



# **Saving Wetlands, Shaping a Legacy 75 Years of Minnesota's WMA System**

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# WMA Statutory Purpose

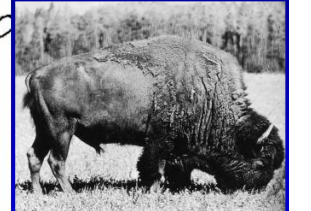
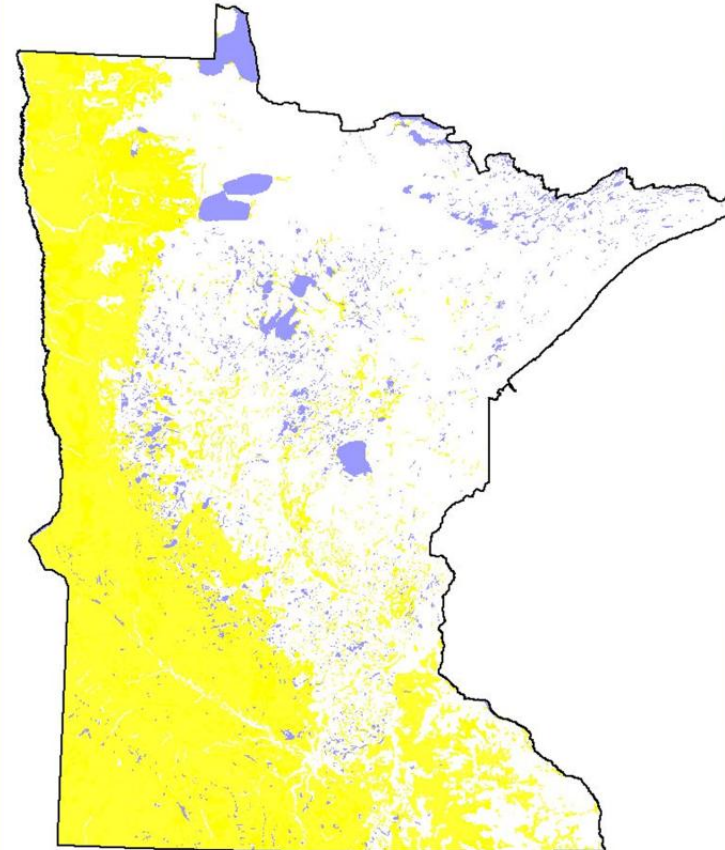
## Subd. 8. State wildlife management area; purpose; resource and site qualifications; administration.

- (a) A state wildlife management area shall be established to protect those lands and waters which have a high potential for wildlife production and to develop and manage these lands and waters for the production of wildlife, for public hunting, fishing, and trapping, and for other compatible outdoor recreational uses.
- (b) No unit shall be authorized as a state wildlife management area unless its proposed location substantially satisfies the following criteria:
  - (1) includes appropriate wildlife lands and habitat, including but not limited to marsh or wetlands and the margins thereof, ponds, lakes, stream bottomlands, and uplands, which permit the propagation and management of a substantial population of the desired wildlife species; and
  - (2) includes an area large enough to ensure adequate wildlife management and regulation of the permitted recreational uses.
- (c) State wildlife management areas shall be administered by the commissioner of natural resources in a manner which is consistent with the purposes of this subdivision to perpetuate, and if necessary, reestablish quality wildlife habitat for maximum production of a variety of wildlife species. Public hunting, fishing, trapping, and other uses shall be consistent with the limitations of the resource, including the need to preserve an adequate brood stock and prevent long-term habitat injury or excessive wildlife population reduction or increase. Physical development may provide access to the area, but shall be so developed as to minimize intrusion on the natural environment.

# Serengeti of North America



Pre-settlement Prairie Conditions



# The Prairies Fell First



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# Our prairies are never safe



