



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

# REPORT

MINNESOTA'S Accomplishments

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11



Helping People Help the Land

**USDA**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**



# State Conservationist's Message

Hello Fellow Conservationist's:

I proudly present to you the 2011 Accomplishment Report for the Minnesota Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This year was a great year for conservation in Minnesota. Thank you for making these accomplishments possible.

In Fiscal Year 2011 I finished visiting all of the NRCS Field Offices (FO). These visits provided me with a better understanding of how Minnesotans accomplish conservation results.

During these FO visits I learned even more about our outstanding conservation partnership that we have with the soil and water conservation districts. This partnership continues to produce a seamless delivery system for our local, state and federal conservation programs. Other partnerships continue to expand and flourish, including but not limited to; Watershed Districts, Joint Powers Boards, Board of Soil and Water Resources, Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Wheat Growers, Corn Growers, Soybean Growers and many more. Together, we ALL made a better commitment to conservation in Minnesota.

Looking for the future, I am encouraged as I know we can and will improve upon getting more "boots on the ground" to solve our Minnesota natural resource concerns. And yes thank you to the Minnesota NRCS staff for a job well done. We had an excellent year and this was due in part to your continued dedication to helping people help the land.

This year we tackled the on-going concerns with the Wetland Conservation Act and Swampbuster provision (1985 Food Security Act-Farm Bill). With the cooperation of many, we have targeted 35 Agreements with SWCDs to provide better service with the wetland concerns. We have initiated Ag. Mitigation Banking to give private landowners the option to mitigate wetlands just as our non-ag folks have had the opportunity to do so since 1991 in Minnesota. So we have done well in 2011 for Minnesota's private landowners.

FY 2012 looks promising too! We have started discussions to implement an Ag. Water Quality Certification Program (Certainty) in Minnesota. This is an exciting opportunity for our Ag. producers to fully address water quality resource concerns by implementing their conservation plans. In return, we (MPCA, MDA, DNR and BWSR) will provide assurance and certification that by meeting applicable water quality standards Minnesota's private landowners will have "Certainty."

Yours in conservation,



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Don A. Baloun, Minnesota State Conservationist



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## Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)

CCPI is a partnership with Trout Unlimited and Natural Resources Conservation Service through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative to dedicate funding to the restoration of aquatic and riparian habitat in the Midwest's Driftless Area. The intent is a coordinated regional approach between Federal, State, Local agencies and groups along with landowners involving agriculture and nonindustrial private forest land to stabilize eroding streambanks and the same time incorporate habitat for both game and non-game species. These projects will improve habitat for fish, reptiles and amphibians and other at-risk or declining species; and will serve as models for other stream restoration projects on how to incorporate non-game habitat.

An additional CCPI partnership is with The Nature Conservancy to facilitate the enrollment in EQIP grassland conservation practices adjacent to blocks of native prairie in western Minnesota. The objectives are: (1) to improve grazing land health and productivity, (2) greater livestock weight gains from improved forage lands, (3) enhanced carbon sequestration through prairie restoration better grazing land management, (4) water quality improvements through streambank and shoreland restoration, and (5) restoration and management of habitats for declining species primarily through increased prescribed fire and brush management on private lands.

### 2011 Accomplishments

Minnesota received 3 CCPI applications in 2011.

Minnesota approved 3 contracts covering 132.0 acres for a total financial assistance of \$89,485. All contracts approved were providing Beginning Farmer/Ranchers with financial assistance.

EQIP funding options included:

- CCPI - Driftless
- CCPI – Native Pasture TNC

Practices included:

- 27,074 feet of Fence
- 125.4 acres of Prescribed Grazing
- 15 Water Facility
- 2 Wells

### Program Benefits

Through voluntary, incentive-based conservation, positive environmental results can be achieved by promoting conservation among Minnesota's private landowners.



## Conservation Security Program (CSP)

The Conservation Security Program is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. CSP identifies and rewards those producers who are meeting the highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations, and helps these producers maintain their conservation stewardship level and implement additional conservation practices that provide added environmental enhancement. The conservation benefits gained will help agricultural operations be more environmentally sustainable and will increase the natural resources benefits provided to all Americans.

The Conservation Security Program was authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill and yearly sign-ups were held in selected watersheds across the nation and structured on a three tier system. To be eligible, an agricultural operation was required to be located in one of the selected watersheds for the specific year's sign-up. A producer's operation also needed to meet the minimum tier eligibility and contract requirements;

- Tier 1** - required to meet soil and water quality resource concern thresholds on part of operation;
- Tier 2** - required to meet soil and water quality resource concern thresholds on entire operation;
- Tier 3** - required to meet all resource concerns on entire operation.

There are no longer sign-ups for the Conservation Security Program, as it was replaced by the Conservation Stewardship Program in the 2008 Farm Bill, but MN NRCS still has 321 active contracts that it is managing and providing technical and financial assistance to producers through. In Fiscal Year 2011, MN NRCS provided \$4.4 million in financial assistance as well as immeasurable technical assistance to Conservation Security Program participants. NRCS financial and technical assistance through CSP promotes the conservation and improvement of soils, water, air, energy, plants, and animal life and other conservation purposes by environmental enhancement activities that include improving soil quality, water quality, wildlife habitat management, nutrient and pest management, air quality management, and on-farm energy management.



## Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

The Conservation Stewardship Program was authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill and replaced the Conservation Security Program (2002 Farm Bill). It is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural and forestry producers to address resource concerns by undertaking additional conservation activities, and improving and maintaining existing conservation systems. By maintaining their current conservation systems and adopting additional conservation activities, producers are maintaining and enhancing the treatment of soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plants, animals, and energy natural resources. Eligible lands include cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture land, rangeland, nonindustrial private forestland, and agricultural land under the jurisdiction of an Indian tribe.

The Conservation Stewardship Program is available to all producers nationwide, regardless of operation size or crops produced. Applications are accepted on a continuous basis with announced ranking cut-off dates when the ranking and funding of applications on file will occur. Applications need to include the applicant's entire operation and are evaluated and ranked relative to other applications that address similar resource concerns in Minnesota. In the ranking process, applicants receive credit for both, conservation measures they have already implemented and for new measures they agree to add. The applications addressing the most resource concerns to the highest degree will receive the highest rankings and will have an on-site field verification conducted prior to entering into a 5 year contract.

MN NRCS currently is providing technical and financial assistance through over 2,300 active Conservation Stewardship Program contracts with an estimated \$38 million in financial assistance being provided annually. MN NRCS provided \$21.4 million in financial assistance in Fiscal Year 2011 through the 1,500 contracts awarded to producers in previous fiscal year sign-ups. Minnesota led the nation in the number of new contracts awarding 764 new contracts during the Fiscal Year 2011 sign-up. Minnesota also led the nation in dollars being obligated for the Fiscal Year 2011 sign-up, with an estimated \$16.5 million in financial assistance being provided in Fiscal Year 2012 for these Fiscal Year 2011 contracts. The technical and financial assistance being provided will help producers maintain their existing conservation system, and add new activities to enhance the treatment of soil, water, air, plants, animals, and energy resource concerns on their operation.

# Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that helps farmers and agricultural landowners, and forest landowners reduce pollution and improve natural resources. EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to help people plan, install and implement structural, vegetative and management conservation practices on agricultural land and forest land.

Minnesota's EQIP program incorporates environmental priorities as identified at the state level (State Technical Committee) and local levels (Local Work Group) into the selection of what specific program options will be offered, and what factors, questions and screening tools will be used in the application ranking process. Ranking worksheets for each program option include evaluation questions that reflect national, state and local priorities.

## 2011 Accomplishments

Minnesota received 2017 EQIP applications in 2011.

Minnesota approved 1147 contracts covering 197,741.9 acres for a total financial assistance of \$23,969,176. Included in these numbers are 228 approved contracts covering 21,433.4 acres assisting Beginning Farmers, Socially Disadvantaged and Limited Resource Producers with financial assistance totaling \$5,284,819.

## EQIP funding options included:

- Beginning Farmers
- CCPI – Driftless
- CCPI – Native Pasture TNC
- MRBI – Accelerated Protection & Restoration
- MRBI – Green Valley/Austin Watershed Initiative
- MRBI – Little Cottonwood River
- MRBI – Redwood County-Middle Minnesota River
- MRBI – Rush-Pine Creek Watershed Initiative
- MRBI – Upper South Fork Root River Watershed

MRBI – Watson Creek Watershed Initiative

Nutrient Management Initiative

- Organic Initiative – certified organic and organic transition
- Seasonal High Tunnel
- Socially Disadvantaged

## Practices included:

- 70 Waste Storage Facilities
- 33 Well decommissioning
- 84 Grade Stabilization Structures
- 107 Grass Waterways
- 664 Nutrient Management Plans
- 39 Terraces
- 157 Water and Sediment Control Basins
- 113 Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops

## Program Benefits

Through voluntary, incentive-based conservation, positive environmental results can be achieved by promoting conservation among Minnesota's private landowners.



*(Before) Reforestation*



*(After) Reforestation*

## Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)

GLRI is a voluntary conservation program to help protect and restore priority watersheds in the region. Through financial assistance and technical assistance, NRCS is assisting private landowners with conservation planning and a variety of conservation practices to combat invasive species, protect watersheds and shorelines from non-point source pollution, and restore wetlands and other habitat areas.

### **\*2011 Accomplishments**

Minnesota received 9 GLRI applications in 2011.

Minnesota approved 7 contracts covering 292.7 acres for a total financial assistance of \$113,123. Included in these numbers is 1 approved contract covering 5.0 acres assisting a Beginning Farmer/Rancher with financial assistance totaling \$749.

### **EQIP funding options included:**

- Great Lakes Nemadji Forestland
- Great lakes Nemadji Pasture/Hayland
- Great Lakes St Louis Forestland
- Great Lakes St Louis Pasture/Hayland

### **Practices included:**

- 186.7 acres of Tree and Shrub Establishment
- 15.0 acres of Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- 123.6 acres of Forest Site Preparation
- 1500' of Fence
- 400" of Pipeline
- 1 Water Facility
- .1 acre of Heavy Use Protection Area



**\*2011 GLRI Accomplishment Data is included in the 2011 EQIP Accomplishment data. (Page 6)**



*Construction Monitoring System*



*Water Monitoring System*



*Explaining How System Works*

## Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative (MRBI)

MRBI is a voluntary conservation program that works with agricultural producers to build on past efforts of addressing nutrient loading in the Mississippi River basin. Sediment and nutrient loading contribute to the water quality problems throughout the river basin. The conservation systems approach is used to manage and optimize nitrogen and phosphorus within fields and to minimize runoff and reduce downstream nutrient loading. Through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program and the Wetlands Reserve Program, a variety of conservation practices promote water quality, wetland restoration and wildlife habitat while maintaining agricultural production.

