



LOWER MINNESOTA RIVER
WATERSHED DISTRICT

2020 Fen Well Monitoring Report



Prepared for the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District
by Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District



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Introduction

The Minnesota River corridor, just upstream of the confluence with the Mississippi River, is a unique habitat consisting of calcareous fens, intersected with small trout streams (see map in Appendix 1). Flora and fauna of the fens and streams rely on groundwater input to maintain water levels and provide cool water. The abundance of dissolved minerals, particularly calcium carbonate, causes the water to be more alkaline (higher pH), a typical signature of streams and wetlands with a significant groundwater influence. This calcium-rich environment supports highly diverse and unique rare plant species.



As a result of development in the area, little natural fen remains and there is concern over the quality of the fen habitat and the ability to support the wildlife that is well adapted to its unique characteristics. Groundwater pumping, infrastructure, and stormwater input have had a noticeable effect on water quality and quantity. Several assessments of this natural resource and the need for continued monitoring were done, and in 2007 the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District began working with the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District to conduct annual fen well monitoring.



Weather Summary

Monthly precipitation data was retrieved from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) [website](#) for the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport weather station (Figure 1).

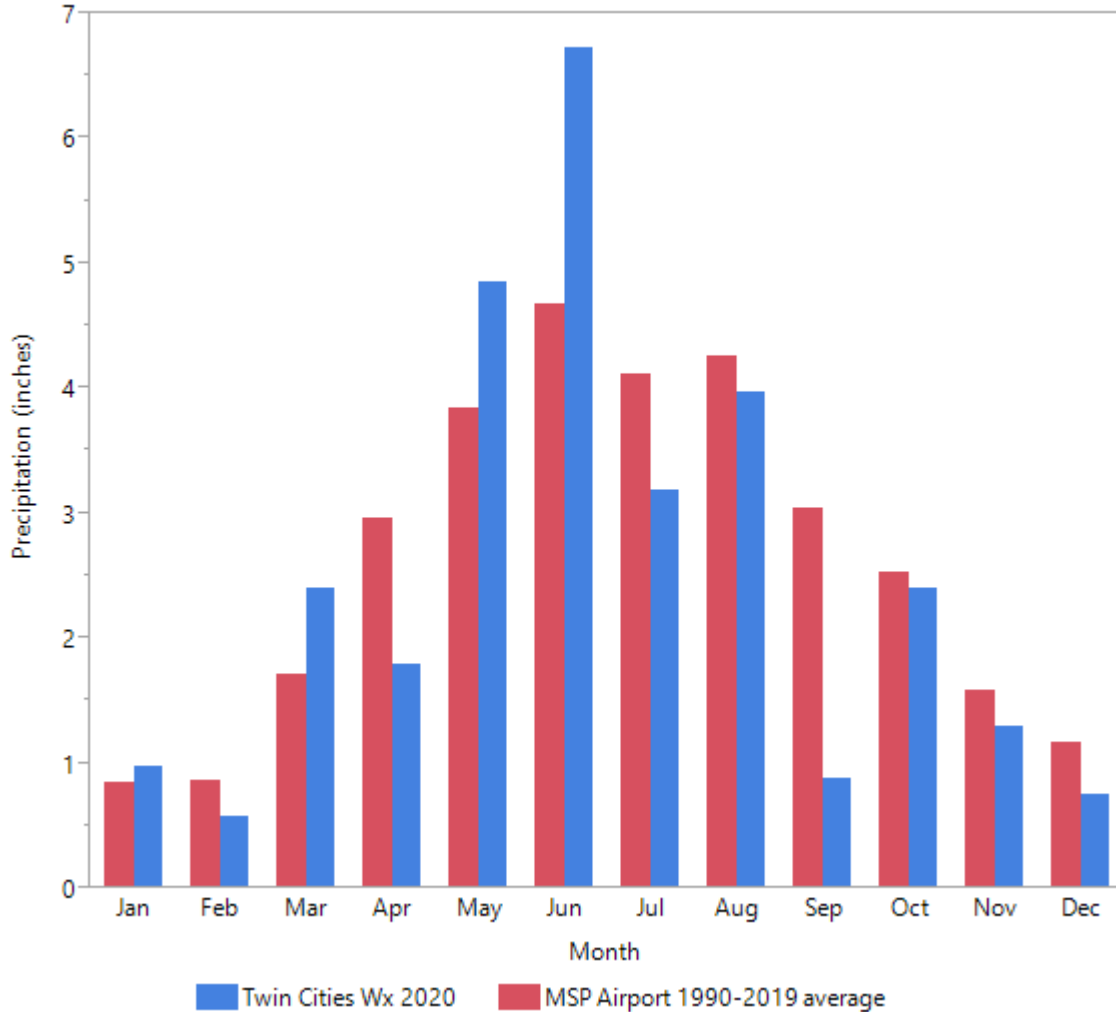


Figure 1. Monthly rainfall (blue) and 30-year (1990-2019) monthly average precipitation at Minneapolis/St. Paul weather station, data courtesy of the MNDNR.

In 2020, precipitation was below the 30-year average for each month except January, March, May, and June. Even with the large rain events in May and June, the abnormally dry fall kept the annual precipitation below the 30 year average (Figure 2).