# Current Conditions



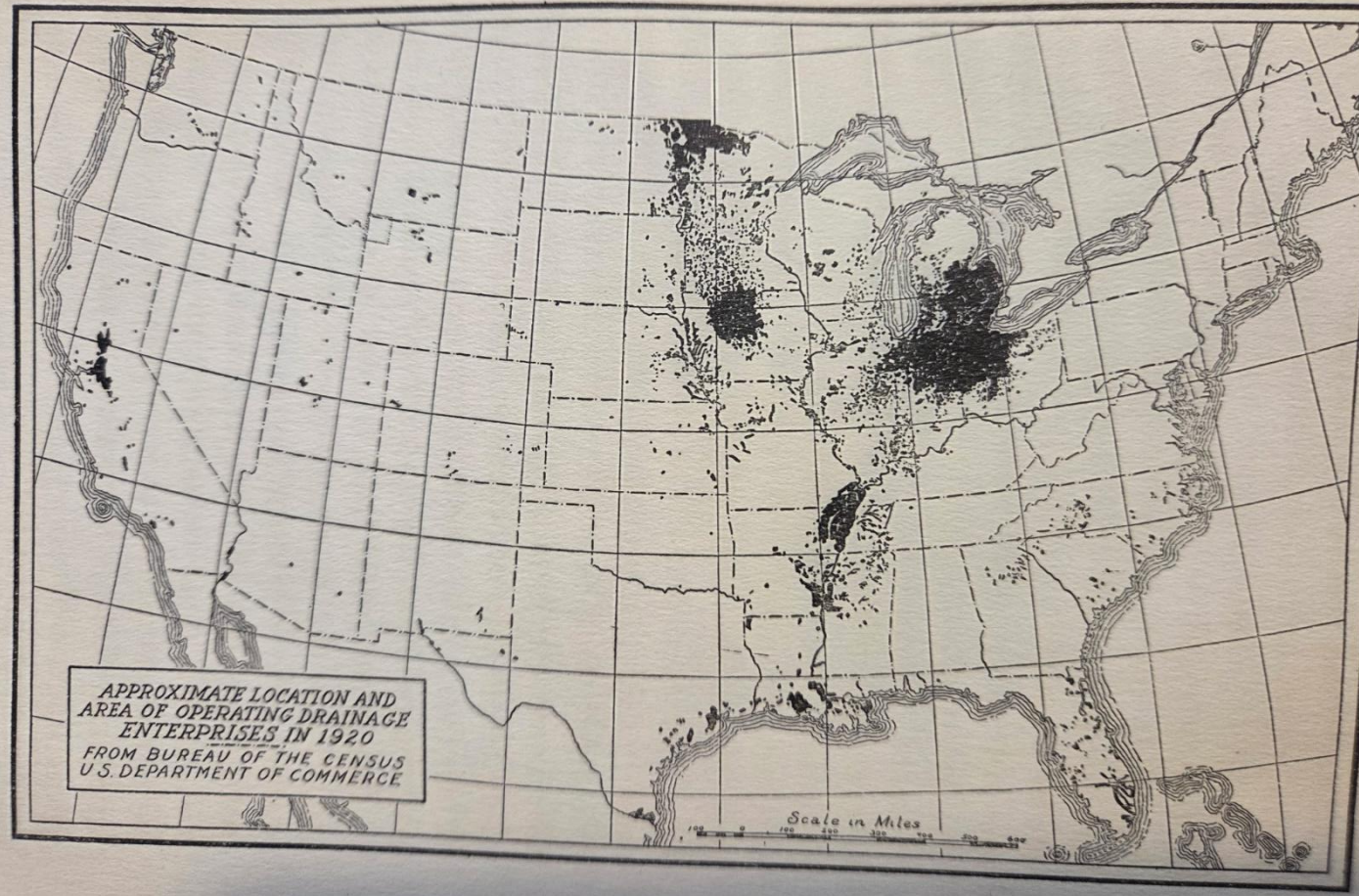
- The “Serengeti” of Minnesota was gone by the very early 1900s
- 18 million acres to less than 2% in a blink of time
- Took 10 years to “tame” a township

# Wetlands and Lakes Were Next - Unrelenting Drainage

- State and National Policy
  - State Drainage Commission
  - State Drainage Law
  - Division of Drainage and Waters



# Drainage Map 1920s



# The First Game Managers

- Dr. Paul Highby, Project Lead and Federal Aid Coordinator, 1946. In 1948 oversaw the transition to area game manager system, 9 Game Management Areas. Later expanded to 12 Game Management Areas (i.e., area wildlife work areas)
- Dr. Arnold B. Erickson & Dave Vesall – hired the first 12 game managers, post WWII



Photos by Deb Gau  
Retired DNR member Bill Berg shakes hands with Jerry Bue, seated, at the dedication of a new Wildlife Management Area south of Marshall. The WMA is named in honor of Bue and his family, who donated part of the land for the WMA.