### ❖ 2011 Accomplishments

Minnesota received 68 MRBI applications in 2011.

Minnesota approved 62 contracts covering 18,258.9 acres for a total financial assistance of \$1,400,451. Included in these numbers are 8 approved contracts covering 2,133.4 acres assisting Limited Resource and Beginning Farmer/Ranchers with financial assistance totaling \$31,312.50.

### EQIP funding options included:

- MRBI – Accelerated Protection & Restoration
- MRBI – Green Valley/Austin Watershed Initiative
- MRBI – Little Cottonwood River - Minnesota
- MRBI – Redwood County - Middle Minnesota River
- MRBI – Rush-Pine Creek Watershed Initiative
- MRBI – Upper South Fork Root River Watershed
- MRBI – Watson Creek Watershed Initiative

### Practices included:

- 7,562.4 acres of Nutrient Management
- 2,300 feet of Streambank and Shoreline Protection
- 13,674 feet of Fence
- 11,670 feet of Terrace
- 440.8 acres of Residue Management – No Till
- 187.7 acres of Cover Crop
- 6 Waste Storage Facilities
- 6 Grade Stabilization Structures
- 3 Roof Runoff Structures
- 11 Water and Sediment Control Basins

\*2011 MRBI Accomplishment data is included in the 2011 EQIP Accomplishment data. (Page 6)

\*\*See Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program for MRBI easement data. (Page 21)

Boots on the Ground.....

## Emergency Watershed program (EWP)

The EWP program is used to correct watershed impairments caused by a sudden natural event that threatens life or property. The Minnesota NRCS is part of the Minnesota Recovers Task Force which is made up of government agencies and other organizations who have a role in disaster recovery. Our EWP projects are coordinated through the Task Force.

In 2011 Minnesota had three eligible projects submitted for funding. One project was considered an “exigency” situation because the Zumbro River threatened a home in the City of Kellogg so severely that it could have been destroyed at any time by slope failure. The NRCS partnered with the MN Department of Natural Resources for a buyout and removal of that home.



*Threatened Home*

Two other homes were threatened to a lesser degree by Zumbro River erosion in the City of Kellogg. Those homes are on a “wait list” and cannot be funded until Congress provides additional funds for the EWP program. The NRCS is partnering with BWSR for assistance on this site. BWSR has moved ahead with funding for an engineering design while we wait for construction funds.

In Blue Earth County, a Township Road is threatened by bank erosion and is eligible for the EWP program. That project is also on the “wait list”.

### **The PL-566 Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program**

Funding for the PL-566 program was terminated in FY2011. Just prior to that termination, Minnesota received funds to construct the Spring Brook project in Kittson County. The Spring Brook project consists of “setback levees” that will improve the health of the stream channel, provide considerable wildlife habitat along the stream and reduce flood damages to adjacent cropland.

Construction on the Spring Brook project is expected to be completed in 2012.



## Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

The Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) is administered by the NRCS and partners with eligible entities to secure easements on eligible agricultural land to maintain production capability. NRCS provides up to 50% of the easement compensation and partner entities along with landowner donations provide the remaining amount.

\$1.16 million of USDA – NRCS FRPP funding was received in 2011. A competitive Request for Proposal process was utilized nationwide. Dakota County was selected to receive funding since they were the only and highest ranked applicant in Minnesota. Dakota County, the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District and NRCS continue to partner on this effort working with 13 private landowners to protect 1,161 acres of farmland.

The FRPP funds will continue to support Dakota County's existing farmland protection efforts through the Dakota County Farmland and Natural Area Program (FNAP). Through this joint effort, FRPP funds will contribute up to one half of the cost of farmland protection easements and the county will pay for the other half as well as other associated costs to secure the easement and administer the program.

Eight landowners had a Dakota County/NRCS FRPP easement perfected in 2011 that had been funded in previous years. This included a total of 1087 acres of which 1020 acres are prime farmland. The easement protects these lands from being converted to non-agricultural land uses.

Additional easements are currently being processed and another Dakota County signup has occurred. Interest remains strong and a number of easements will close in fiscal year 2012.

## Minnesota Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative

The Minnesota Grazing Lands Conservation Association (GLCA) entered into their first Contribution Agreement with NRCS during fiscal year 2011 and funding from that agreement helped them to conduct 34 locally organized grazing workshops that provided training for 564 participants.

Members of the Minnesota GLCA consist of some of the best grazing managers in Minnesota and they come from all parts of the state. Because they understand local livestock and grazing issues they have provided valuable expertise and advice on topics that will benefit local and regional audiences. They furnish one on one advice to producers who want to ramp up their grazing management. GLCA chair Clarence Caraway states that people drive up to his ranch just to ask why his pasture is staying green while others are brown.

Caraway and Scott Thooft organized a workshop to demonstrate improved grazing management techniques and enlisted the help of two commercial sponsors and the local cattleman's association. "I think we get better results when we offer subjects that all cattleman can use" says Caraway. "We use that to get them to look closer at these grazing systems." As a part of the workshop NRCS grazing specialist Lance Smith discussed estimating stocking rates, forage plant ID, forage plant characteristics, placement of fences and watering facilities and let participants know that NRCS provides general technical assistance to all producers. Similar on farm workshops were held in each part of the state with presentations by producers and local NRCS grazing specialists.

Additionally, GLCA assisted the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to sponsor a workshop on the subject of "Mob Grazing" with nationally recognized authority Terry Gompert, which was attended by over 100 people.

