



# 2025

## Annual Report



Serve the residents of the district



Wisely and judiciously manage water resources



Sustain and enhance social & economic natural resources



MORE INFO

218-945-3204

[www.sandhillwatershed.org](http://www.sandhillwatershed.org)

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# 2025 HIGHLIGHTS

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## Project # 27 - Redetermination of Benefits

Due to landowner requests the board inspected the Project benefits roll currently on file with the District and County Auditor's for Project # 27 (a pumping project designed to address high-water concerns and provide relief to surrounding properties and infrastructure surrounding Union Lake and Lake Sarah) and determined that the current benefits roll did not reflect currently benefited property, did not reflect benefits provided by the Project and did not reflect current values of real property benefited by the Project. A new benefit roll was adopted October 2, 2025. (See Page 5)



## Union Lake Pumping - Zebra Mussels

In 2024, Zebra Mussels were discovered in Union Lake, which ultimately affects the Mn DNR permit for pumping related to Project # 27. The district was denied funding using the Flood Hazard Mitigation source to retrofit this flood control infrastructure, and began working closely with MN State representatives for funding to retrofit the existing pump to meet Mn DNR permitting requirements for pumping lakes infested with Zebra Mussels.



## Redetermination of Benefits

Paralleling Polk County's decision for a watershed-wide redetermination of benefits on county systems and the district's 2024 decision to redetermine the benefits on the Sand Hill Ditch, the board determined that since the original establishment of Project 3, 11, 12, 13, 20, 17, Ditch 9 and 119 the original determination of benefits and damages did not reflect current benefited property and land uses and drainage practices have changed to accelerate and increase the flow of water to the drainage system changing the nature and value of benefits accruing to lands from the construction of these ditches. For this and other reasons, the board initiated a redetermination of benefits for these systems, highlighting that the benefits and damages on record did not reflect reasonable present day land values, and the benefit areas have changed.



## SH River Ecosystem Restoration

The district submitted a letter of intent for federal assistance under the Continuing Authorities Program, Section 1135 (CAP) to complete the planning, design, and construction of the Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration Project in reaches of Hubbard, Scandia, Reis, and Liberty Townships

# DITCH MAINTENANCE

Annual Ditch Inspections are performed by staff and recorded for the permanent record. In addition to routine spraying the following was addressed in 2025:

KEY INDICATOR	ACTIVITY / PROJECT	DATA / OUTCOME
Project # 17 Russia, Hammond & Vineland Township	In March of 2024, a landowner meeting was held to obtain feedback for a large cleaning effort. Three hundred landowners were invited.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plans and specs for repair</li> <li>Bid opening 10/24</li> <li>Project awarded to Gladen Construction</li> <li>Project repair began late fall 2024 and was completed in 2025.</li> </ul>
<b>FEMA - SH Ditch Reis, and Liberty Townships</b>	<b>The district's appeal on the denial for FEMA repair funds on the Sand Hill Ditch, was granted in the amount of \$1.7 million</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Project Team active</b></li> <li><b>Developing alternatives for mitigation/improvements</b></li> <li><b>An extension was applied for</b></li> </ul>
Ditch 119 Russia Township	Ditch inspections indicated a cleaning was necessary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey completed</li> <li>Quotes were received from local contractors</li> <li>Contractor hired</li> <li>Cleanings planned for 2026</li> </ul>
<b>HSEM Funding 2023 State Disaster Declaration</b>	<b>Five sites were identified as damaged during the 2023 flooding. Two sites were be repaired in 2025</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Scandia Township Section 23 bank repair</b></li> <li><b>Liberty Township Section 29 repair</b></li> </ul>
Watershed Boundary Revision - Onstad Twp.	Boundary revised along MN 102	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quotes were received from local contractors</li> <li>Contractor hired</li> <li>Construction planned for 2026</li> </ul>
<b>Various Ditches</b>	<b>Some ditches are not mowed, sprayed, or have side slope maintenance on vegetation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Working with a contractor for solutions in 2026</b></li> </ul>
Project 20 Reis Township	Repair noted late in fall of 2025 by a landowner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Install riprap apron in 2026 on east end to fill in scour hole.</li> </ul>