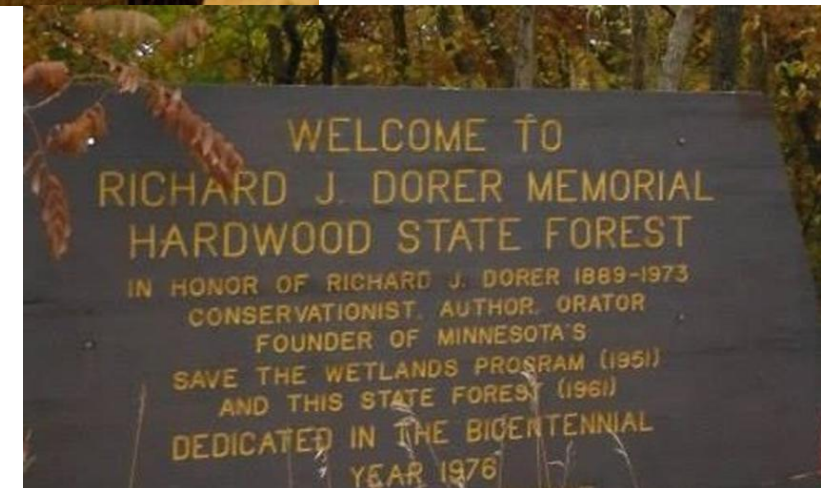
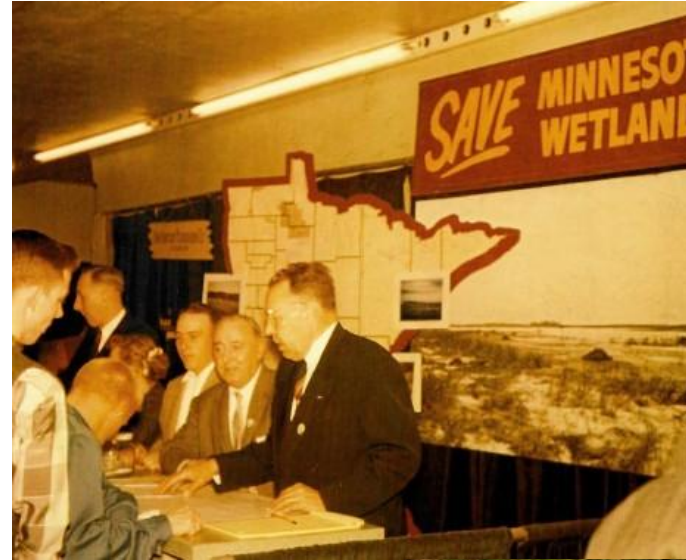
# Game Managers - Sounding the Alarm

- Wetlands were being drained at a rate of 3-5% per year
- Ten Mile Creek drainage job – drained 573 wetlands for nearly 6,000 acres – potential annual reduction of over 5,000 waterfowl, 10,000 muskrats and a large number of pheasants and other wildlife species. Tip of the iceberg
- Agreement with Soil Conservation Districts to investigate drainage projects – hundreds of project each year. Game managers pleaded with landowners to spare a few wetlands from drainage – successful 10% of the time
- Became evident the only way to save wetlands was to purchase them outright



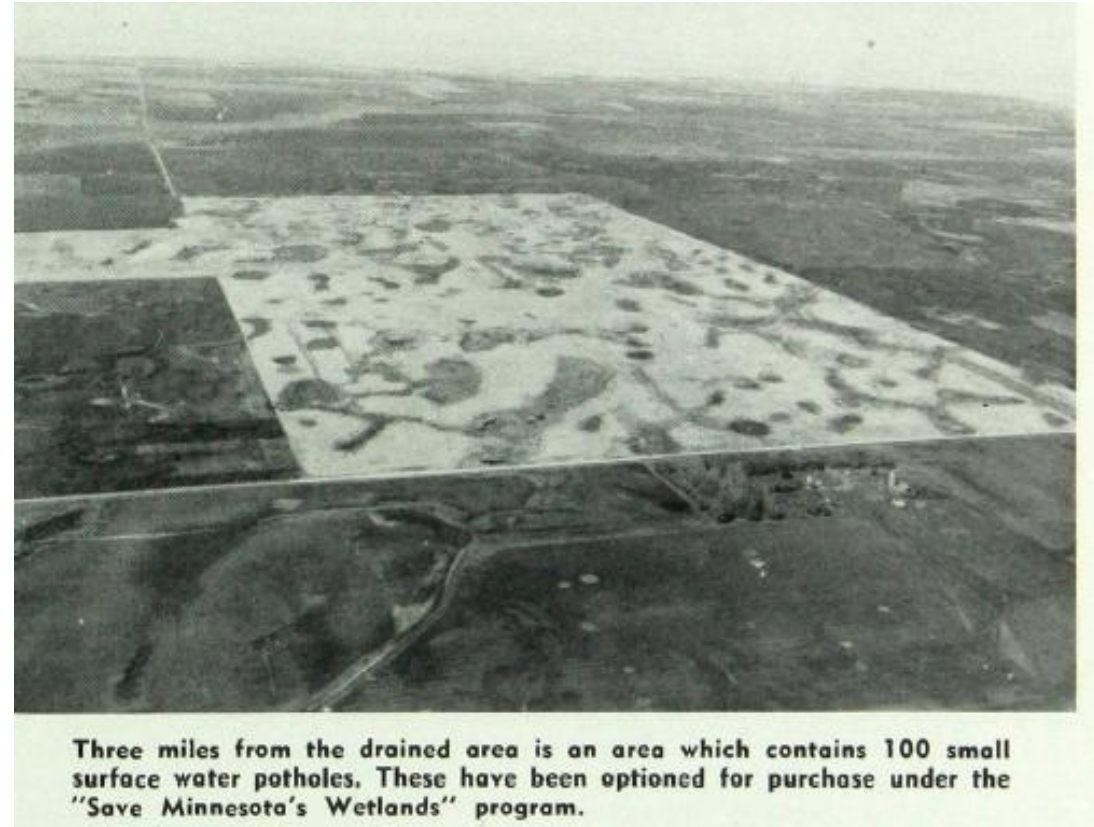
# Lighting the Candle and Leading the Crusade

