

WORKING TO PROTECT THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER
AND ITS WATERSHED IN THE TWIN CITIES AREA

Land conservation retrospective

by Harland Hiemstra



Landowners Carolyn and Dennis Emrick. Photo by Karen Schik.

Toward the end of the film classic “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a despondent George Bailey is shown by his guardian angel how much worse the community he’s devoted his life to would have been without him. It’s tempting to undertake a similar exercise in relation to Friends of the Mississippi River and their land conservation efforts in the metro region. FMR may not have its own angel to tinker with time and fate, but it does have plenty of testimonials about the difference it’s made.

Take Carolyn Emrick, for instance. Her connection to the 73 acres she and husband Dennis own near the Vermillion River south of Hastings goes back three generations to her

great grandfather, who staked his claim in 1857. Orphaned at 11 when both parents drowned in the nearby river, Carolyn returned to the family plot as an adult and has been there ever since, raising sheep and cattle, doing whatever she could to hang on to the land. Over the years, she had lucrative offers from developers. But Carolyn had always dreamed of something different.

“I’ve always had a love for the land, and the Good Lord isn’t making any more of it, so I just felt a responsibility to take care of it,” Emrick says. “I wasn’t real keen on having a field full of houses out there. I wanted a prairie.”

Contacted by FMR’s conservation director Tom Lewanski, Emrick learned about Dakota County’s Farmland and Natural Areas program, and was able to put a conservation easement on 36 acres in 2009. Now she looks out at big bluestem, blazing stars and black-eyed Susans where FMR helped her convert former soybean fields into prairie.

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Why we give to FMR



360 N. Robert Street, Suite 400
Saint Paul, MN 55101
651-222-2193 • 651-222-6005(f)
www.fmr.org • info@fmr.org

Mission

Friends of the Mississippi River engages citizens to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Knowing our place

by Whitney Clark, Executive Director



I was born and raised in Minneapolis and have very early memories of visiting the banks of the river with my dad. We would hike the riverside foot trails and I would ask a million questions — about the river's currents

and the limestone bluffs and the huge fish that I imagined lurked in its depths. As a boy the big river's mythic presence captivated me. Even as a child I had a sense of how ancient and powerful it was.

Over the years people of all ages and backgrounds have shared with me their own similar sense of wonder and awe. The Father of Waters has an undeniable charisma. Certainly it was this sense of affinity that led local leaders to start a campaign to get Congress to designate the Twin Cities segment of the river a National Park back in the 1980s. It was a similar motivation that inspired the founders of Friends of the Mississippi River, some 23 years ago, to create a place-based organization to tap into that wonder and advocate for the river on behalf of those who love it.

Being a place-based organization focused on a particular geography profoundly impacts what we do and how we do it. It sets us apart from most other nonprofits that focus on an issue rather than a place. Because we're grounded

in this place we can demonstrate patience and persistence. In our land conservation work we've been working to protect and restore certain properties for more than 15 years and we'll still be working there 15 years from now.

Being place-based means we can build deep and lasting relationships with river stakeholders. We can take the time to get to know riverfront landowners, city council members, neighborhood activists, city planning staff and towboat operators. Because we know the river and its landscape and we've been paying attention to plans and decisions for more than two decades we can be the keeper or steward of big, visionary ideas that may take a generation to come to fruition. In the late 1990s we were part of the team that drafted the Above the Falls Plan for transforming the gritty, industrial banks of the Mississippi in North and Northeast Minneapolis to continuous parks and trails, bringing the benefits of the great river to those neighborhoods that had never enjoyed them. Today we continue to advocate for that vision at each juncture and decision point.

With the strength of thousands of members, volunteers and activists, FMR has become like an old cottonwood on the bank whose roots are deep and whose topmost branches survey the valley with its island studded channels glistening in the distance.

The river flows through her

"I established a planned a gift to support the health of the river and FMR's future because I have spent my whole life near the Mississippi River. The river is where I swam and fished with my father; it is where I learned about birds and spring ephemerals from my mother. I now live a short walk from the river in the Longfellow neighborhood and have the pleasure of experiencing a river on a trajectory of steady revival. FMR works with a dedicated and growing group of Longfellow community stewards who are protecting the river with lively and useful activities for all ages in care of the river we love. My gift is for where I live now and for everyone downstream." – Francine Corcoran



Mississippi River Legacy Society member, Francine Corcoran, loves the river so much that she has started on a walking journey of the entire 72-mile stretch of the river's national park corridor (Mississippi National River & Recreation Area). Go Fran! Photo by Korab Image.

