Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

A report on protecting and restoring natural resources on Tribal lands in Wisconsin

Stewardship for the Future

This publication is dedicated to Jean Buffalo of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Through her energy, spirit and vision, the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council was launched. Jean Buffalo served as the first president of the council from 2001-2008.

Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

A Voice for Conservation on Tribal Lands

The Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (WTCAC), formed in 2001, provides a forum for the 11 Native American Tribes in Wisconsin to identify and solve natural resource issues on tribal lands. The Council gives a strong voice to tribes on conservation issues at the state and national level.

Funding for Conservation Work

Through a strong partnership with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Council reviews and recommends proposals for conservation projects from tribes. Tribal Conservation Advisory Councils were authorized in the 1995 Farm Bill as advisory bodies to NRCS and all of USDA on tribal issues. For tribal resource issues, WTCAC serves as the equivalent to the Wisconsin State Technical Committee. Wisconsin's was the first such council formed in the country.

Some of the roles of the WTCAC are:

- to advise USDA and NRCS on better ways to meet tribal needs
- to identify natural resource issues affecting tribal lands or ways of life
- to communicate tribal conservation needs to legislators
- to provide input on pending conservation legislation and policy

A Voice for the Future of Wisconsin Tribes

Since the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (WTCAC) was formed, tribal participation and funding for conservation projects have multiplied. Projects range from simple well closures to protect groundwater, to broad campaigns to combat invasive species, to constructed practices to sustain native food sources.

There are over 650,000 acres of tribal owned land in Wisconsin. The tribes are stewards of vast natural resources, including forestland, wetlands, streams and lakes. The focus of their stewardship is to protect pristine areas in the state, restore degraded resources and help in building strong communities.

NRCS recognizes the importance of providing sound conservation technical assistance to the Wisconsin Tribal communities. Many successful projects were accomplished through federal Farm Bill programs. Two of these programs, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) are highlighted in this report.

The unique needs of tribal agriculture and tribal lands occasionally were not met by the common conservation practices used in more conventional farming. In order to meet these needs, WTCAC worked with NRCS to develop new modifications of existing conservation standards, such as Wild Rice Seeding, Pest Management for Aquatic Invasive Species, and Tree Drops for Fish Habitat.

Other Major WTCAC Initiatives:

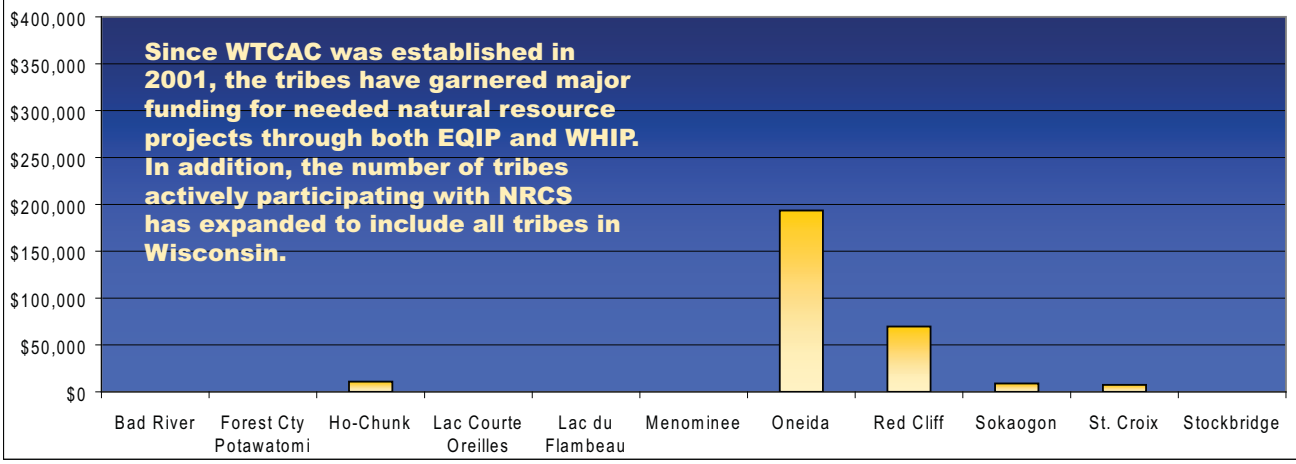
The emerald ash borer (EAB), an invasive beetle that has killed 25 million ash trees in eleven states and adjacent parts of Canada, is advancing westward from Michigan posing serious risk to the wooded lands of Wisconsin. Through a cooperative agreement with the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), WTCAC conducted a survey in 2006 and 2007 to sample ash trees for the presence of Emerald Ash Borer on Reservation lands throughout Wisconsin. Trees on Tribal lands were monitored and sampled for signs of infestation. To date, no signs of EAB were found during any of the surveys.