The partnership between MN GLCA and NRCS created public awareness about the benefits of managed grazing during fiscal year 2011 not only during the workshops themselves but afterwards when the farm press reported on them. These news articles may have as much impact on public awareness of NRCS technical and financial assistance as the workshops themselves.

# Grassland Reserve Program

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners to manage and protect their grasslands. USDA NRCS and FDSA jointly manage this program. Rental contracts or easements are options that landowners may voluntarily apply for utilizing GRP funding.

An expanded Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) effort was conducted in Minnesota in FY11 that included easements as an option. This involved extensive efforts with numerous partners, recommended by the Minnesota State Technical Committee and approved by both NRCS and FSA.

In the end three easement focus areas were designated, the Root River Watershed in SE MN, SW MN and the Prairie Chicken -Beach Ridges in WC/NW MN. Only Three GRP easement applications were received and all were funded on 126 acres in the Root River Watershed focus area.

6 rental contracts (10 and 15 years in length) were obligated on approximately 505 acres in Lac qui Parle, Murray and Swift counties.

In both rental contracts and easements landowners are assisted by NRCS and develop a grassland management plan. Following the plan to manage the grassland resource according to NRCS technical standards is a requirement of the GRP.

## Plant Materials Program

Over the past 50 years, the Bismarck Plant Materials Center in Bismarck, North Dakota has provided plant solutions for the diverse landscapes in North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota. The Center offers technical assistance for native landscaping, windbreaks, re-vegetating saline-alkaline soils, improving productivity of range and pasture lands, enhancing wildlife habitat and wetlands, and enhancing native prairie ecosystems. The Center has released over 40 improved conservation plants.

The plant materials program has provided many benefits to Minnesota residents through the years and continues to enjoy strong support from our field office employees, partners and cooperating landowners.

- Minnesota supports an Off Center Evaluation Planting (OCEP) site in Becker. Additional plantings were done in the spring of 2011 with assistance from NRCS state and field office staff. New and existing plantings were evaluated in August. Measurements and notes were taken on crown spread and plant height, disease and insect damage, drought and cold tolerance, fruit production, survival, vigor and animal damage.
- In the fall of 2011, 44 field plantings across the state were evaluated by field office staff.
- Requests for plant materials for field plantings in 2011:
  - Sweet Grass - 10 plants;
  - Hackberry – 30 plants;
  - Ninebark – 90 plants.

### On-going Projects

#### Collecting Sand Cherry

Western sand cherry is a small native shrub that has been used in conservation plantings for many years. There are no conservation varieties on the market, and nursery stock is known to be quite variable in size and performance. Plans are to establish an evaluation nursery of western sand cherry with the objective of making selections to develop a new variety with more consistent plant performance and longevity.

The PMC collected fruit of western sand cherry from native grasslands and existing plantings in MN, ND and SD.

# Plant Materials Program

## Bio-energy Plots

The Bismarck PMC is partnering with Central Lakes College at Staples, MN, and others in the performance testing of various plant materials as potential bio-energy crops. PMC staff seeded five different species/entries at eight different locations near Staples. Entries included switchgrass, big bluestem, intermediate wheatgrass, prairie cord grass, and a CP-25 native mix. Stand densities have improved for all plots, and data collection continues.

## Area Activities - 2011

### Area 1

- The area participated in harvesting hackberry and black current seed
- Area held annual plant materials tour, showed slides and highlights of the tour.

### Area 2

- Held an area plant materials tour in June at Morris. Grazing dairy, pasture condition scoring demonstration and plant ID were the focus of the tour.

### Area 3

- Reported that Black cherry plantings have had good success in this area
- OCEP at Grand Rapids will be wrapping up in 2011.

### Area 4

- They have been working on getting forbs established in prairie plantings. They try for a mix of 80% forbs, also plant “seed islands” where they fence a small area and plant seedlings rather than seeds.

### Area 5

- Pipestone Co. installed three rain gardens.
- Lac qui Parle Co. established a native planting as a peoples’ garden. Did weekly radio updates of phenology through the growing season.

### Area 7

- Several rain gardens have been installed in the area.

## Dave Wise, Tribal Liaison

- Tribal interest in plant materials is on-going.
- Assisting native plantings with tribes in area 5. Evaluating birch and ash as plants used for cultural activities.

## The Mission of the Plant Materials Program

“The development and delivery of plant science technology to meet the Nation’s natural resources conservation needs.”





## Red River Retention Initiative

In 2011 NRCS made a renewed commitment to address flooding and increase flood retention initiatives throughout the entire Red River of the North Basin. In January a Red River Basin Coordinator position was added to the Minnesota State Office staff. This position is enabling better coordination of retention efforts and strengthening conservation and retention partnerships in the entire Basin. The Basin covers parts of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

The NRCS has made a major commitment in staffing two positions to assist the newly formed Red River Retention Authority (RRRA) in reaching their goal of 1,000,000 acre/feet of flood retention.

Some of the highlights of RRRA and MN NRCS activities in 2011 were:

1. NRCS State Office and Area Office specialists and Red River Basin Coordinator served as technical and program advisors to the Initiatives Retention Committee. This Committee formed six Subcommittees which formulated program and policy recommendations that would provide for flood retention opportunities in the 2012 Farm Bill.
2. NRCS facilitated the completion of a draft Memorandum of Understanding between the RRRA, NRCS and US Army Corps of Engineers to improve the coordination and completion of permit applications on retention projects. The draft is currently being reviewed by St. Paul and Omaha Corps District offices.
3. NRCS is working with the RRRA to co-locate NRCS and RRRA personnel to facilitate better coordination of the planning and installation of retention projects.
4. NRCS engineering staff continues to participate in the RRRA's Basin Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee (BTSAC) effort to study and analyze the impacts of tile drainage on flooding and its effects on peak flows on the red River. As well, they continue to explore ways to improve existing agricultural drainage water management in the Red River of the North Basin.

