



Preserving and protecting wild rice

February 2016 Snapshots



Minnesota is the epicenter of the world's natural wild rice. Although once found throughout most of the state, today the heart of the state's wild rice acreage falls within an eight-county area: Aitkin, Carlton, Cass, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca, St. Louis, and Wadena. Wild rice shoreland encompasses a complex of shallow lakes, rivers, and shallow bays of deeper lakes that are important not just for wild rice, but wetland-dependent wildlife species. Protecting shoreland and preserving it in an undeveloped state has benefits for the wild rice crop, wildlife, and outdoor enthusiasts.

Funded by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC), the Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program uses Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easements to provide permanent protection for these natural resources. Easements are not as well known in the northeast part of the state, where wild rice lakes are found, in large part because so much of the land in this part of Minnesota is public. In the RIM program, landowners retain ownership of the land and receive a one-time payment for agreeing to keep that land undeveloped. Unlike a more traditional agricultural easement, these wild rice easements allow landowners to continue to harvest and manage their timber under approved Forest Stewardship plans.

When it came time for the Carlton Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to approach landowners, they knew just where to start. Jaskari Lake was already supporting wild rice, and the property owner, Bill Jaskari, has a conservation ethic that goes back generations. When the district approached the Jaskari family, who already had a Forest Stewardship Plan in place and had planted thousands of trees on their own, they signed up immediately. The Jaskari Lake easement, over 95 acres of permanent wild rice protection, was the first on the books for the SWCD. In recognition of the Jaskari family's commitment to conservation, they received the Carlton SWCD's 2014 Conservationist of the Year award.

Interest in the program remains steady. Since that first easement, the SWCD has enrolled seven more in the program. Brad Matlack, Carlton SWCD Manager, credits Jake Granfors, a Farm Bill Biologist that splits his time between Carlton and Aitkin SWCD, with getting those moving.

In its first three phases of funding, the Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program will complete 46 easement projects on 29 lakes and rivers. That's over 20 miles of wild rice shoreland protected, with public access for hunting and other recreation on over 400 acres. LSOHC recommended, and the Legislature



Pictured top: Attendees of a Carlton SWCD project tour visit Jaskari Lake.

Pictured bottom: Floating wild rice.

approved, a fourth phase of funding in Fiscal Year 2016 for the Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program.

The public benefits from these easements are significant. These fragile lakes, and the state wild rice crop they support, are permanently protected. In return, the lakes offer unique recreational opportunities, including hunting waterfowl and harvesting rice for food. These easements also support working forests, providing timber for a variety of uses. The Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program, and the partnerships that support it, will continue to protect these shorelines and wild rice well into the future.