

Committed

to People and this Place



Annual Report 2014



Highlights of 2014

Mining suitor rejected, land saved

Vicky Schultz and her family protected their farmland from development permanently with Mississippi Valley Conservancy's help. Page 4

Working with partners

MVC board president and executive director highlight the work being done with partners to protect fragile farmland. Page 3

Focus on the Kickapoo Watershed

The McKnight Foundation, one of MVC's first financial supporters, is helping MVC and its partners work with landowners in the Kickapoo River Watershed to protect the waters that flow eventually into the Mississippi and on to the Gulf of Mexico. Page 7

Climate change advice

Climate change is already having its impact on the nine-county region served by MVC. Staff has agreed to make helping people prepare for this impact on their lands a priority. Page 5

Remembering

MVC remembers the people who have made a special impact on the conservation of land in our nine-county region. Page 6

On the cover

Lush grass covers a farm hillside in Crawford County. Grazing is one of the land uses that can improve water quality in the Kickapoo River. More on MVC's Kickapoo Project, Pages 3 and 7.

Conserved: 16,096 acres

86 Conservation Easements

120 Conservation Projects total (Fee & Easement)



Cattle grazing on a grassy hillside in the Kickapoo Watershed.

Committed to farmland care

By Pat Caffrey, MVC Board President

MVC has protected more than 16,000 acres in southwest Wisconsin, including striking bluff faces, richly textured remnant prairies, lush wetlands, and productive oak woodlands. These lands remain a focus of our protection efforts. However, you may be less aware that MVC has also protected thousands of acres of working agricultural land through conservation easements.



In response to high corn prices, thousands of acres of erosion-prone land has been taken out of conservation programs and put back into row crops, resulting in increased flooding and erosion and loss of wildlife habitat. Indiscriminate use of pesticides has adversely affected wildlife - especially birds, amphibians, and pollinating insects. There is an increasing awareness of the long term impact of traditional farming practices on natural habitats and water quality. Many successful demonstrations of sustainable farm management practices prove that we can minimize adverse impacts on wildlife and water quality while providing a good profit to the landowner.

While many existing erosion reduction programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), provide financial incentives to protect highly erodible land for a defined period, investments into wildlife habitat and soils protection can dissolve at the end of the set-aside contract. MVC, with support of the McKnight Foundation, is working with conservation partners with expertise in soil erosion, grazing, water quality and sustainability to develop and implement management plans where permanent conservation easements include provisions to assure best management farming practices are used in perpetuity.

A key ingredient of this program is farmer to farmer mentoring. The success of one farmer with improved conservation practices is a model for other farmers. Farming practices are more likely to change if a profitable neighbor demonstrates how conservation improvements can be beneficial financially and ecologically. MVC has focused on outreach to landowners in the Kickapoo Watershed with a primary goal of measurable improvement in water quality through better conservation practices as defined by the NRCS and permanent protection with a conservation easement. The

[SEE LAND page 7](#)

By Carol Abrahamzon, MVC Executive Director

Our new Kickapoo Watershed Project

featured in this annual report emphasizes the land-healing ability of grazing -- an agricultural practice I use on my own farm. Working with partner organizations and with funding from the McKnight Foundation, we are building awareness among land owners in the Kickapoo Watershed of the benefits for the land and water of grazing livestock on grass as opposed to growing row crops on steep slopes and other erodible soils. And we're encouraging land owners to make protections permanent.

Looking out on a wintry landscape, I dream about spring and look forward to turning my cows onto fresh grass. I will move them from one paddock to another, allowing the areas already grazed to be renewed. Having seen the land conservation and renewal benefits of grazing first hand, I am an enthusiastic cheerleader for our Kickapoo initiative.