Through a cooperative effort the NRCS and the Red River Retention Authority utilized the Wetland Restoration Conservation Initiative for the Red River Basin of MN, ND and SD; aka Red River Basin Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) initiative to secure easements that will provide retention benefits as well as the restoration of wetlands and increase wildlife habitat production. The Chief of NRCS approved this initiative and allocated \$10 million of WRP financial assistance funds to this effort for FY 2011.

NRCS utilized Red River peak flow data to screen all WRP applications in the Red River Basin in FY11 covered by this initiative. See Red River Retention Initiative map. (page 15)

In FY11 applications were brought forward by partners as well as through the NRCS normal WRP application process. The partner applications maximized flood mitigation benefits while providing wildlife benefits. Partners are currently working to review all of the funded applications to determine if design changes can be made to increase flood mitigation benefits.

The following WRP obligations were made in the Basin in 2011.

# Red River Retention Initiative

FY11 WRP Obligation Summary			
	# Funded	Acres	Dollars
MN	28	5,476	\$5,015,793
ND	10	1,756	\$2,733,000
SD	7	584	\$1,000,854
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>7,816</b>	<b>\$7,849,647</b>

Continued cooperation and coordination is ongoing between the RRRRA, NRCS and all partners. NRCS is currently formulating a more uniform scoring and ranking system to be used across the Red River Basin. Payment rates are being assessed to minimize differences across state boundaries.

Retention Initiative outreach activities were highlighted by a tour with NRCS Chief Dave White and Regional Conservationist Tom Christensen in August. The Chief and Mr. Christensen were shown two good examples of flood retention projects. They viewed the North Ottawa project in the Bois de Sioux Watershed district and the Manston Slough project in the Buffalo-Red Watershed District.

Cooperative partnership efforts, by Peter Mead with Minnesota NRCS and International Water Institute staff, have resulted in the development of GIS based tools that help identify potential retention sites in the Basin.

NRCS has entered into contribution agreements with International Water Institute and Minnesota Agricultural Water Resources Coalition to address water retention and agricultural drainage water management issues in the Basin.

NRCS continues to develop new partnerships and foster stronger partnerships with water retention groups and agencies such as the Red River Basin Commission, Minnesota Agricultural Water Resources Coalition, International Water Institute and Board of Soil and Water Resources.

