

Pilot project sets sights on reforestation via private landowners in priority areas



The Watershed and Forest Restoration: What a Match! project will offer technical assistance to 600 landowners. It is the first step in reaching Minnesota's 1 million-acre reforestation goal. Anticipated results include:

- 300 forest stewardship plans
- 390 tree-planting plans
- 780 tree planting verification checks
- 1,390 acres of conservation easements
- 27,000 acres of land enrolled in the SFIA program
- 15 tree planters purchased
- 1,875,000 seedlings planted
- 3,125 acres of open lands reforested
- 7,437 metric tons of carbon sequestered (the equivalent of taking 1,602 cars off of the road) per year over 20 years



Wadena SWCD Assistant Manager/ Forestry Technician Anne Oldakoski (left) and the late Wade Salo, who worked as an SWCD technician, planted trees in 2015 in Wadena Township. The SWCD is a key partner in Watershed and Forest Restoration: What a Match! The project prioritizes tree planting in the Rum River, Long Prairie River and Redeye River watersheds. **Photo Credit:** Wadena SWCD

A grant-funded, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources- (BWSR) backed pilot watershed and forest restoration project aims to reforest 3,125 acres — part of a larger goal to reforest 1 million acres for carbon sequestration across the state.

The three-year pilot project — Watershed and Forest Restoration: What a Match! — aims to accelerate tree planting for water quality and carbon sequestration by private landowners. It builds the capacity of soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) and of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe by partnering with BWSR and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

A \$3,318,000 Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) grant the legislature awarded to BWSR in 2022 leverages

“ This (ENRTF) grant is basically a first step by the state with districts, tribal members and consulting foresters to come together to help work with landowners in an organized way to get going on this 1-million-acre goal. ”

— Lindberg Ekola,
BWSR private forested watersheds protection coordinator

DNR funding through its [Sustainable Forest Incentive Act \(SFIA\)](#) and [Private Forest Management \(PFM\) cost-share program](#). BWSR is responsible for managing the ENRTF grant, providing project coordination and reporting, as well as administering Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easements for private forestry management purposes.



Left: Douglas SWCD staff (from left) Andy Rice, Rigoberto Gonzales and Dan Meyer planted more than 20,000 trees on land enrolled in the USDA’s Conservation Reserve Program at a site south of Pocket Lake in 2017. **Photo Credit:** Douglas SWCD **Middle:** Newly planted trees grew in 2010 near the Verdale city cemetery in Aldrich Township. The Watershed and Forest Restoration: What a Match! project combines the efforts of private, local, tribal and state partners to connect private forest management with water quality protection. **Right:** Wadena SWCD staff planted trees in 2015 on a property in Wadena Township. The pilot project will increase tree-planting capacity of SWCDs and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. **Photo Credits:** Anne Oldakowski, Wadena SWCD

This project links forestry, water quality and carbon sequestration to help Minnesota reach its reforestation goal. It is the first of a multi-step strategy toward reaching the 1-million-acre reforestation goal initially recommended by Minnesota Climate Change Advisory Group in 2009. The Nature Conservancy, BWSR and the DNR Division of Forestry are among those now supporting the goal.

“This (ENRTF) grant is basically a first step by the state with districts, tribal members and consulting foresters to come together to help work with landowners in an organized way to get going on this 1-million-acre goal,” said Lindberg Ekola, BWSR private forested watersheds protection coordinator.

The project’s goal of 3,125 acres of reforestation will increase wildlife habitat, [protect water quality](#) and sequester carbon. Its outcomes align with [Minnesota’s Climate Action Framework](#) and the state’s push to become carbon-neutral by 2050.

[Research by The Nature Conservancy](#) shows that

“ Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund provides new opportunities for landowners to work with local soil and water conservation districts, DNR and private sector partners to accelerate tree planting. ”



— Don Bajumpaa, Redeye River watershed LFT coordinator

reforestation is one of the best ways to sequester carbon, compared with other strategies such as cover crops, reduced tillage and wetland restoration.

The funds are meant to increase tree planting and private forest management services offered by 14 SWCDs and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe along with DNR forestry staff by coordinating tree planting projects, purchasing equipment and land easements, and expanding outreach. The 14 SWCDs within the priority watersheds include East Otter Tail, Todd, Mille Lacs, Aitkin, Anoka, Becker, Benton, Crow Wing, Douglas, Isanti, Kanabec, Morrison, Sherburne and Wadena.

The SWCDs and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe will provide technical assistance to landowners, and promote and implement tree-planting programs.

The three priority watersheds — the Rum River, Long Prairie River and Redeye River — lie in the region where deciduous forest and coniferous forest meet. Historically, this area within the Upper Mississippi River Basin has seen significant loss of forest cover as trees were cut to make way for agriculture and development. The watersheds contribute to the Twin Cities’ drinking water supply.

