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Minnesota Department of Transportation partners with farmers to help keep snow off the roads

A farmer in West Concord, Minnesota, said participating in the MnDOT program is not just as an investment for public safety, but also as a good alternative revenue stream.



A snow fence on the farm of Tim McDonough of Kellogg, Minnesota, who began to partner with MnDOT on a snow fence when his father was approached by MNDOT staff in 2018. For the snow fence, McDonough leaves two sets of six rows of corn standing, totalling 1.8 acres.
Contributed / Minnesota Department of Transportation

By [Noah Fish](#)

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Farmers play a role with the Minnesota Department of Transportation in keeping snow off the roads.

MnDOT works with farmers who have fields adjacent to highways to create living snow fences by leaving rows of corn standing or stacked bales by the road.

(<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/environment/livingsnowfence/>) These fences help trap snow and deposit it into ditches instead of blowing onto the roadway. The goal is to create drift-free roads, which according to MnDOT are achievable through proper road design and snow fences.

Dan Gullickson, blowing snow control shared services supervisor for MnDOT, said that living snow fences come in many different shapes and forms.

“(Living snow fences) can be strategically planted trees and shrubs and native grasses and wildflowers that are out there 24/7, year after year, to help to control the blowing snow,” said Gullickson. “It could also be working with farmers to leave standing corn rows in their field, or bales strategically placed that can help catch that wind driven snow.”

Statewide, Gullickson said that MnDOT has contracts with 300-350 farmers for living snow fences. Julie Dodge, the coordinator for snow fences in MnDOT’s District 6, which covers 11 counties in southeast Minnesota, said there are 12 farmers in the district that partner with MnDOT on snow fences.

“That’s 4.26 miles,” said Dodge of the snow fences in the district.

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Gullickson said that MnDOT's maintenance staff targets spots of roadway that are lacking coverage and where drifting can be an issue, and farmers within those targeted areas are eligible to participate in the program.

"Our snowplow operators, going back to 2000-2001, began to map where our problem areas are with GPS along our highways," said Gullickson. "And statewide along our highways, we have about 1,000-plus miles of where the wind is a problem along our highway network."

He said that snowplow operators talking to adjacent landowners where drifting problems occur is MnDOT's best form of outreach.

"One of the things that we know is that a lot of farmers and landowners don't typically work with MnDOT, so there is this lack of familiarity with working with us," said Gullickson. "And so that's where our plow operators talking to farmers, and having farmers reach out to us and say, 'Hey, we live in the community, and we've seen this drifting problem, and we would like to be part of the solution.'"



A snow fence on the farm of Bill Smith of West Concord, Minnesota, who began to partner with MnDOT on a snow fence in 2017 when he heard about the program in the local newspaper. Smith said that his fence type is six rows of corn that are left up, with another eight rows separated with 24 rows in between them, totalling 4.8 acres.
Contributed / Minnesota Department of Transportation

For deciding how much to compensate participating farmers, MnDOT uses a specific calculator to look at what percentage of farmland they could employ as a snow fence, and how much it would cost for the farmer to lose that amount of production. The calculator also takes into account how much savings the state could accrue in plowing and salt distribution.

Gullickson said that for standing corn rows, a statewide average payment from MnDOT is around \$1,600 an acre.

“The farmer has chemical, fertilizer, seed cost, land rent or other land costs, and there's the labor associated with having to go out there and grow that crop. So that \$1,600 an acre helps offset some of those costs along the way,” said Gullickson. “And they get to keep the corn, because we're just interested in the stalks, because it's the stalks that are going to catch the wind, and going to hold the snow, and they can utilize that corn.”

Farmers participating in the program are required to register as state vendors, so they can be paid through the Statewide Integrated Financial Tools system. For standing corn rows or stacked bales, MnDOT enters into a short-term (one winter season) agreement with farmers, and payments are made at the end of winter.

Mike Dougherty, MnDOT director of public engagement and communications, said in the past, farmers have gotten volunteers from FFA, 4-H, and even once a high school girls basketball team to do the handpicking of the corn.

“We’ve had a couple instances down here where a farm group or an FFA group, or one time it was the Wabasha-Kellogg girls basketball team that came out, and the farmer paid them a certain amount to handpick that corn in the fall,” said Dougherty. “So the farmer is getting some compensation, and they know they're doing well, and then they also give back to a community youth group that's involved in agriculture.”

Testimonies

Tim McDonough of Kellogg, Minnesota, began to partner with MnDOT on a snow fence when his father was approached by MNDOT staff in 2018. For the snow fence, McDonough leaves two sets of six rows of corn standing, totaling 1.8 acres. The corn is handpicked by local school groups in the fall, and McDonough said the blowing and drifting snow problems have been "exponentially" improved. While vehicles going in the ditch had been frequent, it has now been eliminated, he said. McDonough has also seen an improvement to dust blowing during the fall and spring field work.

Bill Smith of West Concord, Minnesota, began to partner with MnDOT on a snow fence in 2017 when he heard about the program in the local newspaper. Smith said that his fence type is six rows of corn, totaling 4.8 acres. He said the annual rental agreement covers the cost of the corn that is left standing, but salvaging the remaining corn in the spring allows for extra income beyond the regular rental payment. For someone thinking of adding a snow fence, Smith suggests they consider

it not just as an investment for public safety, but also as a good alternative revenue stream.

“The rental payments that are offered can act as a buffer to volatile commodity prices,” said Smith.

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By **Noah Fish**

Noah Fish is a multimedia journalist who creates print, online and TV content for Agweek. He's also the host of the Agweek Podcast. He covers a wide range of farmers and agribusinesses throughout Minnesota and surrounding states. He can be reached at nfish@agweek.com

He reports out of Rochester, MN, where he lives with his wife, Kara, and their polite cat, Zena. He grew up in La Crosse, WI, and enjoys the talent from his home state like the 13-time World Champion Green Bay Packers and Grammy award-winning musicians Justin Vernon and Al Jarreau.

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