Since 2006, there have been a mix of years with precipitation above (2007, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) and below (2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2020) the 30-year average, as shown in Figure 2

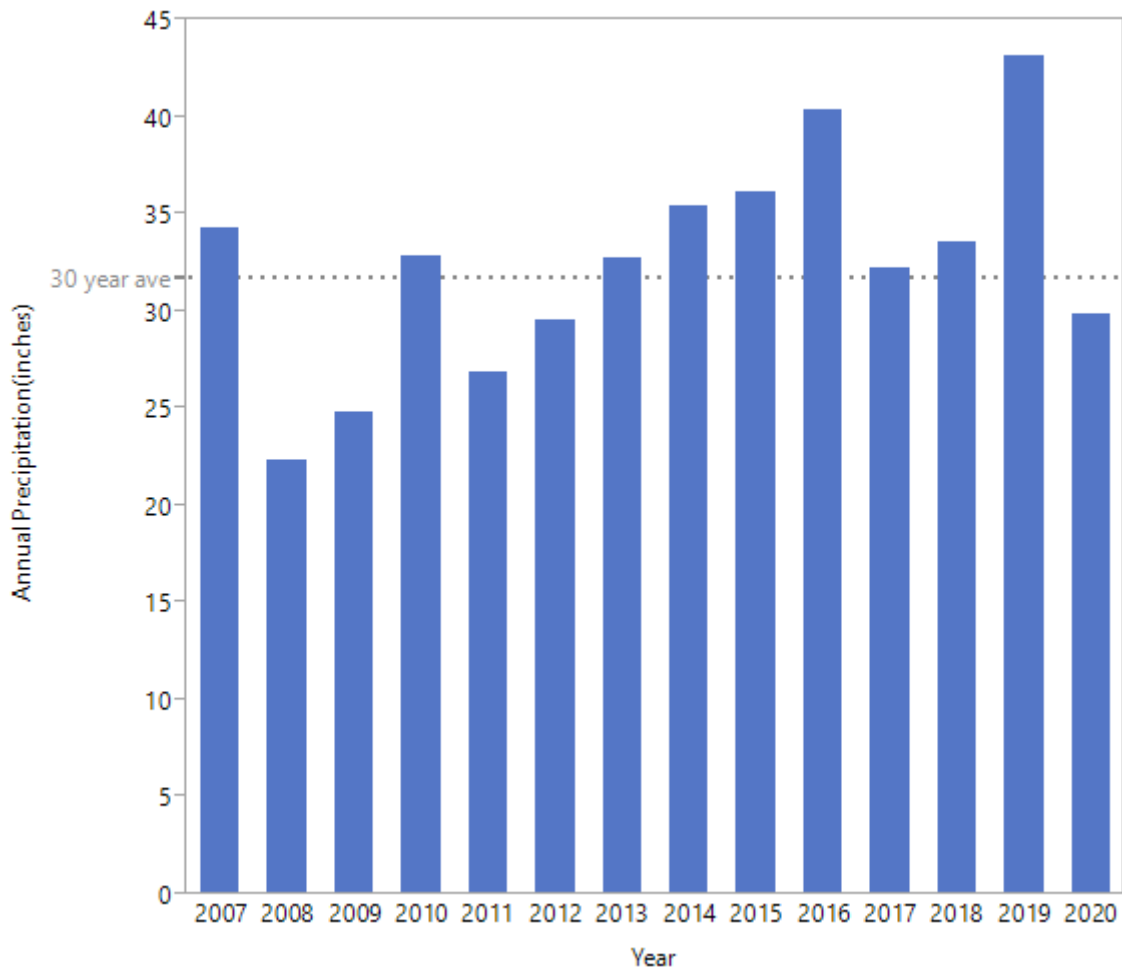


Figure 2. Total rainfall (inches) from 2007-2019 at Minneapolis/St. Paul weather station, data courtesy of the MNDNR. Gray dotted line indicates the 30-year (1990-2019) total annual average precipitation of 31.7 inches.

In the Quarry Island and Fort Snelling fens, well water level does not seem to change much as a result of precipitation in previous or current years. Water levels in some of the wells does seem to be going up, but that doesn't appear to be influenced seasonally or annually.

Historically, the Nichols wells appeared to be heavily influenced by precipitation. According to the “Environmental Monitoring of Nichols Fen” study conducted in 2008 by WSB & Associates, Inc., the Nichols fen has an 18-24 month response time to precipitation. Monitoring data supports that idea that a year with higher well level measurements was preceded by a year when total precipitation was above average. Alternatively, years with lower well level measurements were preceded by years in which total precipitation was below average.

Results from 2020 are less conclusive as to the impact that rainfall has on water levels. We saw a large increase in the amount of rain between 2018 and 2019, but well readings in 2019 and 2020 do not show

as great of a variability as we would expect them to if rainfall influence was still high. Water levels at some wells appear to be rising overall so that could be a factor.

Methods

Fen wells were monitored on a monthly basis from March through December 2007 through 2020 (no monitoring was undertaken in 2014). The monitoring network consists of two wells in the Quarry Island fen, 13 wells in the Fort Snelling fen, and 13 wells in the Nichols fen for a total of 28 wells.

A Solinst Water Level Meter (Model 101) was used to measure the distance from the benchmark at the top of the well casing down to the water surface. Data was later transcribed into mean sea level and reported as elevation, in feet. In cases where the water level was “flowing” or too shallow to measure, the elevation of the pipe casing was used. In cases where the water in the pipe was frozen, no level data was recorded. See figures captions and fen grouping summaries for more description.

Data are reported to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and can be retrieved by following this link (<http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/waters/cgm/index.html>).

Interpreting Statistical Values

Kendall’s tau (T) test is commonly used to evaluate monotonic trends in water quality data as a function of time. Most generally, it is a test for whether well elevations tend to increase or decrease with time. The test determines which wells are significantly trending, but does not seek to explain the cause of the trend.

