



2015 MNTWS AWARD NOMINATION

Date: 1-9-19

Award: (Circle or underline one):

- 1) Minnesota 2) Conservation 3) Student Conservationist 4) Law Enforcement 5) Dr. Janet S. Boe Memorial
6) Bob Fedeler Memorial
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Nominee information:

Name: Aitkin County Land Department
Address: 502 Minnesota Ave N.
City Aitkin State MN Zip 56431
Phone number: 218-927-7364 Email address: jodie.provost@yahoo.com
Affiliation: Aitkin County
Hometown newspaper: Aitkin Independent Age

Nominator information:

Name: Jodie Provost
Affiliation: MN DNR Wildlife
Phone: 218-838-3553 Email address: jodie.provost@state.mn.us

Please explain why you are nominating this person for a MNTWS award in a short biography and brief write up his/her character, qualities, and accomplishments. Letters of support from friends and

Aitkin County, Minnesota, is a natural resource and wildlife habitat gem. Established in 1857 (one year before Minnesota became a state), named after English fur trader William Aitkin, and with 365 lakes (one to visit every day of the year), it is larger than the state of Rhode Island with 1.2 million acres. It's over 700,000 acres of forest, 103 miles of winding Mississippi River (more than any other Minnesota County), peatlands, brushlands, and lowland to upland forests provide wildlife habitat, clean air and water, recreation and forest products. At least 40 species with either federal or state status as rare, threatened, endangered or special concern occur in Aitkin County, including the goblin fern, American ginseng, club-spur orchid, yellow rail, loggerhead shrike, red-shouldered hawk, and four-toed salamander.

As manager of tax forfeited lands in this beautiful and diverse county, the Aitkin County Land Department (ACLD) oversees 224,900 acres. Their mission is "To fulfill the county's obligation as trustee for the local governmental jurisdictions of Aitkin County by being a responsible steward who sustains the forest for future generations, generates income for the county and local governmental jurisdictions, and properly utilizes the land base and renewable forest resources to sustain the region's economic and social well-being." Under the stellar

leadership and skills of Land Commissioners such as retired Roger Howard, very recently retired Mark Jacobs, and currently, Rich Courtemanche, their dedicated staff has included Foresters such as Dustin Goble, Beth Jacqmain, Bob Kangas, Dan Gordon, Tom Parkin and Joe Voller, GIS Coordinator Dan Hassken, Inventory Specialist Greg Thornbloom, Deputy Administrator Cathy Buhmann and Beth Haasken, Survey Crew Dee Curtis and Tracy Fairchild, Park Foreman Rich Hejny, Recreational Foresters Chris Johnson, Joseph Majerus, and Forest Techs Brad Krause, Mike Powers, Gloria Westerlund. Please forgive me if I've missed anyone. All have had a hand in the Department's long tradition of successfully meeting their mission. Their activities include land sales, exchanges and easements, agricultural and peat leases, gravel sales, forest inventory, reforestation, timber harvest and sales, and care of geocaches, ATV, snowmobile, and ski trails, and campgrounds. These responsibilities have provided ACLD the opportunity to keep people connected to the outdoors and positively impact wildlife habitat – two key elements in support for wildlife conservation and sustaining wildlife populations.

In 2011, ACLD adopted a 100 year Strategic Forest Management Plan in which desired future forest conditions of Aitkin County's "working forest" were identified and defined according to landscape objectives, forest ecological systems, forest cover types, age class distributions, and other criteria. Economic, social and ecological objectives were identified. Ecological objectives, to sustain a healthy and diverse forest, include:

1. Enhance and conserve the natural environment, unique recreational, historical and scenic values, essential habitat, rare and endangered species and plant communities, as well as forest soil and water quality.
2. Strive toward a natural forest structure.
3. Maintain ecosystem diversity at all levels—landscape, stand, species, and genetic.
4. Protect water bodies and watersheds to maintain water quantity and quality.
5. Maintain diversity and quality of riparian habitats.
6. Maintain productivity of forest soils except on areas needed for permanent roads or other permanent infrastructure.
7. Encourage other area forest resource managers, public and private, to adopt ecosystem-based management.
8. Cooperate with other area forest resource managers to implement ecosystem-based management.

