

## MN Forested Counties Workgroup

Steve Hughes, Chair  
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(218) 927-6565

February 17, 2009

Mike Kilgore, Chair, Lessard Outdoor Heritage Committee

Dear Mike Kilgore and Members of the LOHC:

We have enclosed a project proposal on behalf of 27 forested counties in Minnesota. This proposal focuses on fish and wildlife habitat protection and improvement. The 27 counties represented account for 84% of the forestland in Minnesota. By managing and protecting these forestlands, wildlife and fish populations will benefit. The proposal addresses: deep-water (trout and cisco) lake habitat, forest management assistance to private landowners, shoreland re-vegetation, and conservation easements on high priority forestlands.

We respectfully request the opportunity to present our proposal on Tuesday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>. Thank you for consideration of this proposal. If you have any questions please contact me, Phone: (218) 927-6565 or email [hughes.aitkinswcd@gmail.com](mailto:hughes.aitkinswcd@gmail.com)

Sincerely,

Steven R. Hughes  
Chair  
MN Forested Counties Workgroup

# **Wildlife and Fish Habitat Enhancement**

## **On Private**

### **Forestlands in Minnesota**

This project application is being submitted on behalf of 27 counties that collectively represent about 84% of the forest land in the State of Minnesota. These counties also contain thousands of lakes and streams, millions of acres of wetland and provide habitat for an incredible diversity of wildlife. This proposal focuses on what can be done for habitat enhancement. This habitat is inclusive of wildlife found on land and fish that depend on clean water and a healthy aquatic environment. The protection of fish habitat is almost exclusively a result of good land management. Shoreland areas of the lake are one focus. In these areas Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD's) would offer conservation alternatives like shoreland revegetation, rain gardens, stormwater management and shoreland stabilization. The other focus area would be tributaries to the lake. If we protect the conveyance system (streams) we can link the good water quality from the forests and get it to the lake without negative water quality impacts. In protecting the streams feeding the lake we protect the in-lake fish habitat while at the same time protecting critical wildlife corridors and their connection from the lake to the forestlands that often comprise most of the lake's watershed. One missing link in protecting our highest quality fish habitat is protection of the tributaries to the lakes. Fortunately, many of the watersheds in the project area are in relatively good condition. Well targeted and prioritized water quality and habitat projects have a very high likelihood of success.

This project proposal contains 4 categories:

1. Cold deep-water (trout and cisco) lakes habitat protection;
2. Forest management assistance to private landowners;
3. Shoreland buffers and re-vegetation;
4. Conservation easements on forest land

- **Healthy Forests = Fish and Wildlife Habitat protection**
- **Public lands are well-managed, we must focus our efforts on private lands**

- **“It Is More Cost Effective To Protect Clean Water Resources Than To Restore Degraded Water Resources.”**
- **Minnesota Forestland Provides Both Water Quality And Wildlife Habitat Benefits.**
- **“Minnesota’s 147,000 Private Forestland Owners Control 35% Of State’s Total Forestland**
- **The 27 Counties With Over 25% Of Their Land Base In Forested Cover Account For 84% Of Minnesota’s Forestland.**
- **Soil And Water Conservation Districts Are The Link To Water Quality And Erosion Control Practice Implementation On Private Forestland In Minnesota.**

#### **27 Minnesota Counties with 84% of Minnesota’s Forested Land Cover**

Aitkin, Anoka, Becker, Beltrami, Carlton, Cass, Chisago, Clearwater, Cook, Crow Wing, Houston, Hubbard , Isanti, Itasca, Kanabec, Koochiching, Lake, Lake of the Woods, Mahnommen, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Pine, Sherburne, St. Louis, Wabasha, Wadena, Winona,