Francine chose to include FMR as a beneficiary of a percentage of her IRA, which provides her with tax advantages and also the greatest return on her philanthropic vision. For more information on how you can create your river legacy and protect the river for generations to come, contact Sara DeKok, Development Director, at sdekok@fmr.org or 651-222-2193 x20.

The sound of success

by Karen Schik

In 2015 FMR conducted breeding bird surveys at nine of our restoration project sites. Bird surveys provide a way to evaluate functional changes we expect to provide by restoring native vegetation. The most dramatic change we might see, for example, is converting cropland to native prairie. The cropland does provide habitat for some species – several sparrows may feed at the bare soil, some may even be able to nest on the ground or in the foliage of the crop plants. In comparison to a prairie, however, the cropland does not offer suitable conditions for nesting, feeding and shelter that most native prairie birds require. So if we restore a native prairie and document a return of the native bird community, it is a good indicator that the site is providing habitat for many other species as well.



Prairie Warbler

As we do these surveys, we encounter the normal suite of breeding birds, many of which are short or long-distance migrants. Occasionally, however, our ears pick up something we don't quite recognize. This year our survey at the Hastings Sand Coulee Scientific and Natural Area yielded not one but four unusual species.

The first, a Bewick's wren, a species most commonly found west of the Rockies, which is only accidental in MN. Though this singing male was quite elusive, there were several sightings of it over one week, primarily with the help of local expert ornithologists, who devoted many hours a day to the search. We also found two other species – a pair of northern mockingbirds, which are common to the southern 2/3 of the United States but quite uncommon in Minnesota, and a prairie warbler, a species found breeding in eastern/south-central U.S. and listed as "casual" for MN. As if all that weren't enough, we went on to find five singing male Henslow's sparrows, a state endangered species, within the prairie restoration units - a satisfying indication that the restoration work is increasing the biodiversity of the landscape.

Why the Twin Cities needs a low-salt diet

by Trevor Russell

Eating too much salt can be bad for your health, and it's no different for our lakes and streams.

We often apply salt that contains chloride, to roads and parking lots in order to speed up snow and ice melt during winter months. Unfortunately all this chloride is a potent pollutant that eventually makes its way into our lakes, streams, wetlands, and groundwater.

It takes only one teaspoon of road salt to permanently pollute 5 gallons of water. Since chloride can't be removed, it remains in the environment and continues to accumulate over time.

This winter the Twin Cities metro area can expect to apply about 350,000 tons of chloride - mostly in the form of deicing chemicals – and its taking a toll on our waters. Of the 10 percent of metro area water bodies that have been fully tested, 39 are impaired for excess chloride, with another 38 waters very close to exceeding state standards.

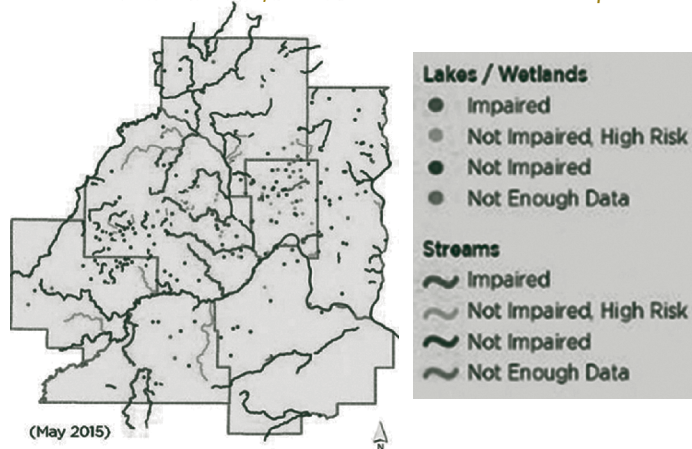
This isn't just a surface water problem: 27 percent of metro area monitoring wells in sand and gravel aquifers have chloride concentrations that exceed EPA drinking water guidelines. Overall, the data show that salt concentrations are continuing to increase in both surface waters and groundwater across the state.

The state's newly created Twin Cities Metro Area Chloride Management Plan aims to address this problem, largely by encouraging improved de-icing practices.

