

# RIVER TALK

THE MINNESOTA RIVER CURRENT

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## BEAVER CREEK: A WATER QUALITY SUCCESS STORY

Pat Baskfield, a hydrologist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency first became aware of dramatic change in Beaver Creek's water quality after running into some kayakers from the Mankato Paddling and Outing Club on the West Fork. They asked him what have you guys done to it because it looks so much better.

"I started to look water quality results," said Pat. "And at the same time I did noticed the water had improved. There was a big high

intensity rain event and all the other rivers were quite dirty. Beaver Creek looked pretty good. I went back to look at the numbers and saw quite a reduction."

Pat touched base with the local

conservation groups like Hawk Creek Watershed Project (HCWP) and Renville SWCD to discover they had aggressively contacted many of the landowners along the creek and as a result were able to enroll critical areas into perpetual easements. According to Pat, "It made a huge difference in terms of water quality."

Cory Netland, coordinator of the HCWP calls it one of the biggest success stories for the Hawk Creek Watershed Project and its partners. "We have managed to reduce sediment greatly over the last decade and hope to continue with this into the future."

By the early 1990s water quality conditions of Beaver Creek had been suffering for a long period of time. As part of the Ask an Expert Video Project, Tom Kalahar of the Renville SWCD gave an example of one area along the creek and how much things changed for the positive. Tom reported how this one field now covered in grass and trees had been farmed or cropped as close to the floodplain and into the floodplain as possible.

"The slopes and the ravines coming into the floodplain were heavily eroded," Tom said. "There were hundreds of tons of sediment coming off these fields and being deposited in Beaver Creek in the 1970s and 80s on an annual basis." As one of the first watersheds he monitored in his career with MPCA, Pat called the conditions of the creek deplorable before the push to improve water quality got going.

This concentrated effort to enroll conservation practices has saw close to 50 percent of the West Fork of Beaver Creek put into some sort of a buffer strip on either one side or both. "When I talk about buffers," commented Netland. "It is really the situation where we are not talking about a 10 - 15 foot buffer. We are talking about the entire floodplain of Beaver Creek and beyond. When this area floods in the spring time we have that grass in place to catch some of that sediment and slow it down and it has made a big difference for West Fork of Beaver Creek."

With only 6.1% of the watershed enrolled into grass practices - a relatively small amount, Netland says the key comes down to where these easements have been placed. This means directly adjacent to streams, in the floodplain and other critical areas as well as most of it being in perpetual easements. "We have addressed this problem the right way by going long term."

*Continued on page 9*



Tom Kalahar and Cory Netland

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

- Beaver Creek: A Water Quality Success Story ..... pg. 1
- Did You Know? ..... 2
- Reflections – Kay & Annette Fernholz ..... 3
- K.K. Berge Building Grand Opening ..... 4
- Conservation Minded ..... 5
- Minnesota River Basin Success Stories ..... 6
- Organization Spotlight – MN River Watershed Districts ..... 7
- Kayaking on Madelia's own Watonwan River ..... 8
- Book Review ..... 9
- River Ramblings ..... 10
- What's Happening ..... 11
- Conservation Thoughts ..... 12

**DID YOU KNOW?**

**G.K. Warren and the formation of the Minnesota River Valley**

General Gouverneur Kemble Warren served honorably in the Union Army during the Civil War rising from a first lieutenant to a Major General before being relieved of his command near the end of the war. During the Civil War, Warren distinguished himself in a number of battles including Gettysburg where he earned the nickname "Hero of Little Round Top." After the war Warren served in the Army Corps of Engineers for seventeen years as an engineer. Today, we know Warren as the person who came up with the theory on how Glacial Lake Agassiz drained southward and the large volume of water carved out what is now the Minnesota River Valley. After his death, Warren received the honor of having his name attached to this massive glacial river.

Warren conducted a survey of the Minnesota River in 1866 and 1867 to determine the river's navigability on orders of Congress. In his "An Essay concerning Important Physical Features Exhibited in the Valley of the Minnesota River," Warren lays out his hypothesis on how the Minnesota River Valley had been formed.

"The valley of the Minnesota above, and of the Mississippi below, is much wider than the existing streams require. It could not have been formed by the action of existing forces, as the Mississippi above has been. It must have been excavated by some force that is no longer in operation, and if this was a river it must have been of much larger size than the Mississippi below the junction with the Minnesota. It will be the object of this essay to show that this force *was a river*; that it drained, in times subsequent to the last glacial drift formations, all the Winnipeg Basin."

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Kay and Annette Fernholz grew up on the family farm near Madison, MN with their parents Armond and Gertie, and seven siblings. The two sisters left home in high school to serve in the School Sisters of Notre Dame community for over 40 years. In 1996, they came back to the 240-acre family farm and established Earthrise Farm to renew their connections to the land and create a learning center for people wanting to become part of the organic farming life. The Earthrise Farm has become an island of food diversity in the middle of an agricultural production desert.