#### **Cold Deep-Water (trout and cisco) Lakes**

The state’s recently completed Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan identifies protection of deepwater lakes as high priority refuges for fish species uniquely suited to the cold oxygen-rich environment found in their depths. These lakes represent about 5% of the total lakes in Minnesota, and are concentrated in the North Central and North Eastern part of the state. Coldwater fish species (cisco, whitefish, trout and burbot) found in these lakes serve as a high quality forage base for walleye and northern pike. Development pressures on the shorelines and land management activities within the watersheds of these high value waters threatens the sustainability of these coldwater species. Accelerated eutrophication through increased nutrient loading, reduces the deepwater oxygen levels upon which these species depend. The high quality of these lake resources and the sensitivity of the indicator species means that relatively small changes in

the watershed can lead to long term habitat and water quality disruptions. Riparian projects that protect the fishery from water quality degradation would also be protecting habitat for terrestrial species.

This proposal focuses on providing SWCD's with resources to offer a suite of conservation alternatives to private landowners in the watershed. District technical staff would work to apply conservation practices with incentives in the shoreland and near-shore areas of the watershed. Conservation alternatives would include shoreland buffers, rain gardens, stormwater management and conservation easements.

BWSR would work with MPCA, DNR and SWCD's to select pilot lakes with the best chances for success. Lakes with effective lake associations, lake management plans, and relatively small watersheds would generally have higher chances for success. SWCD's could lead these projects because they are already working with lake associations, have connections to DNR and MPCA, have access to the county water management task force, and have decades of experience in marketing conservation alternatives. The fiscal and reporting structures they routinely utilize would provide the important accountability and feedback loop.

Coldwater fishery lakes occur across a range of sizes and circumstances. A budget of \$500,000 would allow an SWCD to offer conservation alternatives to landowners adjacent to a priority lake, and provide the technical assistance needed to shop the alternatives "door to door." An allocation of \$1.5 million would allow BWSR to work with three SWCD's and evaluate their success before committing further resources.

### **Forest Management Implementation Funding Proposal**

The forests of Minnesota provide a critical resource feature that provides habitat for wildlife species ranging from migrating songbirds to big game like whitetail deer, moose and bear. Our forest resources also provide a host of environmental benefits including serving as a filtration system that provides crystal clear water. Downstream cities depend on this clean water for their water needs including drinking water. The forests also act as an atmospheric scrubber that removes carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Minnesotans hold a special place in their imagination for the northwoods that attracts tourists who spend dollars in local economies. Of course, the forests of Minnesota provide wood and other forest products that are vital for the economic health and productivity of the state.

Many SWCD Foresters already provide technical assistance to forest landowners through the Forest Stewardship Program. With this program, landowners who own forestland can receive a forest management plan that outlines management recommendations for the future. Management objectives can include wildlife habitat, water quality enhancement, recreational development and timber production. These objectives are based upon the overall management goals of the landowner and are the responsibility of the landowner to implement.

With adequate funding, much more private forestland could be managed through the Forest Stewardship Program. This improved forest management would benefit wildlife, water quality, timber production and recreational opportunities for the entire state. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are uniquely suited for providing additional forest management assistance. SWCD's have the technical knowledge and are the respected land managers within their counties. With their network of local contacts and their presence throughout the state, SWCD's are a natural delivery mechanism for increased forestry assistance.

In 2006, there were 1.3 million acres of family forest lands in Minnesota covered under an up to date "Forest Stewardship Plan". Although 1.3 million acres sounds like a lot, it only encompasses a little over 20% of family forest lands in Minnesota. There is an increasing demand from family forest owners for stewardship plans.

However, the limiting factors to the completion of additional plans are funding and available plan writers. As an example, currently in Itasca County MN, there is approximately a nine month wait for a landowner to receive a stewardship plan. The problem is simply that there aren't enough foresters writing the plans.

The road block keeping SWCD foresters from writing more plans is the fact that the payment rate cap only covers about 40% of the total cost to generate a plan. Average plan acreage is about 65, and takes about thirty hours to complete. At this size, and the LGU cap, the DNR payment rate is \$428.75. The average SWCD forester is going to cost the district \$35/hour to cover all costs, so at thirty hours to write a plan, total costs are \$1,050.00. The DNR payment amount of \$428.75 is 41% of the actually SWCD costs of \$1,050.