To further strengthen WTCAC and to help focus its efforts, the Council has been working over the past year to develop a strategic plan. The document, developed through the assistance of the Pri-Ru-Ta Resource Conservation and Development Council, will be used to guide the direction of WTCAC in the coming years.

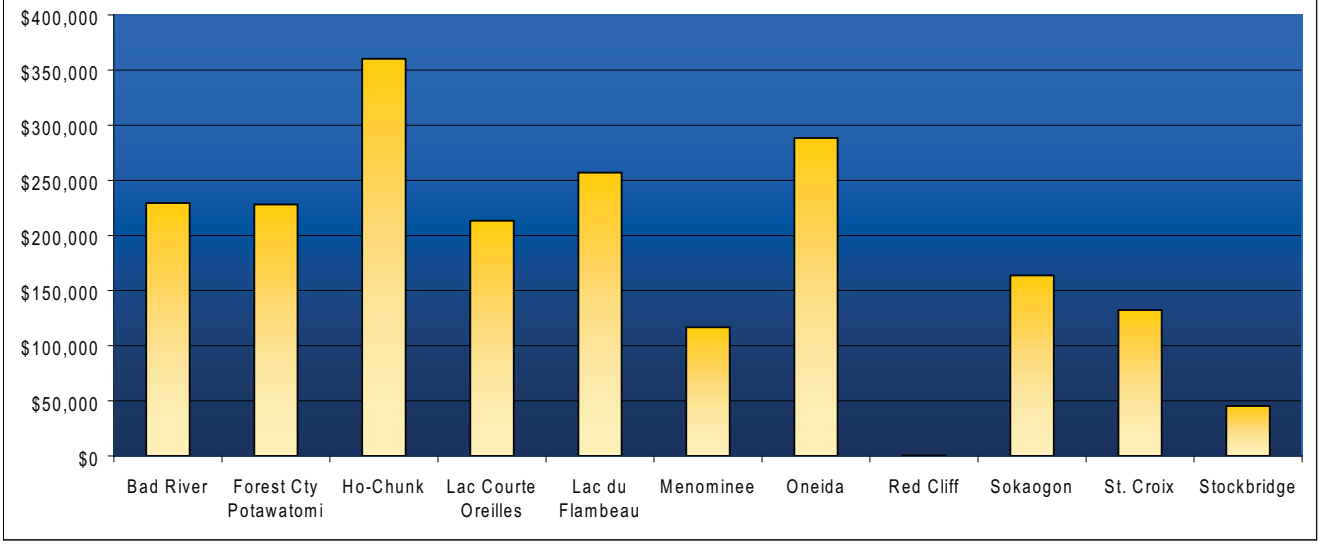
Members of the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council

- Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa
- Forest County Potawatomi Community
- Ho-Chunk Nation
- Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- Lac du Flambeau Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa
- Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin
- Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin
- Red Cliff Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa
- Sokaogon Mole Lake Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa
- St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin
- Stockbridge-Munsee Community

Tribal EQIP Dollars through 1995 Farm Bill
1996-2000 (Pre-WTCAC)

