

Community

Conservation easements good for watershed



In an act they hope will serve as both contribution to a river's future health and as inspiration to other property owners, Mark Dryer and his wife, Pam, have granted a conservation easement to permanently protect a large parcel of their land along the Marengo River. (Submitted Photo)

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In an act they hope will serve as both contribution to a river's future health and as inspiration to other property owners, a Mason couple has granted a conservation easement to permanently protect a large parcel of their land along the Marengo River.

The easement, covering more than 270 acres and two miles of Marengo River shoreline in the Town of Lincoln, was granted to the Bayfield Regional Conservancy by owners Mark and Pam Dryer, who said they hope it will be the first of other preservation efforts along the river.

While one obvious motivation for granting the easement was their awareness of "the importance of our property and overall protection of the Marengo River," said Pam Dryer, the couple also felt "we needed to, if we take seriously the need to protect the Marengo River, we needed to lead by example."

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between landowners and a land trust like BRC that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. The Bayfield Regional Conservancy works to protect natural lands, waters, forests, farms and places of scenic value in Bayfield, Ashland, Sawyer and Douglas counties. Without such an agreement, said BRC executive

director Ellen Kwiatkowski, the Dryers' property would be vulnerable to threats of subdividing or development that could degrade the Marengo River, increasing sedimentation loads and threatening plant and animal life.

Instead, the easement will offer habitat protection to a river that has been identified by BRC as a priority conservation area because of its biological diversity and its connection to the health of the Bad River wetlands, a network of sloughs and lagoons situated down river where the Bad River enters into Lake Superior. According to Wisconsin Wetland Gems, one of the greatest threats to the Bad River wetlands is sedimentation, and various agencies including the Bad River Watershed Association and Wisconsin's Lake Superior Basin Partnership Team have identified riverbank erosion along the Marengo River as one of the biggest contributors to sedimentation.

In addition to protecting valuable vegetation along the river's shoreline, the easement will permanently preserve land that offers high quality habitat to rare and endangered species of wildlife and some 145 species of birds that have been observed there.

Michele Wheeler, executive director of the Bad River Watershed Association's Marengo River Partnership, said the Dryers were examples of "folks who are groundbreakers" whose actions could spur other property owners to beginning examining their own conservation efforts, including further easements.

"I think definitely the Dryers' actions kind of show other people what their options are," she said. "It provides an example of what people can do."

Granting a permanent easement was something the Dryers had been considering since they bought their first 160 acres in 1998. They later added additional acres while also beginning to talk with BRC about the technical aspects of conservation easements and future protection of the property. Mark Dryer said tax advantages that came with the easement were also an incentive, especially given that the agreement did not change what they were already doing on their land.

Under the agreement, they can continue to manage forest cropland and graze as long as it is done in a sustainable way with third-party planners and BRC oversight.

Pam Dryer said she welcomed BRC's intent to work with other property owners to place conservation easements on key parcels along the river "so that our property doesn't become a protected island 50 years from now."

Kwiatkowski said BRC was "fortunate to work with a family as committed to conservation as the Dryers. It is evident that they love the land and have a deep understanding of the conservation value of their property.

"Preserving their beautiful property benefits our greater community by protecting habitats that are important for wildlife and by stabilizing the Marengo River banks. Protecting this property affects everything downstream, hopefully leading to a healthier Marengo River and Bad River."

For more information about conservation easements, contact the Bayfield Regional Conservancy by (715) 779-5263 or visit www.brcland.org.