That initiative fits nicely with our mission: "Conserving native and working landscapes that enrich our communities

through private, voluntary action, for the health and well-being of current and future generations." We've made progress in 2014 throughout our nine-county area with land management on existing projects and with visits to land owners who have expressed interest in permanent conservation for their properties. We're so grateful to the land owners and volunteers who make this possible. We are looking forward to working with the City of Onalaska under the renewal in 2014 of their land preservation partnership with us. A new effort for municipalities in the greater La Crosse area to work together on bluffland planning is moving ahead. We settled into new quarters in 2014, which allowed us to consolidate our offices with maintenance and storage space for our land management equipment. We hope to announce soon the completion of several important projects, some of which have been many months in development. Finally, we have received new funding for our outreach work, particularly to youth.

If you watch livestock entering a fresh pasture, you can sense their enthusiasm, sometimes expressed in kicking up their heels. We'll bring that same vigor to our land protection mission this year! I look forward to another year of protecting land; I hope you do as well. Thank you for your support and helping Mississippi Valley Conservancy flourish!

Committed to protecting land

Not for sale!

That's what Vicky Schultz told the man with mining in mind when he offered to buy her 400-acre farm in Trempealeau County.

She remembers the day when his van pulled into the driveway of her scenic farm in the Town of Arcadia. The land lies at the end of a dead-end road, a horseshoe of rolling farmland and rugged wooded bluffs. The man had papers all drawn up. With the mineral rights, he could level the steep bluff prairies for the riches within. "My son is restoring the prairies," Vicky told him. "Selling this land would be like selling my soul. It is not for sale."

Now those prairies are permanently protected from destruction from mining, subdivision, and development. Vicky, her daughter Stacy and sons Matt and Jon worked together with Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) to convey a permanent conservation easement. This voluntary conservation agreement protects the natural resources on the land, working farmland remains in production, public access is not a requirement, and the agreement is written specifically to the wishes of the landowner.

"People worry about giving up control of their land. This (conservation easement) is really about establishing control over the future of a property beyond your lifetime," said Jon Schultz. Vicky added, "The whole area is so beautiful, we love to hike, its part of who we are. It would destroy me to see this destroyed; that's why it is so wonderful to be able to protect it with an organization like MVC."

Abbie Church, MVC's conservation director, said the land includes two of the rarest habitats in Trempealeau County, oak savanna, considered by the Wisconsin DNR Wildlife Action Plan to be 'globally imperiled,' and dry prairie, considered 'globally rare'. The land is home to declining species, including the whip-poor-will and meadowlark. When Vicky and her late husband Jim moved out to the farm, she referred to it as "Whip-poor-

will Way" because of the distinct and constant singing of the whip-poor-will. Son Matt said, "The amazing thing about this land is, it's right in the heart of the largest contiguous timber stand in Trempealeau County. The land is relatively pristine, with few invasive species, such as buckthorn." The quality of the habitat is a direct result of the conservation practices the Schultz family has initiated over the years. When they first moved to the farm, over four decades ago, the land had been farmed



Vicky Schultz, center, surrounded by her children and grandchildren on the family farm. Son Jon is absent from the photo.

hard and was run down. "There were so many ditches," Vicky said, "it looked like the Grand Canyon." They changed the farming practices to till along the contour, installing grassy water ways, contour strips, and sediment basin structures to stop the rampant erosion. They began using prescribed burning as a management tool back in 2001, restoring the health and diversity of the habitat. The result of 14 years of burning and other management is visible in the open-ness of the woods and the wildflower diversity. The family took a 3-hour hike through the woods on Christmas day, enjoying the scenic views of the surrounding Trempealeau River valley. From the ridgetops, they can see all the way to Minnesota. And today, they know that even with the onslaught of mining interest in the area, the amount of time and sweat they've put into the land, as well as the scenic beauty, wildlife habitat, and productive agricultural soils will remain intact, protected forever.

Climate change advice.

