

## Rice Creek Watershed District's Sommerfeld recognized for excellence in outreach, communications



From setting prescribed burns and restoring prairies to creating digital tools, crafting stories and explaining stormwater science through art, Rice Creek Watershed District (RCWD) Outreach and Communications Manager Kendra Sommerfeld's career took a sharp, unexpected turn.

After hands-on land management and restoration work early on, Sommerfeld found herself increasingly drawn to helping people understand and care about conservation in Minnesota. That motivation led to her current position and continues to drive her work at RCWD.

That work earned Sommerfeld the 2025 Outstanding Watershed Organization Employee Award from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson presented Sommerfeld with the award on Dec. 4 during Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference at Grand View Lodge in Nisswa.

Sommerfeld serves as a spokesperson for the RCWD and leads its outreach and communication strategies. She manages media and public engagement, coordinates project communications and works to strengthen relationships with local governments and



community organizations.

"I want to inspire other people to care about the environment and wildlife ... and for ourselves because we live on this planet," Sommerfeld said.

Sommerfeld earned a bachelor's degree in environmental science at the

**Top:** Rice Creek Watershed District (RCWD) staff celebrated the district's first public art project at Moore Lake Park in September 2025. RCWD Outreach and Communications Manager Kendra Sommerfeld (right) is shown with RCWD staff at the art installation, which was created in partnership with the city of Fridley. From left: RCWD outreach and grant technician Molly Nelson, RCWD project manager David Petry and RCWD administrator Nick Tomczik. Beyond this installation, Sommerfeld has supported three water-focused art workshops through White Bear Center for the Arts and launched a partnership with Springboard for the Arts to support artists creating water-centered community pieces. **Photo Courtesy of Kendra Sommerfeld**

**Bottom:** Sommerfeld accepted the award for 2025 Outstanding Watershed Organization Employee from BWSR Assistant Director for Regional Operations Justin Hanson on Dec. 4 at Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference in Nisswa. **Photo Credit:** Erin Loeffler, BWSR

University of Minnesota and earned a master's degree in natural resource management from Colorado State University in Fort Collins. She spent her early career as a field technician for private industry and nonprofit groups, including Great River Greening, The Nature Conservancy and Prairie Restorations Inc. Then she worked in project management at the Benton Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), aiming for a career with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources restoring prairies and streams.

But her path shifted in 2022, when she took the outreach and communications job with RCWD.

"I really like sharing the work that we do and breaking down these complex scientific things and projects so the public can understand," Sommerfeld said.

Sommerfeld noted the award highlighted a different side of water resource work.

"I know the last couple award-winners, and they were doing multimillion-dollar projects," Sommerfeld said. "It's hard to put a dollar amount on the work I do. The award brought light to a different program and a different piece of the water resource field."

She emphasized that outreach is essential for promoting the district's work and educating the public.

Many district projects, such as stormwater



Sommerfeld (left) and city of Fridley Environmental Planner Rachel Workin hosted a community shoreline planting at Moore Lake Park in Fridley with Blue Thumb – Planting for Clean Water in October 2025.

**Photo Courtesy of Kendra Sommerfeld**

infrastructure and flood mitigation systems, are physically out of sight.

"The things that we do are sometimes invisible, they can be underground and hard to visualize," Sommerfeld said. "Outreach and communication are where all of that is sort of brought to light. For every program and everything we do, there's always an outreach, communications or education component."

Over the past three years, Sommerfeld has helped transform the district's approach to outreach by building meaningful partnerships across the watershed's nearly 30 cities and townships in four metro-area counties. By meeting regularly one-on-one with city staff, she strengthened coordination around stormwater messaging, expanded outreach events and supported increased

project implementation across the district.

In 2024, Sommerfeld planned three major celebrations for Bald Eagle, Golden and Island lakes' removal from Minnesota's impaired waters list — coordinating communications and events across multiple cities, staff and lake associations.

RCWD Administrator Nick Tomczik, who has worked closely with Sommerfeld and was part of the team that hired her, said her work has shaped how the district approaches outreach and communications.

"The program has greater flexibility in its approach," Tomczik said. "Try new things and see where they go. If that is ineffective, let's try something else. So very much, staying well-informed of what is new in the field and how

might the district use it to fulfill its mission."

Tomczik pointed to Sommerfeld's work on the district's [Jones Lake flood mitigation and restoration project](#) as one example. Sommerfeld has helped develop and manage new ways to engage residents and landowners by using flood simulation tools that allow people to see how future rain events could affect their properties — and how the project is expected to reduce that flood risk.

"It's so hard to show people a flood mitigation project if there's not active flooding," Sommerfeld said. "These animation tools can literally simulate different flood scenarios. They help tell the story so well."

In addition to building partnerships with organizations such as the Freshwater Society, Friends of the Mississippi River, Springboard for the Arts and the White Bear Center for the Arts, Sommerfeld has led major digital and communication improvements at RCWD.

She oversaw RCWD's 2023 website redesign, improving access to permitting, projects and district information. During that period, annual website visits increased from 50,000 to 150,000. She significantly expanded RCWD's social media engagement, created the district's first communication protocol for projects, and developed its first ArcGIS StoryMaps and dashboards.

She contributed to RCWD's first climate

resiliency plan in 2023 and presented results at Minnesota Watersheds' annual conference and at the Minnesota Water Resources conference in 2024. The completed plan helped secure \$1.7 million from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in 2025 for the Jones Lake flood mitigation and restoration project.

Sommerfeld expanded RCWD's work with educators and schools, helped develop stormwater curriculum and supported the creation of "live classrooms" through rain gardens and native plantings. She introduced new practices that directly involve residents in water-quality grant projects, such as rain garden planting events, which have now become standard across the district.

Local workshop attendance has increased by 50% under her leadership, averaging 35 participants per session.



*Tour attendees posed during a Minnesota State Bonding Tour stop at Hansen Park in the city of New Brighton in November 2025. The Minnesota State Senate's Capital Investment Committee visited RCWD's Jones Lake flood mitigation and restoration project. From left: RCWD board manager Marcie Weinandt, Sommerfeld, Minnesota Rep. Matt Gottfried, RCWD administrator Nick Tomczik, RCWD project manager David Petry, Houston Engineering Inc. senior civil engineer Chris Otterness, city of New Brighton Director of Community Assets and Development Craig Schlichting and city of New Brighton Mayor Kari Niedfeldt-Thomas. Photo Courtesy of Kendra Sommerfeld*

Hosting workshops with cities at local stormwater sites has increased public visibility while supporting long-term community engagement.

One of Sommerfeld's proudest achievements is incorporating visual art into stormwater education. Sommerfeld created RCWD's visual arts media program in

2025 to integrate art into stormwater education. Full implementation is expected in 2026. She completed the district's first public art installation in Moore Lake Park in Fridley, where a giant frog sculpture connects habitat improvements to restored water quality, giving visitors a tangible way to understand stormwater management.

RCWD has another public art installation planned for later this year in the city of New Brighton at Hansen Park.

"Using art as a communication and outreach tool at RCWD is new way to connect, educate and inspire our communities throughout the watershed to care for our water resources," Sommerfeld said.

She serves as RCWD's in-house illustrator, producing custom graphics and hand-drawn artwork for project signs and educational materials.

"Kendra will take in information, and the next thing I see is an action in a direction to address the situation," Tomczik said. "Instead of pondering, she's action-oriented seeking success for the district."

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