A five year tactical plan for 2017-2022 is also in action, with objectives that include investment in forest resources, insurance of ecosystem services (high priority forests, wildlife habitat; protection of rare, threatened, and endangered species; biodiversity, watershed quality), sourcing of traditional and non-timber forest products (timber, pulp, berries, syrup, decorative materials, firewood), and care of roads, recreational trails, county parks, and public water accesses. It addresses high priority forest threats of invasive plant species (such as garlic mustard and buckthorn), disease (such as oak wilt) and climate change.

ACLD has long been a strong supporter of the state's sustainable forestry movement, including that administered by the Minnesota Forest Resources Council (MFRC), its Landscape Program, and Regional landscape committees. These committees provide an open public forum for diverse interests to cooperatively promote forest sustainability through development of regional forest resource plans (also known as "landscape plans") and facilitating and coordinating plan implementation.

ACLD was active in supporting the development of the first regional plan developed for the North Central landscape which was approved in 2003. They integrated concepts from the landscape plan based on managing by native plant communities into their county forest management planning process and further advanced the concept of forest habitat management zones. In 2016, they again took a lead role in supporting landscape planning and coordination. Rich Courtemanche, served as chair of the North Central Landscape Committee, and guided the revision of the second generation North Central Landscape Plan. He led approval of the revised landscape plan by the MFRC in September of 2017. Goals and objectives in the landscape plan provides a

guidance both on NPC based vegetation management goals as well as larger forest resource policy issues in the economic and social spheres.

ACLD has also been a strong supporter of the state's site level guidelines. The MFRC develops and periodically revises site-level forest management guidelines used by loggers and public and private forest owners statewide to assure sustainable forest resource management, use, and protection. The guidelines address wildlife habitat, soils, riparian areas, water quality, wetlands, aesthetics, and historic and cultural resources. Guidelines were produced in 1999, revised in 2005, and amended in January 2008 to include the first state-level guidelines in the U.S. for the sustainable removal of woody biomass for energy from forests, brushlands, and open lands. Integrated with the County's plans and practices, the MFRC landscape and site level programs provide the County with a credible and scientific based approach to support their forest management activities and address the requirements of forest certification in a truly comprehensive yet cost effective manner.

ACLD's plans thoughtfully considers both coarse and fine filter approaches to managing ecosystems across the landscape with habitat objectives that provide for a range of forest and habitat types. Native plant community designations guide management at both the strategic and forest stand level. As part of a coarse filter approach, a three Habitat Management Zone (HMZ) scheme is used to guide their forest management - "Clustered" to increase the amount of interior forest, "Dispersed" to increase the amount of edge habitat, and "Mosaic", a transition between Clustered and Dispersed. Their coarse filter work stretches even beyond forests, as they are working to restore/abandon ditches where feasible to restore hydrology.

Using its continually updated inventory database and GIS applications, the County monitors the presence and condition of its major habitats. The resulting information is shared with MN DNR wildlife specialists, the County Biological Survey, and other informed parties to determine if significant changes in the amount, variety, and distribution of coarse habitats are occurring and warrant more specific review and analysis.

Fine filter management examples include consulting the County Biological Survey and similar information to identify eagle nests, heron rookeries, and locations of rare plant communities, to avoid disturbance during nesting season, specific trees retained, or activities timed to protect sensitive plants. Management and enhancement of a specific area for a specific species is another example, such as large open landscapes for sharp-tailed grouse, a species in greatest conservation need (Aitkin County harbors the best east-central Minnesota population). Guidelines for forest activities in areas where specific species are also adopted as needed, such as those established regarding the fern *Botrychium*.

On September 1, 1997, over 222,000 acres of forestland, managed by the ACLD, became the first county managed forest lands in the United States to be "green certified" under the strict standards of the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®). The FSC is the leading international monitoring organization for forest certification. This independent third party certifies that forest landowners and businesses embrace "green" practices that maintain ecological, economic, and social components of forests. Through a chain-of-custody process, ACLD's forest products are marketed and labeled as certified only if they originated, were grown, harvested and manufactured in accordance with certification standards. ACLD has continually met or exceeded the required standards during annual audits and reassessments. As stated by Mark Jacobs, "The assessment process gives us new ideas and direction for improvements in the future."