The P-value is used to quantify the statistical significance of the data. It shows the likelihood that the null hypothesis is true; i.e., there is no change in well level over time. A P-value of 0.001 means there is a 0.1% probability that there is no change in well level over time. Since this probability is so small, it indicates that the pattern in the data would be highly unlikely if there was no trend (change in level over time). Thus we can reject the null hypothesis and be fairly confident that there is a change in well level over time. Generally, a P-value below 0.05 is acceptable.

The Pearson correlation coefficient (R) is used to describe the noisiness and direction of a linear relationship. If the well level is decreasing over time there will be a negative R value close to -1, if the well level is increasing over time there will be a positive R value close to 1. If there is no clear linear trend and points are scattered around the line, the R value will be close to 0.

The coefficient of determination (R^2) is a measure of how well the predicted regression line approximates the observed data points. Data that are closely associated with the line have an R^2 close to 1, while data that are very scattered around the line have an R^2 close to 0. R^2 does not indicate whether the independent variables are a cause of the changes in the dependent variable; and thus, R^2 alone cannot be used to determine if a variable is significantly trending (up or down) or not.

Fen Well Monitoring Results and Discussion

Several statistical parameters were calculated to determine if well levels were significantly increasing or decreasing with time (Table 1). Linear regressions for each dataset are shown in Appendix 3. MNDNR visited the fen wells in September 2016 and recorded new elevations for 21 of the 28 wells. Elevations at seven wells in the Fort Snelling fen did not change as they are installed on more stable ground that does not experience seasonal and annual shifts.

Table 1. Water level trends over time for each fen well. Statistics are included only for those wells in which P-values were statistically significant. ¹No clear trend although the P-value is acceptable, the R and R² values do not indicate a strong trend and more data is needed.

	Well	Trend	Kendall's T, P-value	R	R ²
Quarry Island	P1-S	No clear trend			
	P1-D	No clear trend	-0.1863, <0.0042*	-0.063	0.12
Fort Snelling	N3	Increasing	0.4963, <0.0001*	0.5277	0.425
	N4	Increasing	0.5357, <0.0001*	0.5075	0.495
	N5	Increasing	0.4955, <0.0001*	0.4561	0.393
	W1	No clear trend ¹	0.376, <0.0001*	0.1277	0.174
	W2	No clear trend ¹	0.3823, <0.0001*	0.1538	0.171
	W3	No clear trend ¹	0.3319, <0.0001*	0.247	0.175
	W4	No clear trend			
	S1-USGS	No clear trend			
	S1	No clear trend	0.1396, 0.0296*	0.246	0.11
	S2-USGS	No clear trend ¹	0.4729, <0.0001*	0.6102	0.04
	S2	No clear trend ¹	0.3936, <0.0001*	0.7417	0.57
	S3-USGS	No clear trend ¹	0.4573, <0.0001*	0.6442	0.19
S3	No clear trend ¹	0.4111, <0.0001*	0.4238	0.01	
Nichols	1LN	Increasing	0.5656, <0.0001*	0.8179	0.44
	1LS	No clear trend ¹	0.3428, <0.0001*	0.4522	0.02
	F3	No clear trend ¹	0.6307, <0.0001*	0.7887	0.07
	F4	No clear trend ¹	0.5835, <0.0001*	0.5778	0.01
	WN1-USGS	No clear trend ¹	0.3193, <0.0001*	0.097	0.17
	WN5-USGS	Increasing	0.6122, <0.0001*	0.8021	0.06
	WT-1	No clear trend	0.1614, 0.0072*	0.2608	0.04
	WT-2	No clear trend ¹	0.419, <0.0001*	0.6307	0.04
	WT-3	No clear trend ¹	0.4265, <0.0001*	0.6731	0.06
	WT-4	No clear trend ¹	0.4517, <0.0001*	0.633	0.48
	WT-5	No clear trend ¹	0.4193, <0.0001*	0.5915	0.3
	F1	No clear trend ¹	0.4253, <0.0001*	0.6055	0.04
F2	No clear trend ¹	0.3479, <0.0001*	0.4734	0.21	

Quarry Island

The Quarry Island Fen had originally been part of the larger Snelling Fen complex and was cut off during the construction of Highway 494 and watershed development. There may be little potential for restoration in the fen as the watershed is largely developed already.

The shallower well (P1-S) monitors water level in the peat layer while the deeper well (P1-D) monitors the layer immediately below the peat. Water levels in the Quarry Island Fen appear to be decreasing over time (though individual monitoring events showed some variability) and show some annual seasonality with measurements collected in the early fall having the lowest level measurements (Figure 3).

MNDNR visited the fen wells in September 2016 and recorded a new elevation for both wells. Beginning in October 2016, water levels have been adjusted to reflect the new elevations (demarcated by red line). In 2020, the data showed a much higher degree of variability than in previous years. Continued monitoring is necessary to determine if a downward trend for P1-S and P1-D are statistically supported by the data (no clear trend at this time).