Further, if you divide \$1,050 by 65 acres, it can be determined that it costs SWCD offices \$16/acre, on average, to generate stewardship plans. Since the payment rate at the LGU cap is 40% of the total cost to write plans, we are asking for

supplemental funding to cover the other 60%. Sixty percent of \$16 per acre is \$9.60 per acre.

With this accelerated funding, SWCD offices could be fully reimbursed for their time to generate plans, and it would become financially feasible to write more plans.

## **Shoreland Buffers and Revegetation**

**Riparian Forest Buffer Program:**

This program would provide cost sharing for establishment, and incentive payments for maintenance, of riparian area native vegetation buffers. These buffers would be located in high priority habitat areas.

The cost share to establish forest riparian buffer would be 75% - 90% depending on factors such as topography, soils, distance from surface water and habitat priority area.

Eligible lands include farmland, pasture land, degraded land/woods, any shoreline that could sustain trees in its riparian area (determined by the forester; the target areas would include "Impaired Waters" (rivers and lakes), and those watersheds within which lake TMDL studies have been completed.

## **Conservation Easements**

**Forestland Easements:**

In some cases the public interest in a particular land parcel warrants a perpetual conservation easement. SWCDs have been implementing this type of conservation easement program through Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) on other agricultural lands for many years. Expanding this program to include forestland and riparian zones would provide SWCD's, in the forested region of the state, another tool to use in implementing water quality protection projects. Easement properties will be prioritized to provide the highest possible fish and wildlife habitat protection. Much of the shoreland is already developed. By focusing our efforts on lake and stream corridor areas, we can go a long way to ensure the delivery of clean water to the lakes that will provide critical fish habitat in the future. In addition, we will

protect wildlife corridors and connect them to headwater forests and wetlands. Riparian (lake, river and stream) properties would receive the highest priority and payment rates.

Conservation Easements have the flexibility to cover a wide range of activities and protection for a piece of property.

All properties are unique and easements must be matched to the individual property by addressing resource needs, organization goals and landowner expectations. Existing land uses (trails, single family home, forest management, etc.) can become a part of a conservation easement that protects water quality and limits development while still allowing enjoyment of the property.

Forested characteristics and bluff integrity are protected forever, providing wildlife habitat, and protecting water quality and the historical importance of the conservation easements. Landowners are an integral part of the design and language that will become the easement.

This easement process is voluntary and great care is taken to ensure that the easement carries out the wishes of the landowner. The landowner gains by knowing their land is protected for the future, they are able to enjoy their property, and they retain ownership of the property. An incentive payment is given to the landowner for the easement and they may be able to claim a charitable contribution on their income taxes.

Together these four categories of projects represent a water quality and habitat protection strategy for the forest lands of Minnesota, ensuring diverse and healthy wildlife populations and clean water for future generations.

### **We are poised and ready to implement habitat projects:**

The 27 Counties that are jointly submitting this proposal are ready to implement fish and wildlife habitat projects that will get real results in areas of Minnesota that have the most critical habitat. A list of approximately 200 projects that are ready to go has been compiled so that positive results can be quickly achieved. Total budget need for the projects in the 27 counties is \$8,946,000.

**Brief Budget:**

A detailed budget is available for each project category that we have discussed. A brief budget per summary is shown below:

1. Cold water (trout and cisco) lakes habitat protection;  
    \$1.5 million for a three county pilot project in 2010
2. Forest management assistance to private landowners;  
    \$1.21 million (\$45,000/county for 27 counties)
3. Shoreland buffers and re-vegetation;  
    \$810,000 (27 counties for buffers and re-vegetation)
4. Conservation easements on forest land  
    \$3.52 million for conservation easements