**What do you appreciate most about these rivers?**

Kay: I would say first of all having them and having them near. I am hoping they can become less polluted is a wish of mine. Besides looking at them as the pure gift it is. Some rivers give us power and means of transportation, of connecting us. I think of the word confluence and how it has a spirit of uniting us. That is a great aspect of it.

Annette: I think for me right now the analogy of the rivers and the little tributaries I can't help but think of the autonomy of what that is on the larger body of the earth. And I look at my own veins and I see the same tributaries. Eventually I know that the water within these rivers is going to make its way into the bloodstream of the future generation of children because that is what our blood is made out of. Out of the water we drink and the condition of the water that we have. I think that the rivers are just so busy cleaning everything up all the time. If the rivers can maintain that faith in the human being that the human will eventually cleanse them for their job, which is to keep us also health and our blood systems.

**Do you have a favorite place in the MN River Basin?**

Annette: I am going to focus on that little creek that runs through Earthrise Farm and go back to my early years – 10, 11, 12 years old. It was this place for all seasons. In the winter time we would take our skates down there to skate, slide down the hills. It was a family affair. It was always all of us together. In the spring time it became a little furious because of the

thaw. We would go down there but be a little afraid. Because it was so powerful at that moment it was running over everything and the ice was sliding everywhere. You didn't want to get that close to it. By summer time it simmered down a little bit and we could go down and we could see the crawdads, the minnows and fish. We could play around it because it wasn't that dangerous at that point. In the fall of the year as it was preparing itself for winter you could see the beaver dams built up. That was when it was a creek of many colors. Now it has been turned into a drainage ditch so all of the romance is gone because it has been dredged and receiving all the runoff from everyone's farm. That is the spot I want to dwell on and in my mind is still there.



Kay: I think I am going to have to pigback on what Annette has just said and maybe just add the fun we had and in particular in the spring time. I remember the first time Dad took us out. The creek was pretty straight and all of a sudden it took a sharp turn. Right around there was a great big rock and I remember standing on that. It made the water gush more and foamy. I see myself with my little brothers and sisters walking in there. There is a picture of my Mom holding the hand of my little brother and they are walking through the water. Once I had discovered that, I still remember after school going out there and saying I am going out there by myself and didn't need to change because I wouldn't get wet. I will be real careful. Well, I would come back every time soaked, muddy, you name it. I just couldn't resist going out there and just enjoying that whole thing. Now I look at just about every spring time and I think when is that time of spring when its going to look like it did when we went out to the ravine. And it seems like it never does just that way. It is so good to carry that memory because it was such a gift.

# K.K. BERGE BUILDING GRAND OPENING

By Scott Tedrick, Granite Falls Advocate Tribune

When the K.K. Berge Building holds its Grand Opening this Thursday, it will signify the end of a four year restoration effort led by the Granite Falls Riverfront Revitalization (GFRR) organization and powered by the community.

Now, the real fun begins. Since the onset, the restoration of the K.K. Berge building has been driven by a desire to reinvigorate the community of Granite Falls in spite of the ubiquitous adversities that presently afflict small towns.

Because it was a mere twenty inches below the flood plain, the iconic 87-year-old structure was scheduled for demolition. Once gone, no building could be erected in its place.

Having said goodbye time and again to the historic homes of the flood plain, old City Hall and other venerated structures on a rapidly shrinking main street, it appeared – for a few – to be the last straw.

Questions were asked, suggestions were made and then an open-minded city council opened the door to an alternative that would make \$150,000, that was set aside for demolition, available for flood proofing and restoration if a through list of criteria could be met.

The project catalyzed like-minds of the community and together they took on the task of saving the celebrated structure as a newly formed nonprofit, GFRR.

Four years is enough to indicate that the project was no cake walk and on more than one occasion they stood at the precipice of defeat. The group pulled through thanks to stubbornness, a little luck and – above all else – the community.

It was the community, in the guise of Granite Falls Bank that provided \$175,000 loan and contingency fund. It was the community that made over \$50,000 in donations. It was the community that encouraged Steve Ladner to offer his construction expertise.

In countless other ways, it was time and again, the community.

With construction nearing completion, the December 15 Grand Opening is the GFRR's time to say

'thanks' and to show the community where their resources have gone.

"It is a thank you to the donors and all of the people that helped us continue to believe that this was worth doing," said the GFRR's Nancy Beasley.

The Grand Opening will feature local art and historical exhibits and holiday treats and refreshments. Above all, it will present the building itself.

Furniture is still being placed, but the interior is finished – from the carpet to the nearly installed windows offering the best walking bridge view in town.

The first floor will offer up a portion of its space as the new location of the Chamber of Commerce in the coming months. The Granite Falls Historical

Society and Granite Arts Council will have a rotating art and historical display. It will also serve as a venue for events and speakers. And, of course, it is available to the community.

"Really, it's for everyone to enjoy," said GFRR member and Chamber of Commerce Director Nicole Zempel.

Upstairs still has work to be done, but exceptions are that it will be wrapped up by

the years end. Intriguing occupants have already been found. Clean Up the River Environment (CURE) and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design will have a headquarters on the second floor and will begin renting in January.

