefits will establish a one-rod (16.5 feet) buffer strip. An easement will be purchased on the required land, and will be financed by the newly defined Viewer's Report.

# M.S.A 103D.905

Property Tax Decrease Details



### Water Management

The district will use this fund to pay for water management areas such as, but not limited to construction, maintenance, beaver control, and information services related to specific projects within the Sand Hill River Watershed District.



### Water Quality & Erosion

This fund will be used for a variety of water quality and erosion efforts. Examples of water quality efforts include sediment basins, rock riffles, river clean up efforts, and Targeted Watershed cost sharing dollars allocated through the clean water fund.



### Studies/Agency Support

This fund will provide funds for continuing efforts related to watershed studies, education and agency support. Examples of this might include the planning process for the PL566 program and to support local agencies for studies, education and data.

# FISH PASSAGE

By Brad Dokken - *Grand Forks Herald*

Looking across the Sand Hill River and listening to the water rushing over the rocks and riffles, it's easy to envision zipping along in a kayak or casting a line and doing battle with channel catfish, smallmouth bass, northern pike or any number of other species that now call the river home. It hasn't always been so.

A Red River tributary, the Sand Hill River originates in Sand Hill Lake near Lengby, Minn., flowing across the beach ridge of Glacial Lake Agassiz before dropping into the vast expanse of farmland that forms the Red River Valley.

"You get down in there, and it's a whole different world," said Dan Wilkens, administrator of the Sand Hill River Watershed District in Fertile. "It's quiet, the deer will be running around, and in the spring, the ducks and geese are just everywhere."

Up until two years ago, the Sand Hill River didn't offer much for recreation. A flood control project completed in 1954 to straighten and channelize the river included four concrete "drop structures," essentially small dams, to control the flow of water and minimize erosion downstream of Fertile where the river drops out of the beach ridge.

Over time, significant erosion occurred along the channel, and the banks of the altered river began to fail in several places. The concrete structures also impeded passage of Red River fish species that historically spawned in upper reaches of the Sand Hill River.

Severe drought in the 1980s killed off any game fish species that remained in the river upstream from the dams, Wilkens said. That was confirmed by fish surveys the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conducted.

"The dams functionally blocked fish species from moving up into that high-quality habitat area," said

Jamison Wendel, Red River fisheries biologist for the DNR. "It was a heck of a creek chub fishery. There may have been a state record creek chub out there, but beyond that, there was not much of a fishery for anything."

Classified by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency as impaired for turbidity, the Sand Hill River today is a river in recovery, thanks to a multi-agency project to reconnect the river by removing the drop structures and installing a series 16 rock-riffles and two rock arch rapids along a 5-mile stretch of river between Fertile and Beltrami, Minn. The rock-riffles, designed to accommodate fish passage while reducing flow velocity and improving water quality, have produced tangible results since work wrapped up in October 2016.

"This spring, we did a fish survey just above the modified dams, and we already found channel catfish, smallmouth bass, northern pike and some other large river species," Wendel said. "I think we had them up to 20 miles already. Just within the one year, fish were moving upstream of the dam.

"This is creating fishing opportunities throughout the watershed that just were not there for the last 30 years"

On a recent crisp fall morning, several project partners toured the Sand Hill River to see the restoration work firsthand. Besides Wilkens and Wendel, partners onhand for the tour were Nicole Bernd, district manager of the West Polk Soil and Water Conservation District in Crookston; April Swenby, administrative assistant of the Sand Hill River Watershed District; Wayne Goeken, a kayak enthusiast and retired director of the Red River Basin RiverWatch program; and Mark Johnson, a Fertile native and executive director of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. "It's beautiful—I haven't been out here since they were doing con-

struction," Bernd said. "What's neat with this is there are so many different partners involved. And I know in our realm, the more partners you have, the better off you are in getting projects started and implemented, and agencies are looking for that."

The Sand Hill River Watershed District initiated the project in February 2014, contacting the West Polk Soil and Water Conservation District to collaborate and partner in applying for a Clean Water Legacy grant.

The Board of Water and Soil Resources—BWSR, for short—awarded a \$475,000 grant in January 2015. In addition, the watershed district provided more than \$118,000 in matching funds, and a \$100,000 Ecofootprint Grant from Enbridge Inc., further offset costs for the water quality part of the project, Bernd said.