# ADMINISTRATIVE BUDGET

2026

Income	
HOMESTEAD/AG CREDIT (HACA)	3,500.00
INTEREST INCOME	50,000.00
MISC INCOME	350.00
TAX LEVY INCOME	250,000.00
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>303,850.00</b>
Expense	
EMPLOYEE TRAVEL EXPENSES	8,000.00
CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS	48,650.00
WEB-SITE	3,000.00
MISC	200.00
MEETING EXPENSE	1,000
BUILDING MAINTENCE/OCCUPANCY	13,000.00
COMPUTER EXPENSE	15,000.00
DUES-MEMBERSHIP	4,000.00
EDUCATION	4,000.00
FURNITURE-EQUIP	15,000.00
MANAGER EXPENSE	20,000.00
OFFICE OPERATIONS	18,000.00
PAYROLL EXPENSES	125,000.00
PAYROLL TAXES	8,000.00
PROF SERVICES	20,000.00
PUBLICITY	1,000.00
<b>Total Expense</b>	<b>303,850.00</b>

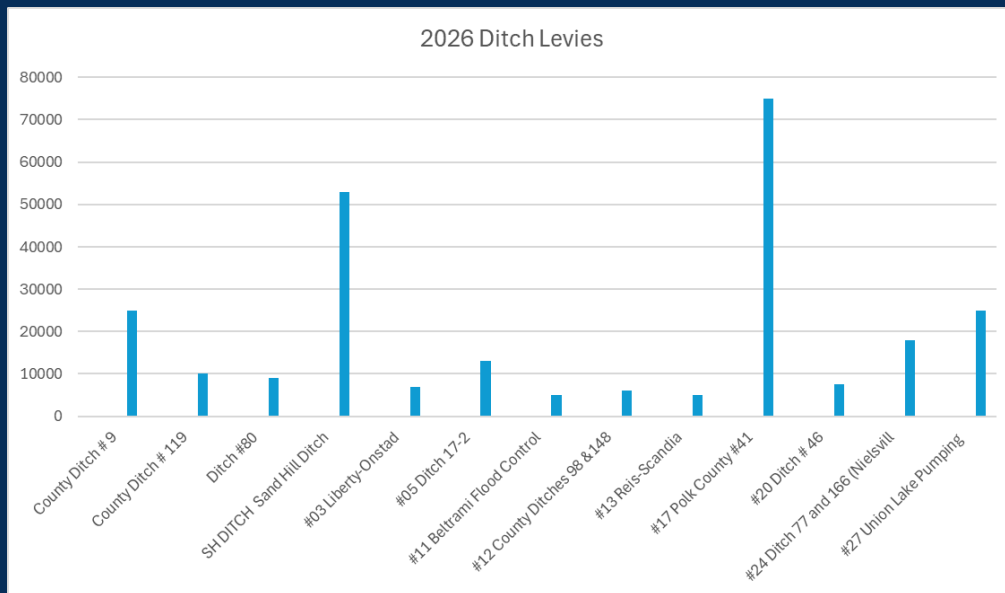
In addition to the Administrative budget, the district uses MSA 103D.905 Subd 3 in coordination with Polk County who petitioned the district to levy for the following endeavors:

- Water Quality & Erosion (\$154,629.71)
- Water Management & Retention (\$154,629.71)
- Studies and Agency Support (\$100,000)

The use of this levy replaces the Red River Watershed Management ad velorum levy that was implemented prior to 2018.

Each year staff is responsible for performing ditch inspections and reporting to the board the needs. Staff is responsible for developing recommendations to the board, keeping in mind any upcoming needs, outstanding payments and MN Statutory requirements relating to total benefits of each system. As usual, in 2025, the district thoroughly evaluated each system, and the following levies were set for 2026.

## 2026 DITCH LEVIES



## DRAINAGE LAW RESOURCES

The Minnesota Public Drainage Manual (MPDM)  
<https://bwsr.state.mn.us/Minnesota-Public-Drainage-Manual>

MN Statute 103E Drainage  
<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/103E>

Drainage Work Group  
<https://bwsr.state.mn.us/drainage-work-group>

**100%**

All inspection reports are available by request by contacting the district office.



## **Advancing Long-Term Sustainability for the Union Lake Pumping Project**

One of the Sand Hill River Watershed District's most significant efforts in 2025 focused on the long-term sustainability and operation of the Union Lake Pumping Project (Project #27), a critical water management system serving Union Lake and Lake Sarah.

