



## Forestland Stewardship Has a Big Role in Protecting Water Quality

July 2023

**“Protecting Our Water – One Forest at a Time”** was the presentation topic at the Mille Lacs Lake Watershed Management Group’s (MLLWMG) Lunch & Learn event held Saturday, June 24, at Appeldoorn’s Sunset Bay Resort near Isle, Minnesota. In addition to the presentation, attendees enjoyed a lunch prepared by Appeldoorn’s, exchanged their in lead tackle for non-toxic alternatives, and signed up to win birdhouses created by Isle seventh- and eighth-grade students.

The guest speaker was **Dan Steward**, creator of forest and landscape stewardship plans with three decades of experience with the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). His talk described the critical role forests play in filtering water; perspectives on how Minnesota’s geography and history have influenced the distribution of public and private forestlands; and current efforts to maintain and restore forest coverage. (The slides from Dan Steward’s presentation are available at the MLLWMG website: <https://millelacswatershed.org>.)

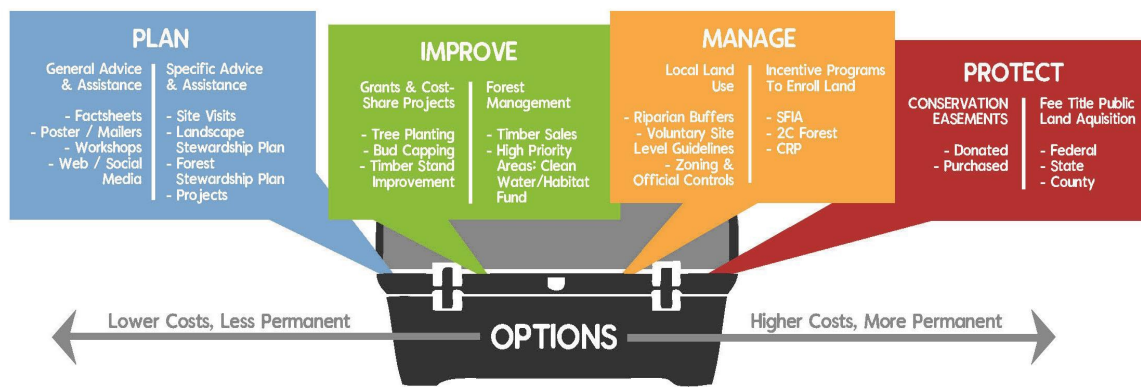
Major points from Steward’s presentation include the following:

**Preserving forests is key to maintaining healthy waters and has other benefits as well.** Forests help clean water because their soils act as sponges that filter precipitation on its way to aquifers, lakes, and streams. Studies show that a 25% loss of forest in a watershed increases phosphorous pollution significantly. Carbon sequestration, wildlife habitat, and recreation use are just some of the additional benefits that forest provide.

**Minnesota has lost almost half of its original forest.** Before European settlement, Minnesota had 32 million acres of trees. Since then it has lost 15 million acres of its forest, largely replaced by cropland and other development. Of the remaining 17 million forested acres, 9 million are publicly held and 8 million are privately held. The privately held forests are especially at risk of loss to agriculture and other development.

**Minnesota seeks to protect at least 75% of its remaining forest from development.** In addition to protection, Minnesota seeks to restore one million acres of forest over the next 20 years. This ambitious effort will require a coordinated effort involving landowners, technical experts, and representatives from many local, state, and tribal governments and agencies.

**Private landowners are the focus of efforts to protect Minnesota's remaining forests.** Woodland landowners are encouraged to participate in a range of voluntary land management activities. As illustrated below, these actions range from taking advantage of educational opportunities and obtaining custom forest stewardship plans to more in-depth, long-term choices, such as participating in easements and other incentive programs.



**BWSR, along with the Minnesota DNR, local county governments, and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, have developed the Rum River Watershed Landscape Stewardship Plan.** The plan provides information and recommendations on sustainable forest management that will help protect water quality, enhance wildlife habitat, promote healthy forests, and address climate change issues while supporting the forest-based economies of tourism and timber. The plan empowers forest service providers to work with private landowners to engage in prioritized forestland protection and management. It also provides an array of forest resource recommendations that support the implementation of the Rum River Comprehensive Watershed Plan. To learn more, see the Rum River Landscape Stewardship Plan: <https://www.millelacsswcd.org/1w1p/rum-river-watershed-landscape-stewardship-plan/>

#### **Mille Lacs Lake and the Rum River are part of an important pilot project.**

A three-year pilot project, funded by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) is now underway in three Minnesota watersheds, including the Rum River. The pilot project aims to develop collaborative relationships and capacities among the Minnesota DNR Forestry Division, BWSR, area SWCDs, the Mille Lacs Band, and consulting foresters. Some of the pilot program's ambitious outcomes include:

- Implementing 300 forest stewardship plans and 390 practice plans.
- Placing 1,390 acres in conservation easements.
- Enrolling 27,000 acres of land in the Sustainable Forests Incentive Act Program.
- Planting 1,875,000 seedlings.
- Reforesting 3,125 acres of open lands.

Anyone interested in pursuing forest conservation or restoration projects is encouraged to contact their local Soil and Water Conservation District. SWCD staff can provide services and connect landowners to currently available programs, grants, and initiatives.

**MLLWMG extends its thanks to the Mille Lacs Area Community Foundation, Appeldoorn's Sunset Bay Resort, and its volunteers for making this Lunch & Learn possible. The next Lunch & Learn will be September 23, 2023 at McQuoid's Inn, Isle, Minn. The topic will be aquatic invasive species.**