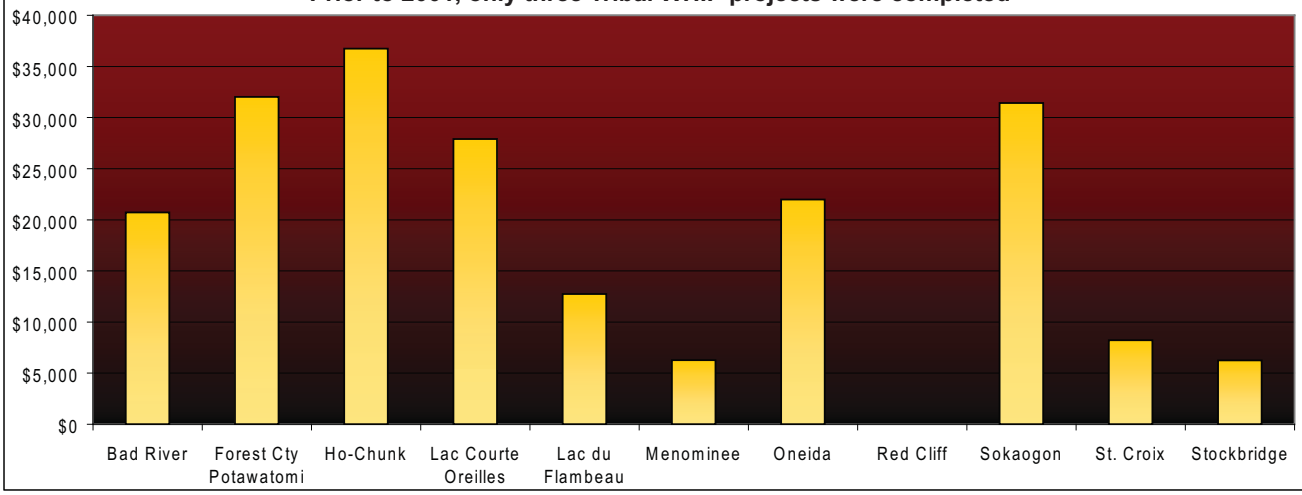


Tribal EQIP Dollars 2001-8 (with WTCAC)



Tribal WHIP Contracts 2001-2008*

*** Prior to 2001, only three Tribal WHIP projects were completed**



Bad River Band

Invasive plants are identified and controlled in this critical part of the Kakagon Sloughs.

Controlling Non-native Plant Species in the Kakagon Sloughs

The Bad River Tribe is utilizing the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to control Pickeral weed on the Kakagon Sloughs. When the project was developed it was thought that Pickeral weed was crowding out the wild rice beds in the slough. Most of the Pickeral weed was flooded out of the rice beds when water levels increased in 2008. It is now believed that the remaining weed provides an aquatic buffer that dampens the effects of boat wakes on the wild rice beds. Subsequent site evaluation identified Narrow Leaf Cattail as a more serious threat to the Kakagon Sloughs. Control efforts have now been redirected to suppress this non-native invasive plant. Treated sites will be seeded with wild rice to enhance the existing beds.

The Community Garden Project offers access to healthy, locally-grown foods.

Community Gardens

The Gitiganing Community Garden Project, located on the Bad River Reservation, created in cooperation with NRCS, established healthy, local food production to help battle diabetes, obesity and nutrition-related illnesses that afflict many tribal members. From 2000 to 2006, with the assistance of NRCS, tribal members produced 14,000 bedding plants and distributed over 400 fruit trees to Tribal families. Gitiganing worked to establish over 100 home gardens on the reservation and 1.5 acre community garden site was developed in Old Odanah.

Sealing Wells on Tribal Lands

Protection of ground water resources is a high priority on the Bad River Reservation. The Tribe is utilizing EQIP to decommission abandoned wells by filling them with bentonite. To date, 14 wells have been successfully closed.

Bad River Band

Forest County Potawatomi Community

Forest County Potawatomi Access Roads

The Forest County Potawatomi Natural Resources Department staff works in partnership with NRCS on road projects that allow Tribal members easier access to traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering areas. Many of their access roads are in areas that are culturally significant to the Tribe. Three access road projects recently completed with NRCS partnership end in areas used for camping.

In the past, these areas were either very hard to access especially in inclement weather, or were found in extremely remote areas. NRCS cooperation with the Forest County Potawatomi on access road projects have provided Tribal members more opportunities to experience their heritage in the outdoors.

Swan Creek Habitat Improvement and Restoration Project

There were two dams in place in Swan Creek located at the Forest County Potawatomi Community Red Deer Ranch. These dams were installed decades ago by a previous owner to allow access to hay fields on the west side of the property. The placement of the two dams had created two impoundments in the stream.

