

Planned eLINK updates respond to growth, need

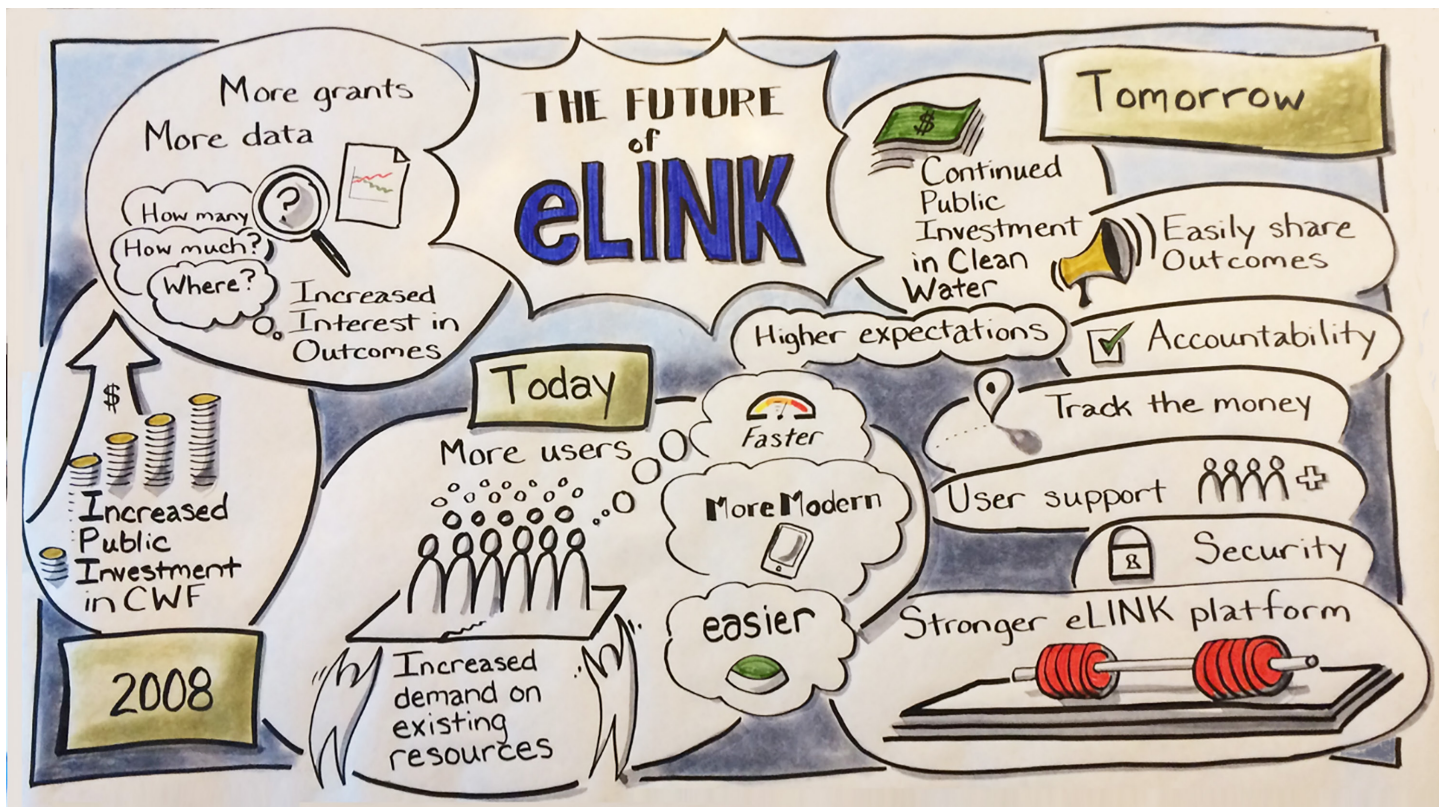


Illustration Credit: Gwen Steel, BWSR

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is working to develop an updated version of eLINK – the agency’s custom conservation tracking and grants management system – by 2022.

The eLINK system plays a critical role in BWSR’s grant delivery processes and in implementing conservation throughout the state. Grant reporting is an important part of overseeing state grant funds and demonstrating the value of conservation projects to Minnesota taxpayers. The eLINK system allows BWSR and local government partners to track conservation projects and grants, indicators and pollution reduction benefits, and cumulative grant funding over a period of years. Users map the project location, and the geospatial

data can then be aggregated and analyzed at the county, watershed or statewide level. This data is made available to the public through the Minnesota Geospatial Information Office’s [Geospatial Commons](#) and has been used by other state agencies and stakeholders to assess progress toward water quality goals.

A growing user base has increased demands on eLINK’s infrastructure, making system speed, stability and security more important than ever. BWSR staff began planning a significant upgrade in 2017. Plans are now underway to ensure that infrastructure priorities and BWSR’s changing business needs are met by the next generation of eLINK.

BWSR started collecting measurable

reporting outcomes in 1997. The reporting process has evolved from a floppy disk and DOS-based database to today’s web-based eLINK system. The first version of eLINK launched in 2003. An update added web-based capabilities in 2009.

Launched in 2013, the current iteration of eLINK added integrated workflow. It allowed government users to submit funding requests, receive grant agreements, build work plans and submit progress reports.



BWSR offers more than 30 unique grant programs and executes more than 1,000 individual grants each year – which staff can monitor efficiently through eLINK. Automated electronic notifications alert users when action is needed. This system has allowed BWSR to more easily query data, respond to public data requests, streamline audits and complete statutory requirements.

In the seven years since the current eLINK system launched, modules have been added to meet statutory requirements and BWSR's changing business needs. Examples include adding fields to accommodate the needs of new grant programs and integrating amendment and payment tracking. New features have been added to better monitor grant compliance and meet Office of Grants Management directives. A Biennial Budget Request tool and the ability to track Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan affiliation were also added.

A Technical Training module was added in 2019. It's used by staff from soil and water conservation districts, technical service areas



BWSR Board Conservationist Matt Fischer participates in a brainstorming session at BWSR's central office about the next generation of eLINK in March 2017. Photo Credit: BWSR

and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The module allows staff to create and update Individual Development Plans, view their current NRCS Job Approval Authority, track training attendance and submit training requests to the Technical Training and Certification Program.

Through focus groups and a survey, BWSR fine-tuned the eLINK update. Focus groups with local government and BWSR staff were held beginning in 2017. Local government eLINK users were also invited to take a

survey about their available technology and what they would like to see in the new system.

"I am really looking forward to the improved mapping systems and possible paperless system," said Nathan Hylla, project management supervisor for Stearns County SWCD, who participated in a focus group. "In the past, eLINK has sometimes been clunky and slow. But recently, I have noticed improvements in functionality and speed. eSignatures will also help improve efficiency and delivery of grant



agreements."

Opportunities for improvement in the new system include ensuring that local governments can easily query and extract any grant data they have entered; integrating electronic signatures and document routing; expanding GIS import, export and viewing capabilities; and integrating a dashboard that clearly shows where a user's action is required. One theme that emerged from the focus groups and survey: Users wanted to retain a similar look and feel – with more obvious indicators of required action, and with fewer clicks required to access record details.

Overall, BWSR is striving to make the system more intuitive and streamlined, while offering more features that users have come to expect in software applications they use every day. Behind the scenes, BWSR intends to deploy a robust and secure underlying platform that will hold up to ever-changing technology and meet users' needs and expectations.