- Richard J. Dorer, 1889-1973
  - US Militar Academy - West Point. Classmates with Dwight Eisenhower. Decorated WWI Veteran – Captain – Awarded the silver star, Two French war crosses, Purple Heart. Citation for gallantry signed by General John J. Pershing
  - Joined the Conservation Department, Division of Game and Fish in 1938 at the age of 48. Later became supervisor of the Bureau of Game
- Visionary – Relentless – Orator - Philosopher – - Great capacity for outrage of environmental sins – author – teacher. Emotional experience
- Responsible for creating the Memorial State Forest in SE MN – Whitewater Valley
- Responsible for the Save Minnesota Wetlands program – foundation for state WMA system



# Providing the Tools, Laying the Legal Foundation

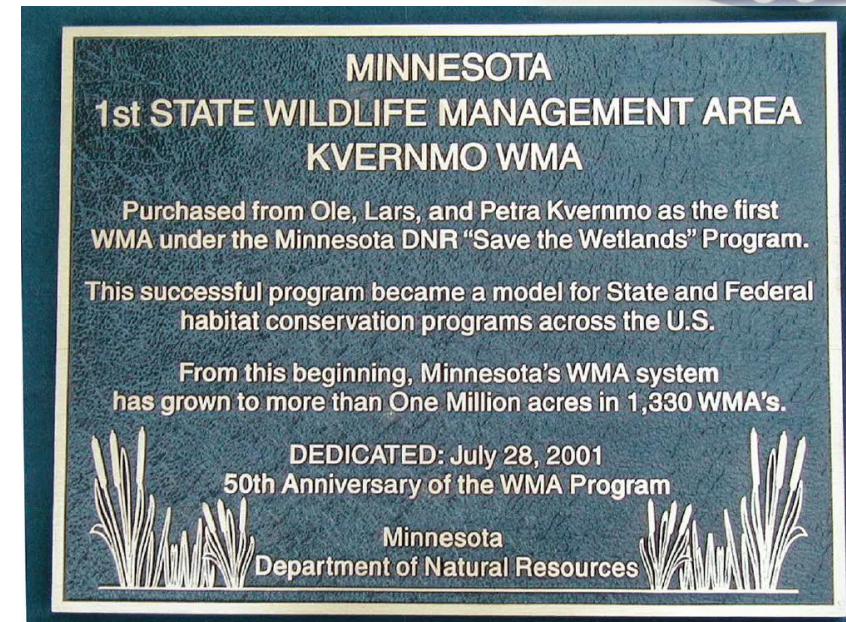
- Ray Haik
  - Assistant attorney general for the MN Department of Conservation
  - Helped establish the legal concepts around *Public Waters* and the *Public Trust Doctrine* that would support water and wetland protections
  - Legal work shaped the way MN recognized and defended public water and environmental interests



