

# Mississippi headwaters protections expand to tributaries, create more linked corridors



Project support came from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, as appropriated by the Minnesota State Legislature.

The Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project (MHHCP) — a partnership among conservation organizations, local government units and state agencies focused on creating and expanding contiguous habitat complexes within the eight-county region — has protected about 7,000 acres and 50-plus miles of shoreline since 2016.

MHHCP's goal is to protect fish and wildlife habitat along the first 400 miles of the Mississippi River, its major tributaries, nine headwaters lakes and other high-quality habitat complexes.

This multi-phase headwaters corridor project aims to provide clean water for fish and to safeguard adjacent uplands, which are home to more than 350 species of animals and birds. The river feeds and shelters migratory waterfowl along the Mississippi River Flyway. Additionally, the project enhances

public recreational opportunities, especially for anglers, hunters and people looking to enjoy nature. Preserving the quality of water also protects a source of drinking water for downstream communities including St. Cloud and the Twin Cities.

The MHHCP is a partnership among the Mississippi Headwaters Board, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), the Trust for Public Land and the soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) in Aitkin, Beltrami, Cass, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Hubbard, Itasca and Morrison counties. The partners are working to link private lands adjacent to permanently protected public lands — such as county, state, federal or tribal lands — to form contiguous, permanently protected habitat complexes. The headwaters region starts at Itasca State Park and ends at

*The Trust for Public Land created the Indian Jack Lake WMA in the Brainerd lakes area, and then added to it via fee-title acquisitions. The WMA includes about 270 acres of hardwood forest with more than 2 miles of shoreline. It is open to hunting, fishing, wildlife watching and paddling.*  
**Photo Credit:** Andy Richter





**Left:** An abundance of blazing stars attracted pollinators including a regal fritillary. **Photo Credit:** Peter Vogel **Center:** The Morrison SWCD showcased Vogel’s property during the SWCD’s summer 2022 conservation tour, which was timed to coincide with the monarch migration. Vogel said he has seen hundreds of monarchs crossing his property, some of them stopping to rest in the pine trees in the evening. **Photo Credit:** Morrison SWCD **Right:** Large-flowered trillium are among the wildflowers that grow in Vogel’s forest. **Photo Credit:** Peter Vogel

Morrison County’s southern border.

“The program has been extremely successful,” said Paula West, MHHCP project coordinator. “We’ve exceeded our program goals by over two-hundred and fifty percent. We’ve protected over 50 miles of the river so far, since 2016, and we’re moving along on keeping the water clean and habitat safe along the river.”

The MHHCP has received \$21.6 million in appropriations from the Outdoor Heritage Fund as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) for the first six phases of the project. Nearly \$5.5 million of that money was available to fund [private landowners’ conservation easements](#) within the eight counties.

According to West, all but \$600,000 of that money has been spent or committed through 46 completed easements and seven that are being processed. West said partners planned to submit a request for Phase 7 funding to the LSOHC this month.

MHHCP partners would then present details of that funding request to the LSOHC in late summer. Presentations typically

**“ Many of the native animals depend upon that grassland habitat, and the only way you can make sure that they’re going to be there in the future is if you preserve some area for them to go and feed and reproduce and hang out. ”**

— Peter Vogel, Morrison County landowner



*The Swan River meanders through Vogel’s property, which was enrolled in a RIM easement through the MHHCP. Photo Credit: Morrison SWCD*

occur in August, and the council makes its funding recommendations to the legislature in October. If approved, July 1, 2024, is the earliest those funds

would be available. West said MHHCP partners would use the funds to preserve habitat and protect water quality through conservation easements.

Initially, project partners focused on land conservation bordering the main stem of the Mississippi River. Later, the focus expanded to include the river’s immediate watershed. Now, the partners have branched out even farther to include critical lands, which eventually drain to the river. That approach makes more opportunities for land conservation possible.

“The soil and water conservation districts in the eight counties are really the RIM (Reinvest in Minnesota) workhorses for this program,” West said. “These soil and water conservation districts do the easement work, and they have the local relationships with the landowners that are very important. Local people like to talk to local officials, to local professionals.”

Among the local professionals working with landowners on the MHHCP are Morrison SWCD staff members, whose role includes making landowners aware of programs available through the SWCD. Landowner Peter Vogel contacted the Morrison SWCD regarding his property bordering the Swan River, a Mississippi River tributary, in response to the letter he received



about the headwaters project.

“We got to talking about the MHHCP and the Vogels had a pretty sizable amount of high-quality upland and shore land that they were operating and maintaining for the wildlife, and we thought (the MHHCP) would be a perfect fit,” said Lance Chisholm, Morrison SWCD RIM coordinator and water plan coordinator.

Vogel bought the 80-acre property with his late wife — a biology major with a keen interest in biodiversity — in the mid-1980s and built a house there. When they acquired the property, two fields that had been rented out lay fallow and full of weeds. Neither had been farmed for some time, Vogel said. Vogel guessed the native white pine forest on the southeast portion of the property had not been logged for 80 to 100 years — if ever; the topography made access difficult. The soil there is quite heavy and tends to be wet. Vogel said he thought the white pine forest — with many trees reaching more than 100 feet tall — is located in an old meander of the Swan River. Vogel suspects that the soil has never been disturbed. This low area is full of trillium, hepatica, false Solomon’s seal and other native wildflowers.