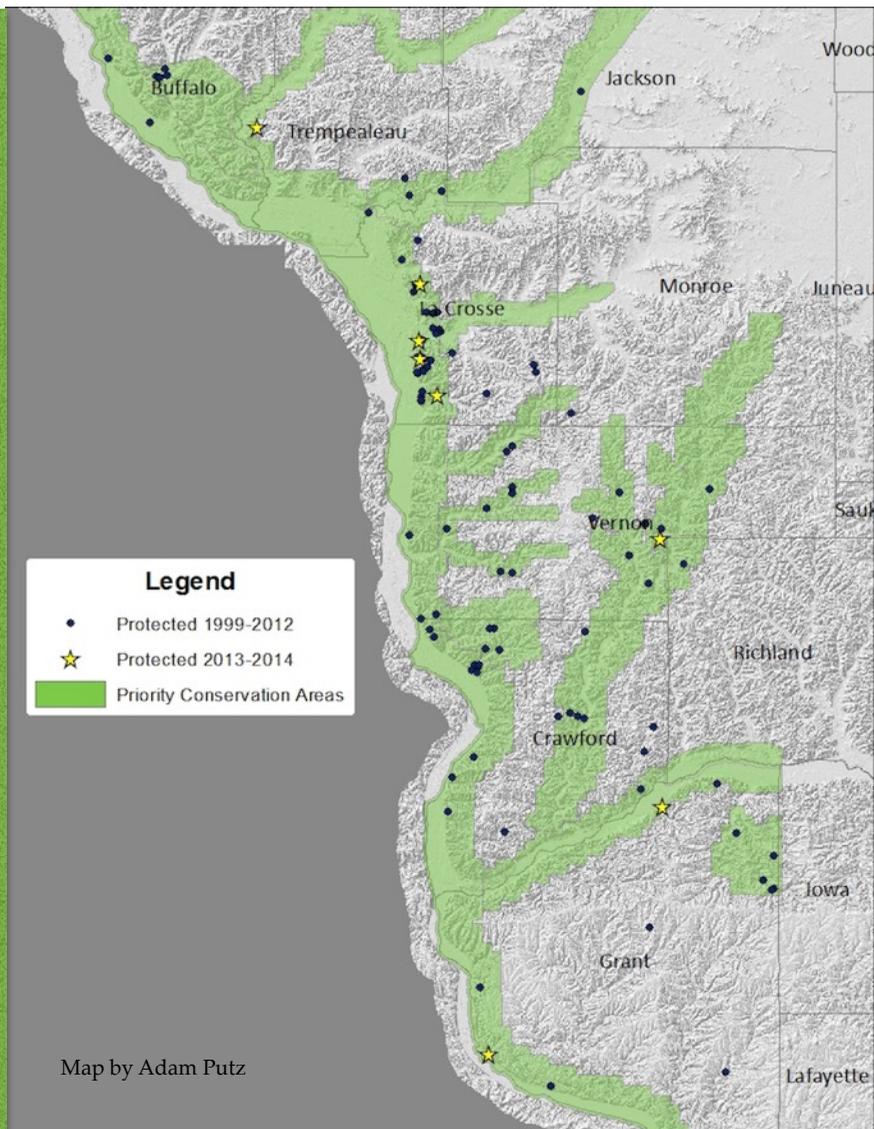
Mississippi Valley

Conservancy staff will seek ways to help land owners to make their lands resilient to changes in the region's climate due to global warming. That was the consensus at a staff team meeting recently.

Carol Abrahamzon, executive director, said the staff realizes that one organization cannot make a huge impact, but it can help empower landowners to do what they can to mitigate the effect of change and preserve habitat. MVC's strategic plan commits the organization to be aware of the scientific information on climate change for use in land management and planning.

The Land Trust Alliance notes in its information on climate change and land trusts that "Climate change is already impacting natural and cultural resources across the United States, and these impacts are only expected to become more dramatic over the coming century. We cannot prevent climate change from impacting our protected lands. But, by adapting our management practices, land trusts can promote climate change resilience in priority species, habitats and resources."

One step recommended by the LTA is to determine what species are vulnerable to climate change. "As we learn more about predicted climate change impacts, land trusts will be able to anticipate and plan for these impacts. For example, in order to protect cold-water fish (such as the Driftless region's native brook trout), a land trust may look to remove barriers that currently prevent upstream migration, thus allowing those fish to reach cooler waters."