"That really helped out quite a bit," Bernd said. "They were pretty excited about the whole project and what it consisted of." West Polk SWCD is the grant recipient and administrator.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers funded 75 percent of the project's cost of nearly \$7.6 million, while the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council funded 25 percent of the fish passage component, providing the Minnesota DNR with more than \$1.9 million in two phases for removing the four dams.

Funding for the Outdoor Heritage and Clean Water grants comes from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment that Minnesota voters approved in 2008.

"That was one thing through this whole process was to make sure the Clean Water Legacy funding was for water quality improvements, and Lessard-Sams funding through DNR is for fish and wildlife habitat so the two components can work together side by side," Bernd said. "It worked

# River Clean-Up

In 2017, the district was notified that they were the recipient of clean water funds to clean the Sand Hill River beginning one mile west of Fertile. The Conservation Corp of MN rallied at the Sand Hill River beginning one-mile west of Fertile and extended all the way to Polk County # 44. The crew cleaned debris and garbage in an effort to help sustain our water resources.

The project was deemed so successful that the Sand Hill River Watershed District applied for Phase 2 of the river clean up efforts and was awarded for a CWF grant which will place another Conservation Corps of MN crew in the Sand Hill River Watershed District in the fall of 2019. The crew will begin at Rindahl, MN and end at Polk County # 1.



*Fish Passage - Continued from Page 6*

out really well.” Wendel, the Red River biologist who worked with the Lessard-Sams council on fish passage, said completing the project would have been difficult without the two pots of dedicated funding from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. “I’ve worked in other states, and it’s hard to even consider tackling a project of this size, a project requiring \$4 million just to modify the dams,” he said. “I’m not saying this is easy—it still presents challenges—but when you’re able to leverage \$3 federal for every \$1 of Outdoor Heritage funds, it makes projects like this much more realistic to get accomplished.”

In more than 40 years with the Sand Hill River Watershed District, Wilkens says the restoration is the largest environmental project he’s been involved with. From landowner buy-in to working with the contractor, Spruce Valley Corp., of Middle River, Minn., the project went smoothly, he said. Construction began in August 2016 and wrapped up about two months later.

“It really works so great having Nicole at West Polk and Wendel (of the DNR) partner on all of this,” Wilkens said. “It was working with really great people, and we just didn’t have any problems at all along the way, which normally you have for projects like this.” The improvements have resulted in a “tremendous uptick” in kayaking along the Sand Hill River, Goeken said.

“You go around Fertile in the summer, a lot of vehicles have kayaks in back of them,” Goeken said. “We also hear a lot of people talking, and they’re really excited about the fish passage. They recall days gone by and good fishing in the river and are really looking forward to the improvements.”

The project came in under budget, and remaining funds will be used for additional improvements on the river, Wilkens said. According to a July 2017 update from BWSR, about \$1.2 million in Lessard-Sams funding remains for fish passage and fish habitat, while about \$246,000 in Clean Water money will go toward projects such as additional riffles downstream to further improve water quality.

Monitoring also will be part of the process once additional work is complete, Bernd said. “There are many kinds of monitoring efforts that can be done,” she said. “Ultimately, Clean Water Legacy funding is everybody’s funding, and people want to know, ‘Is it making a difference?’ That’s the plan.”

As executive director of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, Johnson said success stories such as the Sand Hill River restoration are the goal of every habitat project the council recommends to the Legislature for funding. Revisiting his old stomping grounds and seeing the project for himself had been on his agenda for more than a year, Johnson says. “This one is real personal to me because I used to run my motor scooter right up and down this road and fish all this when I was a kid, each one of the dams,” Johnson said. “And it’s just so exciting for me to see it the way I had hoped it would turn out. It’s going to be better than it ever was in my life previously.

“But other than that, just hearing the successes and seeing all the people involved and all the collaboration that’s part of this, that’s the exciting part for me,” he added. “We got local buy-in, local excitement and just incredible things happened.”



## Sand Hill River project helps fish reconnect to old spawning grounds & reduces erosion

Fish that spend most of their time in the Red River will, during spawning season, go searching for good habitat by swimming up the Red's tributaries. Some of the best spawning habitat in the basin is located upstream in the Sand Hill River in what's known as the beach ridge area. This area is a transition zone where thousands of years ago, a glacial lake called Lake Agassiz retreated and left behind gravel and other features that make fish today "hot to trot." The problem for the fish was getting there.