The north and south impoundment water levels were drawn down and both dams were removed. A box culvert was installed at the former location of the south dam and a road was built at the stream crossing so farm equipment could still reach the field on the west side of Swan Creek. All areas disturbed by heavy equipment were seeded with a temporary crop, as well as native seeds, and erosion control matting was put down.

In order to catch the sediment that will continue to move downstream as Swan Creek cuts and finds its original streambed, sediment traps were installed at the former locations of both dams and an existing sediment trap was already in place approximately 300 yards downstream of the former north dam. These sediment traps will be closely monitored and cleaned out as needed.

Fish assessments will be conducted in the coming years to see if brook trout are now moving into the areas of Swan Creek which were formerly unreachable because of the dams. Furthermore, once the streambed has stabilized, there are plans to incorporate instream fish habitat to improve the conditions for brook trout.

Ho-Chunk Nation

Invasive trees and brush were cleared and oak savannah prairie is being restored to bring these conical mounds back to their original setting.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program Project Restores Sacred Burial Mounds

The Kingsley Bend Indian Mounds were preserved in a state highway wayside, identified with a historical marker, since 1971. Although the mounds themselves were preserved, the native oak savannah habitat has long been overgrown with brush, pine and invasive species. The Ho-Chunk Indian Nation has assumed ownership of the sacred site from the Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation, and will restore it as an interpretive educational site. Through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the Ho-Chunk will remove the brush and non-native trees, and replant prairie grasses to restore the oak savannah.

The site contains 22 mounds, including 2 bear mounds, a bird mound, panther mound, 12 conical mounds, and 5 linear mounds. The mound group is representative of those built by the Effigy Mound Culture between 700-1000 A.D. There was usually only a single burial in a mound, but in some mounds a dozen or more burials have been found.

The 40-acre site sits on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River just east of the Wisconsin Dells in Columbia County.

Ho-Chunk Nation

Lac Courte Oreilles Band

Important cultural artifacts are more protected by reducing shoreline erosion on islands in the Flowage.

Tree Revetments on the Chippewa Flowage

Due to water level fluctuations brought on by the Hydro Dam, which forms the Chippewa Flowage, and increased recreational traffic on the water, many of the shorelines of these protected tribal islands are eroding away at an alarming rate. Some of the islands still have burial sites containing human remains and other cultural artifacts.

Trees that were uprooted or falling into the lake were cut into manageable lengths and anchored into the eroded banks. Over 900 feet of shoreline has been protected using this method. Through the EQIP program this shoreline is protected from further erosion.

Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program Enhances Fish Habitat

The majority of shoreline on all Reservation lakes has been developed in recent years. In turn, crucial littoral zone habitat used by an array of aquatic species has been diminished. Forty tree drops have been completed and anchored to the shoreline on several lakes. The tree drops provide ideal habitat for both fish and other shallow water aquatic species. They provide spawning areas, shelter for smaller fish and a food source because of all the vertebrate and invertebrate species that use them.

Re-seeding/Erosion Control Project

Over the past several years, the LCO Tribe has taken part in an aggressive harvesting campaign to manage tribal forests. Hundreds of acres of overly mature Aspen and mixed hardwood have been harvested. In the process, miles and miles of logging roads were created, many in close proximity to delicate watersheds, rivers and streams. Re-seeding of these roads with different mixtures of seeds help in controlling erosion and provide a nutritious food source for all kinds of wildlife.

Lac du Flambeau Band

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Helps Control Water Levels at the Sugarbush Impoundment

The Sugarbush Impoundment is located in Vilas County, part of the Lac Du Flambeau Reservation. This 400-acre impoundment was built in 2000 with the placement of a levee, a spillway and a stoplog water control structure. The original water control structure was damaged and needed to be replaced.

Through EQIP, NRCS installed a new screw-gate water control structure on the Sugarbush Impoundment. NRCS staff surveyed and engineered the new structure and spillway. This structure will allow for the water levels to be controlled more accurately and the maintenance of the structure will be much easier. Construction was completed in 2008.