Lastly, CURE intends to keep canoes and kayaks at the building's riverfront location that can be checked out like books at a library and used to paddle the Minnesota River.

GFRR member Barb Benson gushes as she describes the nearly finished project.

"I just think it's beautiful. You walk in there and its beautiful, it just makes me feel good," she said. That such a perception is not uncommon, makes it easy to see how the end of the past four years is truly just the beginning for something much greater.

Said Zempel, "We've always believed this building, in this location, will have the potential to act as a foundation and spring board for the many creative forces at play to begin to create the kind of community and main street environment that will help us not only sustain ourselves, but to grow.

"I think the GFRR has shown people that if you believe in what you are doing, and you believe in a vision and do not give up on it, that it can become real."



K.K. Berge Building, Granite Falls



By Troy Krause, Redwood Gazette

For generations, the Hogan family has been part of the Redwood County landscape as the farm family has made its living from the land.

While the clan has received from the soil as crop and livestock producers, it has also recognized the importance and value in being good stewards.

That reality was recognized recently when John Hogan and his family were honored with the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts Outstanding Conservationist Award.



*Some of Hogan's land has also been maintained as woodlands, which can be enjoyed by others as a snowmobile trail.*

The Hogan family was selected for the Redwood County award by the local soil and water conservation district because of its efforts in a variety of conservation areas from wetland restoration to the creation of buffer strips, woodlands and erosion mitigation.

Not only was the family selected for the county award, it was also selected as the Area 5 finalist for the state conservation award.

Hogan said the first conservation practice implemented by the family was an eight-acre pond, which he said is a great spot for wildlife, and he hopes in the future to be able to stock it with fish as the depth of the pond has been increased.

Over the years, thousands of trees have been planted on land owned by the Hogan family. Most of them are conifers with some fruit-bearing trees.

"We have over 5,000 feet of field windbreaks," said Hogan.

In 2000, Hogan said the family began placing land in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and more than 250 acres are currently enrolled.

Some of those lands are in permanent easement through the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program, while others are in 10-15 contracts, and Hogan said it is his intention to renew those contracts when they are due.

Living in Section 9 of Sherman Township means land owned by the Hogans is in the floodplain of the Minnesota River, and Hogan said a number of woodland and grass buffers have been created in those areas most prone to flooding to help with mitigation of erosion due to frequent flooding. In the application submitted to the state as the Area 5 finalist, the local soil and water conservation district wrote, "as a farmer, sportsman and conservationist, John has put a lot of effort into improving and protecting the land."

The application states Hogan has been consistently forward thinking, with short-term and long-term goals using the programs offered through the local conservation district, as well as through efforts in conjunction with the NRCS and the DNR.

"Conservation has always been in my family," said Hogan, adding back in the 60s the family farm was involved in strip cropping and contour farming on the bluffs.

He said he believes it is important to utilize the resources available to do what is best for the land. In an area Hogan described as fragile, sandy soil, having conservation practices in place just makes sense.

Hogan said he thinks it is a great thing to see people recognized for conservation efforts, and he said he was surprised when he was told he had been nominated.

For more than two decades, Hogan taught ag education programs in local schools and emphasized the value of good conservation practices helping to create generations of landowners and producers who focus on good stewardship.

"The goal is to create a family legacy here," said Hogan, adding he wants to ensure the land stays with the family for at least a couple of generations, as they enjoy the outdoors and spend time, as he does, hunting, fishing and just enjoying the outdoors.



*Those on hand for the recent awards presentations were Jeff Potter, Mark Hogan, Ralph Heiling, John Hogan, Marilyn Bernardson, Kim Olafson and Scott Olafson*



Throughout the Minnesota River Basin a diverse array of partnerships are leading the way to engage the public and improve water quality. Here are a few of those stories.

**Women’s Field Day – “Women Rockin’ Conservation (Chippewa River Watershed)**

Forty women participated in a Women’s Workshop on June 24, 2010 sponsored by the Chippewa Soil and Water Conservation District with assistance from NRCS, Chippewa County Land and Resource Management Office, FSA, MN Extension Service, and the Chippewa River Watershed Project. The women took part in a conservation practice scavenger hunt that gave them the opportunity to learn about land use issues and problems in an interactive and practical format. Next, the women heard a presentation on the history of rock outcroppings by Tom Kalahar of Renville SWCD as they enjoyed a picnic lunch along the Minnesota River. The day’s activities ended with a hike at Gneiss Outcrops Scientific and Natural Area to learn explore the unique habitat including native prairie plants and the effort to protect this type of landscape.

**Shoreline Restoration on Brickyard Lake (Lower Minnesota River Watershed)**

Carver County oversaw a project to decrease shoreline erosion and improve water quality on Brickyard Lake in downtown Chaska. Native vegetation was planted along the shoreline by volunteers. They were given a brief tutorial before putting in almost 3,000 plants between the southeast shore and a nearby hill. Prior to the planting, crews prepped the site by removing non-native vegetation and stabilizing the shore with “bio logs” made up of coconut fiber. This will prevent the soil from being washed away before the new plants take hold.

