



Left: Koochiching SWCD forest resource specialist James Aasen and landowner Thomas Wyrobek discussed options related to forestry management in August 2018 as they walked the property overlooking the Little Fork River. Wyrobek worked through the Little Fork Headwaters Non-industrial Private Forestland project.

Below: Stretches of the Little Fork River are impaired for turbidity.

Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Koochiching SWCD exceeds conservation enrollment goals for forested private lands



CLEAN WATER FUNDS: With Clean Water Fund local capacity dollars from BWSR, Koochiching SWCD increased its outreach by hiring a forest resource specialist and by making a temporary water resources specialist position full time.

In the Little Fork River watershed, managing small tracts of land has great potential for water quality, wildlife habitat, forest health

INTERNATIONAL FALLS — In the Little Fork River’s headwaters region, a three-county project now protects small tracts of privately owned forestland vital to water quality, wildlife habitat and forest health.

The Koochiching Soil & Water Conservation District coordinates the Little Fork Headwaters Non-industrial Private Forestland project and serves as its fiscal agent. By late summer when the second of two U.S. Forest Service grants wrapped up, 40 landowners

had acquired Minnesota Department of Natural Resources-approved management plans for 6,250 acres.

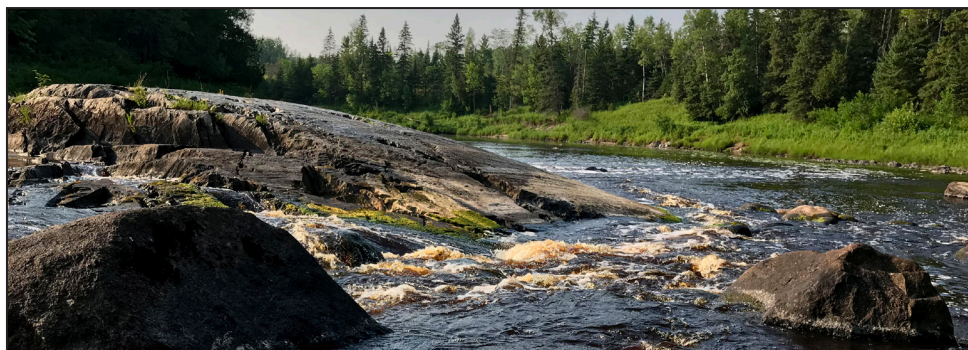
Those tracts were like islands in an otherwise intensively managed forest, scattered throughout the 1 million-acre headwaters region that spans parts of Koochiching, Itasca and St. Louis counties.

“The concern was that you didn’t have continuous management,” said Koochiching SWCD Administrator Pam Tomevi. “So you’ve got these pockets



“**Forestry not only affects soil but it affects water quality and health.**

— Pam Tomevi, Koochiching SWCD administrator”





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 Trying to do a good job at understanding what a steward of the land is. Because I’m blessed to own it, and possession’s obliged. That’s my mother’s phrase, and I believe that. If you’re going to have it, if you don’t take it seriously, you’re going to lose (everything) anyway.

— Thomas Wyrobek, on why he enrolled in the program ”

where maybe forest stands and types are similar. But when you have a break in how they’re managed, then it’s not always the best for the (resource).”

Fragmentation increases the threat of development or conversion to cropland. Unmanaged forests pose risks, too. Open areas can be susceptible to invasive plant species. Overly mature stands can fall prey to forest pests. When timber harvest occurs on private lands, a lack of best management practices can lead to soil erosion — especially in riparian areas.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in 2010 deemed stretches of the Little Fork River impaired for turbidity.

Work on the first NIPF project started in 2011 with a \$45,000 federal grant and a \$37,000 match. The MPCA’s Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) prompted Koochiching SWCD in 2016 to expand its second phase — funded by a \$40,000



Top: Wyrobek is among 40 landowners who acquired Minnesota DNR-approved management plans through the Little Fork Headwaters Non-industrial Private Forestland project. **Above:** Koochiching SWCD forest resource specialist James Aasen contacted owners of prioritized parcels to explain project details. In August 2018, he followed up with Wyrobek.

federal grant and a match exceeding \$106,000 — to focus on riparian areas.

Thomas Wyrobek’s land qualified.

For years, Wyrobek had hunted deer here with friends. He still fills the freezer with venison. But in summer 2018 he was mulling forestry management plans for his 175-acre property. He might stabilize eroding stretches of his 1,350-foot-long

riverfront. He might plant hazelnuts. Or pollinator habitat.