The Sugarbush Impoundment is part of the Powell Marsh. This 14,000-acre area is an important emergent marsh wetland system that annually supports hundreds of thousands of migratory waterfowl and songbirds. The results of the project will have long term benefits for migratory and local wildlife in northern Wisconsin.

Prescribed Burns Preserve Rare Peatland

The Lac du Flambeau Chippewas own 8000 acres of wetland habitat adjacent to the 4000 acre DNR-managed Powell Marsh. Sedge meadows like those found in these wetlands offer favorable conditions for many bird, mammal, and amphibian species. Migration can bring numbers of waterfowl, shorebirds and other passer-bys into sedge meadows for short periods of feeding and resting. About 50 species of birds regularly nest in northern sedge meadows, including the Yellow Rail, LeConte's Sparrow and Nelson's sharp-tailed sparrow; three species of special concern found in consistent numbers at the Powell Marsh area.

Large open peatland is rare in northern Wisconsin. This wildlife area is regionally important because of its large size and open character. Without management, this open peatland will succeed to tamarack forest and black spruce muskeg. A combination of prescribed fire, hand cutting, mowing and shearing can be used to limit the growth of shrubs and tamarack.

The Lac du Flambeau Forestry Department, in cooperation with the NRCS, attempts to burn about 250 acres annually. Along with the prescribed burning, NRCS has worked cooperatively with the Tribe on wild rice seeding and brush management. These cooperative agreements go a long way to help manage this unique environment.

Lac du Flambeau Band

Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin

Keshena Landfill Prairie Restoration

The Keshena Landfill was capped and abandoned but subsequently used as a dumping area for brush and other debris. This area was eventually gated off to stop this activity but the area had little habitat due to the accumulated debris. Through the assistance of WHIP, the Menominee Tribe converted this area to a prairie benefitting song birds, deer, turkeys, and other edge species. The prairie also has the potential to provide habitat for the endangered Karner Blue Butterfly, which has been found on the reservation.

The Menominee Tribal Enterprise Forestry Fire Management team was instrumental in carrying out this project. The tribe provided the manpower and equipment for cleaning of the site, seed bed preparation and planting. In collaboration with NRCS, and initial consultations with the Menominee County LCD, on this project, tribal staff gained valuable training on prairie restoration and equipment. This prairie is considered one of the most successful restorations in the area.

This area is now planted to prairie that will benefit wildlife.

Hazel and Crowell Lake Access Roads Reduce Erosion

Hazel and Crowell Lakes, located adjacent to each other, are well used lakes by tribal members for fishing, including subsistence fishing. The only access to these lakes was down very steep banks, causing significant erosion to be deposited directly into the lake. Through EQIP the tribe closed the existing highly erodible access on Hazel Lake and created a new site, and improved the access road on Crowell Lake. Erosion no longer cuts into the banks sending sediment into the lake. The Menominee Tribal Enterprise Forestry Roads Department was instrumental in carrying out this project by cutting a new access road down to Hazel Lake where the access road improvement was carried out.

Crowell Lake-before

Crowell Lake-after

Highly erodible site on Hazel Lake that was closed.

Hazel Lake after site was closed.

New access site to Hazel Lake.

Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin

Sometimes land purchases come with natural resource concerns, as did this acquisition for the Oneida tribe.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Protects Groundwater

Several recent land purchases by Oneida, such as this farm property, included manure pits that needed to be properly closed to protect the groundwater from contamination. As part of the requirements for this practice, soil borings are taken below the concrete liner to check for seepage. Findings determined the amount of soil that must be removed and properly spread. Soil from another practice installed on this property was used to cover the closed pit to the required depth.

Fisher Grassed Waterway and Crossing

An intermittent tributary of Oneida Creek was receiving a greater volume of water than the watercourse could effectively handle. This was causing a severe erosion problem at the outlet and head cutting up the channel. An EQIP funded grassed waterway with crossing was constructed to widen and lengthen the existing channel thus reducing the velocity and moderating the flow. A relatively small area of wetland was identified within the construction limits of this project. The project was designed to minimize the area of disturbance to the wetland while enabling access to the fields

Oneida Farm Headquarters

The expansion of the black angus operation in the Oneida Farm plan calls for improving both the quality and quantity of forages, and livestock health. To accomplish this, the Farm adopted a managed grazing system by converting 100 acres of cropland to pasture. Paddocks were established and a rotation is followed that optimizes plant and animal production. In addition to a managed grazing system, the Farm installed an animal walkway, roof runoff system, pest and nutrient management, grassed waterway and filter strips as part of their overall water quality plan.