The Vogels planted trees and used previous RIM funding to establish a native prairie to provide habitat and food for monarchs and other pollinators. The property also has an oak forest that has not been logged in living memory, and a small cabin built in 1940. Vogel estimates the property includes about 1 mile of riverfront, given the



*The Trust for Public Land is in the process of acquiring and protecting what is known as the Sheep Ranch property — 2,500 acres in Hubbard County that would expand the boundaries of the Paul Bunyan State Forest. The property contains several lakes and rolling hills. Its protection would connect several other public lands, providing critical wildlife corridors, and providing public recreational opportunities including hunting, fishing, hiking and wildlife observation. Photo Credit: Andy Richter*



*The Mississippi headwaters region spans eight counties, starting in Itasca State Park and ending at the southern border of Morrison County. Minneapolis draws about 21 billion gallons of water from the Mississippi River each year, according to data from the city. Map Courtesy of Mississippi Headwaters Board*

Swan River’s winding path.

Vogel placed about 70 acres of the land in an MHHCP easement to protect that shoreline and to help

maintain and enhance the native prairie. The easement, which took about 16 months to complete, was recorded in July 2021.

Vogel, an attorney who specializes in real estate law, is keenly aware of development pressures on rural land.

“You get these little 5-acre parcels carved out because everybody wants 5 acres in the country. Then they mow the whole 5 acres, and you end up with a 5-acre lawn, which is essentially a desert to any wildlife,” Vogel said. “I feel it’s a unique piece of property. It’s a piece of property that I have spent 40 years protecting and developing, and I did not want to see it carved into 5-acre lots. There is a real destruction of habitat, especially the grassland habitat. ... Many of the native animals depend upon that grassland habitat and the only way you can make sure that they’re going to be there in the future is if you preserve some area for them to go and feed and reproduce and hang out.”

Beyond the habitat protection, Vogel said he was motivated to fulfill the wishes of his late wife, who started the project and whom Vogel said would have wanted to see the land preserved.

As of March 2023, Morrison SWCD had completed seven MHHCP RIM easements, which permanently protected 381 acres and about 5.6 miles of shoreline within the county.

“Soil and water conservation districts are uniquely positioned to build trusting relationships with the landowners. We want the districts to be the first stop for landowners when they’re seeking assistance to address environmental issues or wish to enhance the conservation benefits on their lands,” Chisholm

said. “When an easement is completed, the work doesn’t stop. There’s ongoing maintenance of the lands placed in the easement to ensure that the water quality and habitat benefits are maintained.”

Morrison SWCD staff members conduct yearly RIM easement checkups and work with landowners on maintenance.

Working with the MHHCP partners on easement projects has allowed Morrison SWCD to reach more landowners throughout the county who might be interested in permanent protection, according to SWCD staff. Most of the SWCD’s easement programs lie within a 5-mile radius of Camp Ripley.

The ability to focus on tributaries and their watersheds — instead of solely on lands bordering the Mississippi River,

which is highly developed in Morrison County — gives the Morrison SWCD more opportunities to permanently protect larger tracts of land in areas affecting the Mississippi River.

BWSR administers RIM easements, which remain privately owned.

The Trust for Public Land oversees fee-title acquisitions, another land conservation option in the MHHCP that results in land ownership by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources or the county in which the land is located. Unlike RIM easements, those fee-title lands are open to public hunting and fishing.

One unique aspect of the MHHCP is engaging local governments early in the process. For fee-title acquisitions, West said it is important that county governments are on board.

To ensure plans align with county goals, the Trust for Public Land’s Land Protection Director Bob McGillivray and Mississippi Headwaters Board Executive Director Tim Terrill inform county board members before starting any work on fee-title acquisitions. When they are close to closing on a property, they seek permission from the county board to finish the acquisition.

To date, the Trust for Public Land’s MHHCP efforts have protected 2,365 acres and 7.5 miles of undeveloped shoreline, leveraged grant dollars with \$482,000 in private funding sources, and completed 11 acquisition projects (one Wildlife Management Area [WMA], one WMA addition, one Aquatic Management Area addition, three state forest additions and five county forest additions).

Together, RIM easements

plus fee-title acquisitions have protected 7,000 acres and 50-plus miles of shoreline through the MHHCP. As of March 2023, 3,786 acres of RIM easements had been recorded. Another 1,088 were being processed, meaning BWSR has accepted the application and is now working through the easement process.

West said word of mouth has resulted in some sign-ups.

“Our partner SWCDs do outreach, but landowners talk to each other. So, Landowner A that has an easement talks to the adjacent Landowner B and he says, ‘Look, I got enrolled in this great program, and they’re paying me for what I’m already doing, and I don’t really want to do anything different with my land, so why don’t you get in the program, too,’” West said.