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The background of the right side of the page is a scenic photograph of the Upper Mississippi River valley. A person wearing a yellow cap and dark clothing is sitting on a low stone wall, looking out over a lush green landscape and the river. The sky is clear and blue. The overall theme is environmental stewardship and appreciation of the natural environment.

UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER FOREST PARTNERSHIP

SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

Can Improve the Health of
THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER WATERSHED

Trees and forest cover are a significant part of the solution to water quality and quantity problems in the Upper Mississippi.

Trees and forests provide multiple benefits such as habitat for wildlife, sense of place, lumber, clean air, recreation, carbon.

Planting trees and forests on flood and highly erosion prone lands creates valuable wildlife habitat and cleans water.

Success in promoting the role of forests in providing clean water and wildlife habitat will require the collective effort of many partners leveraging their resources.

About the Upper Mississippi

The Upper Mississippi (UM) River watershed is a huge area, almost 200,000 square miles. Management of this area is complicated and complex, entailing multiple and overlapping political, economic, recreation, social, and ecological issues and challenges.

- 200 years ago, forests occupied almost 75 percent of the floodplain. Today, they occupy about 18 percent and agriculture is the dominant land use on most of the watershed.
- 26 million acres of wetlands have been drained since 1878. Illinois and Iowa have lost over 95 percent of their wetlands.
- Most of the forestland in the UM watershed is owned by private individuals.



What Is the UMRFP?

The Upper Mississippi River Forest Partnership (UMRFP) is an informal alliance bringing together diverse efforts that advocate for forests as part of the solution to the challenges facing the Upper Mississippi.

What Issues Are Facing the Upper Mississippi?

Land use changes have resulted in loss of water quality. The water quality of the river worsens as it flows north to south on its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Sediments

High levels of suspended solids, sediment, are not uncommon in the watershed. Sediment causes many problems including reduced light levels, slowing aquatic plant growth which feeds fish and wildlife. Phosphorus can be attached to this sediment which in fresh water systems drives eutrophication, contributing to algae blooms, low levels of dissolved oxygen, and loss of biotic life.

Nitrates

The nitrate levels in the UM watershed are high and at times exceed the filtering capacity of the water treatment plant in Des Moines, resulting in drinking water advisories. Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois account for 50 percent of the nitrate in the river. This nitrate load, when "flushed" into the Gulf of Mexico, accelerates the eutrophication process causing hypoxia.

Hypoxia

To aid shipping, the river is engineered to flow rapidly, carrying most of these pollutants into the Gulf of Mexico, where they are a part of the creating of a "dead zone" or hypoxia.

What Is the Work of the UMRFP?

The UMRFP has a goal to promote trees and forests as one tool to improve the health and sustainability of the watershed. While this represents just one tool in the overall effort to improve the river, we believe it is a significant one.

The UMRFP has achieved several beginning steps:

- Key state & federal partners began meeting in 2001.
- States submitted a proposal to USDA Forest Service to hire a UM River partnership coordinator who was then hired in October 2004.
- An Action Plan was completed in 2004 emphasizing the use of forest practices to improve water quality and wildlife habitat, restoring floodplain forest and upland oak savannahs, and promoting sustainable forest management on all forests.
- Forest Partnership was focal point of the regional sustainable forest roundtable, March 2004.
- Ten grants were awarded by the USDA Forest Service to improve migratory bird habitat in the watershed to 10 selected projects.

Next Steps for the Partnership

The next steps the UMRFP plans to take will draw more partners to address the challenges with even more diverse strategies:

- Sign a partnership accord with diverse forest and water quality interests.
- Enlist the agricultural community to use trees to mitigate agricultural run off.
- Monitor migratory bird habitat to identify forest and water quality accomplishments.
- Highlight continuing success stories of forests and water quality improvement.