Red Cliff Band

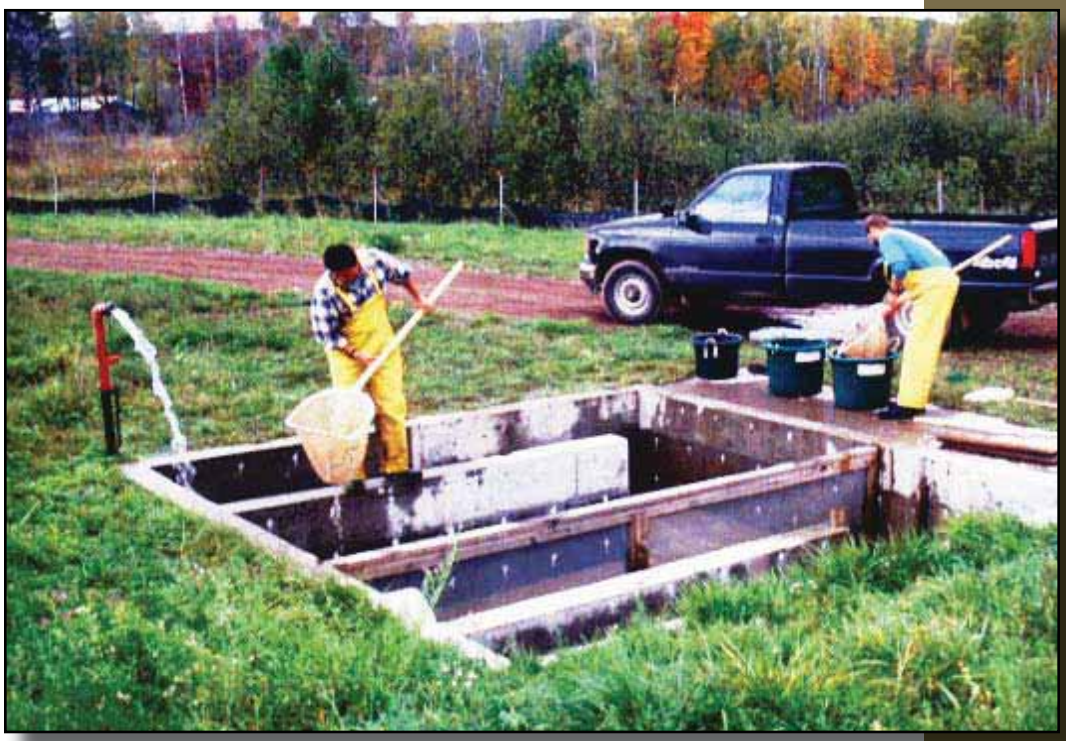
Traditional subsistence food for the Lake Superior Tribes are being restored by revitalizing this hatchery.

Coaster Brook Trout Restoration

Coaster brook trout are a unique sub-species of trout and are a traditional subsistence food for the Lake Superior Tribes. The fish disappeared from many Wisconsin waters in the early 1900's due to habitat destruction and overfishing. NRCS assisted the Red Cliff Band in their work to restore coaster brook trout and its habitat.

This wetland was constructed to treat wastewater effluent from tribal hatcheries, which rear young coaster brook trout. Eroding streambanks were reshaped and stabilized with natural plant materials. For success in the long term, the trout need an underwater habitat with large woody debris submerged in water. Conifers were planted along the stream corridor to provide the

underwater habitat essential to the coaster brook trout. This project was completed through a combination of funding assistance from both EQIP and WHIP.



This fish transfer structure known as a "fish kettle" was part of a Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Project. RC&D is administered through NRCS and focuses on improving the quality of life through natural resource conservation and community development for sustainable communities.

Sokaogon Mole Lake Band

Wild Rice represents the spiritual, cultural and economic centerpiece of the tribe for the last 300 years.