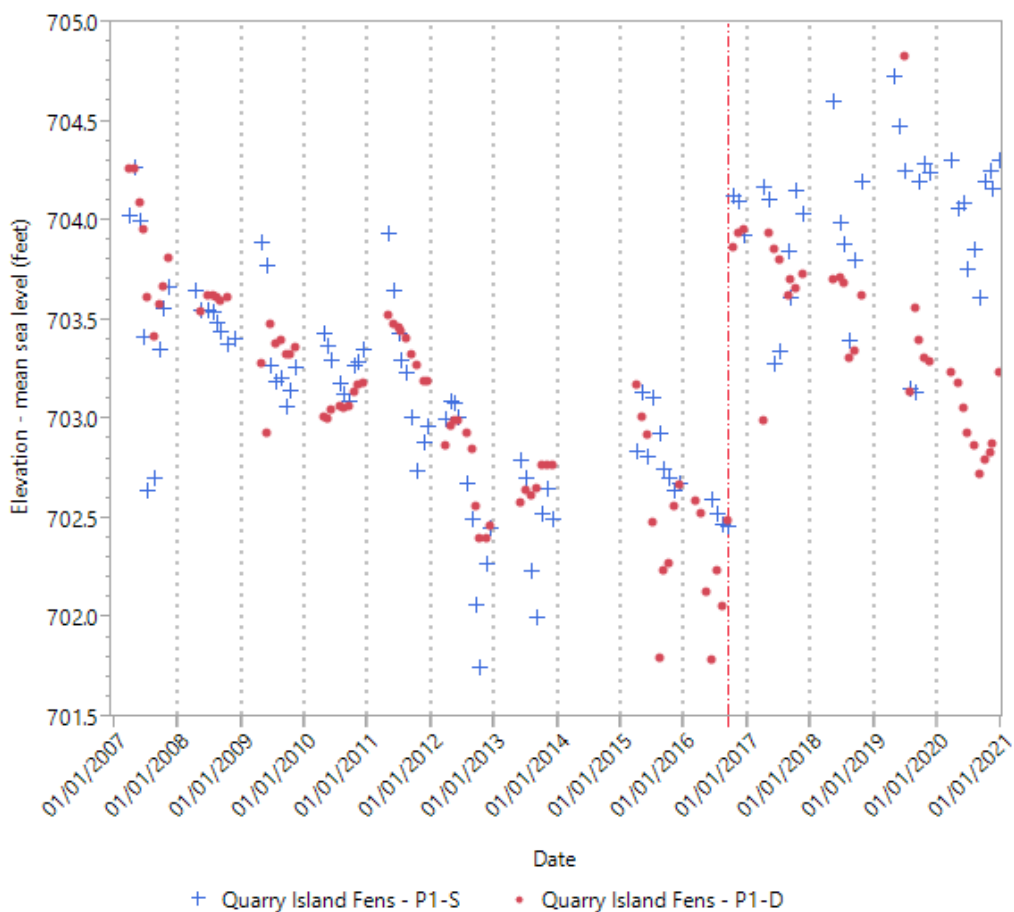


Figure 3. Water level elevation for Quarry Island Fen wells.

Fort Snelling

The Fort Snelling fen is of good quality and seems to be quite stable (Figure 4). MNDNR visited the fen wells in September 2016 and recorded a new elevation for the S# and S#-USGS wells. Beginning in October 2016, there is a visible shift in the water levels of the walls to reflect the new elevations (demarcated by red line). S1-USGS has historically shown a downward trend in water level, but statistical analysis following the elevation change does not support that conclusion at this time. Continued monitoring of the Fort Snelling fen will strengthen trend analyses and allow for any degradation to be more quickly recognized and addressed.

Over time, N3, N4, and N5 show seasonal changes in water levels, but an overall increasing trend.