The FSC certification system also requires that certificate holders define and identify areas of outstanding biological, watershed, social and/or cultural significance, or "high conservation value forests" (HCVF). Biological, high conservation values include rare, threatened or endangered ecosystems, and globally, regionally or nationally significant concentrations of either biodiversity or large, landscape level forests where viable populations of most, if not all, naturally occurring species exist in natural patterns of distribution and

abundance. Forests with these values can be managed as working forests provided the characteristics that make them so valuable are maintained or enhanced.

ACLD proposed three Model Forests as areas having unique biodiversity features including rare ferns, salamanders, and birds, or generally having high value as wildlife habitat. These Model Forests, named Cornish, Libby, and Lakeside, qualify as HC VF. They have rare, threatened, or special concern species from plants to salamanders and/or have unique wildlife habitat features. The wildlife habitat includes elements such as large blocks of forests in high development areas, valuable travel corridors for wildlife along the Mississippi River system, and rich floodplain and mesic hardwood ecosystems. In April 2011, the Forest Stewards Guild formally designated the Cornish and Libby sites as Model Forests. They join 24 other such Model Forests in the US and are the first in the Lake States of the Upper Midwest. Additionally, the 3,500 acre Aitkin-Wawina Peatland is also potential HC VF.

Besides the stellar conservation efforts already noted, ACLD's collaboration in bat and bird conservation further reflect their interest and willingness to go above and beyond. When concern for Northern Long-eared Bat populations grew due to white-nosed syndrome, and hence concern forest management for their habitat too, they stepped up to the plate by collaborating on research to learn more about its use of local forests, and sponsoring and organizing a Bat-Friendly Forestry Workshop & Field Tour in October 2014. It featured results of summer bat survey work, including acoustical and mist net surveys done throughout northern Minnesota. Public and private sector researchers presented information about what was known about forest-dwelling bats in the state, current research needs, and the status of the listing process for the Northern Long-eared Bat. The field tour visited forest management treatment sites to review "bat-friendly forestry" activities and discuss alternatives for protecting bat habitat needs. A Bat Friendly forestry video can be found on their website. Because of their leadership in the forestry community and efforts in researching the habitat needs of the Northern Long-eared Bat, the Minnesota Forest Resources Partnership awarded Aitkin County Land Department the Professional Development Award.

In regard to bird conversation, ACLD has collaborated with several partners to benefit many species. Breeding Birds Studies, such as that by JoAnn Hanowski of Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI) at the Cornish Hardwood Management Area, have been encouraged. To enhance brushland habitats for Sharp-tailed Grouse, prescribed burns have been conducted with MN DNR and Conservation Partnership Legacy Grants secured for mowing woody vegetation. Projects have been undertaken with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) for Golden-winged Warblers. A workshop and tour entitled Forestry for Lake State Birds was hosted with the Forest Stewards Guild in June 2018 at Long Lake Conservation Center. Speakers from Aitkin County, MN DNR, ABC, Forest Stewards Guild, Dovetails Partners, and NRRI shared their expertise on woodpeckers to warblers to wood ducks.

Finally, there is ACLD's outreach to the public and our youth, to encourage and give all the opportunity to access our great outdoors, habitats and wildlife, whether hunting, fishing, bird watching, canoeing, hiking, or cross country skiing on the lands they manage. I have appreciated skiing their No Achen trails for many winters with family and friends. Long Lake Conservation Center (LLCC) is their premier effort. Sitting in the heart of Aitkin County and started in 1963, this county park and nature education facility has a mission to encourage the exploration, conservation, education, and appreciation of nature. It serves schools by hosting overnight, nature immersion field trips, has week long summer camps, adult programs, facility rentals, and community workshops. Sitting on 760 acres, it features a private lake, miles of hiking trails, ski trails, a bog boardwalk, geocaches, and a demonstration forest in development. Over the years thousands of learners have explored the bogs, lakes, and woods of LLCC, including myself with our children on their school trips and many of us in this room during workshops. If you've even been there, you know how incredible the food is, especially the cookies!

Our MN TWS Conservation Award goes to an organization or institution that has shown an outstanding commitment to Minnesota's natural resources. ACLD has indeed done that! Thank you, ACLD. We look forward to your continued leadership and stewardship.

Return this nomination by January 11, 2019 to:

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"Our Mission is to Provide Quality Services and Efficient Resource Management for the Citizens and Guests of Aitkin County"

