

Lessard-Sams funding used to create better MOOSE HABITAT

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By Javier Serna
Assistant Editor

Murphy City, Minn. — Habitat, or lack thereof, may not be the main cause of the decline in the northeast Minnesota moose population, but it's one of the few things wildlife and forestry managers can do something about.

It's why, following the recommendations of Minnesota's Moose Advisory Committee, the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council doled out nearly \$3 million to work on improving moose habitat, work that was highlighted for a media contingent last week.

"They start looking like little bonsai trees," said Fond du Lac Band wildlife biologist Mike Schrage, pointing to a bunch of small aspen trees in an area that had been heavily foraged by moose north of Finland.

Moose like to eat the softest, most tender tips of the aspen branches, and the area of mostly brush and aspen had been picked over pretty well, with even the high branches of taller aspens cracked down by adult moose so they could get at the parts of the tree they prefer.

Some of the aspens were only 3 or 4 feet high, but were actually more than a decade old, by the estimates of University of Minnesota-Duluth moose researcher Ron Moen, who said they been foraged to the point of being stunted.

The Fond du Lac Band is just one of several partners that have pooled together their resources on the project. Others include the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, which received the grant funding for the project, Lake County, Minnesota DNR, U.S. Forest Service, and The Nature Conservancy.

The project, which is scattered throughout moose range in northeast Minnesota, is acting on the recom-



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mendations of the Minnesota DNR's Moose Advisory Committee, which was formed in the late 2000s, as the moose population was nose-diving.

Through various means, including controlled burns, shearing, brush cutting, and re-planting of conifers, the projects seeks to improve habitat for moose.

In some places, crews planted white pine and balsam fir into areas that had been recently cleared, then placed plastic cones over them in an attempt to protect them from browsing deer. The practice helps ensure there will be conifers in the future, instead of them getting outcompeted by aspen and birch, which, generally, need no help in quickly taking over after the landscape has been disturbed. Moose need conifers for thermal cover, both in the winter to stay warm, and in the summer to keep cool, Schrage said.

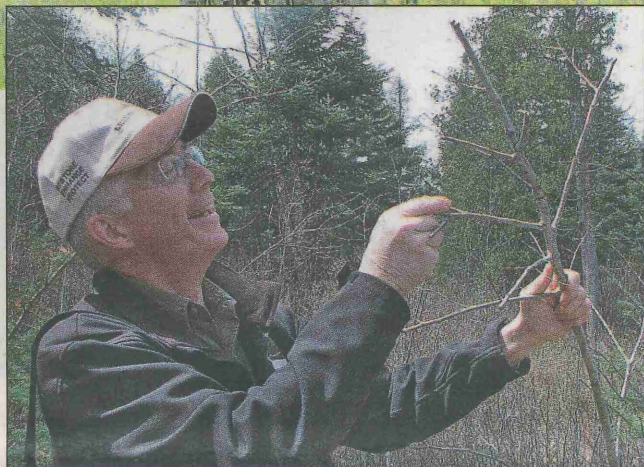
In some cases, such as portions of Lake County's Clair A. Nelson Memorial Forest, the money is not only beneficial to moose, but also will result in a better forest down the road for the county, and in the short-term, better habitat for moose.

"This one is easy, because it's good forestry," said Nate Eide, Lake County land commissioner, noting that the county wouldn't otherwise have the means of doing the work without the help from the Outdoor Heritage Fund. "There's no trees there right now, so it's not going to be making us any money otherwise."

The projects are taking place on land owned by counties, Minnesota, and the federal government.

Schrage said the focus has been mostly on areas where the best response could be gotten out of area moose. That meant, in part, focusing on some areas inside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, where it is not feasible to do some of the management techniques. That's where controlled burns have been necessary.

"Logging isn't an option there," Schrage said, noting that throughout the moose range, fires have, for the most part, been suppressed for decades, which has largely eliminated a form of forest disturbance that healthy forests need for age diversity and regrowth.



Mark Johnson, executive director of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, inspects an aspen tree that had been heavily browsed by moose on Lake County forest land.



There was a lot of moose sign near one project area where a number of short aspen trees had been browsed by moose. By clearing away thick underbrush, new growth can be generated.



The effort to improve moose habitat in northeast Minnesota includes planting conifers, such as cedar and balsam fir (above), and then protecting the young trees with barriers (at left) that prevent deer from eating them before they've reached maturity. These plastic cones that were used in Lake County forest are an example.



In some areas, the brush is so thick that it needs to be cleared with machinery.

Photos by Javier Serna



This aspen branch likely was yanked down by a large adult moose, which can reach 10 feet high, looking to get at the tender branches near its tip.