For example, by upgrading equipment and modernizing practices, the City of Waconia has reduced their salt application by 70 percent, without sacrificing safety for drivers and pedestrians. These practices not only benefit water quality, but also the bottom line. A 10 percent cut in application rates could save metro area communities about \$8 million.

Residents can do their part by using deicing chemicals sparingly and avoiding application of traditional rock salt when it is below 15 degrees outside (which is told cold for it to work). Try sand or gravel for temporary traction instead.

Twin Cities Metro Area Surface Water Status For Chloride Map



Source: Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

Exciting recent Saint Paul riverfront developments

by Alicia Uzarek



A view of the Shepard Davern site from the Mendota Bridge. Photo by Alicia Uzarek.

Many exciting developments along Saint Paul's riverfront occurred over the summer that will maintain scenic views, set river sensitive development guidelines and enhance the Saint Paul riverfront experience. FMR thanks Saint Paul staff, elected officials and community members for their work moving these great riverfront improvements forward.

Shepard Davern: FMR partnered with the Friends of Shepard Davern (a group of concerned neighbors), the National Park Service, the DNR, the Highland District Council and Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County, to appeal a Saint Paul Planning Commission decision to allow a 73.5-foot building at the intersection of Shepard Road and Davern Street. The site overlooks Crosby Farm Regional Park, the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers and is just across the river from Historic Fort Snelling. Views from the Fort Snelling Round Tower, the river and other public outlooks revealed that the building would emerge substantially from the tree canopy and block significant public views

of the valley and bluffs. The appeal efforts resulted in the maximum building height being lowered by 13.5 feet to 60 feet.

West Side Flats: FMR is pleased to report that the Saint Paul City Council approved the West Side Flats Master Plan on June 10, 2015. The plan protects views of and from the West Side bluffs, while promoting density, multimodal transit, a strong stormwater and greenspace network, and additional trails and parkland. FMR served on the Community Advisory Committee for this plan over the past two years and looks forward to supporting plan implementation.

River Balcony Project: This fall, Saint Paul unveiled its plan to create a vibrant, multi-story, destination river balcony park that connects downtown to and along the Mississippi River. The plan includes pedestrian trails throughout; a passenger boat terminal connected to Union Depot; a destination brewery or restaurant space; an activated arcade; and other indoor and outdoor gathering spaces. Public input is now being gathered to further this vision that grew out of Saint Paul's Great River Passage Plan. Stay tuned!



Artistic rendering of the proposed Saint Paul Riverfront Balcony by the Saint Paul Great River Passage Plan.

Protecting a special place in Minneapolis

by Irene Jones

FMR is working in partnership with the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board (MPRB) to expand the Gorge Oak Savanna restoration site from 10 to 13 acres.

Located in the Mississippi River Gorge near East 36th Street and West River Parkway, the restored Oak Savanna offers a rare prairie remnant and one of the only places in Minneapolis where residents can experience pre-settlement vegetation, an important feature of our local natural heritage. Thanks to thousands of volunteer hours and significant investment by many parties, the Oak Savanna is an example of how community engagement can lead to successful ecological planning, restoration and management of a high quality natural area in an urban setting.

But even with all those efforts, the native plant communities that have been established on the site are still at risk, as the Oak Savanna is an island surrounded by invasive species in both the river parks and adjacent neighborhoods. To address this, FMR is working with both volunteers and professional work crews to buffer the Oak Savanna by removing invasive species at the north and south ends of the sites and replace them with native species.



Volunteers planting native species in the Oak Savanna.

FMR volunteers began work on the north expansion area last fall, removing invasive buckthorn and other species from a slope between the bike trail and the Winchell Trail. The native shrubs and wildflowers that were added to the site during two volunteer planting events in 2015 will brighten up the area with added color and diversity. The south expansion area has far less existing diversity and a crew will remove buckthorn during the fall and winter so the site will be ready

for planting next year.

The expansion of this very special restoration site is supported by grants from the Laura J. Musser Fund, REI, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, as recommended by the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources.

For more information, contact Adam Flett, Stewardship Events Coordinator at aflett@fmr.org or Alex Roth, Ecologist at aroth@fmr.org

FMR is brewing up clean water

by Trevor Russell

We all know Minnesotans value clean water. Minnesotans also love great beer. That's why FMR has created the Brewing Clean Water program. Brewing Clean Water (BCW) is a new initiative that hosts unique and fun education and stewardship events in partnership with great local breweries.