# Save Minnesota Wetland Program

- Launched in 1951 by the Minnesota Conservation Department – goal to protect disappearing wetland. Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds (Pittman-Roberson) along with state matching funds
- Goal 250,000 acres – early detractors
- Led by Richard Dorer – Spearheaded the crusade and setup a special fund for private donations –\$9,784 by 1956. Awareness and tireless advocacy (The North Shore Game and Fish Club of Long Lake promoted the sale of the lapel buttons and arm patches)
- First acquisition in 1953 – Kvernmo WMA, Lincoln County
- 1957, the Legislature required a \$1.00 surcharge to small game licenses – wetland acquisitions; legislature appropriated in additional funding and about \$200,000 per year of PR funds
- Precursor to federal WPA system
- Foundation for the WMA system we have today

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# The Evolution – WMA Program Expansion

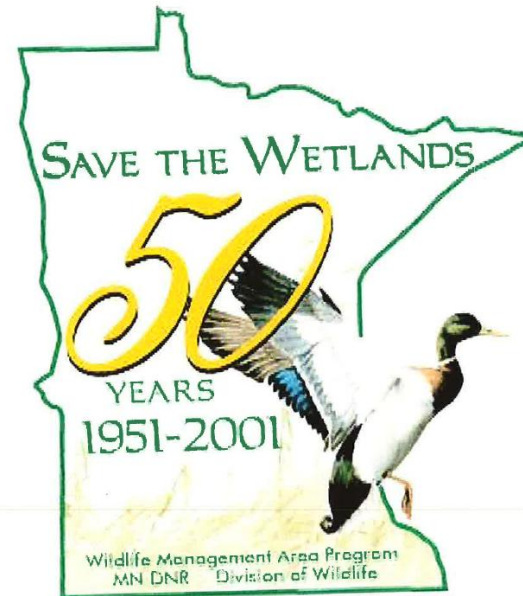
- 1971 – rising land prices and continued drainage prompted the legislature to raise the surcharge to \$2.00 and increase annual appropriation for WMAs to \$550,000
- 1975 – 450,000 acres of WMA lands acquired, and the annual appropriation increased to \$615,000. Long-range WMA acquisition program was developed under **Resource 2000** – the goal 1 million acres by the year 2000
- 1981 – thanks to Resource 2000 the legislature appropriated \$4.5 million for the 1981-83 biennium. Also increased the surcharge on small game licenses to \$4.00
- 1983 - program expands beyond wetlands – 520,000 acres acquired, with 950 WMAs in 84 of Minnesota's 87 counties.



Image: Roger Holmes on the left with Joe Duggan of Pheasants Forever at the dedication of the Roger M. Holmes Wildlife Management Area in May of 2008.

# The Evolution – WMA Program Accelerates

- 2001 – 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the WMA system – 1.1 million acres of land – one of the best and largest in the country. Lands made up 1,355 WMAs across 86 of Minnesota's 87 counties
- 2005 – Rally for Ducks, Wetlands and Clean Water – 6,000 attendees – press lawmakers to support a constitutional amendment
- 2008 – Passage of Legacy Amendment – increased state sales tax by 3/8 of 1%, 2009-2034.
  - Four funds – Outdoor Heritage, Clean Water, Parks and Trails, and Arts and Cultural



# Legacy Amendment: Transforming Minnesota's Wildlife Landscape

Protected 73,793 acres of new WMA lands

Restored 12,152 acres of degraded habitat on WMAs

Enhanced 519,675 acres of existing WMA habitat

Protects critical habitat for pheasants, waterfowl, deer, turkey, pollinators, and nongame wildlife

Reconnects fragmented landscapes and supports healthier wildlife populations

Safeguards wetlands and uplands that buffer climate impacts and maintain biodiversity

Strengthens long-term management capacity through fire regimes, invasive control, and hydrologic restoration

# Legacy Amendment: Expanding Access, Opportunity, and Outdoor Heritage

More than 1,500 WMAs and 1.4 million acres statewide

Creates more places to hunt, fish, hike, birdwatch, and trap across Minnesota

Provides permanent public access to prairies, wetlands, forests, and brushlands

Improved habitat quality enhances wildlife encounters and outdoor experiences

Supports local economies through tourism, hunting, and recreation

Safeguarding our wildlife and outdoor inheritance for future generations

# Closing Thoughts – Caring for the Legacy

- Our work is only beginning – we are following in the footsteps of conservation giants
- Save Minnesota Wetlands was not its physical acquisitions – its was its ability to change attitudes and set forth new state and federal policy
- In another 25 years we will be celebrating two conservation milestones:
  - Save MN Wetland Program
  - The Legacy Amendment
- “Conservation, thy name is controversy. Remember that! Do not allow yourself to be defeated ... Don’t become a cynic. If you lose one, get up and win another!”



# WMA Photo Contest

- Photo contest is open – runs through January 1, 2027

## Our partners