Originally constructed in 1999–2000 through collaboration between the Union Lake Sarah Improvement District and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the project was designed to address high-water concerns and provide relief to surrounding properties and infrastructure. In 2012, ownership and operational responsibility for the project was formally transferred to the Sand Hill River Watershed District under Minnesota Statute 103D.

As the project has evolved over the past two decades, the District recognized the need to modernize and reevaluate the project's historic benefit structure to better reflect current property ownership, changing land values, parcel divisions, and the ongoing benefits provided by the system. In response, the Board of Managers initiated a formal benefits determination process during 2025.

Throughout the year, the District worked closely with engineers, legal counsel, and a professional appraiser to conduct a detailed technical and financial evaluation of the project. The review included property analysis, site visits, LiDAR evaluation, shoreline assessments, flood-risk analysis, and examination of current market values. The process also evaluated the broader benefits provided by the project, including flood protection, shoreline stability, erosion reduction, pollutant reduction, and water quality protection.

Public engagement remained a key priority throughout the process. The District held a public hearing in August 2025 and continued discussions through additional meetings in September and October to ensure that landowner comments and concerns received careful consideration. Property owners were provided mailed notices, individualized property reports, and opportunities to submit written and verbal feedback. The Board and technical consultants reviewed concerns raised by landowners and incorporated additional analysis where appropriate to support a fair and equitable determination process.

The Board's efforts in 2025 were focused not only on current operations, but also on ensuring the project remains functional and financially sustainable into the future. With the discovery of zebra mussels in Union Lake, the District is actively seeking outside funding opportunities to address more stringent filtration requirements to prevent zebra mussel transport downstream. The District continues to evaluate long-term infrastructure improvements required for zebra mussel filtration, as well as operational changes that may allow for limited operation of the existing system. Staff continues to pursue outside funding opportunities and coordinate with state and federal partners in an effort to minimize future local costs associated with major improvements.

In 2026, District staff will continue working closely with state legislators and agency partners to pursue state funding opportunities for infrastructure improvements necessary to comply with Minnesota Department of Natural Resources permitting requirements related to aquatic invasive species prevention, including zebra mussel mitigation measures. These efforts are intended to help reduce the financial burden on local landowners while ensuring the long-term operation and regulatory compliance of the pumping system.

By the end of 2025, the District had completed a substantial milestone toward establishing a more modern, transparent, and sustainable framework for the continued operation and maintenance of Project #27. The work completed this year reflects the District's continued commitment to responsible water management, protection of property and natural resources, and long-term stewardship of the watershed.



## Restoring Critical Drainage Infrastructure Through Project #17 Repairs

The completion of the Project #17 cleanout and repair project marked one of the Sand Hill River Watershed District's most significant infrastructure accomplishments of 2025. Spanning portions of Vineland, Hammond, and Russia Townships in Polk County, the large-scale maintenance effort restored drainage capacity and improved the long-term function of an important public drainage system serving agricultural land, local infrastructure, and surrounding properties.

Cleaning Project #17 involved nearly 15 miles of common excavation and channel cleanout work designed to remove accumulated sediment and restore efficient water conveyance throughout the system. The work required extensive engineering design, bidding, contractor coordination, environmental protection measures, and ongoing field oversight throughout construction.



Houston Engineering prepared detailed plans and specifications for the project, which included channel excavation, spoil placement, erosion control, drainage repairs, seeding and mulching requirements, tree and brush removal, and restoration of disturbed areas. The project also included a repair to the 290th Avenue drainage crossing and installation of erosion protection materials designed to stabilize disturbed areas following construction.

Because of the scale of the cleanout, construction required careful coordination with landowners and agricultural producers throughout the corridor. Specifications required contractors to minimize crop damage, protect adjacent roads and property, maintain positive drainage, and carefully manage spoil placement along the ditch system. Disturbed areas outside designated spoil and excavation zones were required to be reseeded and stabilized following construction activities.

The project also required substantial technical planning to address varying ditch conditions throughout the system. Construction plans identified multiple channel configurations, benching requirements, varying bottom widths, culvert crossings, and erosion control measures needed to complete the repairs while maintaining drainage function during construction.

