

Well Aware program promotes well testing in northwestern Minnesota



The Well Aware program was partially funded by Watershed-Based Implementation Funding dollars. WBIF is supported by the Clean Water Fund.

Private well owners in northwestern Minnesota now have access to free water testing and groundwater education through a regional initiative aimed at ensuring the safety of drinking water.

The Well Aware program, part of the larger Northwest Minnesota Groundwater Initiative, provides testing for contaminants such as nitrates, bacteria, lead and arsenic; interprets the results; and offers treatment options.

“We have seen the need,” said Nicole Bernd, West Polk Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) manager. “People want to know more about their drinking water. They want to know what’s in their drinking water, and then what some of the mitigation processes are.”

The program delivers services through community water-testing clinics where residents can pick up free test kits, receive on-site nitrate testing, and learn about groundwater and water quality.

The initiative took root in 2024 during a meeting of the natural resources work group for the University of Minnesota Extension Northwest Regional Sustainability Development Partnership (RSDP) in Crookston, where participants realized the lack of regional programs or educational workshops focused on groundwater protection.

The group formed a steering committee and developed a strategic plan for what eventually became the Northwest Minnesota Groundwater Initiative. Well Aware emerged as the initiative’s signature program.

“The primary goal of these clinics is awareness,” Bernd said. “To get people to think about the groundwater. Think about what you’re drinking from.”

Well Aware partners include the West Polk SWCD, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the White Earth Reservation, the University of Minnesota’s Water Resources Center,

Crystal Rayamajhi (right), Northwest RSDP outreach specialist, explained how nitrates are detected in groundwater during an October 2025 Well Aware clinic. Local public health representatives and Minnesota DNR area hydrologist Brent Mason (end of table) also attended the clinic, held at E & J Grocery in Oklee.

Photo Credit:
Northwest RSDP



Left: From left: Brent Mason, Minnesota DNR hydrologist, and Shannon Stassen, Northwest RSDP executive director, demonstrated a groundwater model to two visitors alongside Crystal Rayamajhi, Northwest RSDP outreach specialist, at a Well Aware clinic at Hugo's Family Marketplace in Fosston. **Middle:** Rayamajhi demonstrated the groundwater model at a clinic during Earth Summit 2025 at White Earth Tribal & Community College in Mahanomen. **Photo Credits:** West Polk SWCD **Right:** From left: Zachary Paige, program coordinator for Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems with Northwest RSDP, explained the testing process; Rayamajhi shared information about the 10,000 Families Study, which examines how genetics, lifestyle and environmental factors affect health and cancer risk; and Kelsey Merkens, a public health nurse with Norman County Public Health, spoke with clinic attendees at the Grygla General Store in Grygla. **Photo Credit:** Northwest RSDP

Northwest RSDP, and county public health departments in Polk, Norman and Mahanomen counties. RMB Environmental Laboratories Inc. in Detroit Lakes provides the water-testing services.

Crystal Rayamajhi, an outreach specialist with the Northwest RSDP, helped to increase participation and test kit return rates.

Residents collect water samples from their private wells, and then return the kits for laboratory testing.

Typical test return rates hover around 18%, according to Rayamajhi. By incorporating participant pledges and follow-up communication, Well Aware clinics have seen return rates ranging from 50% to nearly 80%.

At Well Aware events, organizers set up informational tables in high-traffic areas such as grocery stores, where residents can stop by to ask questions and pick up test kits.

"We're trying to remove all the barriers," Rayamajhi said. "We're going to the community, giving out the test kits, sometimes at grocery stores, just catching people doing their normal day-to-day thing."

Each test kit typically costs about \$120. Well Aware makes them available for free to private well owners.

Demand has been strong. During the first clinic in November 2024 at Hugo's Family Marketplace in Fosston, organizers distributed all 30 test kits within two hours.

To date, 105 private well owners have received test kits during four clinics. Forty-six samples have been tested on site for nitrates. Funding totaling \$12,600 has supported the purchase of test kits.

Well Aware is not a formally funded state, federal or local government program. Instead, organizers have pieced together support through grants and partnerships to bring testing directly to residents.

Initial funding came from Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) awarded through the Clearwater River One Watershed, One Plan partnership, with West Polk SWCD covering the upfront cost of test kits and later being reimbursed.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources

(BWSR) administers WBIF, awarding state funds to local watershed partners to implement projects identified through regional watershed planning efforts.

Additional support came through Polk and Norman-Mahanomen Healthy Homes grants from the Minnesota Department of Health, which funded test kits for clinics held in Mahanomen, Grygla and Oklee in May, June and October 2025.

At each clinic, education is as important as testing. A groundwater model demonstration shows how water moves underground, and organizers discuss mitigation options such as reverse osmosis and filtration systems.

Rayamajhi said one of the biggest challenges is explaining the testing process.

By simplifying instructions and answering questions in person, the team works to make the process less intimidating.

Rayamajhi said arsenic is a significant concern in the region. Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) data show naturally occurring arsenic has been detected in groundwater across parts

of northwestern Minnesota, particularly in private wells. MDH maintains [public maps](#) documenting where arsenic has been detected in private wells statewide.

"If we find anybody with high arsenic and they get treated, you might have prevented someone from getting cancer. And even if you only do that for one person, it's worth it," Rayamajhi said.

Organizers say strong public interest has reinforced the value of the program.

Well Aware aims to hold two clinics each year, in the spring and in the fall. The team is currently planning a May clinic in Roseau County and is working with the Roseau County SWCD to explore funding for additional test kits.

For Rayamajhi, the long-term goal is clear.

"If we can raise awareness and slowly move the needle in these communities, we can help entire communities have better health," Rayamajhi said.

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