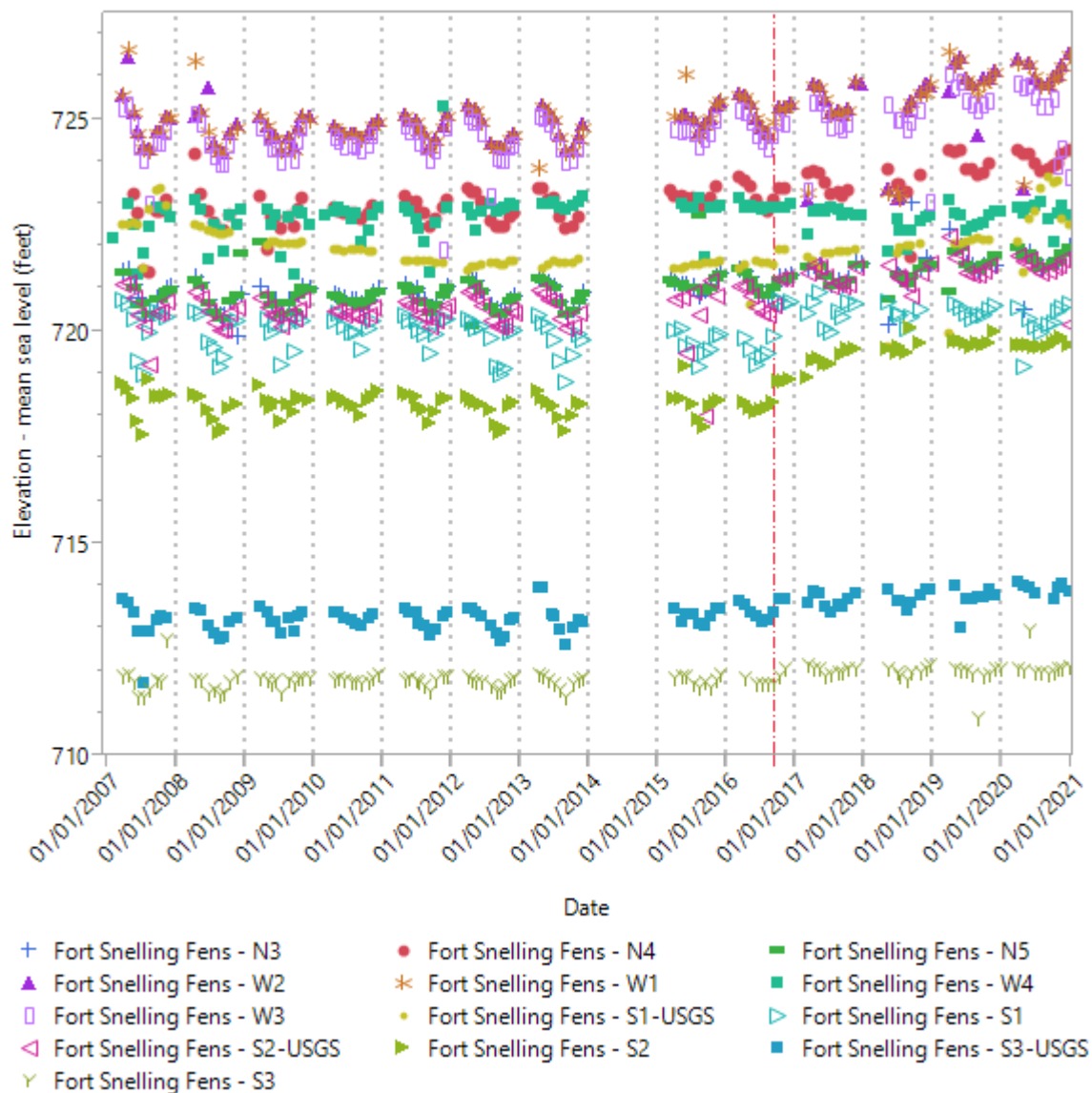


Figure 4. Water level elevation for the Fort Snelling fen wells. At well S3-USGS, when the water was overflowing, the elevation of the top of the pipe (Historical - 713.97 and 2016 – 714.18) was recorded. See individual well graphs in Appendix 3.

Nichols

Figures 5-7 summarize the results of the fen well level measurements from 2007 through 2020 (no data were collected in 2014). Data are presented across several figures for clarity and grouping is based on proximity, not hydrologic characteristics.

Historically, several of the wells have shown increasing trends. Unfortunately, since the elevation change, only two of the wells (1LN and WN5-USGS) are showing any sort of trend in water level. Both 1LN and WN5-USGS are showing increasing trends currently.

MNDNR visited the fen wells in September 2016 and recorded a new elevation for both well. Beginning in October 2016, water levels have been adjusted to reflect the new elevations (demarcated by red line). Prior to the survey effort, wells F3, F4, WN1-USGS, and WN5-USGS showed significant increasing trends in the data well measurements due to elevated water levels in 2011 and 2013 that were higher than in other years. The two years prior, 2010 and 2012, had higher than average total precipitation. Water levels in 2018 were elevated, much like in 2011 and 2013, which is consistent with the theory that heavy rainfall the previous year contributed to elevate measurements during the field season as rainfall was above average in 2017. Water levels at F2 had been trending upwards starting in 2013 after low values measured in 2012 (following a below average total rainfall year in 2011). Longer datasets for these wells will help to determine if there is a long-term increasing or decreasing trend, and will be less heavily influenced by one to two, wet or dry years.

Each of the wells seems to show some amount of seasonality on an annual basis with late summer having the lowest level measurements and early spring and summer having higher levels.

With the change in known well elevations in this fen, continued monitoring is necessary to improve confidence in the historical trends and determine if there is long-term drawdown of the water table as a result of watershed impacts or if the groundwater levels in the Nichols fen are recovering and stabilizing.