The successful completion of Project #17 represents the District's continued commitment to proactive infrastructure maintenance and responsible watershed management. Public drainage systems require ongoing investment and maintenance to preserve their intended function, reduce flood risk, protect road infrastructure, and support agricultural productivity across the watershed.

By completing this large-scale cleanout effort, the District helped restore long-term drainage efficiency within the system while extending the useful life of critical public infrastructure. The project reflects the importance of long-term planning, engineering oversight, and coordination between the District, contractors, engineers, and affected landowners to successfully complete complex drainage improvement projects.

# Sand Hill River Watershed District: 50 Years of Leadership, Innovation, and Impact

## *CELEBRATING A LEGACY OF EXCELLENCE IN WATERSHED MANAGEMENT 1975–2025*

Proudly commemorating its 50th anniversary, the Sand Hill River Watershed District (SHRWD) stands as an exemplary model of stewardship, community engagement, and forward-thinking water management in Minnesota. For half a century, the SHRWD has redefined what it means to protect and enhance our water resources, consistently setting the bar for watershed districts statewide.

### **A Distinctive Landscape, Met With Vision**

Situated in the heart of the Red River Valley, the Sand Hill River Watershed is approximately 495 square miles and features a unique blend of landscapes: the expansive, flat Lake Agassiz glacial lake plain with heavy soils, the moderate slopes and lighter soils of the escarpment region, and rolling terrain dotted with numerous lakes and wetlands. This patchwork of topography supports a land use pattern dominated by agriculture, yet it is also enriched by a wealth of natural resource amenities—including Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Management Areas and lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The SHRWD has leveraged these diverse natural assets, transforming landscape challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth, agricultural prosperity, and ecological stewardship. By recognizing the value of both productive farmland and protected habitats, the District has fostered a dynamic environment where economic success and conservation go hand in hand.

This thoughtful approach ensures that local communities benefit from the region's agricultural productivity while also enjoying recreational opportunities and thriving wildlife populations, reinforcing the SHRWD's commitment to balancing development with long-term sustainability.

### **Fifty Years of Transformative Projects**

**Public Drainage Systems:** The SHRWD's commitment to robust drainage infrastructure has been vital to the region's agricultural success and to date is the drainage authority for 103 lineal miles of public drainage systems. By modernizing century-old systems and overseeing the Sand Hill Ditch Flood Control project, the SHRWD has protected local farms from flooding and ensured long-term economic viability. Their proactive approach to drainage upgrades and resilience planning is a testament to their leadership in adapting to environmental and economic change.

**Flood Control and Retention:** With flagship projects like the Bear Park Dam and innovative flood control initiatives in Climax, MN and rural farmstead ring dikes, the SHRWD has safeguarded communities, farmland, and critical infrastructure. Their visionary SH River Ecosystem Project Team comprised of township officials, landowners and state/local government agencies continues to pioneer solutions that address both local and basin-wide flood challenges.

**Water Quality and Habitat Enhancement:** The SHRWD has capitalized on state funding and local partnerships to create thriving environments for agriculture and wildlife. Projects such as constructed wetlands, sediment basins, and buffer strips have reduced erosion, improved fish passage, and promoted soil health — proving that economic and ecological goals can go hand in hand.

**One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P):** By spearheading the 1W1P Comprehensive Plan with county and agency partners, the SHRWD has established a unified, data-driven strategy for watershed management. The District's ability to secure and deploy implementation funds demonstrates their agility and commitment to advancing shared goals for Minnesota's waters.

**Monitoring and Adaptive Management:** The SHRWD sets the standard for accountability and transparency by continuously gathering and applying quality data. Their ongoing studies ensure that every decision is rooted in sound science, with a clear focus on long-term resource stewardship.

**Community Outreach and Education:** The SHRWD goes above and beyond statutory requirements, engaging local residents through workshops and educational initiatives. Their open-door approach fosters trust, empowers citizens, and ensures that watershed priorities are shaped by those who know the land best.

## Honoring Our Champions

The District's legacy is forged by the dedication of visionary board members, managers, and volunteers. The appointed board members bring a diverse range of expertise and local insight, ensuring that the District's governance is both responsive and forward-thinking. Their leadership is complemented by an advisory committee, whose members provide essential feedback and guidance on technical and community matters, further strengthening the District's decision-making process.

