



Land Stewardship in the Minnesota River Watershed



BACKGROUND

The Minnesota River is one of the 20 most endangered waterways in America. The Minnesota River Assessment Project documented frequent violations of federal or state standards for bacteria, phosphorus, turbidity, and dissolved oxygen levels.

In 1998, the State of Minnesota signed an agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for landowners within the Minnesota River Watershed. This agreement utilizes both state and federal funds to encourage landowners to remove sensitive areas from production by melding the state-sponsored Reinvest In Minnesota Program and CREP. Landowners enrolling in the program must establish a conservation cover, such as native grasses or riparian forest buffers, on the areas enrolled.

Riparian buffers have long been recognized as a means to prevent many pollutants from entering water bodies. Buffers are a main component of CREP, and because many landowners signed up, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources saw a need to assist landowners with making good decisions about riparian forest management and installation.

LOCATION

The Minnesota River begins in South Dakota, meanders through southwestern and southcentral Minnesota, and empties into the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. It drains over 15,000 square miles and contains all or parts of 37 counties.



Minnesota River Watershed.

ISSUES BEING ADDRESSED

The large landowner response to CREP created a need for additional foresters to encourage proper forest management and the establishment of riparian buffers. Other issues being addressed include:

- Lack of sound forest management.
- Lack of forest riparian buffers along major water bodies.
- Woodland grazing.
- Lack of public awareness of forest management and riparian buffers.

GOALS

- Increase the use of tree planting and riparian buffers to minimize or eliminate the adverse effects of development and to protect the watershed.
- Promote forest management and water quality practices within the watershed to improve water quality through the preparation and implementation of Forest Stewardship Plans.
- Promote livestock exclusion from woodlands, streams, and rivers to reduce the occurrence of nonpoint source pollution.
- Reduce the negative impacts of urban development, including fragmentation, on the flora and fauna unique to the area.

METHODOLOGY

An educational assistance campaign will inform landowners within the Minnesota River Watershed about proper land management practices and of opportunities to implement these practices.

Foresters will provide technical assistance to private landowners to help design riparian buffer plantings to reduce sedimentation and nutrient loading into the Minnesota River and its tributaries.

Foresters will prepare Forest Stewardship Plans for interested landowners in the river basin to give them the information they need to make management decisions in an ecologically sound manner. Management practices recommended within the Stewardship Plans will tie site-specific recommendations back to the watershed, and ultimately result in improved water quality.

Since 1999, the Northeastern Area and the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters have sponsored a cooperative challenge grants program to promote watershed health and restoration through the conservation, restoration, and sound stewardship of trees and forests.

The Division of Forestry will expand its technical assistance and educational efforts to inform private landowners of the proper implementation of Best Management Practices and the installation of riparian forest buffers as a cover for CREP.

OUTCOMES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The project is completed.

Three foresters were hired, supported, or contracted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to provide technical assistance and prepare Forest Stewardship Plans within the watershed.

As a result of this grant, landowners participating in the project are aware of the resource concerns within the Minnesota River system. The educational assistance component resulted in one-on-one contacts with various landowners throughout the watershed. There were several group meetings and direct mailings; over 200 people were reached. Landowners also have the information they need to make proper land management decisions on their property, including the effects of their decisions on water quality and pollution.

The following final accomplishments are expected to meet project objectives:

- Preparation of 26 Stewardship Plans within the Minnesota River Watershed covering over 3,210 acres.
- Technical assistance to allow tree planting on over 7,590 acres of riparian buffers and timber stand improvement on 1,608 acres of non-CREP land within the basin.
- Technical assistance resulting in the exclusion of livestock from 290 acres of forests and riparian areas.
- Technical assistance to improve wildlife habitat and water quality on 1,150 acres of non-CREP land.

PARTNERS

- Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- Minnesota River Basin Joint Powers Board
- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources
- Natural Resources Conservation Service

FUTURE PLANS

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry, will continue to work with landowners in the watershed, but with less staff available to help landowners.

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