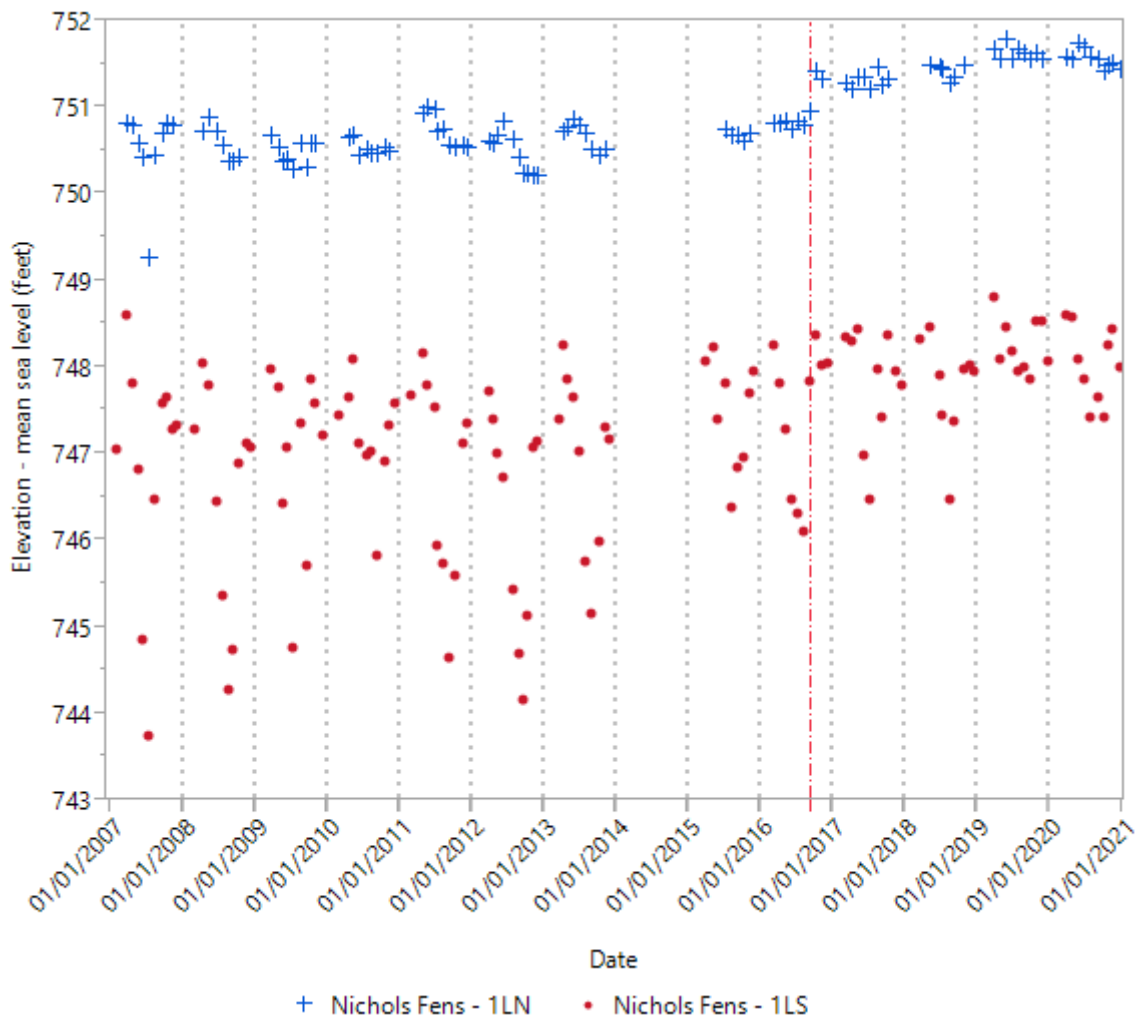


Figure 5. Water level elevation for the Nichols Fen wells (set 1 of 3).

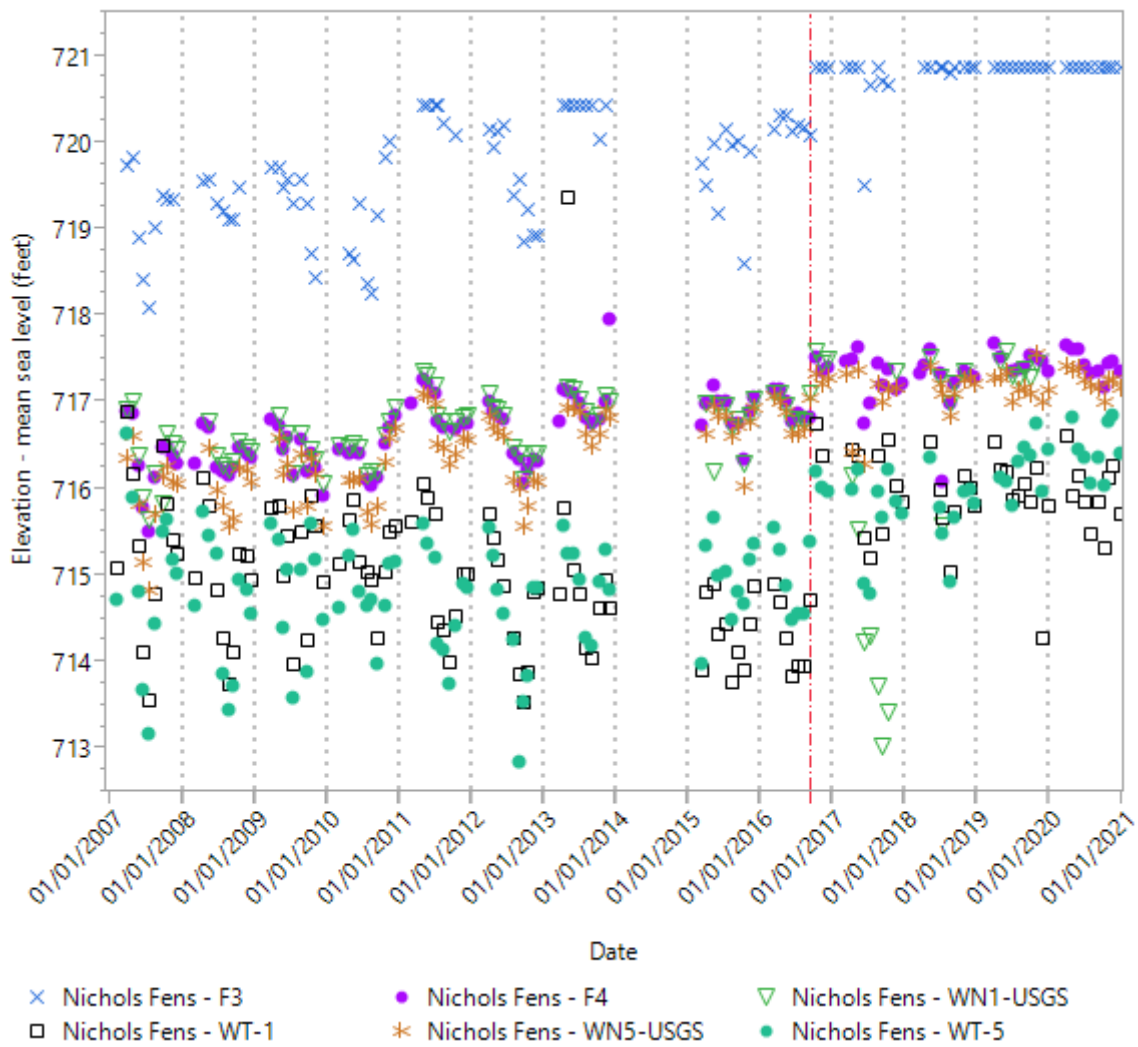


Figure 6. Water level elevation for the Nichols Fen wells (set 2 of 3). At well F3 and WT-1, the water was often overflowing and the elevation of the top of the pipe (F3: Historical - 720.43 and 2016 – 720.88; WT-1: Historical - 719.37 and 721.25) was recorded. See individual well graphs in Appendix 3.