Equally important is the unwavering support of our constituents—local residents, landowners, and agricultural producers—who actively participate in workshops, meetings, and educational outreach. Their engagement ensures that every project and partnership reflects both scientific rigor and common-sense values, rooted in firsthand knowledge of the land. Together, these groups embody the collaborative spirit that defines SHRWD, guiding its growth and ensuring that stewardship of the watershed remains a shared and lasting commitment.

*To commemorate this historic milestone, the SHRWD hosted an open house on December 8, 2025 for the public at the district office.*



## Collaborative Success

The SHRWD's achievements are built on a foundation of strong partnerships — from local landowners to state and federal agencies. This collaborative spirit has unlocked technical expertise, funding, and community support, fueling meaningful improvements across the watershed.

- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)
- United States Army Corp of Engineers (USACOE)
- U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
- County governments, townships, SWCDs
- Local landowners and agricultural producers
- Regional and community organizations

## Looking Ahead: Stewardship for the Future

As the SHRWD celebrates five decades of unparalleled leadership, it remains committed to meeting tomorrow's challenges with innovation, collaboration, and integrity. With changing climates and evolving community needs, SHRWD will continue to pioneer solutions that protect Minnesota's water, land, and way of life for generations to come.

"The story of the Sand Hill Watershed is one of cooperation and commitment. For 50 years, we've worked together to protect our land, our water, and our way of life. As we move forward, that spirit of partnership will continue to guide us."  
— Stuart Christian, Board Chair



# STRENGTHENING REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH ONE WATERSHED, ONE PLAN

In 2025, the Sand Hill River Watershed District continued advancing long-term watershed management efforts through active participation in the Sand Hill River One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) partnership. This collaborative initiative brings together counties, soil and water conservation districts, and watershed organizations to address water management on a watershed-wide scale rather than along political boundaries.

The Sand Hill River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan was officially approved by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in January 2024 and remains effective through 2034. Through the 1W1P process, local partners work together to identify priority resource concerns, coordinate projects, pursue grant funding, and target conservation efforts where they can provide the greatest measurable benefit.

In 2025, the District received Watershed Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) through the One Watershed, One Plan program. These funds allocated to the Sand Hill River Watershed District, over \$546,000 just in 2025, supported critical engineering, modeling, and infrastructure efforts focused on long-term watershed resiliency, river stability, and natural resource protection throughout the Sand Hill River Watershed.

Two major initiatives supported through this funding included continued engineering and modeling efforts for the Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration project and completion of a riverbank stabilization project along the Sand Hill River in Section 24 of Scandia Township.

## Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration Efforts

Throughout 2025, the District continued advancing planning and technical evaluation efforts associated with the Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration initiative. The project focuses on restoring more natural river function while improving flood resiliency, reducing erosion, stabilizing streambanks, and improving long-term watershed health.

Engineering and hydraulic modeling efforts supported through WBIF funding allowed the District and project partners to further evaluate potential restoration alternatives, assess river conditions, and identify opportunities to improve channel stability and floodplain connectivity within the Sand Hill River system.

The project represents a long-term collaborative effort involving multiple agencies and stakeholders working toward solutions that balance flood management, environmental stewardship, agricultural productivity, and protection of natural resources throughout the watershed.

**Through the One Watershed, One Plan partnership, the District continues leveraging regional cooperation and state funding opportunities to complete projects that strengthen watershed resiliency, protect infrastructure, improve water quality, and support the long-term sustainability of the region's natural resources and agricultural economy.**

## Scandia Township Bank Stabilization Project

Watershed Based Implementation Funding also supported completion of an important riverbank stabilization project along the Sand Hill River in Section 24 of Scandia Township. The project area, located approximately 2.5 miles downstream of Beltrami, addressed ongoing erosion concerns.

Engineering plans focused on stabilizing actively eroding riverbanks while preserving the long-term integrity and function of the Sand Hill River channel. Project improvements included installation of Class III riprap revetment along the south bank, grading and setback of the north bank, channel restoration work, and erosion control improvements designed to maintain the original channel width and reduce future bank erosion.

Specifications included sediment control practices, vegetation restoration, pollution prevention measures, erosion control blanket installation, and ongoing inspection and monitoring procedures designed to protect water quality and minimize environmental impacts during construction activities.