FMR relies on informed, active members to speak on behalf of our great river. Through the Brewing Clean Water program, we are able to reach out to a diverse group of beer lovers who are naturally inclined to care about clean water.

Breweries themselves require a reliable supply of clean water as the foundation of their products. By hosting BCW events, breweries can engage a new and varied customer base while helping support a community committed to protecting their main ingredient.

These innovative partnerships are helping us tap in to the momentum of the fast-growing craft brewery movement to develop and nurture an informed base of beer lovers who take action to protect and preserve clean water throughout the Twin Cities metro area.



Volunteers enjoy a post-stenciling beer and brewery tour at Tin Whiskers.

So far, FMR has hosted six BCW events in partnership with our friends at Fulton Brewing, Flat Earth Brewing, Tin Whiskers Brewing, and Fair State Brewing Cooperative. From educational events to rain barrel workshops and even a storm-drain stenciling outing, we've had a wonderful time protecting our great river and enjoying some great beer.

Stay tuned for more BCW events in 2016. And remember: "Without clean water – we can't have great beer."

"I don't know that I ever really thought it would happen," Emrick says "It was a blessing when Tom called. The more he told me about it, the more excited I got that this dream was a possibility."

Emrick's story is one of dozens where FMR has played a key role in conserving land around the region. Over the past decade and a half, the group has helped protect more than 2,000 acres of vital habitat, while developing natural resource plans to take care of hundreds more, building productive and lasting relationships along the way, and transforming the basic paradigm around natural resource protection.

Filling a need

When Whitney Clark started as executive director of FMR in 1997, his first assignment was to identify the big issues around the metro Mississippi by talking with people who knew the river. His conversation with Minnesota DNR plant ecologist Hannah Texler still stands out.

Texler had just wrapped up a field survey of Dakota County, and the results were surprising. While most of the county's native plant communities had been lost, there were still significant areas of high quality pre-settlement vegetation remaining, especially in the Pine Bend area, where hundreds of acres of prairie, oak savanna, white pine forest and seepage swamps stretched along the Mississippi in Inver Grove Heights and Rosemount.

"Pine Bend stood out as a large chunk of undeveloped land with high biodiversity," Clark recalls. "And it was in one of the most rapidly developing areas in the nation."

"The development pressures created a sense of urgency, a fear that if we didn't do something, important parts of our natural heritage would be lost," Texler says. "No one else was really focusing on land conservation in the metro region, so when FMR started its program here, it filled a critical need."

Growing concerns

FMR wasn't the only entity worrying about nature in the face of urban growth. A growing number of organizations

were starting to take note. Aided by new computer mapping tools, many of them (including FMR) participated in a working group that met throughout 1997 to develop a vision and framework for protecting and connecting the Twin Cities' natural resources while accommodating growth. The resulting Metro Greenways program mapped out a system of interconnected natural areas aimed at maintaining the region's ecological integrity.

"Natural resources function as systems; it's not just a park here and another park over there," says Al Singer, former Metro Greenways program coordinator, now land conservation manager for Dakota County. "That was a

real paradigm shift regarding natural resource protection in urban areas. It was a recognition that green infrastructure is just as important as the gray."

With state funding for land acquisition and grants to help communities map out greenway plans at a more detailed local level, the DNR started the Metro Greenways program in 1998. At about the same time, Dakota County launched

a series of meetings in response to growing citizen concerns over the loss of open space and ag land, which had been disappearing at the rate of more than 2,000 acres per year. The county's Farmland and Natural Areas Program identified nearly 80,000 acres of land for possible protection, mostly through easements. In 2002, the Dakota County board asked voters to approve a \$20 million referendum for land conservation.

A similar measure in nearby Washington County had been narrowly defeated two years earlier, and FMR determined to heed the lessons of that failure. They set about organizing support and raising funds to hire a campaign manager. Their efforts paid off with approval of Minnesota's first countywide conservation referendum, passing by 14 percentage points despite growing anti-tax sentiment. Those local funds have been augmented by significant state dollars from the Legacy Amendment passed by Minnesota voters in 2008, as well as other legislative appropriations from the Environmental Trust Fund.