In more recent history, people have straightened and channelized the Sand Hill River's natural shape. Doing this sped up the flow of water, increasing erosion and flooding. In an attempt to control these impacts, four concrete drop structures were installed in the 1950s. These structures did not really do much to prevent problems, but instead caused several environmental issues, including preventing fish from accessing many miles of prime spawning habitat in the beach ridge area.

This issue came to light in the Sand Hill River Watershed Biotic Stressor Identification Report completed a few years ago. Scientists from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency conducted on-the-ground surveys to record conditions in the watershed that pose a threat to aquatic life: fish, aquatic insects and other creatures. The report showed many species of fish were only found downstream of dams or other control structures, including larger fish such as channel catfish, walleye, rock bass, goldeye, and sauger.

To help reduce erosion problems called head cutting and bank sluffing, and at the same time address the fish barrier problem, local partners installed a series of rock riffles bordered with rip rap that replaced the concrete drop structures. The stretches of riffles have flat enough slope to allow fish passage upstream across each structure.

Reconnecting this substantial spawning and rearing habitat will improve the composition and quality of the fishery both in the Sand Hill River and the entire Red River basin. The work is also expected to help efforts to reestablish lake sturgeon in the basin.



## RCPP Program

The Sand Hill River Watershed District continued its efforts for the Upper Sand Hill River – RCPP Watershed Plan. By the end of 2018, comments were received from NRCS regarding Review Point No. 1. Regarding Review Point Number 2, the following was completed by the end of 2018.

- Draft Purpose and Need was submitted to the Project Team to solicit comments.
- Comments have been incorporated into the Purpose and Need.
- Draft Scoping Table has been assembled.

## 2018 Permit Applications

The district received 24 permit applications. Additionally, the district began the process of updating their Rules and Regulations. The Rules and Regulations are expected to be formally adopted in the winter of 2019.

## Sand Hill Lake Dam

The District is working collaboratively with the MN DNR to retrofit the outlet of Sand Hill Lake with a rock-rapids outlet. The Project will allow for a better maintained outlet elevation of Sand Hill Lake, and also facilitate fish passage between the Sand Hill River and Sand Hill Lake. Construction is expected in fall of 2019.

## Kittleson Creek

The outlet of Kittleson Creek has posed a public safety risk due to insufficient culvert length, and also has been a barrier to fish passage from the Sand Hill River into aquatic habitat in Kittleson Creek. The District is working collaboratively with the MN DNR and the Polk County Highway Department to install a new stream crossing that will address both of these issues. Construction is expected in fall of 2019.

## Project # 5 - Redetermination of Benefits

The district redetermined the benefits on their ditch referred to as Project # 5. Seeding to establish the required 1-rod buffer strip will take place summer 2019.

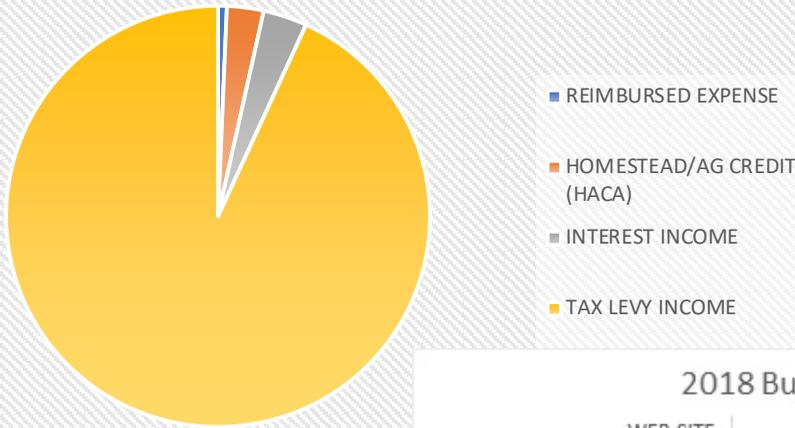
## Sand Hill Rock Riffles (Phase 2):

The highly successful collaboration between the District, BWSR, the West Polk SWCD, and the MN DNR that was used to implement Phase 1 is being continued to implement Phase 2 of the combined fish passage/grade stabilization project for the channelized portions of the Sand Hill River. Phase 2 of the project will install additional rock riffles to further reduce channel incision along with facilitating fish migration throughout the Sand Hill River system. Construction is expected in fall 2019.



