



Grants to Local Government Units Help Increase Conservation Easements on Lakes and Streams

Featured Project

Nearly 900 acres of land adjacent to lakes and streams are protected from future development in Aitkin and Cass counties, thanks partly to state grants that helped landowners pay for costs associated with enrolling shoreland property into conservation easements.

Landowners in Aitkin, Cass and Crow Wing counties had expressed interest in protecting un-developed land adjacent to local lakes and streams. In order to enroll the land in a conservation easement, the landowner would have to pay about \$10,000 for appraisals, surveys, legal fees and other expenses before completing the transaction.

Local government officials in Aitkin, Cass and Crow Wing counties proposed a solution – offer landowners a \$10,000-\$15,000 payment to offset their costs. The three counties jointly applied for and received a Local Water Management Challenge Grant in 2005 and in 2007. These competitive state grants are administered by the Board of Water and Soil Resources, and they target state funds to high-priority projects that are identified in local water management plans.

A total of \$156,000 in payments to landowners resulted in shoreland property easements of land valued at about \$3.2 million. Sites included about 4,500 feet along a tributary that feeds Lake Mille Lacs, and 3.8 miles of lakeshore property in Aitkin and Cass counties.

These lands are now managed to maximize their natural resource value. Soil and Water Conservation District staff walked through the property with landowners to develop a forest stewardship plan. Landowners in Aitkin County are also eligible for third-party certification for their forest management activities. Aitkin SWCD recently became the first district in the nation to achieve third party certification status.

Location: Aitkin, Cass and Crow Wing counties jointly applied for this grant, and all of the easements are in Aitkin and Cass counties.

Partners: Aitkin County and SWCD, Cass County and SWCD, Crow Wing County and SWCD, local lake associations, landowners and BWSR.



Land on Little Bass Lake in Aitkin County that is protected by a permanent conservation easement.



BWSR Featured Project

Project Timeline: July 2005-June 2009

Project Costs / Funding Sources: BWSR received \$222,000 in Fiscal Year 2005 and \$500,000 in Fiscal Year 2007 for Local Water Management Challenge Grants. Funding for this grant program was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR). BWSR approved \$156,000 in grants to Aitkin and Cass counties. Aitkin and Cass Counties provided in-kind project management. Most of the required non-state matching dollars were provided by landowners through the value of the property.

Keys to Success: This project was led by local units of government that excel at creative solutions to problems. The project showed that landowners are willing to forego their development rights on extremely valuable lakeshore property to protect water quality and wildlife habitat. Offsetting their up-front costs was a good incentive that made it more feasible for them to enroll their land in a conservation easement.

BWSR roles: BWSR field staff provided administrative assistance to the Crow Wing SWCD, which served as the project manager and local fiscal agent for the grant. BWSR staff also worked with local staff to maintain records of all expenditures and outcomes to ensure accountability of these state dollars.

Measurable Outcomes:

- Aitkin County - Two easements totaling 325 acres, including 9,000 feet of lakeshore and 4,500 feet of shoreline along a stream that feeds Lake Mille Lacs; land value is \$700,000.
- Cass County - Five easements totaling 557 acres, including 11,454 feet of shoreland; land value is \$2,468,356.
- Total - Seven donations of land totaling 882 acres, including 20,452 feet of lakeshore (3.8 miles) and 4,500 feet of stream frontage. Total land value in conservation easements is \$3,168,000 (20:1 ratio of land value per state dollar).

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