Local forestry technical teams (LFTs) guided by

landscape stewardship plans and One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) priorities will lead the local coordination of the grant-funded project within the three watersheds. One Watershed, One Plan and landscape stewardship plans provide guidance on priorities for landowner outreach and service delivery.

LFTs consist of representatives from SWCDs, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, consulting foresters, BWSR and the DNR. LFTs help landowners decide how to protect their forests. Options include BWSR’s RIM program or the DNR’s SFIA.

“Local partners in the Redeye River watershed recently developed a landscape stewardship plan. This plan makes critical linkages between forestry and water quality, and complements the water quality goals we identified in the Redeye River Watershed Local Comprehensive Water Management Plan,” said Don Bajumpaa, Redeye River watershed LFT coordinator.

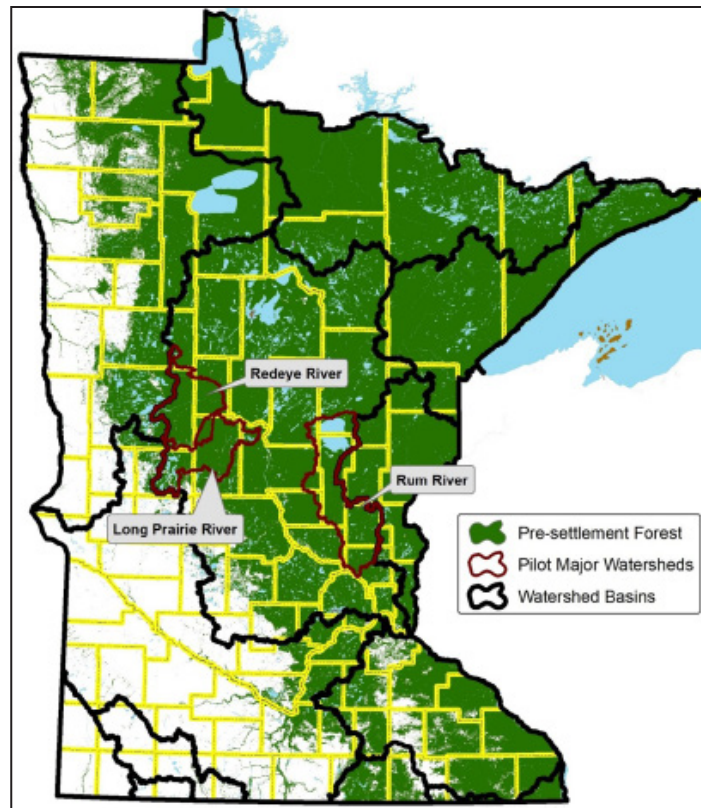
Bajumpaa has started to assemble his team

and think about how to approach the project. Land management and protection is a priority in the Redeye River 1W1P. Creating and implementing forest stewardship plans and promoting tree plantings will ultimately provide for forest enhancement and protection in the Redeye River watershed, while also reducing phosphorus- and sediment-loading, and protecting groundwater quality.

“A big part of the pilot, in my opinion, will be assessing what worked well and what didn’t,” Bajumpaa said. “Building from our lessons learned will result in a better program, healthier forests and cleaner water.”

Forests protect water resources by filtering rain and snow, curbing erosion and reducing stormwater runoff. Forests also mitigate the harmful effects of climate change by sequestering carbon through photosynthesis.

The grant was allocated in three ways. The first allocation, a total of \$1,180,000, is earmarked for accelerating tree planting — including \$1 million, which will be



*A glimpse of pre-European-settlement forest cover in Minnesota shows forest areas, watershed basins, and project priority watersheds. Minnesota has lost 15 million acres of forests since pre-European settlement. More than 95% of that loss occurred on private lands. **Map Credit:** BWSR*

transferred to the DNR Division of Forestry’s cost-share program; and \$180,000 to purchase equipment and coordinate seedling tree planting stock needs. Coordination includes developing seedling projection reports, a tool that districts use to let DNR nurseries and commercial growers know what their seedling needs will be

over the next couple of years. Ekola said SWCDs with existing tree sales programs can use grant funds to prepare and implement those programs.

The second allocation targets watershed protection with \$1,390,000 budgeted for conservation easements through BWSR’s RIM

program. The funds are split evenly among the three priority watersheds to purchase 1,390 acres of conservation easements.

The third allocation sets aside \$748,000 for staff capacity and project coordination such as outreach, technical assistance, watershed coordination, training and evaluation.

Since July 2022, BWSR and its project partners have worked with landowners, initiated grant agreements, and organized work plans. Ekola said the project is an opportunity to build networks and delivery systems to ramp up tree planting across Minnesota.

“That first year, we’re not anticipating planting nearly as many trees as we will in years two and three because ... mobilizing tree planting is like mobilizing an army, it takes a little bit of time,” Ekola said.

Watershed and Forest Restoration: What a Match! project funds will be available until June 30, 2025.