

# Farm Bill biologist expands easements

Pheasants  
Forever-SWCD  
partnership leads  
to forestland  
protection with  
clean water  
benefits in Aitkin,  
Carlton counties

Farm Bill biologist Jake Granfors fills a niche role advancing conservation efforts in the forested northeastern region just below Minnesota's arrowhead.

Across the state, 19 Farm Bill biologists employed by Pheasants Forever help landowners find voluntary conservation programs that fit their land management goals. Most focus on implementing practices on marginal cropland for conservation purposes.

Granfors' work area in Aitkin and Carlton counties looks a bit different. Here, opportunities to preserve forestland and open meadows that offer vital habitat for game birds abound.

"The cost is a lot higher to restore something than it is to protect it," Granfors said. "By doing these easement protection programs, we're keeping habitat complexes together. They're important habitat corridors."

Granfors helps landowners enroll in state and federal



conservation programs such as the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)-administered Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the USDA Farm Service Agency's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Granfors assists landowners throughout the easement process — from finding programs that fit their property, to enrolling in those programs to implementing conservation practices. He visits sites, meets with landowners, writes conservation plans and conducts outreach efforts such as targeted mailings.

"Most of these people use easements for hunting land or recreation, so it ends up fitting into what they want to do. They're all voluntary programs. We go out there, listen to what they want to do and try to make recommendations to meet their objectives," Granfors said.

Granfors was hired in January 2014. At the time, Aitkin and Carlton soil and water conservation districts were looking to expand easement enrollments in the area, but found it difficult to dedicate staff time to those programs.

"It takes a lot of time to do an easement. Jake being able to focus on easements gets them done so much faster," said Aitkin SWCD Manager Steve Hughes. "It really took off once we got

*Farm Bill biologist Jake Granfors (left) and landowner Francis Dierickx discuss recently completed brush mowing on Dierickx's farm near Palisade in August 2018. Mowing can reduce brush density, improving habitat conditions for the sharp-tailed grouse and other game birds. Photos courtesy of Jake Granfors*





Jake on board.”

Pheasants Forever partners with NRCS through a Conservation Collaboration grant to fund 90% of Granfors’ position; the remaining 10% is provided by Carlton and Aitkin SWCDs. He is based in the Aitkin SWCD office, and splits his time between the two SWCDs depending on need.

During the first few years on the job, Granfors focused on enrolling land in BWSR’s RIM Wild Rice Conservation Easement Program, which permanently protects wild rice lakes. Following a series of successful enrollments, Granfors expanded the scope of his work to protecting Mississippi River shoreland and preserving habitat for sharp-tailed grouse and other game birds. Sharp-tailed grouse populations have decreased significantly over the past 50 years: According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, approximately

100,000 sharp-tailed grouse were harvested annually in the 1940s; in 2010 only 16,800 were harvested. The drop in numbers led to its listing as a species in greatest conservation need. They prefer open meadows and grasslands.

Granfors also works to enroll forestland easements.

“There’s a lot of water quality benefits from having a forested landscape,” Granfors said. “It reduces runoff and soil erosion just by having a forest in place and intact. By keeping the forest forested, we’re essentially protecting water quality long-term. Good habitat also means good water quality.”

Carlton SWCD Manager Brad Matlack said trout stream habitat is one of the areas where he’d like to engage Granfors’ services in the future. Trout require clean, cold water.

“Preserving the uplands



helps that water stay cool, and helps the streams stay shaded,” Matlack said. “The preservation of forestland affects the water quality of the streams, which comes back to the habitat.”

Matlack said the partnership among the SWCDs, Granfors, and Pheasants Forever has been a success.

“There’s not a huge focus on pheasants (in the region), but that never really stood in the way of Pheasants Forever helping us accomplish these goals. Pheasants Forever stepped up and partnered with us to make it happen,” Matlack said.

Hughes agreed the partnership has been a success, and has a recommendation for other SWCD managers:

*Granfors in July inspected a 58-acre RIM easement in Aitkin County that protects 1 mile of Mississippi River shoreline on the river’s west side.*

“Get a Farm Bill biologist if you have a chance,” Hughes said. “We’ve never regretted jumping into this. It’s been a completely positive thing for the citizens of the state and for wildlife. My suggestion is to take that opportunity if it comes up — it’s a good addition to an SWCD.”

Granfors’ success working on non-agricultural easements inspired the hiring of two additional Farm Bill biologists in northern Minnesota in 2019. Morrison and Pine counties now have Farm Bill biologists working with area landowners.

“By showing what this Farm Bill position could do in the forest, we’ve added two more biologists farther north,” Granfors said. “It kind of opened the door to a few more positions being created within Minnesota.”