

FRESHWATER

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Freshwater Society is a nonprofit organization working to inspire and empower people to value and preserve our freshwater resources.

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March 24, 2021

House Taxes Committee

RE: HF 1733, related to Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Dear Chair Marquart and Committee Members:

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are essential partners in the work to protect and restore Minnesota's waters. They engage directly with farmers, foresters, other local governments, and landowners to identify problems, provide technical and financial assistance, and implement the projects that make cleaner water and healthier soils a reality.

Given their vital role—one that existed before the Clean Water Land and Legacy amendment and one that will continue long past the Clean Water Fund (CWF) sunsets in 2034—it is unfortunate that SWCDs have found themselves in a position of extreme budget uncertainty for the last few biennia. Despite never being included in the Clean Water Council's budget recommendations for CWF appropriations, SWCDs have been funded through the CWF as a short-term solution in the last few budgets.

We appreciate that in HF 1733, there is an effort being made to find a permanent, stable funding source devoted to SWCDs outside the CWF. That consistency of funding is crucial to allow SWCDs the ability to more deeply engage in the long-term planning and relationship building that is necessary to strategically pursue opportunities to advance conservation goals. This also opens up the ability to use CWF dollars, as intended, to go above and beyond and supplement existing programs.

If base funding for SWCDs comes from the CWF this year, we encourage the Legislature to once again incorporate the payback provision that has been attached to that funding in the past. We also encourage the Legislature to continue to work with State Agencies, the Governor, and stakeholders to find a permanent funding solution for SWCDs in the next year so that this discussion is not delayed until the budget cycle, when meaningful stakeholder involvement and creativity is limited by the confines and logistics of a legislative session. Whether that funding come from fees, is shifted back to the General Fund, or is found in other ways—we are committed to seeing the recent use of the CWF come to an end.

With gratitude,

John Linc Stine, Executive Director
Dr. Carrie Jennings, Research and Policy Director
Jen Kader, Senior Program Manager