Eight Projects completed 2013-14

- ◆ Boscobel Bluffs State Natural Area, Grant County, 389 acres
- ◆ Schultz Conservation Easement, Trempealeau County, 400 acres
- ◆ Gilbertson Tract of the La Crosse Blufflands, 4 acres
- ◆ Gerrard Corp. Tract of the La Crosse Blufflands, La Crosse County, 5 acres
- ◆ Babson Conservation Easement, Vernon County, 983 acres
- ◆ Greenley Conservation Easement, Grant County, 70 acres
- ◆ Nolte Conservation Easement, La Crosse County, 40 acres
- ◆ Strehl Trust Conservation Easement, La Crosse County, 100 acres

Financial Highlights

Assets	
Cash	\$164,336
Unconditional promise to give	\$426,584
Prepaid expenses	\$8,410
Investments	\$429,847
Equipment - net	\$15,307
Land	\$10,307,913
Total Assets	\$11,352,397

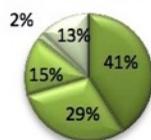
Less	
Liabilities	\$23,565
Restricted net assets	\$10,076,407
Unrestricted net assets	\$1,252,425

Revenue		
	Restricted	Unrestricted
Contributions	\$447,529	\$200,914
Grants & Endowments	\$71,000	\$145,428
Special Events		\$72,119
Investment income	\$13,095	\$10,445
Released from restrictions	(\$62,563)	\$62,563
Total Revenue	\$469,061	\$491,469

Expenses	
Land Management	\$109,067
Land Protection	\$107,921
Outreach & education	\$106,573
Management & general	\$58,264
Membership & Fundraising	\$29,876
Total Expenses	\$411,701
Land Purchases	\$20,498

FY 13/14 Revenue

- Contributions
- Grants & Endowments
- Special Events
- Investment income
- Released from restrictions



FY 13/14 Expenses

- Land Management
- Land Protection
- Outreach & education
- Management & general



Committed to remembering

Mississippi Valley Conservancy remembers with respect the special contributions of these conservation leaders who died in 2014.



Ben Logan. Ben, who died in September, wrote "The Land Remembers," the story of growing up on the ridge top farm near Gays Mills. Later in life he returned to the farm, bought it and worked with MVC on an easement to protect it from development and ensure that it would be used for sustainable agriculture in accordance with his wishes. The land has since become an example of how best agricultural practices can protect the land that so many people remember from Logan's writing.



Carol Kube. Carol, who died in August, worked with her husband, Allen, to protect their 700 acre farm in Buffalo County from development. Their easement

on the properties with MVC remains one of the largest conservation projects in MVC history. Carol, according to her obituary, "enjoyed daily walks on their trails of her beloved Four Seasons Farms. She was an accomplished deer, turkey, and waterfowl hunter. Carol had a fervent love of the natural world and its critters. She was a dedicated steward of our natural resources, working with Allen to restore and enhance the fields, forest and wetlands on their properties."

George Varnum. George, who died in November, spent many years advocating for the protection of the Holland Sand Prairie, a rare remnant of the great prairie that bordered the Mississippi River north of La Crosse. He was responsible for making the DNR and MVC aware of the rare plants on the property west of Holmen, part of which had never been plowed. After the land was purchased by MVC and permanently protected, he continued as a volunteer to help manage the property.



Committed to the Kickapoo

Land conservation and protection in the Kickapoo River Watershed can help improve the quality of water in the Gulf of Mexico where a "dead zone" grows year after year from sediment and nutrients washed in from the Mississippi River.

That's the science behind the work being done in the Kickapoo watershed by Mississippi Valley Conservancy and many partners including the Kickapoo Grazing Initiative and the Valley Stewardship Network. The work is funded in part by the McKnight Foundation as part of its commitment to help improve the water quality in the Mississippi by helping to reduce runoff of sediment and nutrients in the Upper Mississippi River watersheds. Grants include \$50,000 from McKnight and \$25,000 from Fishers and Farmers.

Megan Kabele, MVC conservation specialist, says that MVC's special role in this effort is to encourage and support land owners who respond to the project's plea for permanent land protection.