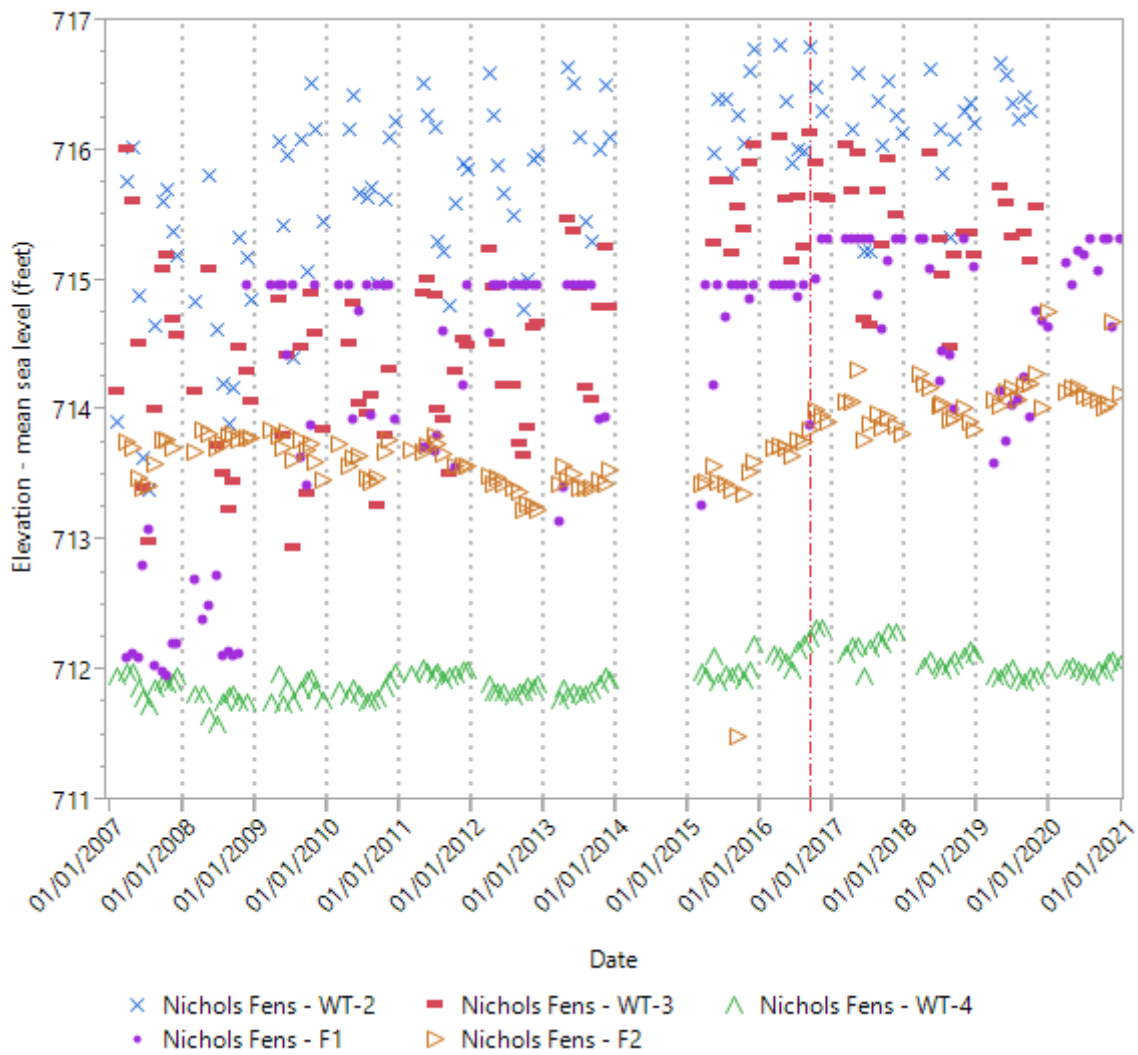


Figure 7. Water level elevation for the Nichols Fen wells (set 3 of 3). At well F1, the water was often overflowing and the elevation of the top of the pipe (Historical - 714.97 and 2016 – 715.32) was recorded. See individual well graphs in Appendix 3.

Conclusion

Due to the resurveying of well elevations in the fall of 2016, it is difficult to determine trends in groundwater levels as the data record is now only two years for the majority of the wells in the three fens along the Minnesota River. The data record at the seven wells that were not resurveyed in 2016 was maintained through the 2020 monitoring season. Three of those wells (N3, N4, N5) show an increasing trend in groundwater level. Continued monitoring is recommended as the data set is limited.

Two of the wells that was surveyed in 2016 shows a significant trend in water level in 2018 (ILN, W5-USGS; increasing). Continued monitoring is a must for all of these wells as more data is needed to reestablish trends calculated during the monitoring effort that occurred in the years before the survey.

