NRCS Joins Upper Mississippi Forest Partnership

Growing Partnership Results in Better Use of Funds for Forestry

The Challenge

Technical and financial assistance are important tools for promoting sustainable forest management whose value extends well beyond the science. Many landowners first commit to keeping their land forested as they work with natural resource professionals and see their vision for their land coming to life.

In 2008, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) joined the Upper Mississippi Forest Partnership to bring important new resources to the Partnership's efforts to improve wildlife habitat and water quality by sustainably managing forest land and restoring bottomland forests. NRCS is a valued partner that provides agricultural and forest management assistance to farm owners. However, decisions about how to allocate NRCS funds are made by local committees, which may not include a voice for forestry.

The Zumbro River watershed includes diverse woodlands and wildlife and is the target area for the NRCS Healthy Forest Reserve Program in MInnesota.

The Solution

The NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides cost-share funds for wildlife habitat development, tree planting, forest stand improvement, and control of invasive plants. Several of the region's State NRCS organizations have found innovative ways to target EQIP resources for forestry practices:

Illinois—NRCS sets funding aside for developing forest management plans and other EQIP forest practices. Local NRCS or Soil and Water Conservation District staff write plans that are approved by the local Illinois Department of Natural Resources forester.

Iowa—NRCS began dedicating EQIP funds for forestry practices in 2008, allocating $250,000 for projects and receiving an additional $100,000 in project requests.

Missouri—NRCS addressed a lack of assistance for landowners by funding seven NRCS forestry positions through a cooperative agreement with the Missouri Department of Conservation. They work with local groups to help make forestry a priority for EQIP funds and coordinated $1.5 million in projects.

Minnesota—NRCS received $980,000 in Fiscal Year 2008 for a Healthy Forest Reserve easement program to benefit threatened and endangered species. Minnesota NRCS targeted Wabasha County and partnered with the U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program.

Wisconsin—NRCS celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Coon Creek watershed demonstration project. This area of southwestern Wisconsin was once crippled by severe soil erosion, rendering once-productive farms unworkable. Landowners adopted soil conservation practices, including planting trees and removing cattle from woodlands, which gradually restored the area. In August 2007, up to 12 inches of rain fell in 24 hours. The soil conservation practices helped avoid severe flooding.

Sharing Success

The sharing of State and Federal expertise in Upper Mississippi Forest Partnership projects is providing valuable experience that will be needed as NRCS develops site plans for lands enrolled in the Floodplain Easement Program.

Resources needed to inform forest landowners of their eligibility for NRCS cost-share programs are limited. Partnerships with Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry on initiatives such as State and Private Forestry Redesign competitive projects or the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Upper Mississippi Watershed Fund allow efficient use of available resources.

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