The project will also serve as an educational tool by promoting the practice to lake home associations and through the installation of information signs. Sponsored by Michelob Golden Draft Light & National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Carver County Water Management Organization, Carver Soil & Water Conservation District, city of Chaska, and the Lower Minnesota Watershed District, this effort serves as a way for people to get involved in a community-based project.

**“Farm to School” Foods at Morris School Cafeterias (Pomme de Terre River)**

A local foods initiative started up in the 2010 school year in the Morris District to feature more locally grown produce on the menu. One local grown food will be on the menu per month including sweet corn husked by the school’s agriculture students. Peppers and cabbages were brought in by one of the school’s custodians that turned some heads. The cabbage was twice the size of that found in grocery stores and used to make cole slaw. According to the Food Services Director and coordinator of this project, Jeanine Bowman, education is an especially important part of the move to local foods. Other examples of local foods include wild rice, honey, dinner buns made from grain grown and ground in the area, and bison meat. Morris Area agriculture students will also be stocking a campus green house and trying out different food production methods including hydroponic growing and planting potatoes in barrels.



**Waterfowl Production Areas in Blue Earth County (Le Sueur River Watershed)**

Currently, there are about two dozen Waterfowl Production Areas and Wildlife Management Areas in Blue Earth County including the Perch Lake and Cobb River WPAs. Over two hundred bird species can be found at these two waterfowl production areas. The Perch Lake WPA had once been a soybean field before the restoration of wetlands by the use of bulldozers and planting of native prairie plants. To let rain water soak into the soil the external drainage network to the Cobb River was cut off. In 2010, a 520-acre section of former cropland was being restored into a native prairie at a cost of \$2.3 million (\$1.9 million in land costs and \$400,000 in construction). The project is being led by the Minnesota Valley Trust, a nonprofit organization created to spend the \$25 million settlement from the expansion of a runway at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport into the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge on conservation land. Additional funding for the Lincoln WPA came from the Blue Earth County chapter of Minnesota Pheasants Forever Inc.



**Introduction**

Seven watershed districts have been organized in the Minnesota River Basin with three found in the Twin Cities (Riley-Purgatory-Bluff Creek, Nine Mile Creek and the Lower MN River Watershed) and featured in the Winter 2010/11 edition of River Talk newsletter. The other four are further upstream (High Island Creek, Yellow Medicine, Lac qui Parle-Yellow Bank and the Upper Minnesota River). Watershed districts function as local government units focusing on water-related issues and overseen by the State’s Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

**High Island Creek**

Established as the first watershed district in Minnesota, High Island Creek oversee nearly 245 square miles covering areas in the three counties of Sibley, McLeod and Renville. This watershed district is part of the collaboration with local, state and national agencies working to improve water quality in the High Island Creek Watershed.



*High Island Creek near the confluence with the MN River*

Recently, they established and implemented a 1-rod easement on all district maintained drainage ways and achieved full landowner compliance.

- Established: June 14, 1957
- Phone: 507-964-5641
- Website:

**Yellow Medicine**

Located on the south side of the Minnesota River, this watershed district came into existence in the early 1970s as a result of a county petition. Portions of Yellow Medicine, Lincoln and Lyon counties make up this watershed, classified by the U.S. Geological Survey as the Yellow Medicine-Hawk Creek Watershed District. The District works with landowners on tiling and drainage permits, flood control projects and partnering with other local groups to implement conservation practices.

- Established: August 27, 1971
- Phone: 507-872-6780
- Website:  
<http://www.ymrwd.org/index.htm>

**Lac qui Parle – Yellow Bank**

In the late 1960s, county commissioners from Lac qui Parle, Lincoln and Yellow Medicine began the process of establishing this watershed district. A District Court approved the inclusion of the Yellow Bank Watershed, part of the Upper Minnesota Watershed, into this new entity. Watershed boundaries stretch across six counties with three in Minnesota and three in South Dakota. Today, the Lac qui Parle – Yellow Watershed District works on flood control structures, overseeing a Clean Water Partnership and managing the regional Stone Hill / Del Clark Park, west of Canby.

- Established: April 19, 1971
- Phone: 320-598-3317
- Website:  
[http://www.lqpybwatershed.org/Home\\_Page.html](http://www.lqpybwatershed.org/Home_Page.html)

*Lac qui Parle Co. Highway 31 Project was undertaken to stabilize a streambank near this highway bridge.*



*Lac qui Parle River*

**Upper Minnesota River**

An area of 505 square miles covers this watershed district starting at Browns Valley on the northern end and ending at Appleton with portions of Big Stone, Stevens, Swift, Traverse and Lac qui Parle counties. The Upper Minnesota river Watershed District works on flood control projects including the construction of a diversion channel around the community of Browns Valley. In addition, the District has sponsored a Fourth Grade Wetland Restoration Educational Program, funded the construction of rain gardens and partnered with federal and state agencies to partially restore flows to the Whetstone River (originally diverted in the early 1940s)

- Established: September 7, 1967
- Phone: 320-839-3411
- Website:  
<http://www.umrwd.org/index.html>



*Whetstone River*

*The Upper MN River Watershed District is working with a variety of partners to restore flows to the Whetstone River, which had been diverted in the 1940s.*

## KAYAKING ON MADEIRA'S OWN WATONWAN RIVER

By Pat Baskfield, Sportsmens Club

I consider myself fortunate that I live on the Watonwan River, and over the 14 years I have spent exploring its banks and waters have learned quite a bit about the best times and ways to recreate on this little river. Prior to moving to the area, if I went fishing it was in a motorized boat with lakes and occasionally large rivers my destinations of choice.

