

Conservation Corps builds careers



The Brainerd-based Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa (CCMI) crew worked on a Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) bank stabilization project in October at Mississippi River County Park. Meet the crew, clockwise from center.

Austin Dixon, 24, of Catonsville, Maryland, was finishing his second season as a CCMI crew leader. The Michigan State University grad earned a fisheries and wildlife degree in 2016, and aims to work in habitat restoration.

Thomas Rusco, 22, of Lino Lakes, planned to resume studies at Hamline University, and eventually get a job in natural resources.

Megan Gillespie, 23, of Morris, earned an environmental studies degree from Hamline University in May, and aims to work in the conservation or sustainability field.

Joshua Dilling, 22, of Killeen, Texas, had studied outdoor education in high school. He plans to become an EMT, and then work in a wilderness therapy program.

Alexis Rodriguez, 22, of Phoenix, was earning science credits at Estrella Mountain Community College, with plans to study forestry at Northern Arizona University.

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Ann Wessel, BWSR

Clean Water Fund allocations provide SWCDs with a trained labor force and equip CCMI crews with skills ranging from firefighting to disaster response. Meet a Brainerd-based crew at work on the Mississippi River in Stearns County.



SARTELL — Armed with loppers and sledge hammers, a five-member Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa (CCMI) crew drove sharpened lengths of willow into a thick, coconut-fiber net. When the willows take root, they'll stabilize a 600-foot-long stretch of riverbank at Mississippi River County Park.

The Brainerd-based CCMI crew members finished their service term in mid-December with a better chance of finding jobs in natural resources.

During the most recently completed service term in Minnesota, 555 CCMI

crew members — including 326 AmeriCorps crew members ages 18 to 25 — worked with about 250 agencies on 399 conservation projects. CCMI crews installed rain gardens in the Twin Cities, cleared downed trees on the Sand Hill River in Polk County, suppressed wildfires on 24,400 acres across Minnesota, and assisted with hurricane relief in Puerto Rico, North Carolina and South Carolina.

Crews gain training in wildland firefighting, prescribed burns, chain saw use, heavy equipment operation, pesticide application, first aid and

plant identification — training that would cost potential employers time and money to provide. Those who work 1,700 hours receive a \$1,355 monthly stipend and a \$5,920 education award. Agency contacts often lead to jobs.

Agencies gain an efficient, economical labor source.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) annual appropriation of \$500,000 in Clean Water Funds pays for CCMI crews' labor costs. Local government units submit applications for work projects, and often provide matching funds. This year, CCMI crews worked with 35 soil and water conservation districts on 41 projects.

"It's been a huge help for water quality in the state because many of the partners we work with — SWCDs and watershed districts — tell us this is work they need to get done but just don't have the staff or funds," said Brian Miller, St. Paul-based AmeriCorps program director.

"It leverages funds from multiple sources to meet the tipping point to have a project happen," Miller said. "The limited resources will go further."

Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff oversaw the project at Mississippi River County Park, where erosion had undercut the riverbank. The work is funded through a \$218,000 Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund grant. The CCMI crew helped with labor. Construction costs total about \$137,000 to date; work will finish in the spring.



Jute and coconut fiber-wrapped soil lifts layered with brush "mattresses" of willow, dogwood and alder create toe wood benches along a 600-foot-long stretch of riverbank at Mississippi River County Park. When the shrubs take root, they will help to stabilize the shoreline. Root wads placed on top of logs on the riverbed help to cut the velocity.



The average CCMI crew member is 22 or 23 years old and has a four-year degree. Since 2003, about 5,800 people have served on a CCMI crew. The 2018 roster included 73 crew leaders, about 60 workers in their second CCMI season, and about 100 workers from outside Minnesota or Iowa.

"When the park was developed, crews cleared trees and mowed to the river's edge, which may have caused destabilization. The area is also hit hard in the spring with ice flow and flooding," said Stearns County SWCD Lakeshed Specialist Greg Berg. "Before, we had kind of a sheer cliff. It wasn't real tall but it was straight up and down in a lot of places."

Stearns County Parks Director Ben Anderson estimated 10 to 15 feet of riverbank had eroded over the past decade. The undercutting created a

potential hazard.

"The project is twofold in that it is stabilizing the bank and decreasing erosion, but also is going to provide a better opportunity for people to fish from shore and will provide better access," Anderson said.

The CCMI crew worked on the riverbank for a week in October.

Three weeks earlier, a private contractor had created a footing in the river channel and placed 15- to 20-foot logs on the riverbed. Workers positioned upstream-facing root wads

on top of the logs to divert streambank-carving water and cut the velocity. They created toe wood benches — layering jute and coconut fiber-wrapped soil lifts with brush "mattresses" of willow, dogwood and alder that will take root. The final soil layer was seeded. A final planting of native grasses, wildflowers, trees and shrubs is slated for spring.

Berg described the intended outcome:

"It'll be more stable. You'll have a lot of native plants. We should have additional fish and wildlife that are inhabiting the area because of what we've done. You're going to see a lot more birds, butterflies, bees because there'll be pollinator habitat. The fish will like the toe wood. We also put in some rock veins ... that deflect that water flow."

Well-placed boulders will make shore fishing easier. Anglers might have better luck, too; the rock veins create scouring that makes for good fish habitat.

West Central Technical Service Area (TSA) staff designed the project. Through Great River Greening, the Anoka Sand Plain Partnership coordinated the Outdoor Heritage Fund grant. A Minnesota Native Landscapes crew completed the bulk of the construction. The CCMI crew and Stearns County Parks employees finished the balance of the work.

The project extended 300 feet in both directions from the boat landing. In a separate project, Anderson said the parks department and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) planned to improve the boat landing next season.