Wyrobek planned to do much of the work himself. He expected to have more free time after he transferred ownership of his nanotech company. He discussed possibilities during an August 2018 visit with James Aasen, Koochiching SWCD forest resource specialist.

“The way I’m going to use

it is to commit to improving it,” Wyrobek said of the land he’d enrolled.

Aasen’s role in the NIPF project included contacting the owners of prioritized parcels to explain the details.

“The stewardship efforts with the DNR are the perfect way to connect with those landowners and get them engaged,” Aasen said of the DNR’s Private Forest Management program. “Throughout northern Minnesota, you’re seeing land-use priorities changing. There’s a lot of fallow fields ... that were farmed, and now there’s invasive weeds that have taken over. Those could be replanted and become productive again.”

Those who signed on were reimbursed for half the cost of hiring a private forester to develop a long-term management plan. Foresters met with

landowners, walked their land and considered their goals —which ranged from preserving white pines to attracting songbirds.

Implementation was optional.

Those who registered their forest stewardship plans with the DNR and followed suggestions could receive tax breaks through programs including the Sustainable Forest Incentive Act.

“You’re a landowner and you’re not really thinking about your property 300 miles away. But now you might,” Tomevi said.

Wyrobek elaborated on his reasons for enrolling:

“Trying to do a good job at understanding what a steward of the land is. Because I’m blessed to own it, and possession’s obliged. That’s my mother’s phrase, and I believe that. If you’re going to have it, if you don’t take it seriously, you’re going to lose (everything) anyway.”

Losing contiguous tracts of forestland also would affect wildlife — including wolves, moose, bobcats, bears and fishers, which require large tracts of uninterrupted habitat. The Little Fork River itself is known for sturgeon, muskies, walleye, small-mouth bass and northerns.

“It’s one of the wildest rivers outside of the Boundary Waters. There’s huge stretches that are undeveloped,” Aasen said.

Government agencies manage the county, state and federal forests that comprise 52% of the watershed. Companies manage industrial forests



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Project Partners, Funding Sources

PARTNERSHIPS:

One of the Minnesota Forest Resources Council’s six regional landscape committees, the Northern Landscape Committee supported Little Fork Headwaters Non-industrial Private Forestland project development and gave feedback. Koochiching SWCD was fiscal agent and project coordinator. Landowners engaged professional private foresters to write

stewardship management plans. The Minnesota DNR’s forestry division administered the grant, and reviewed and approved final forest stewardship plans.

BUDGET BREAKDOWN:

The \$100,000 Phase II budget included \$40,000 from the U.S. Forest Service’s Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry Landscape Sale Restoration Grant Initiative plus \$60,000 in

matching funds. The actual match and in-kind contributions included \$58,400 from Koochiching SWCD; \$21,500 in-kind from partners plus support from the Northern Landscape Committee, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the MPCA, Koochiching County, Boise Forte and private landowners; \$16,400 in landowner matches; \$10,000 cash from the MFRC.

for sustainable timber production. Private property owners — many of them absentee landowners who only hunt here — may lack forestry knowledge.

Koochiching SWCD increased its outreach efforts when it leveraged \$30,000 — \$10,000 a year

for three years — in Clean Water Fund local capacity dollars from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources to hire Aasen in 2016 and to make a temporary water resources specialist position full time.

The Little Fork Headwaters Non-industrial Private

Forestland project exceeded its acreage enrollment goals and its matching contributions.

The two-phase project aimed for 5,000 acres. It enrolled 6,250. It budgeted \$60,000 to match the Phase II grant, but produced nearly \$106,370 in cash and in-kind contributions.

The Koochiching SWCD’s efforts to manage sustainable, healthy forests continue through its involvement in the county water plan, adopted in 2018.

“As we work with the county in partnership to implement the plan, it makes perfect sense that we work with private landowners. In a county that’s as forested as Kooch, you have DNR working on state land. You’ve got county working on county land. Federal lands take care of their own,” Tomevi said.

“Who does a private landowner turn to? That’s the niche that is the soil and water. So when we talk about resources, we don’t just stop at soil and water. We think about a renewable resource that impacts both of those, and that is forestry.”



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission is to improve and protect Minnesota’s water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. www.bwsr.state.mn.us.