So, of course, the first thing I tried to do when I moved to the Watonwan was to fish it using my 14-foot aluminum boat. My first expedition was in the fall after the air temps cooled and the bugs were gone. I launched my boat, headed upstream and made it about a quarter mile before I realized if I kept going I was going to ruin my prop and water pump on my outboard. The Watonwan is typically very shallow in the fall and full of rocks.

I next tried my boat the following spring when the water was high. After a harrowing experience, when my anchor let loose and I floated into a logjam, I decided fishing this river in high water from a boat was also not a good idea.

Logjams, also known as strainers, are one of the most dangerous obstacles on rivers. When you wash into one, the physics of flow against most boat designs is such that the boat wants to roll inward against the current; the potential to flip is high. Often these jams contain logs from the top to bottom of the water column. The force exerted by flowing water can be tremendous. Depending on the velocity of the water, one can easily become trapped and drown in these obstacles. This happened to an experienced kayaker early this summer on Hawk Creek by Granite Falls.

While excellent resources, one must always bear in mind that rivers can be very dangerous under certain conditions. Rivers are not very forgiving and risk taking should be minimized.

It's best to know how to paddle before venturing on rivers. I recommend starting when water levels are low and then working up to higher flow conditions as your confidence builds.

After abandoning my boat, I next tried a canoe. It worked okay, but when the river was low I spent as much time pulling it through riffles as I did paddling.

Deciding to downsize even further, I bought a little 9.5-foot kayak and discovered it to be the ultimate form of river transportation. What I discovered with my new kayak was I could go through water as shallow as four inches and maneuver, control and fish out of it with ease.

After gaining confidence, I could handle most flow conditions. Most interesting of all, however, was discovery of the diversity of wildlife that resided on and along the Watonwan and in my kayak, how close I could get to so much of what I saw.

On the river you will see with regularity deer, turkeys, mink, beaver, turtles, eagles, hawks, owls, song-birds, muskrats, raccoons, vultures, ducks, geese and so on. Because of the low profile and stealth of operation, many animals are much less wary of approaching kayakers than other recreational watercraft. I have, on a couple of occasions, been within an unnerving distance of less than five feet from beavers along the banks of the river. Beavers have bad eyesight and, if you see them ahead of time, you can often float to within a distance of a few feet without spooking them. On one memorable float a few years back, a buddy of mine (in town for deer



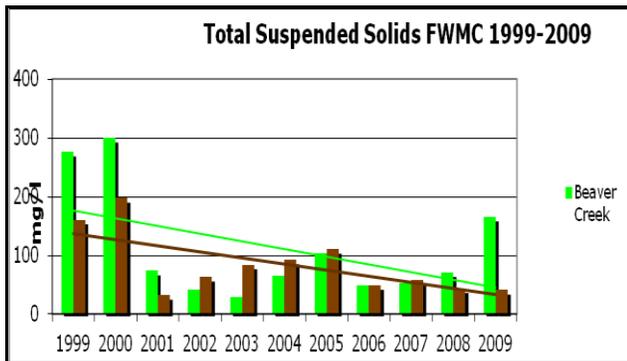
Pat Baskfield kayaking on the Watonwan River

season) and I casually drifted a three-mile stretch of the river on a warm November afternoon.

Over the course of an hour and a half we counted 29 turkeys, 19 deer and two pheasants along the river. I guarantee you will come home with positive memories from every trip down the river.

**Beaver Creek: A Water Quality Success Story**  
continued from page 1

Hawk Creek Watershed Project has been conducting water quality measurements since the start of the project in 2000. “What we have seen is a 50% reduction in sediment in the West Fork of Beaver Creek and a 25 % reduction in phosphorus levels in Beaver Creek,” reported Cory Netland.



What is next for the Beaver Creek Watershed and water quality? “It took us about a hundred years to do the damage that we have done to the



landscape and it is going to take us probably that long in order to get the fix in that we need to do,” commented Tom Kalahar. “The big part of fixing landscapes, heavily

agricultural landscapes is that conservation offices and conservation agencies need the programs and options able to offer those farmers.”

“The future of Beaver Creek looks bright,” states Netland. The fact the vast majority of what has been placed out here on the landscape is in a perpetual program means that we are going to realize these benefits long beyond Tom’s career or even my career.”