*(Before) Restoration*



Legend

WRP

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*(After) Restoration*



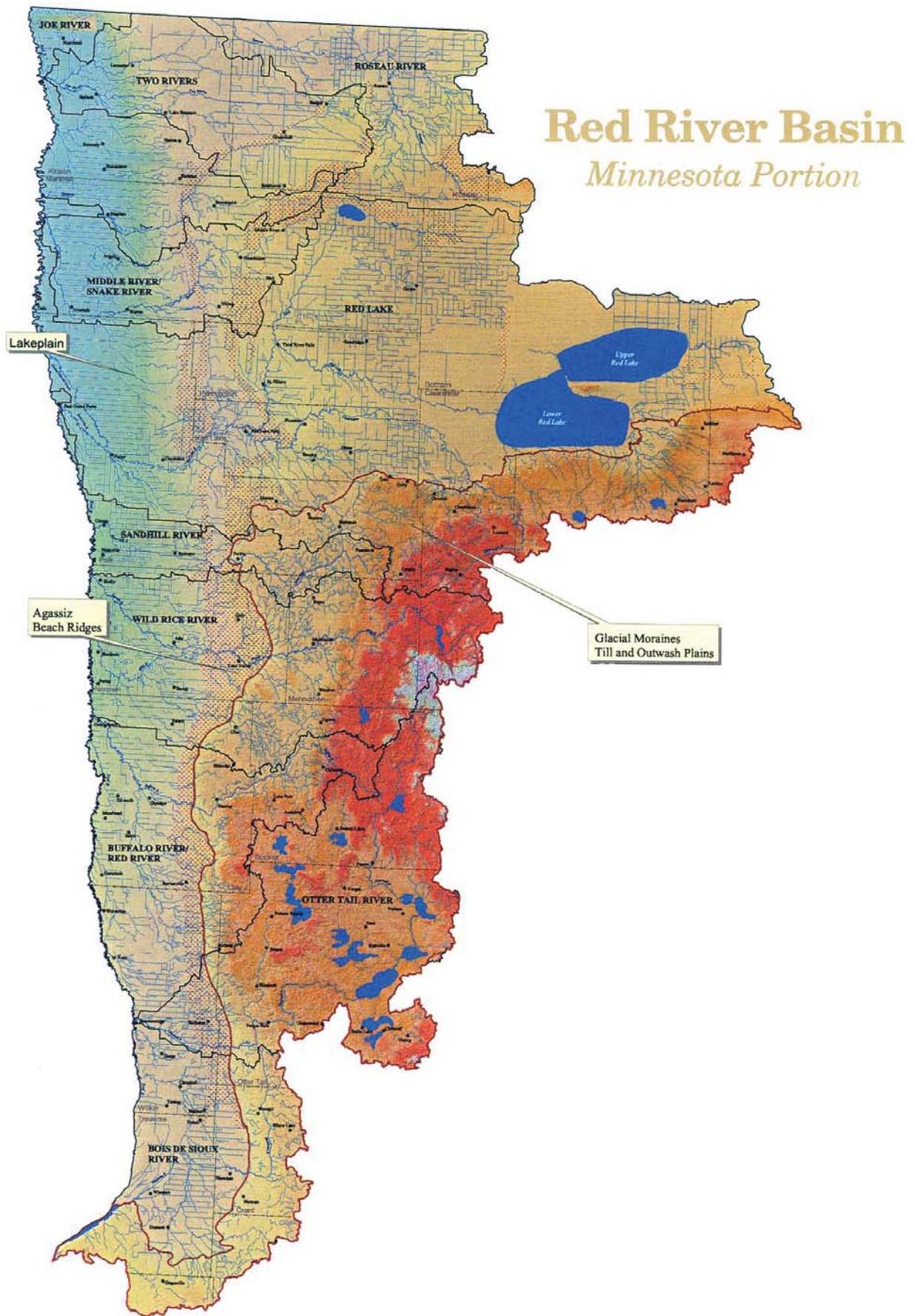
Legend

WRP

Disclaimer: "Map use for graphical purposes only. They do not represent a legal survey. While every effort has been made to ensure that these data are accurate and reliable within the limits of the current state of the art, NRCS cannot assume liability for any damages caused by any errors or omissions in the data, nor as a result of the failure of the data to function on a particular system. NRCS makes no warranty, expressed or implied, nor does the fact of distribution constitute such a warranty."

*Aerial view while the site was still farmed and after the restoration was completed showing the large wetland basin restored.*

# Red River Retention Initiative



Map demonstrates placing WRP in the landscape to hold water back out of the valley and provide wildlife benefits.

## Soil Sciences

Soils information is integral to our conservation planning and application efforts. NRCS soil scientists are responsible for inventorying the soils in the field and making the data available online. Soils information is currently available online for most of the state through the Web Soil Survey. One more soil survey area in Minnesota was added to the soils database this fiscal year – the Crane Lake subset of St. Louis County. Portions of Lake, Cook, Crow Wing and Pine Counties are the only areas remaining for the initial soils inventory in MN. The State of Minnesota continued to support the completion of a statewide digital soil survey through a grant from the MN Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENTRF). The ENTRF funds were used to bring in additional soil scientists on detail and on contract significantly increasing production. About 350,000 initial acres were inventoried in FY11.

Soil scientists in Minnesota also completed sampling sites for the nation's soil carbon assessment. Nationwide, more than 150,000 samples from 30,000 pedons at 6,000 locations were collected in less than 18 months. There is no other group of scientists in the world with the knowledge, skills, and dedication needed to accomplish a task of this magnitude. The data gained from the project will impact our efforts to effectively manage the nation's soil resource in a changing world for years to come.

Area Resource Soil Scientists (ARSS's) help people understand and properly use soils information. They also provide users with predictions and interpretations about the behavior of each kind of soil mapped or identified under defined situations. In FY11, the 7 ARSS's in MN performed over 200 on-site soil investigations benefitting multiple conservation programs (CRP, EQIP, GRP, WRP) greatly enhancing our efforts to address our priority natural resource concerns and get conservation on the land.

NRCS Area, MO, and other field staff assisted MNPCA scientists conducting a National Wetland Condition Study directed by the EPA. 25 wetland sites in Minnesota were evaluated for water quality, vegetative composition, and soil descriptions and samples were taken. The soil samples are being processed by the National Soil Survey Lab in Nebraska. The data will be a valuable addition to the national soils database as it fills a data void by sampling wetter soils than NRCS soil scientists have traditionally analyzed.



*Photos: Soil scientists and field office staff collecting data for the National Rapid Carbon Assessment project. The objective of the project was to evaluate differences in soil organic matter associated with different ecosystems, agricultural management systems, and land uses and to apply this information in developing improved decision support tools. Data gathered from this project will be used to determine the effects of conservation practices on soil organic matter, and develop better models and calibrate existing models that can predict carbon sequestration by agricultural lands.*





