

Northwoods Land Trust
Florence County River Conservation Project
2011-13
River Management Planning Grant – RP-215-12

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

Contact Person:

Bryan Pierce, Executive Director
Northwoods Land Trust
P.O. Box 321
Eagle River, WI 54521-0321

Telephone: (715) 479-2490
Email: pierce@northwoodslandtrust.org

Project Report:

This report describes the final results and impacts from the initiation of the project in 2011 to the completion in 2013 of the Northwoods Land Trust Florence County River Conservation Project. As indicated in the following report, the project was highly successful and achieved results well beyond the planned outcomes.

The goal of the project was to conduct a direct-mail education campaign with all property owners with at least 500 or more feet of natural frontage on the priority river and stream segments in Florence County that were identified by the DNR Northern Rivers Initiative. Information packets highlighting voluntary conservation options those property owners can utilize to protect their priority river and stream corridors were mailed to each. Those options include Land Protection Agreement (Conservation Easement), Land Donation, Land Registry and Conservation Buyer/Seller programs. Follow-up on-site property assessments and conservation planning were conducted with any landowners who expressed interest by responding to the direct mailing or media publicity. It was anticipated that the mailing and publicity would result in at least one landowner committing to donate a conservation easement to permanently protect their river or stream shoreline.

Project objectives included the following:

- 1) To direct-mail an informational packet on voluntary conservation options private landowners can utilize to protect their Northern Rivers Initiative-identified priority river and stream segments in Florence County. The information will include how the options can protect land while also providing income, estate and other tax benefits to the landowners. This direct mail campaign will include all private property owners with at least 500 feet of natural shoreland frontage on those priority segments.
- 2) To conduct on-site follow-up contacts with interested landowners as generated by the direct mail campaign and media publicity.
- 3) To encourage interested landowners to voluntarily enter into perpetual land protection agreements or utilize other land protection tools to protect their priority river or stream segments.

Report on Project methods and activities:

A summary of results and impacts on each of the project methods and activities follows:

1. Property Owner Identification – Where possible, the project will utilize geographic information system (GIS) technology to identify all property owners with natural shoreland frontage along all of the priority river and stream segments identified by the DNR Northern Rivers Initiative. The project will utilize Florence County Mapping Department digital mapping, orthophotos and property owner data to generate the property owner contacts. Where digital parcel data is not sufficient, the project will utilize existing tax roll data and other hard copy maps to develop the mailing lists. GIS maps of each town will be generated to illustrate the parcels with existing natural shoreland frontage on these river and stream segments.

Geographic Information System data and map layers were purchased from the Florence County Land Information Department. The GIS system was utilized to identify Florence County river and stream property owners with approximately 500 feet or more of natural shorelines. Where there were questions about the approximate size of shorelines, digital aerial photos were consulted (Florence County digital orthophotos). Property owners' names and addresses were then selected from the linked Florence County tax roll database.

This individual mapping and identification process was completed for each of the eight towns in Florence County. An overview countywide map of the selected parcels was also produced. These included all property owners on priority river and stream segments identified by the WDNR Northern Initiatives.

GIS electronic maps with shape files mapping the selected riverfront parcels were color-highlighted in yellow and then scanned as image files. These scanned files are included in the attached CD. A total of 578 private riverfront parcels were identified with approximately 500 feet or more of natural shoreline frontage on the priority rivers and streams. A total of 410 property owners own one or more of these river and stream parcels.

2. Information Packet/Direct Mail Campaign - A packet of information on voluntary conservation options will be mailed first class to each of the identified river and stream property owners. The packet will include the most up to date information possible on current tax implications and conservation options.

Landowner information packets on voluntary conservation options were updated. After screening for duplicates and those who had previously received NWLT information from other publicity and education efforts, the property owner lists resulted in a total of 343 names of priority river shoreland property owners generated for the Florence County mailing (see attached MS Exel database file). Cover letters and mailing labels were mail-merged using this database. The cover letters included information on the current enhanced federal IRS income tax charitable deduction benefits for conservation easement donations. The information packets were mailed to the landowners on April 10, 2013.

3. Property Owner Contacts - Follow-up contacts for property owners responding to the information packets and any media publicity from the easement acquisitions will be conducted with on-site visits. Legal and technical assistance for conservation easement transactions, land donations, conservation buyer and land registry program applicants will be provided by NWLT board of directors or volunteers and/or by contracting for outside assistance.

The Project Coordinator provided one-on-one consultations with property owners who responded to the direct mailing of the information packets. Other river property owners (including from outside of Florence County) contacted the land trust from various media publicity and referrals. These additional contacts were also provided copies of the landowner information packets. Direct technical assistance and on-site consultations were provided to a total of 16 landowners through this project.