The Scandia Township bank stabilization project helped protect critical river infrastructure, reduce continued streambank erosion, improve channel stability, and support long-term watershed resiliency within the Sand Hill River system.



# ADA COMPLIANCE

## BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE



One of the long-term projects that reached a major milestone in 2025 was the completion of the Sand Hill River Watershed District office addition and accessibility improvements. What began as early discussions prior to 2018 to address accessibility limitations and improve compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines ultimately became a multi-year effort requiring extensive planning, redesign, and perseverance.



Over the course of several years, the project faced numerous unexpected challenges. Early planning and architectural work began in 2019, but progress was later slowed by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, significant increases in construction costs, and the unexpected passing of the project architect. As construction estimates continued to rise, the Board revisited the project multiple times to evaluate more affordable and practical solutions while still maintaining the original goal of improving public accessibility and functionality of the District office.



Despite these obstacles, the Board remained committed to completing a project that would better serve residents, landowners, contractors, and partner agencies visiting the District office. The completed addition and renovations improved ADA accessibility, enhanced public meeting accommodations, and created a more functional workspace for staff and District operations all while preserving the integrity of the historic bank building structure.



The completion of the project reflects years of planning, financial stewardship, and determination by both current and former Board members who remained committed to seeing the project through despite significant setbacks and changing circumstances. The upgraded facility will help the District continue serving the public more effectively for many years to come.

# NEW IN 2026

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What's up and coming for 2026? In addition to the daily operations such as ditch maintenance, permitting regulations and oversight, and financial operations, the district highlights the following for 2026:



## 01 — Two new Project Teams

The Board of Managers continued advancing long-term flood damage reduction and water quality improvement efforts through the establishment of two new project teams during the year. Following strong attendance and participation at the January 29, 2026 project team meeting, consensus was reached to move forward with two distinct project concepts: the Bear Park Dam Modifications project and an Off-Channel Storage project. Both concepts received unanimous support from participating project team members and were recommended by staff for advancement.



## 02 — Partnerships

Staff relies on dedicated partners and will continue to foster the relationships with water management partners such as the Red River Basin Commission, the Flood Damage Reduction Work Group, Mn Watersheds, the Red River Watershed Management Board, the Drainage Work Group, Red River Retention Authority, other Red River Valley Watershed Districts and local government units (SWCD's, county's, etc.) and our state elected legislative officials. April Swenby, the district Administrator was appointed in 2024 to serve on the board of directors for the International Water Institute and continues to serve. She also serves on the Communications Committee for the Flood Damage Reduction Work Group. New in 2026, Swenby was appointed serve on the Executive Committee for MN Association of Watershed Administrators as Secretary representing Region 1 Watershed Districts.



## 03 — Special Recognition

Over the past six years, Craig Engelstad dedicated his time and service to the Sand Hill River Watershed District Board of Managers, serving from January 2020 through December 2025. During his tenure, Craig was part of many significant projects, infrastructure improvements, policy discussions, and long-term planning efforts that helped shape the future of the watershed district.

The District would like to thank Craig for his six years of dedicated public service and for the commitment he demonstrated to the residents, landowners, and communities within the Sand Hill River Watershed District.

In 2026, Todd Peterson will serve as a new manager for the district.

# ADMINISTRATIVE UPDATES

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- The Beaver Bounty Program was revised and the bounty was increased to \$125 per beaver. Townships are asked to pay \$10 per beaver and the district reimburses the Township \$115 per beaver.
- The district entered into a contract to rent office space to Country Side Crop Insurance to maximize the new space in the addition of the district office.
- The meeting space in the district building was optimized with several TV's and collaborative furnishings for a wide range of meetings held at the district office.
- Twenty-one drainage permits were received in 2025.
- Administrator April Swenby, applied to MN Governor's office to serve as a representative on the Clean Water Council for the state of MN. If selected she will represent all MN Watershed Districts and Watershed Management Organizations in the state of Minnesota.

**We thank you for your continued support  
for our efforts! You contribute to the  
success of the SHRWD.**

## Contact

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**Board managers are appointed by the Polk  
County Board of Commissioners annually.**

### **Managers serving in 2025 include:**

Stuart Christian, Chairman  
Don Andringa - Vice Chairman  
Shawn Brekke - Secretary  
Clayton Bartz - Treasurer  
Craig Engelstad - Manager