

Glenwood native leads conservation program *'In general, most conservationists are sportsmen'*

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Reporter

For nearly 25 years, the non-profit group Pheasants Forever has aimed to preserve fowl population through habitat improvement, land management and public awareness, while Minnesota's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) since 1938 have strived to protect the environment by encouraging landowners to conserve soil and water resources.

Now, with the formation of Stearns County area's Grand Lake Project, the two seemingly-diverse groups have joined forces to reach a common goal. The project was pioneered by Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist, Jason Selvog - a former Glenwood resident and 1992 MAHS graduate; and Stearns County SWCD shoreline specialist, Greg Berg.

"Since 2002, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has partnered with the Board of Water & Soil Resources and Pheasants Forever Inc." Selvog said. "The purpose of the program is to promote and implement conservation programs that result in more acres of grass and wetlands for water quality and wildlife habitat," said Selvog. "The State has awarded several grants to Minnesota Soil and Water Conservation Districts to hire staff for the promotion and implementation of Farm Bill Programs. Stearns SWCD has been one of the grant recipients since it began."

Minnesota is home to over 10,000 lakes, a haven for the state's many outdoors enthusiasts and sportsmen. But the scenery and recreation of these lakes can be jeopardized by runoff pollution and sedimentation, which can upset a lake's delicate balance and become detrimental to surrounding wildlife populations. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides often used on erodible cropland can drift into nearby lakes and can encourage many types of decidedly unwanted plants to multiply, ultimately causing the lake to become less suitable for recreational activities like boating, swimming and fishing. These effects can be limited or even reversed with the help of government-sponsored environmental programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP.

The CRP distributes payments to land owners, usually farmers, in exchange for the use of portions of their land for the reestablishment of native wildlife habitat. The program has changed over the years, and now pays landowners to grow native plant species on their "environmentally sensitive" land, areas that are prone to erosion, runoff and sedimentation, often water-adjacent land strips. Today more than 36 million acres of land are enrolled in the CRP program.

"Stearns County Soil and Water Conservation District initiated CRP promotion partnerships with several local groups. These partnerships allow us to pinpoint high-priority areas in the county," Selvog said. "These organizations worked together to help promote and implement CRP in Stearns County and adjoining watersheds. Stearns County can attribute the SWCD's success to their ability to partner with other agencies and employ a Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist to help market federal Farm Bill programs. This opportunity gives the Stearns SWCD the ability to reach more people and implement more conservation."

Some believe that environmentalists and hunters have somewhat differing opinions when it comes to outdoor conservation, but according to Selvog, any differences are slight. "In general, most conservationists are sportsmen," said Selvog. "Two of the most famous are Aldo Leopold and Teddy Roosevelt. Look at the contributions these good old boys have brought us; 'Sand County Almanac' and huge contributions to the National Park System. There are thousands of volunteers with groups like PF that contribute time, energy, knowledge and money toward a conservation goal. That goal may be habitat, wildlife or education, but it's all conservation."



Stearns County area's Grand Lake Project was pioneered by Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist, Jason Selvog - a former Glenwood resident and 1992 Minnewaska Area High School graduate. Photo by Craig Bihrie