



Protecting Minnesota's wild rice lakes

June 2015 Snapshots

Minnesota is the epicenter of the world's natural wild rice. Protected, undeveloped shoreland is important to preserving sensitive wild rice lakes for current and future generations of wildlife and outdoor enthusiasts. Although once found throughout most of the state, today, the heart of the state's wild rice acreage falls within eleven counties: Aitkin, Becker, Beltrami, Carlton, Cass, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca, St. Louis and Wadena.

Wild rice is important both socially and culturally in Minnesota. Wild rice also provides important ecological benefits. Wild rice shoreland encompasses a complex of shallow lakes, rivers, and shallow bays of deeper lakes that support rice and provide some of the most important habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife species in Minnesota. Wild rice habitat is especially important to Minnesota's migrating and breeding waterfowl and provides Minnesotans with unique recreation opportunities: hunting waterfowl and harvesting the rice itself for food. Wild rice also improves and protects water quality by keeping soil and nutrients in place and acting as a buffer to slow winds across wetlands.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) has received Outdoor Heritage Funds to support and protect our state grain. Working in cooperation with the DNR and soil and water conservation districts, BWSR will complete 46 easement projects on 29 lakes and rivers.

Funding for wild rice protection began in 2012. This first phase of the project was awarded \$1.89 million which yielded 18 completed projects extending permanent protection to almost 10 miles of wild rice shoreland. Phase II began in 2013 and is still underway. Working together with the Department of Natural Resources and Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), the program has prioritized the list of wild rice lakes for protection efforts and is working on outreach with landowners to fully allocate \$1.63 million in funds. Over 25 easement applications are in the pipeline to provide permanent protection for these valuable lakes.

This program is expected to continue in the coming years with \$2.66 million in funding available for phases three and four of the program. In addition to continuing to promote easements and permanent land

protection, BWSR and SWCDs will hold more local wild rice lake prioritization sessions to focus protection on the most significant wild rice resources.

Overall, these efforts have resulted in protection over 20 miles of wild rice shoreland. "Wild rice, and the lakes that support it, are an important part of Minnesota's cultural livelihood and ecological health," Board Conservation Dan Steward said, "and we're pleased with the work we've been able to do so far to protect this resource for future generations. We will continue to partner with state and local agencies to make sure wild rice shoreland continues to be a healthy, thriving part of the landscape."



A young man harvests wild rice.



Above, Mallard Lake, part of a large Wildlife Management Area in Aitkin County. Two easements are in process on the lake and, when completed, there will be no more unprotected shoreland.