Restoring Wetlands and Wild Rice

With funding from WHIP, NRCS partnered with the Sokaogon Mole Lake Band to complete a wetland restoration and improve 30 acres of wild rice beds in Rice Lake in Forest County in northeastern Wisconsin. The reservation is adjacent to Rice Lake, or Zaaga-i'-gan Manoomin. The Ojibwa refer to the rice as "manoomin" meaning the food that grows on the water. Wild rice has always been a staple of the Chippewa diet and is still harvested and processed today, in the traditional way. It thrives exclusively in the stillness of this approximately 320-acre mineral-rich lake. This natural ecosystem maintains the necessary and orderly combination of consistent water level and temperature to sustain the annual crop.

Manoomin is a sensitive plant and does not tolerate chemical pollutants or drastic changes in water level during the growth cycle. Scientists have determined that wild rice is the only naturally occurring grain in North America. This is a very special place, yet hardly visible for the most part even though it lies just a few hundred feet from a main highway. This is one of the last remaining ancient wild rice beds in Northern Wisconsin.

The tribe settled in this area because the wild rice fulfilled the prophecy of Tribal ancestors, in which they "were told to find the food that grows on water" during the migration from the east. Rice Lake was the primary reason for determining the location of the present Reservation.

The restoration, protection and management of Rice Lake restores the centerpiece and the spirit of the Sokaogon Band of Mole Lake.

Sokaogon Mole Lake Band

St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin

Grasslands and Pine Barrens being restored on tribal land in Burnett County.

Restoring Pine Barrens and Karner Blue Butterfly Habitat

Through a WHIP project, NRCS partnered with the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin to restore grassland and pine barrens habitat which will benefit the endangered Karner Blue Butterfly, which has been seen in the area.

Approximately 12 acres of former grassland/pine barrens is being restored after it had grown up through the years to a predominantly oak-aspen-pine habitat. The project is located in Central Burnett County on tribal lands.

The project has consisted of a combination of brush management and prescribed burning done by St. Croix tribal staff and Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel. Wild Lupine has been seeded to provide food for Karner Blue Butterfly larvae.

In addition, the prescribed burning will allow, over time, a return of wild berries in the burned area, for tribal gathering and sustenance.

Wild Lupine will attract the Karner Blue Butterfly.

Stockbridge-Munsee Community

The restoration of a priority coldwater stream brings back spawning grounds for brook trout.

Stream Habitat Improvement and Management

NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds were used to restore an isolated spring pond outflow that once provided critical fish passage to a small spring pond. Brook trout would utilize the creek for spawning in the fall and for thermal refuge during the winter. The Spring Pond was a prime target of local fishermen until beaver activity flooded riparian forests and destabilized the creek banks. The creek was quickly choked with woody debris and sediment, brook trout stopped using the creek, and fishermen stopped visiting the pond.

The Stockbridge-Munsee Community identified the creek as a priority coldwater resource and applied for EQIP for technical and financial assistance to restore Spring Pond. Tag alder brush bundles were created from shoreline stands, staked into the eroded shoreline, and then filled with excess spoil from the stream channel. Brush bundling and spoil removal redefined the main channel and provided a foothold for shoreline plants to grow upon. A total of 750 feet of stream channel was reconstructed over the course of two summers. The project was proven successful when brook trout spawned in the creek in the fall.

Cleaner Drinking Water

Safe drinking water is a major concern for people around the world and the Stockbridge-Munsee Community is no exception. Parts of the reservation where farming practices were prevalent in the past have groundwater contamination due to nitrates from animal waste. In December of 2007, the Tribe purchased a 160-acre dairy farm which had a clay-lined manure pit. It was believed that this was a major contributor to the high groundwater nitrate levels.

Through NRCS, an EQIP project provided the technical and financial assistance needed to properly close up the manure pit. A local contractor removed the clay liner and filled the pit with clean soil. It was discovered during excavation that the clay liner was damaged some time in the past and raw manure may have been leaching into the groundwater. All of the contaminated soil was removed and disposed of properly. This may have been a major cause for the high nitrate levels in the groundwater. Now that the possible source of the contamination has been removed, it is anticipated that the nitrates in the groundwater will gradually decline thus providing safer drinking water for future generations.

Water quality is improved by sealing this source of nitrate contamination.

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