**Grass practices directly adjacent to Beaver Creek:**

- RIM, CREP: 4,621 acres – 131 easements
- CRP only: 596 acres
- WRP: 75 acres
- WMA: 188 acres
- Other idle grass: 2,000 acres – this includes pasture, native prairie, etc.
- Total: 5,480 acres in programs (4.5%) and 7,480 acres in grass (6.1%)

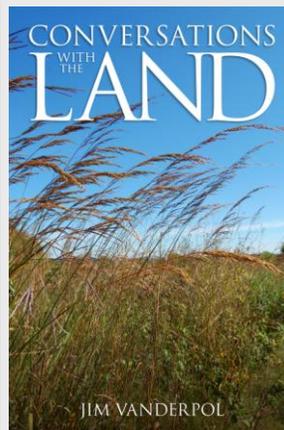
**RIM (Reinvest In Minnesota); CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program); WRP (Wetland Reserve Program) and WMA (Wildlife Management Area)**

**Book Review: Conversations with the Land by Jim Van Der Pol**

*There is a sense in which the field is a commons for me and my family and livestock and the fox and her cubs, as well as the birds and insects that fly up from the cutter bar and everything else that calls the field home. To think of it as such, whether or not it is or could be, seems to me to be a way of encouraging kindly use of it by all of us. And kindly use is a result good enough that I tend to think that applying the philosophy of the commons is a good idea.*

*But the point is not that we can control the future, but that the distant vision will help govern our day-to-day management by serving as a nearly warning sign whenever we are headed in the wrong direction. If that prairie settler a century ago had held a dream and a vision for seven generations that included more perennial plants to ensure a healthy landscape, he may have had a second thought about destroying the sod he found here.*

*Similarly for us, if our vision for the seventh generation includes more people on the land and more local wealth, as ours does for our farm, then we tend to make decisions in a way that helps bring that about.*



Jim Van Der Pol grew up on a western Minnesota farm during the 1950s and 60s before going off to college. In 1997, Jim came back to take over the family farm and in the process became a leader in the sustainable agriculture movement. In this his first book, Van Der Pol tells the story of his life through a series of essays and photos on the struggle to make a living at farming.

*To enjoy the work that much is a blessing, of course, but a mixed one. For this zest and excitement for the farm and business tend to mask important realities. This is no place for the Marlboro man. And that is exactly what makes it exciting. At Pastures A Plenty, four adults run the farm and the business. All are employed full-time caring for 140 head of cattle, producing 1,000 head annually of market hogs and marketing the meat from the hogs. We think that it takes about two of us to run the farm, since the hog systems are somewhat labor intensive with the bedded animals. In point of fact, the two people are about three-quarters of each of two, I suppose and then bits and pieces of others plus kid labor. The farm has three children growing up here learning by doing, which really is the one thing I am positive we are doing right. That is the way families work best.*



On the 5th of January, a host of conservation organizations sponsored the Stakeholders' Forum on the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. The idea behind this forum was to answer the question: "Is the Legacy Amendment money going to projects and programs as voters expected?"

A room filled with agency staff, nonprofit organizations and citizens came out to hear from state and local leaders on how this Legacy Amendment is being spent. We heard from panels on Parks and Trails, Water Policy, Water Implementation and Outdoor Heritage.

I was mostly interested in the two Water panels hoping for some clarification of its impact, especially from some of the state policy makers. For the most part each of them followed the company line: speak in general terms, keep it upbeat and don't dive into any of the more thornier issues. That is to say except for Gene Merriam of the Freshwater Society.

Executive Director Merriam came out of the gate dismissing the idea that citizens are talking about TMDLs or BMPs. Merriam had a bone to pick, especially when it came to all the money spent to improve water quality in the Minnesota River and the lack of any real progress. He also brought up the recent MPCA report "Revisiting the Minnesota River Assessment Project" and how there has been little improvement when it comes to fish population and pointing out the decrease in macroinvertebrate diversity.

This all led into the next panel - the SWCD and Watershed District folks who talked about the projects they have put on the ground as a result of the Legacy dollars. One of the panelists - Tom Kalahar, Renville SWCD is someone that doesn't hold back and speaks right from the gut. I am a big fan of Tom and what he has helped accomplish in Renville County.

Tom pointed out how Renville County is number 1 in corn, sweet corn and sweet pea production, No 1 in soybean production and No. 5 in

Sugarbeet production and all at the same time is No. 1 in perpetual conservation easements. As someone who has lived and worked in the county for over 30 years, Tom knows there is still a lot to be done when it comes to water quality problems but also recognizes it has gotten better.

Dennis Anderson of the Star Tribune wrote about the event coming to conclusion we should look at more legislative-citizen councils like Lessard-Sams to decide how the funds are spent. I am in total agreement when it comes to public involvement. Citizens need to be a part of the process and right now this just isn't the case.



If you have read this column before and know me personally you will know I am a winter person. I relish the cold temperatures, heavy snows and long nights. Everyone is talking about how great the weather has been this year and that we deserved a break from the harsh one last year. I come from a different perspective. We live in Minnesota knowing full well winter usually runs from November to March or April. Why not embrace it hardily?

