

BWSR lauds Pope SWCD manager's big-picture view of conservation



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Fund AT WORK

Since 2014, with 11 BWSR Clean Water Fund competitive grants Pope SWCD has worked on 60 projects totaling 231 practices implemented and projects installed. Centered on lakes Minnewaska and Emily, Glenwood and the East Branch Chippewa River, they include erosion control structures, well sealings, manure pit closures, a wetland creation, shoreline and stormwater work; and prioritizing and targeting eight subwatersheds.

Pope Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) Manager Holly Kovarik knows the people, priorities and projects that drive conservation in Pope County — and how that work affects resources statewide.

"The priorities within (local watershed plans) fit into a bigger picture on a statewide and a national scale. The things we do here in the state of Minnesota affect the Gulf of Mexico. We do our part locally, and that fits into a bigger picture," Kovarik said.

"The goal is ultimately to make improvements in our resources," she said.

Kovarik was named the [2025 Outstanding SWCD Administrator](#) during the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts' annual convention Dec. 2 in Bloomington. Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson presented the award.

BWSR Board Conservationist Jason Weinerman nominated Kovarik.

"In my mind, what makes her an outstanding manager is she doesn't just look at her district. She looks at

“This is about all of us, not just me. The partnerships of our county, our local NRCS and Farm Service Agency and the people — it's humbling.

— Holly Kovarik, Pope SWCD manager

the larger, regional- and state-based conservation benefits. She participates in a lot of efforts and organizations that are outside the district. They benefit the district, but they also serve the larger conservation vision," Weinerman said.

Kovarik is the fiscal agent for the eight-county, 2,000-square-mile Chippewa River watershed partnership. She represented the state's SWCDs on the Clean Water Council for two four-year terms, starting in 2015.

"She's willing to step in and do the hard work of fighting for what she thinks is right. And she's got her heart and her ethical position in the right place. What she thinks is right is good for the entire conservation delivery system," Weinerman said.

Sometimes, Weinerman said, that means making sacrifices. Within watersheds, it's meant funding other

From left: Pope SWCD Manager Holly Kovarik inspected a project underway this fall with SWCD conservation technician Mason Stewart, left, and contractor Rick Erickson. Pope SWCD staff participated in September's Pope and Stevens County Water Fest. They are, from left: Stewart, Kovarik, resource and outreach technician Kimberly DeMorett, Chippewa River Watershed Coordinator Katie Disrud, habitat resource specialist Nicole Brede and conservation technician Christopher Borash. Kovarik and SWCD Board supervisors, from left, D. Gary Reents, Randy Pederson and Keith Nygaard attended the March 6 Soil and Water Conservation District's Day at the Minnesota State Capitol. **Photo Credits:** Pope SWCD

counties' priorities. Within the 12-county West Central Technical Service Area (TSA) 2, it's meant equipping Pope SWCD staff to relieve the burden on TSA 2 engineers.

"She's been very good at providing her staff with opportunities to go to trainings and work with TSA staff to learn the survey equipment and some of the simpler, lower-level (Job Approval Authority) projects," said West Central TSA engineer Ross Reiffenberger.

Reiffenberger said Kovarik's ability to describe exactly what a project will entail helps landowners decide if a project is a good fit.

Much of the Pope SWCD's recent water-quality work has centered on protecting Lake Minnewaska and restoring Lake Emily.

Since 2014, 11 Clean Water Fund grants from BWSR have supported 60 projects — including 231 practices and structures targeting Lake Minnewaska, Lake Emily and the East Branch Chippewa River, and within the city of Glenwood.

"Her collaboration with not only us but the Pope County residents to be able to get these projects implemented on the ground has been, I'd say, exceptional," Reiffenberger said. "Especially for an office that size, and her being able to spearhead that project workload."

In the past five years alone, the SWCD staff — six full-time and two to four seasonal employees — and Board of Supervisors have worked with landowners throughout the county to install nearly 60 projects.



Pope SWCD Manager Holly Kovarik accepted the award for 2025 Outstanding SWCD Administrator from BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson on Dec. 2 at the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) annual convention in Bloomington. **Photo Credit:** Mary Juhl, BWSR

"She does a good job for the landowners in Pope County," said Pope SWCD Board of Supervisors Chairman Keith Nygaard, noting Kovarik's upfront and honest yet personable approach. "At the end of the day, that's what it's all about, is your working relationship with the landowners. ... You've got to have private landowners wanting to do conservation."

One project often leads to another, and Kovarik, who grew up in Pope County, has worked with many repeat customers over the 22 years she has worked there — first as the Pope SWCD office manager, then as the Sauk River Watershed District administrator, and since 2013 as the Pope SWCD manager.

Her approach: Listen. Try

to understand landowners' concerns. Get to know them. Relay what the SWCD (or one of its partners) can offer. Follow through.

"If you're honest and straightforward, even in the most challenging of situations people can maybe eventually appreciate that," Kovarik said. The SWCD also deals with Wetland Conservation Act and Buffer Law compliance. "At the end of the day, while they might not like the outcome (I hope) that they feel like we handled them with respect and empathy. Compassion. ... Sometimes they just need to be heard."

Nygaard said Kovarik's No. 1 strength is her ability to communicate — with landowners, SWCD staff and supervisors, county commissioners and

departments, and partners within the Chippewa River, Sauk River and North Fork Crow River watersheds.

"I didn't do this alone. I have a supportive board behind me. Wonderful partners," Kovarik said. "When we help each other, we all win."

For example, a Pope County conservation project engineered by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff was uninterrupted by the 43-day federal shutdown this fall because SWCD staff arranged to temporarily pick up those duties.

The Chippewa River [Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan](#), which BWSR approved in August 2024, will guide much of the Pope SWCD's work through 2033.

Because Pope County had been targeting and prioritizing conservation efforts within eight lakesheds long before it received its first round of Watershed-Based Implementation Funding, the SWCD was prepared to implement projects once those funds became available.

"Wouldn't it be awesome in 10 years (to say) that we were able to delist impaired waters in our county, and (to) show it's because of the work we're doing with producers? That's the goal, to move that needle of progress," Kovarik said.

"Looking over a lifetime of work, did we leave things better? Did we make improvements?"

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.