

South Branch Root River Watershed Project  
September 14, 2006 Meeting Notes

In attendance: Rich Biske (The Nature Conservancy), Lee Ganske (MPCA), Fred Beier (Property owner), Warren Netherton (Mystery Cave), Oakley and Gaye Stockdale (York Twp), Mark Dittrich (MDA), Bill Sweetser (Supervisor-Bennington Twp), Keith Voorhees (Supervisor-Clayton Twp), Clint Miller (MN Land Trust), Donna Rasmussen (Fillmore SWCD) Introductions were made.

Voluntary Conservation Easements 101: Clint Miller, MN Land Trust, spoke about the MN Land Trust, which is a private, non-profit land conservation organization in Minnesota which assists landowners with permanently protecting natural and scenic resources by limiting the use and development of their land. Landowners have a number of options open to them, which include land acquisition by purchase or donation (such as through The Nature Conservancy), deed restrictions (non-permanent easements that the landowner must enforce and must renew every 30 years), government land retirement programs (CRP, etc.), and permanent conservation easements, which is what the Land Trust does. These easements are permanent and legally binding land use restrictions. They are voluntary, perpetual, and are tailored to each property. The focus is usually on wildlife, fish, and plant habitats, lakeshores and streams, and scenic landscapes. Conservation easements can only be held by a government agency or by a qualified conservation agency, such as MN Land Trust or The Nature Conservancy. Typical restrictions include what buildings and structures are allowed and where they can be built so that conservation values are not affected. Other restricted uses often include roads and trails; industrial, commercial, or ag uses (although practices in place can be protected); altering habitat or water bodies, extracting minerals, and subdivisions. The landowner continues to own and manage the property and pays the property taxes. The landowner allows the Land Trust to monitor the easement and notifies them before the property is transferred. Violations are enforced based on the state statute and tax code. The purpose of these types of easements is to keep private lands in private ownership while allowing for personal participation in conservation. Many landowners are left with peace of mind that they have left a legacy. Income taxes are minimal because the easement is considered a charitable donation, but it requires a qualified appraisal. With recent tax changes, the income tax benefits have increased greatly. Estate taxes are only paid on the value after the easement. Property tax benefits are up to the county assessor. The community benefits from the easements because they protect land and water resources, preserve the character of the community, maximize the use of conservation dollars (avg is \$300/acre), and keep the land on the local tax roles without any additional services required. On forest lands, logging is allowed if there is an approved stewardship plan.

The 319 grant work plan includes cooperation with MN Land Trust to encourage landowners to develop conservation easements, especially to maintain permanent vegetation. We plan to hold a landowner workshop this winter to get information to those that are interested. Suggested topics include CREP, the MDA Ag Preservation Program, Wetland Reserve Program, involuntary protections through Zoning, such as Shoreland ordinances, and The Nature Conservancy. Senior citizens may be a target audience as they are doing retirement and estate planning.

BREAK

Woodchip bioreactor research to reduce nitrogen in tile discharge: Mark Dittrich, MDA, spoke about the proposed addition of this to the drainage research project. The woodchips act to reduce nitrogen in tile discharge water before it enters streams, and possibly bacteria and pesticides also. Five to ten feet of wood chips are needed per acre to be effective. The use of buckthorn as a source for the wood chips would serve two purposes and may also decrease soybean aphids which use buckthorn as a reservoir. Mark will keep us apprised on the project.

How can the Clean Water Cabinet assist our project? Lee and Donna presented information to the Clean Water Cabinet in July about the watershed project since this is a focus area for the Governor's Clean Water Initiative. They seemed pleased with the progress being made and with the types of efforts going on here. They asked for ways that the Cabinet might assist us with the project. Lee mentioned some concerns related to the JD#1 clean out project for water storage and doing more planning before a cleanout project is underway. He also mentioned that more time might be needed to get more people signed up for the CREP since initial sign ups have been slow due to low rental rates for CRP and low RIM rates, which were recently increased. Also mentioned was a need for adequate funding for low-interest loans for septic system upgrades and feedlot projects. Other concerns mentioned by this group were enforcement of the shoreland ordinances so that buffers are maintained along protected waters, and the need to address sedimentation in the TMDL process by ramping up the work on the turbidity TMDL.

#### Updates:

Aerial seeding of cover crops- The helicopter was here last Friday and seeded about 150 acres of winter rye on corn silage and bean fields in the watershed. The rains over the weekend and the warmth should improve germination. About 450 acres were done in the whole county. The aerial seeding is being implemented the same as the SWCD program: pay the cost of the helicopter out of the grant and the farmer pays the cost of the seed on up to 40 acres of corn silage or soybean acres. (The SWCD paid on up to 30 acres and only allowed corn silage acres.)

Total Resource Management-A Clean Water Legacy proposal is being developed to hire staff to work with farmers in four watersheds, including the Root, to use the River Friendly Farmer criteria to develop a simple farm management plan to address their management needs. The funding includes cost-share practices that address fecal coliform bacteria sources.

A Root River Clean Water Legacy proposal is also being developed with a focus on rotational grazing. Farmers who participate and can show that they have addressed all of the fecal coliform sources on their farms will receive a bonus payment.

The MDA riparian grazing project rain simulation studies started last year were done again in August, including Heusinkvelds west of the park. Dan Miller's site was also done one, two and three weeks after the cattle are removed from a paddock.

There are now 6 loans completed and 4 in progress utilizing the CWP loan funds for the watershed project amounting to about \$75,000.

WSU students under the direction of Neal Mundahl have completed biological monitoring on 12 sites in the South Branch to follow up on the work that was done in 1998 and 1999. Two sites were added downstream of the JD#1 project in an effort to determine if there have been downstream impacts from the project. Funding came from evaluation funds in the 319 grant.

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.