

AmeriCorps powers Root River SWCD project



Crews gain experience installing cedar revetments while improving trout streams on tributaries of the Root River in Houston County

BLACK HAMMER TOWNSHIP — A trout stream bank stabilization project that started as an experiment on a Root River tributary has become a tested conservation practice in Houston County's bluff country.

This summer, for the sixth consecutive season, a Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa (CCMI) crew will harvest invasive cedar trees from nearby bluffs, and then anchor them to eroding streambanks. Root River Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff oversees the work, designed to fit small streams high in

the watershed where the banks are less than 7 feet tall.

Both stream and bluff habitats benefit. The SWCD gains a labor force. The CCMI crew, whose membership changes each season, gains job experience.

"If it wasn't the Conservation Corps doing it, I don't know that we would get this kind of work done," said Bob Scanlan, Root River SWCD assistant manager.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) annual

Cole Wentworth, 25, of Preston, Iowa, and Lakota Kirst, 23, of Osage, Iowa, angled a cut cedar into position on the bank of Riceford Creek in Houston County in August 2018 while Alexis Schwanz, 18, of Polk City, Iowa, left, and Andrea Dormer, 19, of Owatonna, on the bank, wait to hand over tools. Photos: Ann Wessel, BWSR



Left: Solimar Garcia led the AmeriCorps crew working on a Root River Soil & Water Conservation District project on Riceford Creek in August 2018 in Houston County. **Middle:** Andrea Dormer of Owatonna worked on the Rochester-based AmeriCorps crew. **Right:** Ashley Hayden of Virginia state worked on a different Midwestern crew the year before she joined the Rochester-based AmeriCorps crew in 2018.

appropriation of \$500,000 in Clean Water Funds pays for CCMI crews' labor costs. Local government units submit applications for work projects, and often provide matching funds. A \$20,000 grant from the Minnesota Corn Growers Association (MCGA) covered the cost of materials for the Root River SWCD project.

This year in Minnesota, about 500 CCMI crew members — including 300 AmeriCorps crew members ages 18 to 25 — are slated to work with about 50 agencies on 150 conservation projects.

Set in cool trout streams surrounded by scenic bluffs, the Root River SWCD assignment is among the most coveted in the state.

Since 2014, CCMI crews have worked on segments of Riceford Creek totaling about 2 miles — about half on cedar revetment, half on boxelder removal and related work.

It's slow, difficult manual labor that requires chain saws and chest waders. It's the sort of job that tends not to attract contractors.

The revetment cuts velocity and catches sediment, creating a stable slope where plants can take root. Gentler slopes thick with vegetation mark past years' work sites.



The project benefits the turbidity-impaired Root River.

In August 2018, a Rochester-based CCMI crew dragged cut cedars to the stream, where they secured the trees snug against a 500-foot stretch of bank. Using mauls, crew members drove each duckbill anchor 3 or 4 feet into the bank, tightened the attached cable, wrapped it around the trunk and crimped it — while standing waist- to chest-deep in rushing water.

Previously, landowner Walt Nigon, 67, had cut and hauled the cedars from his bluff across the stream. Walt, a retired Rochester area tool and die machinist, and his wife, Barb, president of the nonprofit prairie restoration group Prairie Smoke, bought the 29-acre weekend getaway property in 1999.

“They’re trying to put in some of these cedar trees and hopefully save some of these banks from eroding away,” Nigon said

This spring, Nigon said the revetment held up well to severe flooding. Work he’d done upstream likely helped.

The cedar revetments in Houston County were new to the Root River SWCD in 2014. Staff partnered with

a Winona State University geologist who helped assess the streams.

The Riceford Creek project has withstood a few tests.

Most cedar revetments held up to the September 2016 flood that decimated parts of the creek. Additional revetment areas saw some damage over time. But Scanlan said the revetment seems to be working overall, as stability has improved in most of the original streambank treatment areas. Those results mesh with Winona State University’s follow-up research.

Cedar is strong, rot-resistant wood. In neighboring Winona County, Scanlan said similar, 20-year-old projects remain intact.

“We’ve gained a lot of confidence in this kind of work,” Scanlan said. “Those trees are still in place. As the years go by, those banks start to stabilize themselves ... and you end up with a more stable streambank and less sediment.”

This season, Root River SWCD staff was slated to oversee work on Bridge Creek, another small South Branch Root River tributary a few miles from Riceford Creek. Its 40-day contract for CCMI labor includes invasive Japanese hops eradication along the Root River.



Teamwork was especially important for the Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa crew working along a section of Riceford Creek with steeper banks. Brennen Reyscak, 24, of Ankeny, Iowa, handed down tools to fellow crew members on Aug. 15, 2018, in Houston County.