

Securing sourcewater via forestland



With an Outdoor Heritage Fund grant, the Crow Wing SWCD worked with private landowners and Crow Wing and Hubbard county land departments on acquisitions that protect forestland in the Pine and Leech Lake river watersheds which, in turn, protect habitat and a drinking water source for the Twin Cities



Project support came from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, as appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature.

A land acquisition made possible with a \$1.6 million [Outdoor Heritage Fund grant](#) will help to preserve water quality in a Crow Wing Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) priority watershed that supplies the Twin Cities with a source of drinking water.

The five parcels totaling 200.52 acres lie in the Pine River watershed, surrounded by 105,000 acres of county-owned land. The \$436,900 purchase, recorded on Oct. 27, nudges the SWCD's goal of keeping 75% of forestland within the Ruth Lake subwatershed forested up by 2 percentage points to 64%. The SWCD purchased the land from two couples, and then donated it to the Crow Wing County Land Services department, which will manage it for timber production and wildlife habitat.

“The more we can keep forests as forests, the more we’re going to be able to keep this water clear and good so when it comes down to the Twin Cities, people don’t have to pay as much money to treat it,” said Crow Wing SWCD Manager Melissa Barrick, who serves as the project manager.

The Pine River flows to the Mississippi River, a source of drinking water for more than 1 million people in the Twin Cities and St. Cloud.

A Minnesota Department of Natural Resources study determined that protecting 75% of forestland within a lake’s watershed helps to preserve its water quality. When more than 25% of a lake’s watershed is deforested, phosphorus runoff spikes. Phosphorus

Outdoor Heritage Fund-backed land purchases in Crow Wing and Hubbard counties will benefit wildlife habitat and protect a source of drinking water. The Crow Wing County purchases included this parcel in the Pine River watershed, which flows to the Mississippi River — a source of drinking water for more than 1 million people in the Twin Cities and St. Cloud.

Photo Credit:
Crow Wing SWCD

feeds the algae that turns lakes green.

When it prioritized 500 lakes within the 785-square-mile Pine River watershed, the SWCD ranked Ruth Lake among those deserving the highest level of protection based on water quality, sensitivity to phosphorus, economic significance, and probability of attaining the 75% goal.

“The No. 1 goal for the Pine was to protect habitat, forestland and groundwater. And the best way to do that is through either acquisitions or through conservation easements, because we’re basically buying the rights so that land doesn’t get developed,” Barrick said. “It’s a three-for-one: habitat, water protection, forestland.”

By working with landowners to install best management practices, the SWCD also aims to reduce by 5% the amount of phosphorus that enters Ruth Lake. That translates to 18 pounds a year.

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Board Conservationist Chris Pence added land access and consolidation to the list of stacked benefits.

“It’s not too often that you’re going to find a piece of property like this that’s completely forested and surrounded by county land. It’s an island to itself,” Pence said. “One of the reasons why it’s so important to look at these rural parcels for consolidation is the county is unable (without incurring a high cost) to provide services that people would expect if they would build a house back there.”

A second grant-funded land purchase in Hubbard County — encompassing parcels



A Clean Water Land & Legacy Amendment sign marks property south of Akeley in Hubbard County that is now owned by the county. Photo Credit: Chip Lohmeier, Hubbard County

south of Akeley and north of Kabekona Lake near Laporte — protects 309.8 acres within the Leech Lake River watershed, which also feeds the Mississippi River. That \$417,832 purchase was also recorded on Oct. 27. The Crow Wing SWCD bought the land from [The Conservation Fund](#), which [had purchased the property](#) from [PotlatchDeltic](#), and had been seeking a third party to take it over. The SWCD bought the parcels for well under the assessed value of \$639,000. It then donated the land to Hubbard County. Barrick worked with both counties’ land departments.

Hubbard County Land Commissioner Chip Lohmeier said the property would be managed for forestry, public recreation and wildlife habitat.

“We try to mimic nature,” Lohmeier said. That means the occasional timber harvest. Public recreation includes activities such as hunting, hiking and bird-watching. The land provides habitat for

deer, black bears, wild turkeys, ruffed grouse and nongame species such as eagles, hawks and songbirds.

The \$1.6 million grant covered the land acquisitions in Crow Wing and Hubbard counties, plus \$107,000 for contract, legal and appraisal work related to those purchases (including a \$65,000 contract with Walker-based Northern Waters Land Trust, which coordinated the acquisition process among landowners and partners, gathered necessary documents and ensured reporting requirements were met). The balance will fund permanent Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easements with willing landowners. The grant was awarded on July 1, 2021, and runs through June 30, 2025.

“Our goal was to acquire 300 acres, which we did surpass. And then we had a goal to place 240 acres of high-quality forest, wetlands and shorelines into conservation easements,” Barrick said. “The

grant’s purpose was to have a unified protection plan for the lands within the watershed. ... That’s why we’re doing both easements and acquisitions.”

The Crow Wing SWCD staff is reviewing landowners’ easement applications, which are ranked. Easement outreach continues in Hubbard and Cass counties. RIM easements are held by BWSR and monitored by SWCDs.

The Pine River ranked No. 3 among 27 watersheds in terms of private forests important for drinking water supply in seven states — Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana. The USDA Forest Service’s “Forests, Water and People: Drinking water supply and forest lands in the Northeast and Midwest United States,” published in June 2009, ranked the Mississippi headwaters No. 7 and the Leech Lake River watershed No. 9.

The SWCD’s grant application notes that the Pine and Leech Lake river watersheds provide habitat for wild rice, golden-winged warblers, Northern long-eared bats, Blanding’s turtles and more than 100 unique, rare, endangered or threatened species — all of them at risk from development trends. The application also notes that the watersheds’ lakes and fisheries contribute to a tourism industry that generates nearly \$400 million in gross sales per year in Crow Wing, Hubbard and Cass counties.

Thirty-three percent of sales tax revenue from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, which Minnesota voters passed in 2008, is allocated to the [Outdoor Heritage Fund](#).