Initial meetings with individual landowners generally focused on establishing the conservation values of the property and discussions of voluntary conservation options. For those who decided to proceed with land protection, additional technical and legal assistance from NWLT included drafting of conservation easements, preparation of conservation values summaries (ecological assessments), preparation of photographic and other baseline documentation according to IRS standards, and providing information to the landowners on tax benefits and other issues associated with permanent land protection.

GIS maps were also prepared for individual properties as part of the technical assistance provided to landowners. These maps include digital parcel maps, digital orthophotos (aerial photos), soils maps, topographic maps and others.

A generalized listing of river landowner follow-up contacts by program type is attached. However, due to the confidentiality of landowner interests, names, addresses and other identifiable information are not included in the project report, except for completed projects which have been recorded with the Register of Deeds.

Overall Project Impacts:

In addition to providing information and education and one-on-one technical assistance to landowners, the project proposal originally estimated that one new conservation easement or other land protection project would be completed. The project far exceeded expectations.

Five new conservation easement donations were completed as part of this grant project. Copies of these conservation easements and maps are attached for each of the following:

- Tom & Carol Mertens, Town of Fence, Florence County – 60-acre conservation easement adjacent to a 20-acre CE parcel and Nicolet National Forest land. Includes 4,400 feet of frontage on the South Branch of the Popple River – a state “wild river.”

Project was completed with all baseline work finalized and the conservation easement signed and recorded.

- Joseph Mertens, Town of Fence, Florence County – 20-acre conservation easement adjacent to the 60-acre CE above and Nicolet National Forest land. Includes 2,900 feet of frontage on the South Branch of the Popple River plus another 460 feet on Simpson Creek, a class 1 trout stream. Project was completed with all baseline work finalized and the conservation easement signed and recorded.
- Tim Hagen & Kimberly Kelling, Town of Crescent, Oneida County – These conservation buyers purchased 98.78 acres on the Wisconsin River south of Rhinelander. Includes 5,440 feet of shoreline frontage. This property is located across the river from two previous NWLT conservation easements, so the corridor is now protected. All baseline work was completed and the conservation easement was signed and recorded.
- Daniel & Catherine Hauptert, Town of Catawba, Price County – 182.33 acres with about 10,570 feet of frontage on the North Fork of the Jump River. Required three comprehensive revisions due to mineral rights issues. Project was completed with all baseline work finalized and the conservation easement signed and recorded.
- Cynthia Walters & Sue Ann Kartman, Town of Fifield, Price County – 319 acres south of Fifield. Includes approximately 4,000 feet of frontage on Sailor Creek and nearly one mile of boundary with the adjacent Chequamegon National Forest. Completed all baseline documentation work and the conservation easement was signed and recorded.

Town of Armstrong Creek, Forest County - One 37-acre property was committed by the landowners to be donated to NWLT for conservation as a bequest. This property is accessible from Hwy. 8 and includes significant white cedar swamp habitat draining to the adjacent Armstrong Creek.

Two landowners enrolled in NWLT's conservation buyer/seller program, and listings for those properties have been included in the NWLT newsletter. Five additional conservation easement projects are currently in progress and received extensive technical assistance through this River Planning Grant project.

Note: while NWLT project staff did not visit all of the public river and stream access sites in Florence County, numerous access sites were observed during the multiple drives through the area. No new public access sites were noted beyond those mapped with the initial project proposal. If additional sites are located during subsequent property visits, NWLT will notify DNR to include them on access maps.

Overall the grant project was very successful. The five conservation easement projects directly protected about **680 acres** of land, including approximately **27,770 feet (5.25 miles)** of frontage on the South Branch of the Popple River, Wisconsin River, North Fork of the Jump River and Sailor Creek – all priority river and stream segments identified by the DNR Northern Rivers Initiative.

Two conservation easement projects were donated without the intent of qualifying for an income tax deduction through the IRS, but have estimated conservation easement values totalling \$33,910. One project appraisal is still pending. The two remaining projects leveraged another \$223,150 of appraised donated conservation easement values. The total donation value of four of the five conservation easements exceeds **\$257,000**.

The 37-acre property near Armstrong Creek committed as a land donation by bequest has a current assessed value of **\$44,700**.

Two river properties with 539 acres and about 2.75 miles of river and stream frontage were also enrolled by the landowners in the NWLT Conservation Buyer/Seller program. These properties were listed for sale in the NWLT newsletters.

Sharing project results:

Project results have been shared in an open public meeting as part of the Northwoods Land Trust Annual Meeting. Conservation easement projects have been publicized in the local news media (samples attached) and also in the NWLT quarterly newsletter.

The final project report is also being shared with the River Alliance of Wisconsin, Florence County Land Conservation Department, Florence County UW-Extension and the Florence County Lakes & Rivers Association.