Winter just doesn't feel the same without snow covering the ground and a stinging wind out of the north. Celebrating the winter solstice just doesn't have that same appeal. Or for that matter going back to North Dakota for Christmas. I grew up sledding, skiing, ice skating, and snowmobiling over the winter. Nothing stopped us from getting outside even nasty blizzards.

One time all of us were home because of the weather and we got kicked out of the house to go play by our mother including dad. We spent it jumping off the shed into this big pile of snow and building snow forts as the wind howled and snow piled up. To me that is how you enjoy winter or getting out to cross-country ski when the temperatures hit 30 below with the wind chill. Now that is winter!



## Friends of the Minnesota Valley 2011 Highlights

In 2011, over 2,100 citizens were involved with the Friends' Community Clean-ups program. By removing leaves and other organic debris from city streets and lawns, over 3,200 pounds of phosphorus pollution didn't reach waterways in the Minnesota River Basin. Friends also hosted 3 conservation drainage technology workshops in the basin and showcased it in front of nearly 12,000 people at their Farmfest booth. On the ground, progress included the restoration of 135 acres of wetland, upland and shallow lake habitat in the Lower Minnesota River Watershed.

## Big Stone Coal Plant Retrofit

At the end of December the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission voted 5 to 0 to endorse a \$489 million retrofit of the 36-year-old Big Stone Coal Plant on the South Dakota border. Otter Tail Power Company as the owner says it needs the retrofit to comply with regulations limiting air pollutants causing haze in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. On the other side of the debate, environmental groups feel rising coal prices and the potential for future regulation of greenhouse gases will make this a very expensive mistake.



## Ney Christmas Bird Count

Perfect weather conditions of 45 degrees and sunshine didn't result in high totals of birds during the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Ney Christmas Bird Count. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, close to 100 people from all ages counted almost 40 different bird species including a lone Red-breasted Nuthatch, a late migrating Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a couple of White-throated Sparrows. Big numbers came with 295 Canada Geese, 173 Wild Turkeys and 292 Dark-eyed Juncos. According to event organizers Art and Barb Straub, this low number of birds could be due to high temperatures during the nesting season, disease, changing habitats, increase in natural enemies, severe storms and autumn drought.

## Chippewa River land ownership

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MN DOT) offered ownership of a piece property along the Chippewa River to the City of Montevideo. This section of land starts at the dam in Lagoon Park and runs beyond the wastewater treatment plant. Ownership of it means the city will no longer need to request permits from MN DOT. A transfer fee has been waived due to the land being used for public river recreation use. On another note, the riprap structure scheduled to replace the current Chippewa River Dam will be maintained by the MN DNR in case any boulders are dislodged because of flooding.

*The Chippewa River Dam at Montevideo will be removed next summer to be replaced by 4-foot to 6-foot boulders to create a series of four weirs or rapids.*



## Severe Drought Conditions

Despite some badly needed moisture in the form of rain and snow on December 30<sup>th</sup>, much of southern Minnesota is suffering from severe drought conditions. Last year the region experienced a fairly hard winter with cold temperatures and a lot of snow. Winter translated into a spring dominated by flooding with water sitting everywhere.

Excessive moisture continued until July when it seemed like the water spigot suddenly shut off. Most places in southern Minnesota received close to 3 inches and more that month. Over the last five months the area hasn't even come close to that amount. According to Mark Seeley, U of M Extension, "since August 1 we have seen one to two inches of precipitation. Typically we see 10 inches or more in that same time. That means we are about eight inches on average behind." Seeley said it's been decades since we have seen it this dry.

## America's Great Outdoors Initiative

The upper Minnesota River Valley corridor has been selected by the U.S. Department of Interior as one of two projects in Minnesota for this new initiative by the Obama Administration. America's Great Outdoors is designed to reconnect Americans to the outdoors and establish a 21<sup>st</sup> century conservation and recreation agenda. With its high density of county and state parks, wildlife or aquatic management areas, natural areas, a National Wildlife Refuge, a Wild and Scenic River, a National Scenic Byway, and a Minnesota Water Trail designation, the upper Minnesota River Valley corridor has been recognized for its rich natural and cultural history of regional and national significance. Numerous partnerships involving government agencies and nonprofit groups are already working on these issues

# CONSERVATION THOUGHTS



## Louise Erdrich – “Big Grass”

*It was big grass. Original prairie grass – bluestem and Indian grass, side oats grama. The green fringe gave me the comforting assurance that all else planted and tended and set down by humans was somehow temporary. Only grass is eternal. Grass is always waiting in the wings.*

*Since my father began visiting the wild places in the Red River valley, he has seen many of them destroyed. Tree cover of the margins of rivers, essential to slow spring runoff and the erosion of topsoil – cut and leveled for planting. Wetlands – drained for planting. Unplowed prairie (five thousand acres in a neighboring Minnesota county) – plowed and planted. From the air, the Great Plains is now a vast earth-toned Mondrian painting, all strict right angles of fields bounded by thin and careful shelterbelts. Only tiny remnants of the tallgrass remain. These pieces in odd cuts and lengths are like the hems of long and sweeping old-fashioned skirts. Taken up, the fabric is torn away, forgotten. And yet, when you come across the original cloth of grass, it is an unfaded and startling experience.*

