

# Landowner News

SPRING 2025



AMARAH OTTO

## LANDOWNER SPOTLIGHT

# Dag Knudsen

### RESTORING A PRAIRIE, NURTURING A LEGACY

*Thank you to Amarah Otto, 2024 Minnesota Land Trust intern, for their research and photos which were critical to telling this story.*

At Manawa Prairie Farm, Dag Knudsen walks a path shaped by patience, purpose, and deep respect for the land. Alongside Deidre Flesche, Dag has spent decades transforming former farmland into a thriving prairie landscape—rich with native grasses, wildflowers, and the pollinators that depend on them.

### THE LAISSEZ-FAIRE FARMER

Dag doesn't call himself a conservationist or ecologist. He calls himself a "laissez-faire farmer." It's a lighthearted phrase that reflects a serious philosophy: give nature the time and space it needs, and it will flourish. That philosophy has guided him as he's coaxed life back into depleted soils, welcomed migrating plants like mountain mint to find their place, and created a haven for monarchs, sparrows, and bees.



His approach to land stewardship leans on intuition as much as it does experience. Mowing paths that double as fire breaks, burning the prairie in rotation, and tending to plants without chemical shortcuts—these are the rhythms that guide his work. His commitment to non-chemical practices stems from a deep concern for water quality and the health of the broader ecosystem.

### GIVING NATURE A HELPING HAND

The results are striking: towering grasses that weren't there a decade ago, coneflowers multiplying year after year, and native species like prairie dock and rattlesnake master reclaiming their ground. Even the pasture, home to a small herd of cattle rotated between paddocks, pulses with life—thistles left standing for butterflies and birds finding rest in the open grass.

Dag doesn't shy away from the challenges. The pond near the prairie, once choked with silt, required excavation and careful reseeding. With poor soil and little more than hand tools and time, he watched life return to the edges of the water. Today, the grasses there stand taller than ever before.

### A CONSERVATION LEGACY

Perhaps most inspiring is the sense of legacy woven through Dag's work. Manawa Prairie Farm is protected by a conservation easement with the Minnesota Land Trust, ensuring it will remain a refuge for wildlife, native plants, and people for generations to come. And through the Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry Scholarship Endowment Fund that Dag and Deidre helped found, they're passing on that ethos to future stewards of the land.

Restoring a prairie isn't a weekend project. It's a way of life—one that Dag Knudsen lives with humility, wisdom, and an abiding trust in nature's pace.



## Dag's Words of Wisdom

**THINK NON-CHEMICAL:**  
Native plants will eventually outcompete weedy species if given the chance.

**DON'T BE DISCOURAGED BY EARLY CHALLENGES:**  
Seeing weeds in the first few years is normal, as native plants focus on establishing their root systems.

**PERSEVERE:**  
The rewards of a healthy, thriving prairie are well worth the effort and time.

AMARAH OTTO

Key milestones in Dag Knudsen's prairie restoration journey.

## Timeline of Restoration at Manawa Prairie Farm

1995

### PROPERTY ACQUIRED

Dag acquires the property, which is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Land shows little to no native vegetation due to past agricultural use.

1999

### BEGINS RESTORATION ON THE BIG PRAIRIE

Soil is disced and tilled in preparation for seeding. Plants a mix of 22 forbs and 6 grasses using a drill seeder.

2000–2005

### NATIVE PLANTS BEGIN ESTABLISHED, MAINTENANCE

Within 5 years, prairie plants dominate the landscape. Mowing paths introduced as fire breaks. Rotational burning begins to encourage plant diversity. Excavates silt-filled pond caused by historical farming practices. Spreads nutrient-poor soil from the pond edge. Hand-seeds the area and encourages natural regeneration.

2010s–PRESENT

### PRAIRIE DIVERSITY EXPANDS

Species like prairie dock and mountain mint flourish. Pasture managed through rotational grazing with wildlife in mind. Conservation easement established with Minnesota Land Trust. Dag and Deidre establish a scholarship fund supporting future land stewards.



## 2024 LANDOWNERS OF THE YEAR

Last October, the Land Trust had the distinct honor of recognizing two great families with Landowner of the Year awards at our annual Treasured Places event.