MVC and the partners have identified more than 800 properties in the watershed where because of slopes and soil conditions soil conservation practices would be especially critical in preventing sedimentation and pollution. Many of these properties are absentee owned and being farmed under

rental agreements. Information packets and letters have been sent to the owners of all these properties. Megan follows up with a visit to land owners who have asked for additional information.

In addition to the mailings and visits, the partners offer pasture walks, workshops and other informational events to get out the message that there are alternatives such as rotational grazing of livestock to the intensive agriculture of row crops that can be heavy contributors to soil loss and nutrient loss.

Megan said, "We have 19 contacts that we have met/will meet with and have shared resource information addressing erosion, stream bank stabilization, rotational grazing, forest management. At each of these outreach visits we also discuss protecting their investments into the land and preserving their land with a conservation easement.

"Many folks are interested, and most take some time to digest the information. Numerous landowners have initiated conservation practices on their land and we have already begun work on several conservation easement projects. The seed has been planted and we'll be following up with folks from the outreach mailing, through workshops this spring, and additional outreach events with partners."

LAND from page 3

documents developed will be readily transferable to other watersheds in southwest Wisconsin and beyond.

Since acquiring its first property, MVC has worked to balance resources between land protection and land management. Land protection is the primary mission of land trusts - providing legal protection to special properties before they are developed. Land management is also critical to maintain native habitats. For example, if we choose to protect a high quality remnant prairie and no prescribed burning or brush and tree removal is done, the prairie will have become overgrown in a few decades and the rare prairie habitat lost. The Kickapoo Watershed project represents a similar balance for farmland. A conservation easement on agricultural lands not only assures that valuable farmland will be legally protected, but also promotes active farm management to reduce soil erosion and sedimentation, protect water quality, and protect habitat in adjacent natural areas.

The involvement of conservation partners in this more holistic approach to land protection allows MVC to

concentrate on what it does best - permanent land protection - while our partners provide the expertise to assure the best farming practices are used. What could be better than a future where people have good food to eat while visiting the beautiful natural areas that MVC has protected?



Grass pasture and woodlands in Crawford County.

Committed CITIZENS

Donations in fiscal 2014, July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014

\$10,000 & Above

Anonymous
Barbara and Donald Frank
Jon and Ann Rigden
Pat Caffrey and Peg Zappen
Philip and Melissa Gelatt
Warren and Denise Loveland

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Mississippi Valley Conservancy would like to extend appreciation and thanks to Endow-Bio for making a financial donation in the amount of \$1,214.81 to help offset transactional costs incurred on purchase of Boscobel Bluffs.

Endow-Bio is the first national endowment for biodiversity. It is an all-volunteer public charity that raises funds for organizations involved with biodiversity. For more information, see the website at endow-bio.org.

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Stewardship Circle grows in 2014

Membership in the MVC Stewardship Circle has grown to 35 from 25 a year ago. Below are listed the names of Mississippi Valley Conservancy supporters who have notified us that MVC is in their will. If you have decided to join this growing "Stewardship Circle" by making a similar commitment, or if you want more information on this long-term support for MVC, please contact Carol Abrahamzon, executive director, at (608) 784-3606 x4.

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Driftless documentary wins Emmy

Mississippi Valley Conservancy and Untamed Science, co-producers, of the documentary film *Mysteries of the Driftless*, earned an Emmy® Award in the category of "Outstanding Achievement for Documentary Programs – Topical."

The documentary film, a joint production of Untamed Science and Mississippi Valley Conservancy, features a team of explorers and scientists as they reveal the majesty and allure of the Driftless Area using a stunning combination of filmmaking and genuine adventure. The film was shot in southwest Wisconsin, northeast

Iowa, and southeast Minnesota.

"Mississippi Valley Conservancy became involved in this film because we saw it as an education and communication tool to show people what a unique and beautiful feature the Driftless area is," said executive director, Carol Abrahamzon.

To purchase a DVD of the film, please contact us at (608) 784-3606 ext. 3 or email info@MississippiValleyConservancy.org

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