

Partners protect groundwater, habitat



Native vegetation planted on 56.7 acres of former cropland in Nobles County is visible in the foreground of this recent aerial shot. It will take approximately three years to establish a mature native plant stand. **Photo Credit:** Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District

The Worthington area will gain wellhead protection and wildlife habitat in a recent land acquisition. Partners include BWSR, Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District, Nobles County Pheasants Forever, Worthington Public Utilities, DNR



BWSR's Board allocated \$1 million in Clean Water Funds to the WPPP in 2019 and an additional \$3 million in 2021. These funds were earmarked for groundwater and wellhead protection.

Local, state and federal partners collaboratively purchased 56.7 acres of former cropland in Nobles County to provide habitat benefits and protect vulnerable groundwater sources for Worthington-area residents and businesses.

Partners purchased the land from the Drost family in July 2020 for \$465,000. The Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District (OOWD) contributed \$265,000 via a Wellhead Protection Partners Pilot (WPPP) program grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Worthington Public Utilities (WPU) contributed \$60,000

toward the acquisition. The Nobles County Chapter of Pheasants Forever covered the balance, using \$10,000 of its funds, \$90,000 in federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants and \$40,000 from the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

BWSR formed the WPPP in 2019 using \$1 million from the Clean Water Fund that was earmarked for groundwater and wellhead protection. So far, the WPPP has supported four projects throughout the state. BWSR Board Conservationist Doug Goodrich said the pilot program's goal is to provide competitive grants to support land acquisitions

and long-term easements in wellhead protection areas with vulnerable drinking water supplies. In December 2021, BWSR's Board authorized an additional \$3 million in Clean Water Fund dollars for the pilot program.

The WPPP supports projects such as the purchase near Worthington, which offers multiple conservation benefits. Located near the Minnesota-Iowa border, the land was planted with row crops until 2020, when the Nobles County Chapter of Pheasants Forever purchased it on behalf of the partnership. In December 2020, ownership was transferred to the Minnesota

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—Dan Livdahl, Okabena-Ocheda Watershed District administrator



Department of Natural Resources (DNR). DNR staff began converting the land to native vegetation in the fall of 2021 and will assume ongoing management.

The OOWD and WPU pursued the project because the land falls within the Worthington Wellhead Protection Area located upstream from Lake Bella. Access to adequate quantities of water is a long-term issue in the area.

“Groundwater in large enough quantities for domestic, commercial and industrial use is hard to come by in Southwest Minnesota because of our geology,” said OOWD Administrator Dan Livdahl.

Livdahl said Lake Bella and the surrounding aquifer are the most important sources of surface and groundwater for the Worthington area.

“Groundwater is rare here and almost all of the Worthington area’s water comes from the Lake Bella area,” Livdahl said. “Our goal is to take the land in that critical area, take it out of agricultural production and put it into permanent protection to protect the

aquifer. The aquifer itself is very shallow, meaning the water is being stored in gravel and deposits that are very close to the surface with only a thin layer of soil on top of it, so it’s very vulnerable to pollution.”

The Nobles County Chapter of Pheasants Forever sought to convert the land to native vegetation for habitat purposes. The parcel is the latest addition to Pheasant Run One, a habitat complex created and expanded by the local chapter since 1986. Pheasant Run One involves seven connecting land acquisitions and covers 543 acres.

“Large contiguous tracts have higher wildlife carrying capacity than those same numbers of acres broken into, say, five separate parcels,” said Scott Rall, the Nobles County Chapter of Pheasants



Forever president. “The benefits to the wellhead protection cannot be overstated, but the fact that parcel is chock full of forbs and flowers adds pollinator benefit on top of the traditional game and non-game species that live there.”

Rall added that with this latest acquisition, Pheasant Run One now allows hunters to walk 13 miles without leaving public land.

Livdahl said project partners’ different, yet complementary goals made the work a success.

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It will take about three years for the native

vegetation to become established; in the meantime, the land may appear weedy and overgrown. Livdahl said ongoing management will focus on controlling invasive species and noxious weeds. This is often accomplished with controlled burns because native prairie species are well-adapted to fire and thrive after burns, while noxious weeds and non-natives are not well adapted to these same conditions.

“The land is now restored to a diverse mix of native upland grass and flowers, and will serve as critical nesting and brood-rearing habitat for pheasants as well as many other game species,” said Eran Sandquist, director of Conservation Delivery – Midwest Region for Pheasants Forever. “Coupled with other existing habitat close by, this habitat mosaic also serves as an important wildlife corridor and is a destination for hunters, birders, and those that enjoy our public lands within the prairie pothole region of Minnesota.”