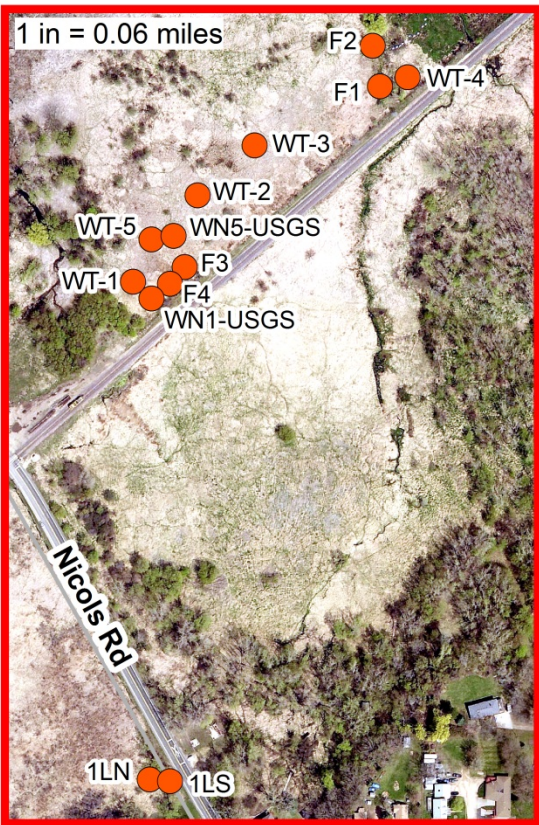
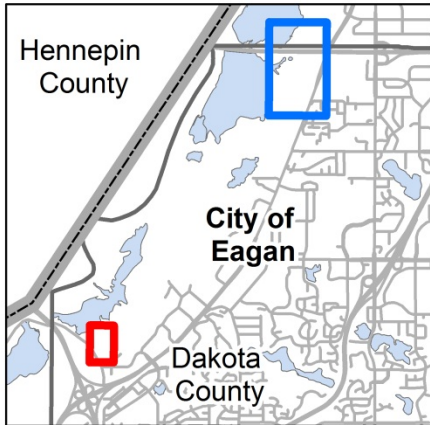
Three wells (WT-2, WT-3, WN1-USGS) were not monitored in 2020 due to lack of access (cap stuck). DCSWCD staff will work with partners to improve conditions during the 2021 season.

When evaluating groundwater levels in a fen, it is important to consider that seasonal changes in temperature, precipitation, flow, etc., can influence fen well water levels, especially over short periods of time. For some of the fen wells, water levels fluctuate seasonally, as well as annually, based on current and past weather patterns. Above average precipitation years seem to be followed by higher well level measurements during subsequent years. The opposite is also true when total annual precipitation is below average.

Longer datasets are needed to confirm degradation or stability of fens (such as for the Quarry Island fen and Fort Snelling fen, respectively), and also to determine if the Nichols Fen is recovering or if the historical increasing trend at many of the wells is just an artifact of the recent wetter than average years.

Appendix 1: Map of Fen Well Monitoring Locations

Fen Well Monitoring Locations



- Monitoring Wells
- Roads
- Public Waters
- City Boundary
- County Boundary



Dakota County Soil & Water Conservation District
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This drawing is neither a legally recorded map nor a survey and is not intended to be used as one. This drawing is a compilation of records, information and data located in various City, County, and State Offices and other sources, affecting the area shown, and is to be used for reference purposes only. Dakota County SWCD is not responsible for any inaccuracies herein contained. If discrepancies are found please contact the Dakota County Soil & Water Conservation District at 651.480.7777.

Appendix 2: Well Metadata

Approximate depth, coordinates, and mean sea-level elevation for each well (data courtesy of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources). Elevations at W1, W2, W3, W4, N3, N4, and N5 did not change in 2016, so no values are recorded.

Well	Approximate depth (feet)	Northing (UTM)	Easting (UTM)	Elevation (feet)	2016 Elevation (feet)
P1-S	4	243025.4	535925.6	707.29	708.56
P1-D	8	243024.2	535925	706.98	708.67
N3	45.21	240030.6	535345.7	723.87	
N4	75.34	240030.5	535349.3	724.27	
N5	21.69	240035.5	535347.4	724.06	
W1	77.00	239330.3	535121.9	728.45	
W2	50.12	239325.1	535119.2	728.47	
W3	21.83	239330.7	535130.5	726.87	
W4	12.00	239333.3	535130.2	727.6	
S1-USGS	20.67	239503.2	534796.5	723.44	723.83
S1	5.35	239502.7	534796.6	723.83	722.98
S2-USGS	27.00	239519.2	534506.9	722.35	722.77
S2	5.25	239518.1	534507	721.13	721.59
S3-USGS	21.68	239547.5	534222.3	713.97	714.18
S3	21.68	239548.3	534222.9	715.06	715.32
1LN	29	226915.8	525306.8	751.59	751.93
1LS	8	226913.4	525308.8	751.43	751.78
F3	75	228058.8	525367.6	720.43	720.88
F4	21	228055.9	525364.7	720.36	720.65
WN1-USGS	19.82	228054.3	525357.3	719.51	719.92
WN5-USGS	16.08	228125.3	525293.5	717.92	718.13
WT-1	9	228054.7	525356	719.37	721.25
WT-2	9	228222.7	525372.2	719.88	719.55
WT-3	8	228330.4	525514.2	721.27	718.26
WT-4	6	228457.4	525783.2	713.58	713.63
WT-5	7	228126	525293	720.69	721.51
F1	N/A	228466.4	525785	714.96	715.32
F2	15	228454.9	525794.3	714.68	714.77

Appendix 3: Linear Regressions for Each Well Dataset

Linear regressions are included for each of the wells. As well elevations were resurveyed in the fall of 2016 for all but seven of the wells, updated linear regressions lines are shown for 2020. More data is needed to further determine trends in these wells.

Two of the well nests in Fort Snelling Fen have more stable footing and were not resurveyed as part of the 2016 effort. Elevations at W1, W2, W3, W4, N3, N4, and N5 did not change in 2016, so there is a single linear regression on the graphs.

In cases where wells were overflowing, the top of the pipe elevation was recorded and is shown with a black dashed line. When the water in the well was frozen, no water level measurement was recorded.

