

Accelerating and Implementing Conservation in the Root River Watershed **2012-2014**

Most (97%) of the 1,064,970 acres in the Root River watershed are privately owned, and this includes about 3,000 farms. It is a beautiful area, mostly within the Driftless region and noted for its bluff lands and river valleys. But its resources are under pressure and erosion, water contamination, nutrient management, biodiversity, and habitat protection preoccupy the minds of residents and natural resource staff alike. These concerns are the target of much private and public work to bring the region's ecosystem into a healthier balance. That the need is still so great suggests we need to look elsewhere for inspired change—not instead of the essentials of technical assistance and funding but in addition to them. What does stewardship of this land look like to people who live here, and what more shall we do together?

Statement of Purpose

The Land Stewardship Project (LSP) and partners will accelerate conservation in the Root River watershed with a 2-year project of significant, personal contact to move landowners to conservation plans and plans to practices, and by nudging along a community where conservation and farming are mutually inclusive. Activities propel us all toward long term goals that address tangible reductions (20%) in sediment, total P and nitrate-N losses by 2015, with a primary focus on helping farmers and landowners integrate more perennial cover into their management goals and practices. This support for grass-based livestock farming as a sustainable enterprise advancing ecological, financial, and community well-being is at the foundation of all LSP work. The challenges of corn and soybean prices, climate changes, and karst typography are offset by burgeoning grass-finished beef markets, enthusiastic new farmers, research illustrating a 90% improvement with a mere 10% investment in soil cover, and even rising fuel prices.

Long-term outcomes

- A. Better habitat for grassland birds of greatest conservation need
- B. More perennial cover (and incumbent resource benefits)
- C. Reduced nutrient losses
- D. Progress toward multifunctional landscape goals for water quality, wildlife habitat, and food and energy production by the watershed community

Activities

- A. Public education on farming for profit and conservation – on-farm and classroom, open to all
- B. Kitchen conversations to learn about stewardship farming and farm programs – watershed-wide hosts for discussion, information, and next steps
- C. Technical assistance – with government and/or private staff, to develop, update, and activate land use plans (grazing, conservation, nutrient management, other)
- D. On-farm bird monitoring – route development, point-count methods, and record keeping for monitoring habitat especially in a pasture setting
- E. GIS research on water quality and sensitive features identification

Active partners

Rich Biske – Southeast Minnesota Conservation Coordinator for The Nature Conservancy

Donna Rasmussen – Director, Fillmore County SWCD and program coordinator for the Mississippi River Basin Initiative for the Root River Watershed

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