The conservation achievements of the **Ebeltoft/Eppling** and **Fischer/Herbst/Thorp** families from Frazee, MN, include the protection of nearly 500 acres of land and more than three miles of shoreline on six different lakes.

Over the years, they have planted thousands of trees, maintained cross-country ski trails for public use, and hosted thousands of school children on the properties to learn about the natural world.

Also recognized was the **Hinze Family** from Pine County. Starting in 2006 with their first conservation easement, the family went on to complete four more easements with the Land Trust, protecting nearly 450 acres of land in the process and two miles of shoreline along Rock Lake and Rock Creek.

In truth, the Land Trust is not the first to recognize their good stewardship of the land. In 2023, the family was honored with the Outstanding Conservationist Award by the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Congratulations to both families on the well-deserved awards!



The Ebeltoft/Eppling and Fischer/Herbst/Thorp families.

SARAH SULLIVAN



The Hinze Family.

SARAH SULLIVAN

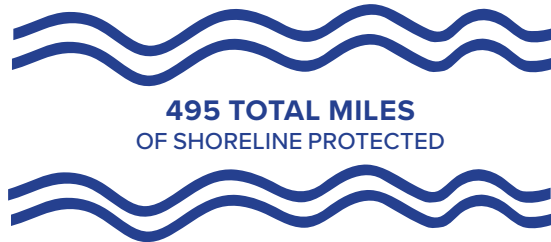
### • STEWARDSHIP AND CONSERVATION BY THE NUMBERS •

**230,000**

METRIC TONS  
OF STORED  
CARBON IN  
PROTECTED  
PROPERTIES,  
OFFSETTING  
ANNUAL CARBON  
EMISSIONS  
EQUIVALENT OF



**200,000**  
GASOLINE-POWERED  
CARS DRIVEN FOR  
ONE YEAR



**VOLUNTEER  
MONITORS**

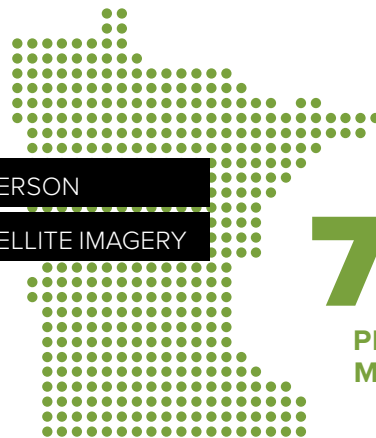
ALL  
TIME

TOTAL ACRES  
PROTECTED  
**84,000+**

**9,000+**  
TOTAL ACRES  
RESTORED

**77% IN PERSON**

**23% SATELLITE IMAGERY**



**783**

PROPERTIES  
MONITORED  
IN 2024



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## 2025 MONITORING SEASON UPDATE

Happy May, Landowners! This year, we met with approximately 90 new and returning volunteer monitors who are excited to help the Land Trust meet our annual obligation to monitor more than 750 unique properties across Minnesota.

Now that training is complete, **Minnesota Land Trust Staff or Certified Volunteer Monitors will be in touch to schedule your annual monitoring visit.** If you're available, we encourage you to join the visit. It's a great opportunity to ask questions about your conservation easement, discuss any upcoming projects, or share insights about the land's history. If you can't join, or if you have any questions later on, don't hesitate to contact a member of our Stewardship Team.

**We will also be continuing our remote monitoring program,** which is entering its sixth year. Remote monitoring involves the review of current-year satellite or aerial imagery

and is only conducted by Minnesota Land Trust staff. This will also be our third year using drone technology to augment our in-

person visits. Our drones are piloted by certified Minnesota Land Trust staff and are never used without the express permission of the landowner. However, rest assured that each protected property will be visited in-person at least once every five years. **If your property has only been remotely monitored for the past four years, you'll receive an in-person visit this year.**

Learn more about our monitoring program at: [mnlnd.org/conservation-easement-monitoring](https://mnlnd.org/conservation-easement-monitoring).



ANDREW MOE

## Let's Connect

Get email updates from the Minnesota Land Trust and follow us on social media to learn about our protection, restoration, and nature engagement projects, events, and other outdoor and conservation news from around the state. Go to [mnlnd.org/enews](https://mnlnd.org/enews) to sign up or scan the QR code with your smart phone.



### QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

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