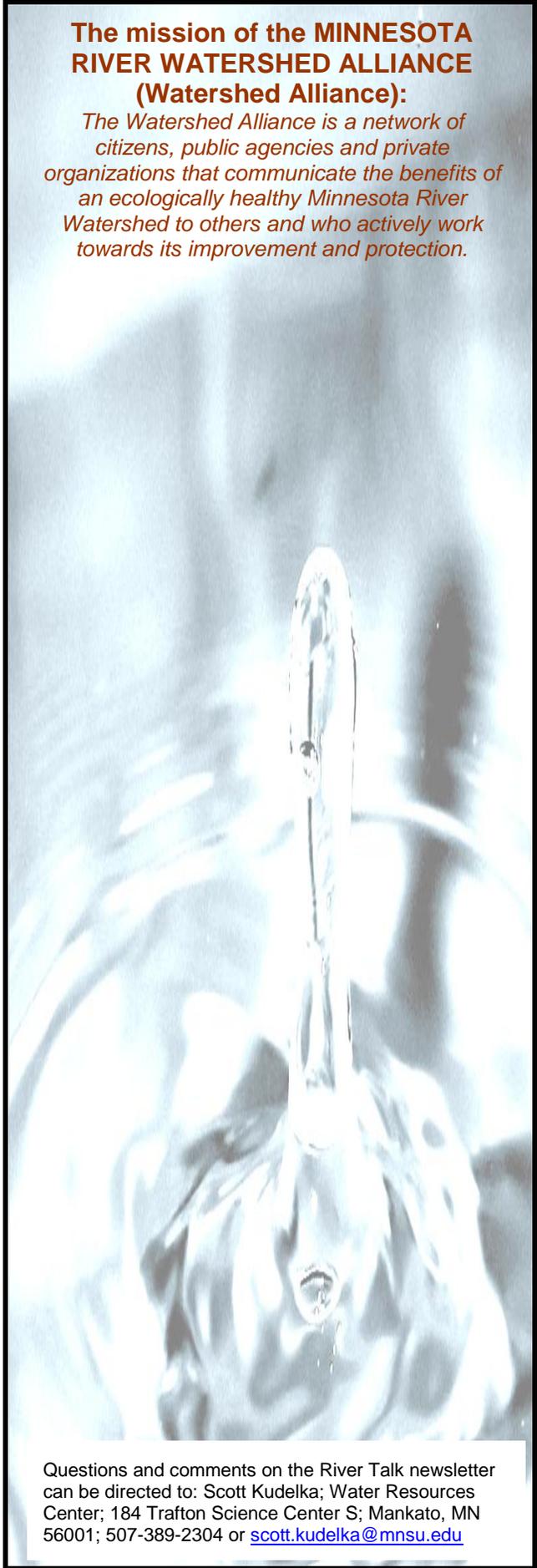


Louise Erdrich is the author of the novels *The Bingo Palace*, *the Beet Queen*, *Love Medicine*, and *Tracks*, and a volume of poems entitled *Jack-light*. She is a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. She grew up in North Dakota and is of German-American and Turtle Mountain Ojibwa descent.

*To appreciate grass, you must lie down in grass. It's not much from a distance and it doesn't translate well into most photographs or even paint, unless you count Albrecht Durer's *Grosses Rasenstuck*, 1503. He painted grass while lying on his stomach, with a wondering eye trained into seed tassles. Just after the snow has melted each spring, it is good to lie oneself on grass. The stems have packed down all winter, in swirls like a sleeper's hair. The grass sighs and crackles faintly, a weighed mat, releasing fine winter dust.*

*Grass sings, grass whispers. Ashes to ashes, dust to grass. But real grass, not the stuff that we trim and poison to an acid green mat, not clipped grass never allowed to go to seed, not this humanly engineered lawn substance as synthetic as a carpet. Every city should have a grass park, devoted to grass, long grass, for city children haven't the sense of grass as anything but scarp on a boulevard.*

*Grass streams out in August, full grown to a hypnotizing silk. The ground begins to run beside the road in waves of green water. A motorist, distracted, pulls over and begins to weep. Grass is emotional, its message a visual music with rills and pauses so profound it is almost dangerous to watch. Tallgrass in motion is a world of legato.*



## The mission of the MINNESOTA RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE (Watershed Alliance):

*The Watershed Alliance is a network of citizens, public agencies and private organizations that communicate the benefits of an ecologically healthy Minnesota River Watershed to others and who actively work towards its improvement and protection.*

Questions and comments on the River Talk newsletter can be directed to: Scott Kudelka; Water Resources Center; 184 Trafton Science Center S; Mankato, MN 56001; 507-389-2304 or [scott.kudelka@mnsu.edu](mailto:scott.kudelka@mnsu.edu)