The 2002 Farmland and Natural Areas referendum in Dakota County raised \$20 million for open space protection.

A conservation toolbox

Tom Lewanski may have a doctorate in public administration, but it's his folksy charm that serves him best as FMR's conservation director. Lewanski's knack for connecting with landowners has been instrumental in FMR's land conservation projects. His work with Dwight Malcolm and Mayjel Anderson to protect the 50 acres of wooded hills and prairie openings above the Mississippi River where they grew up laid the groundwork for what in 2003 became the Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area (SNA). South of Hastings, outreach by Lewanski and FMR ecologist Karen Schik culminated in the creation of the Hastings Sand Coulee SNA in 2007.

But acquisition isn't the answer everywhere. In the Pine Bend area, much of the land is owned by Flint Hills Resources as buffer to their refinery. For the past 16 years, FMR has helped the company plan and implement natural resource management activities on a portion of its 4,000 acres, removing invasive species, harvesting prairie seeds, and conducting prescribed burns. The efforts are paying off in terms of a greater diversity of bird species, positive PR, and employee morale, says facilities and engineering manager Don Kern.

"This is part of being a good neighbor, and it's turned into a real showpiece for us," Kern says. "We're a refinery, but we're also very environmentally conscientious."

Across the river, FMR has been working with 3M, helping the company restore prairie on portions of its 1,700-acre campus in Cottage Grove. Both companies see the restoration projects as a part of their future business plans, and are giving thought to other ways they might protect the land's conservation values. Both acknowledge the essential role of FMR and the importance of the organization's ongoing involvement at the site level.

AT A GLANCE

FMR Land Conservation: 1998-2015

- Protected 2,300 acres at 41 sites
- Developed natural resources management plans covering 9,100 acres at 84 sites
- Additional 5 protection projects in progress covering 300 acres
- Additional 13 restoration projects in progress on 783 acres

That long-term, place-based approach has been a key factor in FMR's work, both in terms of protection and restoration. In many cases, the organization is talking and working with landowners that it first approached 10 or more years ago.

"We're able to spend the time to build trust, to monitor projects and provide ongoing help," says FMR ecologist Karen Schik. "That's enabled us to have a more lasting impact on natural resources, to see these places really transformed,

and it's often allowed us to expand from one site to adjacent properties, improving habitat values across a broader landscape."

"This region wouldn't be where it is with regard to natural resources without FMR," says Dakota County's Singer. "They've brought a non-governmental credibility and mission to the table, along with recognition of the need for a new way of cooperating and prioritizing. Natural resources need an advocate, a voice; they've provided that."

FMR drafts a first round ecologist

by Tom Lewanski



FMR Ecologist Alex Roth

In April Alex Roth joined the land conservation team as an ecologist. He recently completed his PhD in Forest Ecology at the University of Minnesota. His research centered on the mechanisms and processes involved in species invasion and ecosystem restoration, with a particular focus on woody invasive plants in Minnesota's forests. He is bringing this knowledge to bear on his work at FMR, which includes surveying natural communities, drafting ecological management plans, overseeing contractors in the field, and helping with volunteer projects.

Alex seems to be enjoying his work at FMR almost as much as we enjoy having him here: "I'm relishing the level of responsibility and decision-making that I have, but also the supportive and fun work environment. I'm less than half a year in, but I'm really excited to explore some new projects and to continue to help FMR build partnerships (research and otherwise) with the University of Minnesota and other groups." We are honored to have Alex at FMR. The river certainly will benefit.



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Why we give to FMR



Della & Will Young with their children Katelynn and Whitney.

"We give to FMR largely because of our children. Canoeing the river with our kids and seeing the joy in their eyes when they see wildlife along the river brings joy to our hearts. We grew up at opposite ends of the river—I have lived at the headwaters, Will is from the delta—so when we are on the river it's this awesome love story."

"In the past, I haven't thought of the Mighty Mississippi as a place to recreate, but now I do. Seeing bald eagles, experiencing the river without fear...these are things that are happening for the first time, thanks in part to the work of FMR. It is exciting to see that FMR is steadily bridging the gap between the Twin Cities' urban environment and the river wilderness in our backyards."

- Della Young, FMR Board Member

If you would like to learn more about giving and membership opportunities at FMR
please contact Sara DeKok, Development Director, sdekok@fmr.org.



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