## State Resource Assessment

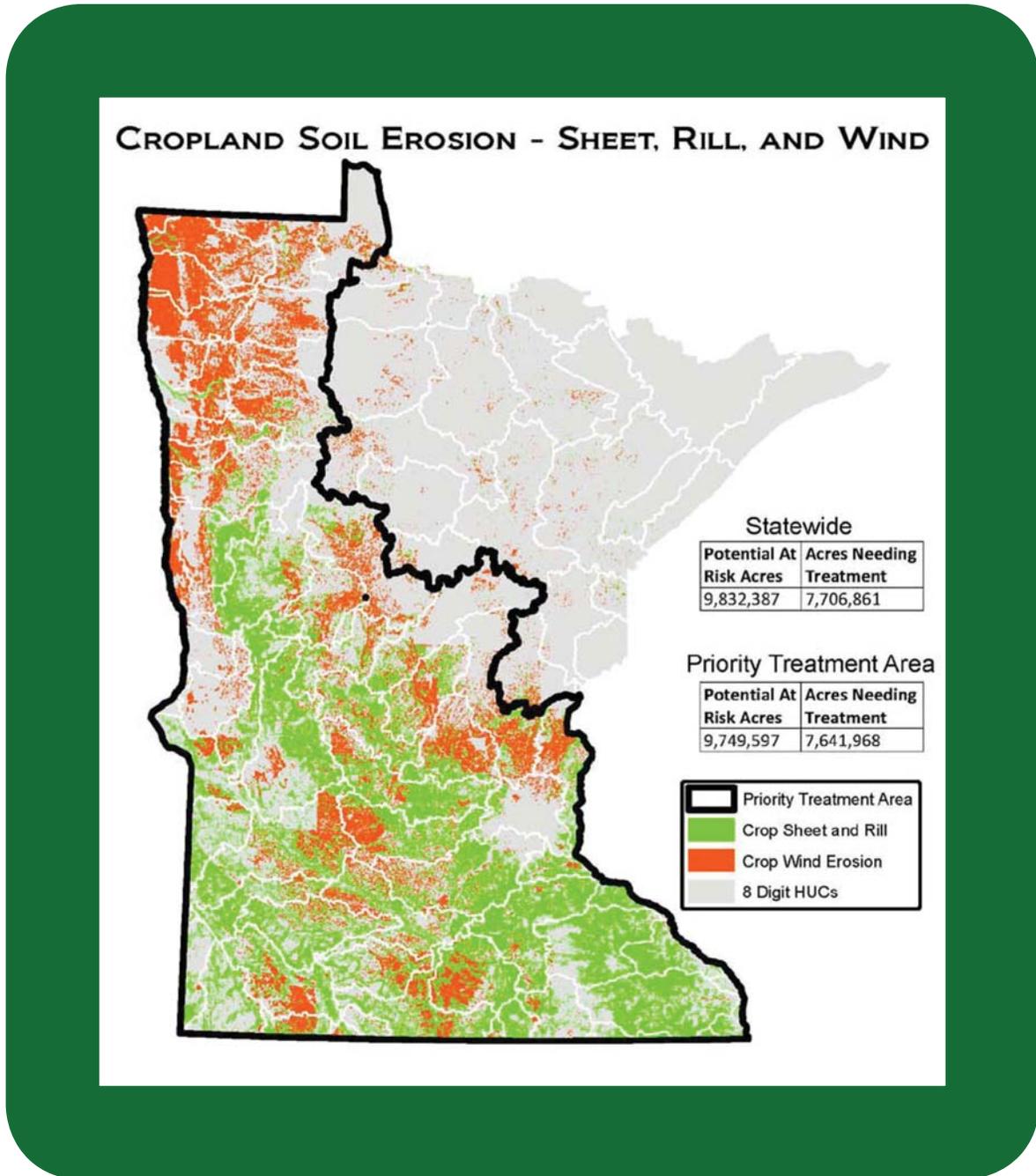
A State Resource Assessment (SRA) was completed in June 2011. The purpose of the SRA is to identify and document the extent and geographic distribution of potential resource concerns within a state. The SRA provides critical information for a number of current agency efforts, including resource-based performance planning, workforce planning, and budget and allocation formulation.

National, regional and state level natural resource geospatial data layers were utilized to determine potential at risk acres for each resource concern and land use. Conservation practice data (IDEA, ProTracts, PRS) were utilized to determine acres needing treatment. Priority treatment areas were identified based on the geographic distribution of at risk acres. 8-digit hydrologic unit boundaries were used to delineate priority treatment areas. Treatment goals (priority treatment acres) within the priority treatment areas were set for the next 3 years. The following table summarizes the priority resource concerns for Minnesota.

Resource Concerns	Priority	Potential At Risk Acres	Acres Needing Treatment	Priority
<b>Cropland</b>				
Soil Erosion - Sheet, rill and wind	1	9,832,387	7,706,861	637,658
Water Quality - Excess sediment	2	2,259,289	1,058,642	720,000
Water Quality - Excess nutrients	3	33,123,659	31,138,740	794,000
Soil Quality - Organic Matter Depletion	4	18,136,532	12,726,695	633,784
Soil Quality - Compaction	5	24,415,619	22,877,771	524,771
Soil Erosion - Excessive bank erosion	6	169,493	89,508	2,543
<b>Pastureland</b>				
Undesirable plant productivity & health	1	2,379,132	2,135,403	73,000
Inadequate livestock feed & forage	2	2,028,074	1,173,146	91,273
<b>Forestland</b>				
Undesirable plant productivity & health	1	1,519,836	885,356	4,000
Water Quality - Excess sediment	2	2,842,711	2,208,231	4,000
Water Quality - Elevated water temperature	3	8,625	8,398	275
<b>Other Lands - USDA Easements</b>				
Fish & wildlife habitat degradation	1	450,925	329,601	29,100
<b>Other Lands - Farm Headquarters</b>				
Excess pathogens/chemicals from manure, biosolids, compost	2	1,415,488	1,340,221	9,400

# State Resource Assessment

The following map displays the geographic distribution of potential sheet, rill and wind soil erosion on cropland in Minnesota and includes the priority treatment areas identified by the State Resource Assessment. NRCS SSURGO data was used to determine erodibility of soils to wind and water.



**Note: Criteria used to determine potential at risk acres:**  
 Sheet and Rill Erosion - RKLS/T 5 or greater  
 Wind Erosion - Wind Erodibility Groups 1, 2, 4L



*NRCS providing assistance*



*NRCS providing assistance*

## Technical Assistance

The Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program provides technical assistance supported by science-based technology and tools to help people conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources. The CTA program provides the technical capability, including conservation planning, design, and implementation assistance, that helps people plan and apply conservation on the land. This assistance is provided to individuals, groups, and communities who make natural resource management decisions on private, tribal, and other non-federal lands.

NRCS, through the CTA Program, provides conservation technical assistance that addresses natural resource conservation issues at the local level that are of State and national concern.

