



Ruth Boulanger with newly planted white cedar (fenced), Norway pine, and spruce, along her portion of the Knife River, where the trees will help prevent erosion and also provide shade for the cool-water fishery.



Between these two newly planted tamaracks, a tributary of the Knife wends its way through Tom Leider's property. During rains, it floods well into the hay fields on each side.

Tree planting project reveals the many faces of the Knife River

While most people who have driven the North Shore have seen its rivers wild sides, few area tributaries have a more unruly nature than the Knife River. Located between Duluth and Two Harbors, the Knife is one of the most “flashy”—one day barely a trickle, and the next a muddy torrent. It is also one of the most fishy, and a favorite of area anglers. But flash and fish don’t mix. In the past two weeks, a crew of young adults has planted over 300 trees for private property owners along the Knife River and its tributaries, as part of a local grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources.

On a drizzly June morning, things along the Knife appeared calm. But landowner Ruth Boulanger said, “You wouldn’t say that in the spring when the ice comes floating down!” Ruth has lived beside the Knife since 1969. Her property, once fenced pasture for horses and still largely open grassland, is wrapped by a corner of the river on two sides. She recalls the time she and her husband saw one of their young dogs come floating round the bend on an ice flow. “That was a dangerous stunt he pulled,” she said. “He could’ve easily been crushed between ice cakes and killed.”

Boulanger’s stretch of the Knife is virtually treeless. As a result, at flood stage, the sand and clay banks have little to hold them in place. After two days of tree planting, she now has Norway pine, white spruce and carefully fenced white cedar trees, free to her as part of a conservation grant to help restore the Knife.

The tree planting project is one part of a \$72,000 Knife River grant received by the South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) from Legacy money through the Clean Water Fund. The SWCD contributes \$18,000 as in-kind match for coordinating the project, providing for a total value of \$90,000.

“About one third of that money is going into the tree planting,” said Kate Kubiak, conservation specialist for the SWCD. Kubiak has been coordinating a planting crew from the Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa, working with more than a dozen landowners in the [Knife River watershed](#).

At first Kubiak had hoped for greater landowner participation, but found some were wary of signing a contract promising not to remove, destroy or neglect the trees. Now she says, “We couldn’t have handled any more participants. Caging the fragile white cedar to protect them from deer takes a long time.”



. . . Many Faces of the Knife (cont. from p. 1)

Upstream from Boulanger, Tom Leider’s land borders a tributary of the Knife so small you could jump over it, some days anyway. Not when it rains.

“This little bugger gets big. It stretches out well into these fields,” Leider said.

Leider rents his property to a farmer for hay, which works well except when the farmer plows the fields for reseeding. Then raw clay shoulders right up to the stream. Now, in addition to planting large tamarack and spruce along the tributary, Leider plans to talk with the farmer about leaving a wide buffer of untilled land where native willow, red osier--and hopefully seedlings from the new trees--can establish a natural filter for any agricultural runoff.

Leider fishes the Knife for steelhead, so he appreciates the need for clear water. And while his farmer friend fishes Lake Superior, Leider points out, “It’s all the same water.”

Another face of the Knife shows itself at Ron Benson’s place, on the Little Knife, a tributary. About a half-mile of river runs wide through Benson’s forested land. Where at first there would seem no need for tree planting, Benson points out the weakness of his stand.

“A lot of this is technically junk—balsam fir, poplar,” Benson said. “I was told this land has been clear-cut three times. It’s like ‘Operation Over-Grow’, it’s totally an unnatural state.” Benson has done some tree planting of his own, but not what a crew of four has done in four visits to his property. And they’re not done yet.

“It would cost thousands and thousands of dollars to do this on your own,” he said, “with the 6-foot tall fences and all. I just feel really fortunate.”

While the Conservation District’s Knife River grant paid for trees and fencing, labor for the Conservation Corps workers was paid for through a separate grant from the Board of Water and Soil Resources. In addition to the tree planting component, the Knife River grant will also fund one bank stabilization project on the lower Knife (in collaboration with Lake County SWCD) plus several ditch checks to slow water and catch sediment (in collaboration with St. Louis County). For these, South St. Louis SWCD will provide valuable [engineering expertise](#) as well as project coordination.

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Along this rockier, wooded stretch of the Knife, a mono-culture of balsam fir now make way for white pine and white spruce, species with a longer life span which can grow and thrive in shade. Ron Benson crouches beside one of his new white pine, caged to protect it from browsing deer.



Three days later after the tree planting visits, rains swelled the Knife River to its chocolate-brown flood face.