

Saving forest cover, saving lakes

Crow Wing and Aitkin SWCD staff launch project that targets 25 at-risk cold-water fisheries

In the heart of Minnesota lakes country, Crow Wing and Aitkin Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff are unrolling a plan to protect cold-water fisheries through voluntary conservation.

The project strives to maintain and improve the water quality of 25 at-risk lakes by permanently protecting forest cover on private lands within the lakes' watersheds. A \$750,000 award from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) will help to keep at least 75 percent of a targeted lake's watershed forested.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) discovered that phosphorus runoff — which feeds the algae that turns lakes green — spikes when more than 25 percent of a lake's watershed is deforested.

"We have these fisheries. The question is: Are we going to keep them?" said Dan Steward, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) forestry management coordinator.

"Over time, we tend to open up these forested watersheds more and



Borden Lake, in the foreground, is one of 25 prioritized lakes in Crow Wing and Aitkin SWCDs' Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund-supported project to protect water quality by keeping those lakes' watersheds in at least 75 percent forest cover. Mille Lacs Lake is visible in the background. Photo Credit: Dan Steward, BWSR



more," Steward said. "We reduce that element of infiltration, and we start running that water across the surface of the ground where it picks up more nutrients. As you harden the surfaces, (lakes move) from groundwater-fed to hard-surface fed. That's a step backwards."

Property owners have two options.

“

If you look at some of these lakes, all you're going to see is a beautiful water body where the lakeshore looks pretty good. Conveying the urgency of protection is a little harder.

— Steve Hughes, Aitkin SWCD manager

”

They can enroll land in a permanent Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easement, which is processed by Crow Wing SWCD and administered by BWSR staff. Or, with a 20-acre minimum they can enroll in the Sustainable Forest

Initiative Act (SFIA) for an eight- 20- or 50-year term. SFIA is administered by the Minnesota Department of Revenue and checked by the DNR.

Both options keep land in private ownership and on the tax rolls.

Enrolled property remains working land open to forestry management and timber harvest. SWCD staff, private consultants and DNR private forest management foresters can write forest stewardship plans for interested landowners with at least 20 acres.

“Landowners choose,” Steward said “The state is not making decisions. The county’s not, either. Landowners are. How much conservation is right for them? It’s their choice.”

Crow Wing and Aitkin counties identified 880 high-quality lakes of statewide importance within their borders. The 25 were chosen based on phosphorus sensitivity, cold-water fisheries, forest cover and habitat.

“We’ve really zoned in on some unique, high-quality lakes that we want to protect,” said Steve Hughes, Aitkin SWCD manager.

“If you look at some of these lakes, all you’re going to see is a beautiful water body where the lakeshore looks pretty good,” Hughes said. “Conveying the urgency of protection is a little harder.”



Boldt



Hughes



Steward

Affected Watersheds

The 25 targeted lakes are within the following subwatersheds: Round-Big Pine, Dam-Long, Round, Waukenabo-Round, Spirit-Farm Island, Minnewawa, Cedar, Rat-Flowage, Hill Lake, Camp-Smith, Borden, Ruth, Serpent, North Long-Round, Mitchell, Cullen Chain, Bay.

The ENRTF award is a start. SWCD staff intensified outreach efforts in February. The first round of applications are due May 1.

Sheila Boldt of Crow Wing SWCD handles outreach and, with Jake Granfors, a Pheasants Forever biologist in Aitkin County, will process easements. In February she notified 430 landowners whose property scored at least 6 of a possible 10. One challenge: Absentee landowners comprise about half of the potential audience.

A technical committee will rank applications based on the quality of a property,

whether it is riparian, and whether it’s adjacent to public lands.

How quality is defined will be decided locally. For example, the presence of wild rice might boost a score. Lakeshore property may be discouraged because of its high cost. Steward said property adjacent to public land would compound benefits.

“We have a limited number of conservation dollars. I think we owe it to the taxpayers to get as many conservation benefits out of the dollar as possible,” Steward said.

Those who enroll in RIM will receive payments for

“

We have a limited number of conservation dollars. I think we owe it to the taxpayers to get as many conservation benefits out of the dollar as possible.

”

— Dan Steward, BWSR forestry management coordinator

conservation easements. Those who receive forestry plans will have a management blueprint. Another potential benefit: Peace of mind knowing the land will be protected from development.

“No one apologizes when they say, ‘I’m going to develop this.’ Because that’s an allowed land use. Neither should we have to apologize for saying, ‘I don’t want this to be developed.’ Development is a permanent land-use decision, too. Why are we so uncomfortable with permanent conservation but not permanent development?” Steward said.