The CTA Program provides the local delivery system and the foundation technical expertise for other NRCS programs. The CTA Program is unique because it provides a substantive level of technical expertise, background and support for Federal, tribal, State and local conservation programs. The working relationships that landowners and communities have with their local NRCS staff are unique. One-on-one help through flexible, voluntary programs occurs every day in local NRCS offices. It is the way that NRCS does business, and it works.



*CTA assistance - informing landowners about the Farm Bill wetland provisions in person*



## Wetlands Reserve Program



*American Bittern*

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) has helped private landowners voluntarily restore, protect and enhance wetlands and wildlife habitat on their lands since 1992. Through the WRP NRCS provides technical and financial support to landowners. Since 2008, NRCS through WRP has partnered with the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and the Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program to acquire and restore RIM-WRP Partnership easements. 2011 was once again a very successful year for this effort.

The wetlands and associated uplands on these easement lands provide a variety of environmental benefits, including: migratory and resident wildlife habitat, water quality improvements, flood mitigation benefits, added economic value and carbon sequestration benefits.



*Wetland*

Prior year funded WRP easements were closed at a record amount in 2011. This included 92 easements on 10,200 acres.

In 2011, \$20.5 million was obligated with 131 participants on over 13,000 acres. The majority of these obligations included RIM funding at approximately \$13.8 million. The RIM funding was supplied through both Capital Investment (Bonding) appropriations and funding through the MN Sales Tax Amendment as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council.



*Teal*



*Showy Lady Slipper*



*Moose*

# Wetlands Reserve Program

A few special efforts are detailed below:

RIM-WRP Floodplain Partnership - 4,500 acres and \$11 million of WRP combined with RIM to address a state bonding initiative to deal with severe flooding that occurred in the summer of 2010 in 29 southern counties.

Wetland Restoration Conservation Initiative for the Red River Basin of MN, ND and SD – After months of formulation, this initiative, utilizing WRP to provide wildlife habitat and flood mitigation benefits, was submitted to the Chief of NRCS and subsequently funded. MN received over one half of the WRP FA allocation. \$5 million was obligated on over 5,000 acres in MN. Major partners included Watershed Districts and private landowners.

Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP)-Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative (MRBI) – Assisted partners in three MRBI approved WREP projects (Cedar River, Root River and Sauk River/Crooked Lake) with all aspects of signup and obligation. This has yielded 7 approved applications on 677 acres for approximately \$1 million.

WREP – Scott SWCD – Continued to work with the Scott SWCD and other partners on a nationally funded WREP focusing WRP in the Sand Creek Watershed in Scott, LeSueur and Rice Counties as well as the Prior Lake/Spring Lake Watersheds in Scott County. This effort is focusing on wildlife habitat and water quality as co-primary purposes. One easement was obligated on 26.5 acres.

WRP Acceleration - WRP funds were obligated to continue and accelerate all aspects of the program with Technical Service Providers (TSP's). Obligations included: \$400,000 with BWSR to increase engineering assistance; \$150,000 with the MN Waterfowl Association and US Fish and Wildlife Service and \$100,000 with Ducks Unlimited both for WRP application and implementation assistance. In addition, \$200,000 was obligated with local SWCD's and BWSR to increase monitoring efforts on 550 easements.



*Outlet Structure  
(Before)*



*Outlet Structure  
(After)*



*Snow Seeding*



*Glacial Ridge*



*Prairie Chicken*



*Fawn*



*Sharptail Grouse*



*Marsh Hawk*

## Program Focus —

The goal of WHIP in Minnesota is to “Maintain a healthy, diverse ecosystem through the improvement, enhancement and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat, in cooperation with private agricultural landowners”.

Promote wildlife habitat restoration and management on private lands through cooperative endeavors between landowners and Federal, state and local conservation partners.

To maximize habitat and species benefits, focus WHIP financial and technical resources towards projects statewide which are a component of a comprehensive plan with the greatest environmental benefits.

Utilize WHIP, to the extent practicable, to benefit State and Federal at risk species.



## Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

### Overview

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. WHIP provides technical assistance and financial assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.

### Minnesota Priorities

- To “maintain a healthy, diverse ecosystem through the improvement, enhancement and restoration of fish and wildlife habitat, in cooperation with private agricultural landowners”.
- To promote wildlife habitat restoration and management on private lands through cooperative endeavors between landowners and Federal, state and local conservation partners.
- To maximize habitat and species benefits, focus WHIP financial and technical resources towards projects statewide which are a component of a comprehensive plan with the greatest environmental benefits.
- To utilize WHIP, to the extent practicable, to benefit State and Federal at risk species.

### FY 2011 Accomplishments

Minnesota received 186 WHIP applications in 2011.

Minnesota approved 79 contracts establishing and enhancing 3,179.2 acres for a total financial assistance of \$638,800. Included in these numbers are 11 approved contracts covering 1,221.5 acres assisting Beginning Farmers, Socially Disadvantaged and Limited Resource Producers.

### Habitats include:

- 2,831.6 acres of upland habitat
- 47.3 acres of wetland habitat
- 1.0 acre of aquatic habitat
- 251.3 acres of pollinator habitat
- 48.0 acres of Threatened & Endangered habitat.

### Program Benefits

NRCS has worked closely with several tribal conservation departments to utilize WHIP in meeting comprehensive wildlife management plans. WHIP has provided NRCS the opportunity to reach non-traditional clients and introduce them to USDA programs and services.

***The Natural Resources Conservation Service is an agency of  
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