

Protecting Mississippi headwaters habitat



Twin Cities’ drinking water supply, recreational resources also benefit from \$8.5 million in Outdoor Heritage Fund projects involving landowners’ work with 8 SWCDs, the Mississippi Headwaters Board, BWSR, Trust for Public Land



COUNTIES:
Aitkin, Beltrami, Cass, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca, Morrison

PARTNERS:
Mississippi Headwaters Board, Trust for Public Land, BWSR and eight SWCDs; support from The Nature Conservancy, DNR

CROW WING COUNTY — Bobcats turn up on the trail camera. Timber wolves roam here. Deer abound.

Along his secluded stretch of riverfront, Dick Schuh has encountered bears, caught five different species in three hours of fishing off the dock, and watched a massive insect hatch rise like fog from the Mississippi River.

“This is just pristine, and we’d like to keep it that way,” Dick said as he worked on his dock. The nearest houses are a mile in one direction, a half-mile in the other.

By protecting more than a half-mile of shoreline and 166 acres from development with a Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement, Dick and Barb Schuh have preserved the habitat that inspired them to buy the property 11 years ago. By linking public lands, their easement maintains a high-quality fish and wildlife corridor.

The Crow Wing County property is exactly the sort of critical habitat the



Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project (MHHCP) aims to protect through RIM easements and fee-title acquisitions. The project draws from three Outdoor Heritage Fund awards totaling more than \$8.5 million.

The eight-county, 400-mile headwaters reach runs from Itasca State Park through Morrison County.

The unbroken tracts vital to fish, mammals, migratory waterfowl and

Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project Coordinator Paula West shows a map to (from left) Tim Terrill, Mississippi Headwaters Board executive director; landowners Barb and Dick Schuh; and Dan Steward of BWSR.
Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

nesting birds also attract anglers, hunters, and people seeking a secluded water view.

In Crow Wing County, shoreland properties made up 53 percent of the total value of taxes payable in 2018. The county ranked No. 1 in Minnesota for cabin ownership in 2018, as defined by the Minnesota Department of Revenue as non-commercial, seasonal recreational residential parcels valued at \$10,000 or more. Cass County, more than twice its size, ranked No. 2.

Tim Terrill, the Mississippi Headwaters Board's executive director, has seen the progression: Property owners convert seasonal cabins to year-round residences. Houses pop up around the larger lakes, and then the smaller lakes, and then the rivers.

Development breaks up the contiguous habitat some animals require to hunt, forage, spawn, mate or nest.

"Habitat will fragment way before water quality will degrade. They'll both happen eventually. But the wildlife will (be affected first) because it wants to follow the river," said Dan Steward, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) forestry management coordinator.

BWSR administers the RIM easements, with ownership remaining in private hands and on the tax rolls. The Trust for Public Land handles fee-title acquisitions, with final ownership by the local county or the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The Mississippi Headwaters Board serves as the project coordinator. Staff from the eight county soil and water conservation districts make initial landowner contacts, and help process RIM easements.



Dick and Barb Schuh protected their Mississippi riverfront property from development through a RIM easement. "We love nature and we think this is the way the Mississippi should be kept — as natural as possible," Barb said.

Participation is voluntary; landowners choose which option to pursue.

So far, landowners working through the MHHCP have protected 13 miles of shoreline and 1,731 acres through 10 easements and three fee-title acquisitions. Nearly 65 percent of the 400-mile-long, 500-foot-wide corridor is protected — mostly through publicly owned local, state or federal land.

Eligible lands may border the Mississippi River, its major tributaries or reservoirs along the 400-mile stretch.

"The primary purpose of the program — the reason it's funded by (the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council) — is to protect critical fish and wildlife habitat along the first 400 miles of the river. Whenever you protect habitat, you're going to get clean-water benefits and vice versa," said Paula West, MHHCP coordinator.

Migratory waterfowl and neotropical birds rely on the Mississippi River flyway. Downstream cities get their drinking water from the river.

"When we protect some habitat along the river, which

is the primary goal of the funding, we also are helping protect Minneapolis-St. Paul's source water. That is by far the state's largest source water," Steward said.

Minneapolis' Water Treatment Distribution Services pumps 21 billion gallons of water from the Mississippi River a year, according to a 2017 public works department report. About 62 percent of it provides drinking water to residents of Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs.

The Mississippi Headwaters Board follows a DNR guideline that generally applies to lakes: 75 percent of a lake's watershed should be protected to maintain its water quality.

One of the MHB's greatest successes to date was in a 3,420-acre subwatershed near Crosby, where the amount of protected land has increased from 35 percent to 73 percent over the past few years — primarily through fee-title acquisitions, RIM easements and Sustainable Forest Incentive Act enrollments.

Sheila Boldt, who works directly with landowners through Crow Wing SWCD, has noticed the program

At a Glance

RANKING ELIGIBLE

LAND: Maps identify high-quality habitat, indicating if a property is riparian or adjacent to public or otherwise protected land. More weight is given if wild rice habitat, shallow lakes, or endangered species or species of greatest concern are present. The ranking system allows planners to complete a cost analysis.

RECENT ACQUISITIONS:

A 331-acre addition to the Crow Wing State Forest with 8,210 feet of Mississippi River shoreline in Crow Wing County; creation of 234-acre Indian Jack Lake Wildlife Management Area with 12,300 feet of lakeshore and 75 feet of Mississippi River frontage, adjacent to public land in Crow Wing County; a 172-acre Savanna State Forest addition with 6,600 feet of Mississippi riverfront in Aitkin County.

tends to appeal to landowners for one of two reasons.

"They want it preserved. They don't want their kids to think about developing," Boldt said. "Another side is the ones that genuinely are already using the property for just hiking and hunting, and they've got forest management already."

The easement option made sense for the Schuhs.

"We were not planning on building. So if they're going to pay us not to build — if they want to preserve the area, that's very much fine with us because we're never looking to expand or sell off or anything. That was not our goal," Dick said.