

Kandiyohi's keys to buffer compliance

Working together and listening to producers has turned potentially contentious issues into congenial discussion, resulting in a compliance rate nearing 99 percent



Ellie Dittes, left, of the Kandiyohi Soil & Water Conservation District, and Angelica Hopp, who works with Kandiyohi County's buffer and drainage programs, found communication between them and with producers was key in pursuing buffer compliance.
Courtesy Photos



Since the buffer law's public water compliance deadline has passed, Minnesota counties and soil and water conservation districts have found their stride managing compliance.

In Kandiyohi County, the SWCD's self-described "Buffer Lady" and the county's buffer compliance technician have developed a collaborative approach that works for them and for the landowners with whom they're exploring options.

Kandiyohi County chose to use part of its riparian aid funds to hire a new employee to manage some of its buffer and drainage programs. Angelica Hopp started in January 2018. She quickly began building a solid working relationship with Ellie Dittes, who started at Kandiyohi SWCD in spring 2017.

In her previous job as a private sector consultant, Hopp, who grew up on a farm, focused on the Natural

Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and its Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Both of those programs can be tapped for buffers' alternative practices.

Dittes had just graduated from Bemidji State University with a wildlife biology degree. She fields buffer-related questions, conducts site checks, offers technical assistance and cost-share options.

"I'm more seasoned and Ellie is not," Hopp said. "And we have different personalities. That, I think almost is the bottom line of why that works between us."

Dittes described herself as taking a quieter approach; Hopp described herself as pushy when necessary. Their shared goals: Offer assistance. Get to know the landowners and listen to their concerns. Arrive at a solution.

“ Giving them part of the decision-making ... at least it gives them an opportunity to have a say in what has to get done.

– Angelica Hopp, Kandiyohi County

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Kandiyohi County has a buffer compliance rate of nearly 99 percent on public waters.

The two communicated early and often. They established a flowchart outlining their roles, and organized how any enforcement would happen so that each party knew what to expect and what information was required to help make the process go as smoothly as possible.

Dittes determines if a parcel complies with the buffer law. If it doesn't, the landowner is notified. Hopp contacts the landowner, and offers to meet face to face to discuss alternatives. She and Dittes conduct site visits together — one more way in which they can ensure a consistent approach.

"I'm looking at this as a customer service position," Hopp said.

Together, Hopp and Dittes have helped to resolve more than 50 instances of noncompliance.

In the beginning, questions were the norm as Hopp and Dittes worked together and with other program staff. Hopp organized an informational meeting with county and SWCD staff members from Kandiyohi, Chippewa, Meeker, Renville and Swift counties. The buffer law has a lot of flexibility. But conservation workers agreed that similar situations should be handled in a similar fashion, and terminology should be used consistently.

Hopp and Dittes have spent many hours in the field and in the kitchens of

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Kandiyohi County farmers throughout the fall, winter and spring. Meeting face to face, listening to landowners and talking about options helped immensely in getting buy-in.

"I think a lot of our approach has been to talk to them, with them — not at them. Talk with them about, 'What do you think? What would you like to do?'" Hopp said. "Giving them part of the decision-making ... at least it gives them an opportunity to have a say in what has to get done."

Hopp recalled interactions with one landowner that started as "a bit inflamed" but, after three or four meetings in the field to discuss options, became friendly.

Dittes described her approach: "Just

getting to know the farmer and talking to them ... and knowing that you care about how they're doing."

As a result of the great effort by Kandiyohi County, the SWCD Board and these two motivated staff members, Kandiyohi County is currently sporting a compliance rate of nearly 99 percent on its public waters.

"Ellie and Angelica are an absolutely first-class example of local staff taking the time to work with and listen to landowners. They have done an amazing job and it's been a pleasure to work with them and help them along the way," said Tom Gile, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) buffers and soil loss operations supervisor.

The county is systematically going through redeterminations of benefits, and the buffers on the public drainage systems are coming along, too, with a Nov. 1, 2018, compliance date.

Kandiyohi County isn't alone. Efforts like this are happening throughout Minnesota. Buffer compliance rates continue to increase steadily. This is in large part because of the efforts of the farmers across the state stepping up and doing what it takes.

But it certainly doesn't hurt to have staff like Hopp and Dittes listening and working with them along the way.