USDA NRCS
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative

Background and Purpose

The Driftless Area is a 24,000 square mile area in the four states of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin This area was by-passed during the last glacial age, so the glacial “drift”, a mixture of rocks and stone left by receding glaciers, is absent here. Instead, the defining characteristics of the driftless landscape are steep valleys, sandstone bluffs, spring-fed creeks and ridgetops.

Land use practices in the area in the late 1800s and early 1900s led to wide-scale soil erosion and flooding. The impacts to some areas were devastating. The Soil Erosion Service, now the USDA-NRCS, worked with farmers to try new approaches to farming. Contour strip cropping, and terracing along with planting trees on steep slopes helped heal the landscape.

Today pressures from changing agricultural practices contribute to soil erosion and subsequent soil deposition into streams.

These streams show signs of degraded waters and higher water temperatures impacting fish habitat. Other concerns include the introduction of non-native species which become invasive competing with native flora. A decrease in the level of forest management threatens the area.

The Driftless Area Landscape Conservation Initiative’s (DALCI) primary purpose is to restore, improve and protect the unique and diverse species found in the region’s working lands, forests, streams and prairies.

A collaborative approach is the hallmark of this initiative. It is a approach that involves individuals, conservation organizations, and state and federal agencies. It looks at the watershed on a landscape scale and evaluates the best land treatment options.

Goals/Objectives

1. Manage working lands to reduce erosion
2. Manage woodlands for increased diversity
3. Restore prairies and manage grasslands and oak savannas for habitat
4. Restore cold water streams

Goals

1. Manage working lands to reduce erosion

Promote sustainable conservation practices such as managed grazing, conversion of cropland to pasture, cover crops, grassed waterways, buffer strips, crop rotation and others practices to address soil erosion, reduce sediment delivery to streams and increase perennial grass cover.

2. Manage woodlands for increased diversity

Support the development of forest management plans to encourage oak regeneration and improve habitat diversity for wildlife. Reforestation efforts on open ag lands with significant steep slopes will reduce erosion and improve water quality.

3. Restore prairies and manage grasslands and oak savannas for improved habitat

The area has many remnant prairies and oak savannas to be protected or improved. Numerous threatened and endangered species still exist here as well as grassland birds and pollinators that are in decline.

4. Restore cold water streams

By stabilizing degraded streambanks cleaner, cooler water will stimulate native fish populations. The streambank restoration will incorporate snake and turtle habitat and shallow areas for amphibians. The projects will serve as a model for incorporating non-game habitat into other restoration projects.

Benefits to Producers

The collaborative stewardship of DALCI provides funding that will be available to participants annually for five years. By taking actions now the Initiative can reverse the decline for the at-risk species and habitats. The overall health of the watersheds and their natural resources will improve.

Benefits to Resources and the Public

Treating this area on a landscape scale will maintain and improve the area's rich biodiversity. The benefits of these conservation approaches help restore the diversity, health and productivity of the area. Cleaner, cooler water, less erosion, and more wildlife habitat help bring economic and social well-being.

For more information contact your local NRCS office at the nearest USDA Service Center or www.nrcs.usda.gov

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