# 2018 Budget

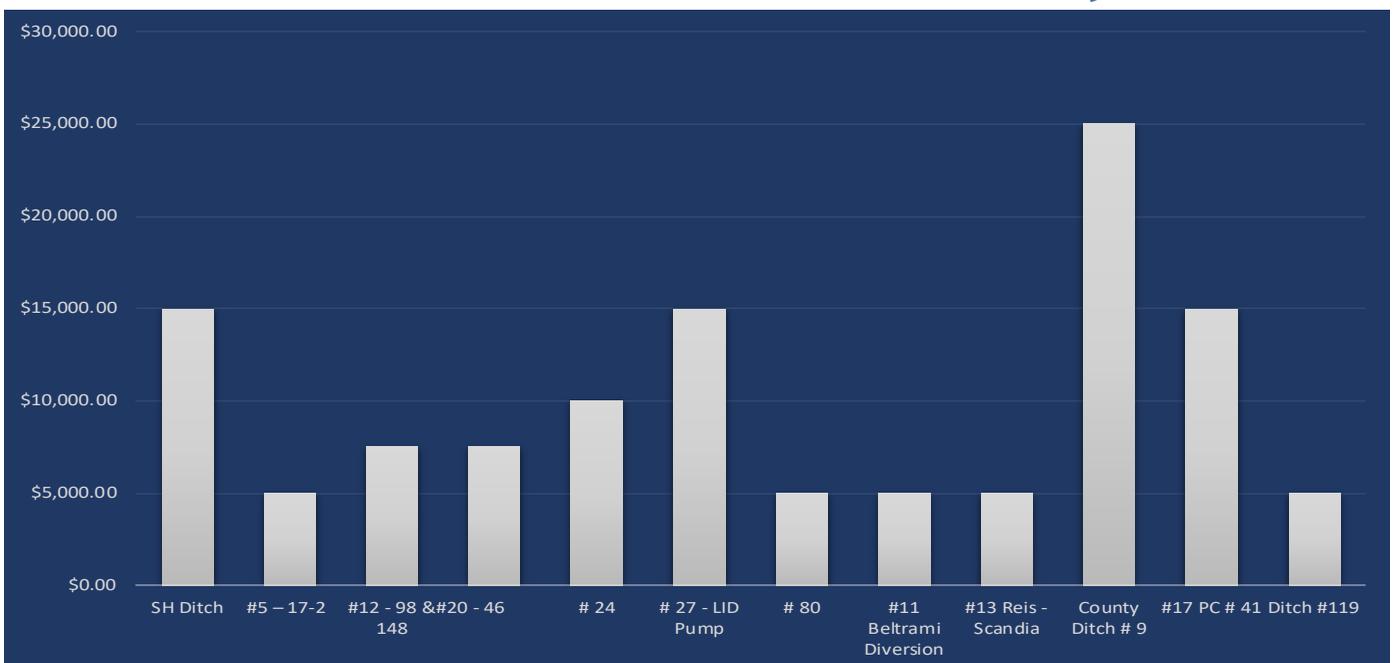
2018 Budgeted Income



2018 Budgeted Expenses



# 2019 Ditch Levy



# Board of Managers

The Sand Hill River Watershed holds five board managers who represent the district from East to West. The managers serve a 3 year term and are appointed by the Polk County Commissioners.



Stuart Christian, Chairman  
Erskine, MN



Dan Vesledahl, Vice-Chairman  
Winger, MN



Roger Hanson, Manager  
Beltrami, MN



JJ Hamre, Secretary  
Beltrami, MN



Clayton Bartz, Treasurer  
McIntosh, MN

## Keep in touch and stay involved in the SHRWD

The Sand Hill River Watershed makes every effort to provide communication via our web-site - [www.sandhillwatershed.org](http://www.sandhillwatershed.org). To stay updated on the latest news and happenings of the district, read our minutes monthly and check out our home page for the latest up-to-date announcements.



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