

Morrison SWCD, NRCS support forester



“A lot of my job is to guide people in the right direction,” said Morrison SWCD forester Lew Noska, who spends part of his time at Camp Ripley. “I want to have the tools to offer landowners the best possible (management) tools for their property, whether it be for wildlife, water or just species diversity and resiliency.”

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When the Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) hired forester Lew Noska, it expanded the capacity to provide expertise — and one more point of contact — for landowners throughout Morrison County and the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape.

“There is a large chunk of Morrison County that is forested,” said Morrison SWCD Manager Shannon Wettstein. “To have someone that can specifically help landowners with their questions and how to manage lands is priceless.”

Wettstein said Noska will be one more person landowners can get to know, trust and work with directly.

Noska earned a biology degree from Minnesota State University Moorhead in 2006, and then worked for an uncle’s Browerville-based heating, ventilation and air conditioning business for 12 years. Most recently, he worked for five years as Todd County SWCD’s wetland coordinator and buffer specialist. Noska joined the Morrison SWCD staff in November 2021. He remains a certified wetland delineator, and is the Walk-In Access coordinator for that Minnesota

Department of Natural Resources program in Morrison, Cass and Crow Wing counties.

A \$400,000, three-year contribution agreement between NRCS and the Morrison SWCD, which took effect in August 2021, is bringing forestry related training and technical assistance to the 805,000-acre Sentinel Landscape, a 10-mile buffer that simultaneously protects natural resources and the National Guard’s training mission. The agreement gave the SWCD the means to hire a forester, and to subcontract with the Forest Stewards Guild to train regional staff and landowners in prescribed burning.

Since he joined the Morrison SWCD in November, Noska has facilitated Forest Stewards Guild prescribed burn trainings for landowners hosted by Camp Ripley.

The contribution agreement requires Noska to complete 45 field visits with landowners and write 30 management plans. Forestland makes up 35% of the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape, primarily in Cass, Crow Wing, northern Morrison and part of Todd counties. All but 0.5% of those forests are privately owned.

Noska meets with landowners to see their property, hear their goals, and then write a management plan. Management plans that identify resource concerns are the basis for landowners to apply for assistance through NRCS' Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). That five-year \$2.76 million RCPP renewal took effect in July.

"It's just getting them that first initial contact where they can take that first

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step and get comfortable working with us, and then we can direct them in the

right direction for what their objectives are, be it wildlife habitat, be it timber

management — even if they want to harvest timber,” Noska said.

Noska spends some of his time at Camp Ripley, where he earned a firefighter certification that allows him to work on its prescribed burn crew, and where he is working toward NRCS job approval authority. He facilitates Camp Ripley-hosted events for landowners and conservation professionals — including Forest Stewards Guild learn-and-burn workshops, and a planned Oct. 1 forestry field day.

“We're trying to create more opportunities for landowners to learn alongside of us, and bring in more dollars so they can do the management if they're so inspired after they learn more about what they can do on their land,” said NRCS District Conservationist Josh Hanson.



An undisturbed, forested stretch of the Mississippi River runs for 18 miles through Camp Ripley. The river is seen here from a boat launch at Camp Ripley.