



# Fox Lake Conservation League

Communication key to successful conservation in state’s farm country

By Tim Spielman  
Editor

There are a host of superlatives that folks use to describe the Fox Lake Conservation League. Emilee Nelson, of The Conservation Fund, says the Martin County group’s efforts for the outdoors are “phenomenal.” DNR area wildlife manager Brian Nyborg calls the 400-member outfit “outstanding.”

Among the Fox Lake Conservation League’s accomplishments are thousands of acres of land added to the county’s state wildlife management areas – no small feat in an area of southwestern Minnesota dominated by agriculture. The group hosts youth hunting events, leads firearms safety training classes, operates a park on Fox Lake near the town of Sherburn, and donates to a host of local causes. It’s been doing so since 1947.

This year, for all its accomplishments, the Fox Lake Conservation League has been named the recipient of the *Outdoor News* Outdoor Leaders Award.

League leadership is a picture of longevity and consistency – a group of individuals with roots running deep in Martin County.

FLCL president Tim Eisenmenger, 58, has held that position for 25 years, and joined the league fresh out of high school. He’s been a firearms safety instructor since the 1980s. Doug Hartke, 54, the league’s grant coordinator, has been a member nearly as long as Eisenmenger. And he’s lived in the Sherburn community his entire life. Nate Amborn, 39, the league’s secretary, has been a member for nearly two decades. He’s a graduate of Martin County West High School, a consolidation in 1988 of the Trimont, Welcome, and Sherburn-Dunnell school districts.

The league also has a 15-member board of directors.

“It’s a group that has a lot of momentum, a lot of stuff going on,” Nyborg said. “They’re making a difference in Martin County.”

While the FLCL has been around for 70 years, its conservation work was taken to new heights about five years ago. It was then that the group applied for and received funding from the state’s Outdoor Heritage Fund (Legacy Amendment dollars) for land acquisition. In 2016, the FLCL was awarded its first \$1 million to expand state wildlife management areas in the county.

But it proceeded toward acquisition only after carefully laying the groundwork for success.

“Everybody in our group is all for (increasing wildlife) habitat,” Amborn said. “But we have to be mindful of not taking good ag ground (out of production).”

Acquisition of land for public use doesn’t occur without detractors, especially in farm country. But the FLCL had a plan – simple but effective, and an example of how effective communication can plow down barriers.

In 2016, a meeting was called to discuss land-acquisition goals for WMAs in Martin County, according to TCF’s Nelson. There were about 20 people in attendance, representatives of a variety of government agencies and conservation groups: county commissioners and other county officials, the DNR, the U.S. Fish and



The Fox Lake Conservation League each year hosts a youth duck hunt. Above, a youth (l) is mentored by league members Egan Matson (c) and Bob Sorenson. Photo courtesy of FLCL

Wildlife Service, the county soil and water conservation district, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, and others. In essence, it was intended to show all vested parties the grand scheme, and to get buy-in thereof.

Conservation opportunities abound in the county, but the focus needed to be narrowed.

“You could fall out of a plane and land on a restorable wetland (in Martin County),” Nelson said.

Securing local support required a structured process. Those who’d gathered examined a map of the county and identified the best places to create wildlife habitat. Nearly all those locations were adjacent to existing WMAs and nearly all

consisted of marginal and erodible farmland. By the time folks were heading home from the gathering, “We had very good consensus,” Hartke said. The process of adding acres for wildlife and hunters in a county where just 1.5% of the land is in public ownership – building on acquisitions that began in the early 1990s – began to accelerate.

Since that first grant of \$1 million from the OHF, the group has received \$2.45 million in 2018, \$3.65 in 2019, and \$2.75 million in 2020. All is used for land acquisition and restoration. The group’s recent funding past also has been checked with various Conservation Partners Legacy grants that can range from \$5,000 to \$400,000. Much that funding is used for enhancement and protection of existing WMAs – things such as invasive plant removal and planting of more wildlife-friendly species.

For the most part, Hartke said, land-acquisition battles have been few.

“The Martin County board has been awesome and they support what we’re doing,” he said. “And Rep. (Bob) Gunther (a Fairmont Republican) has been phenomenal.”

As for those who question removing land from private ownership, “We can publicly say there’s 96% of the county (land) that we don’t want,” said Hartke, a member of the Sherburn Fire Department for more than 30 years.

CPL grants require a match from nonprofit recipients, and the FLCL has a source that’s provided in excess of \$100,000 annually for the past several years: pull tabs, both electronic and paper, available at bars in the area. Amborn said 70% of that income is earmarked for conservation purposes. The remainder is donated locally – for high school senior scholarships, to fire departments, and so on. A few years ago, the group assisted with funds for a greenhouse at Martin County West High School.

Some of those dollars might also be used for



Members of the Fox Lake Conservation League (top photo) recently gathered at Four Corners WMA for a photo with the *Outdoor News* Outdoor Leaders Award. They are (l-r) Scott Kittleson (board), Jim Miller (treasurer), Tim Eisenmenger (president), Josh Markquart (board), Doug Hartke (grant coordinator), Josh Eisenmenger (board), Bob Smith (board), and Dustin Frank (board). Photo/image courtesy of FLCL

upkeep at Everett Park, located on the shore of Fox Lake, just north of Sherburn. The park is privately owned by the club and has available 30 campsites, a playground, shelter, public boat access, and fishing pier. Fox Lake anglers can fish for panfish, muskies, and even walleyes.

The FLCL also continues to keep the lines of local communication wide open. Once or twice a year, it hosts a meeting of the county’s various conservation groups and others to talk about projects and opportunities to collaborate. It’s model that’s worked well for many years.

For example, Nelson said, TCF often assumes the role of real estate specialist during land purchases – handling appraisals and working out purchase details with sellers. Once land had been bought, groups like DU and PF offer restoration expertise. The DNR works with the group to identify priority acres.

But it’s group members who do the things that make it possible for land acquisition to occur consistently.

“They’re well known and they’re active in the community,” Nyborg said. “These guys are finding leads on good projects on a regular basis.”

Willing sellers have emerged, understanding that marginal land is best suited for nature, and that dollars paid for such land is better invested in more productive farmland. And local officials who might otherwise balk at such sales understand what’s being done has purpose.

“The biggest reason for their success is that they explain and communicate with townships and the county that this is the end game,” Nelson said.

Martin County is now home to 10 WMAs totaling more than 4,000 acres – places where wildlife thrive and kids and adults can play.

Eisenmenger cites varying expertise among the board and league members, a fiscally conservative approach to spending, an immense number of volunteer hours donated each year, and youth among membership as reasons for the group’s success. The creation of WMAs – wild places where the last time they existed was nearly 150 years ago – and knowing they’ll be appreciated into the future is the reward.

“I love to see the birds and the other wildlife out there, as well as the kids,” Eisenmenger said.



**BEFORE:** This drone photo is of an addition to Rooney Run Wildlife Management Area before restoration efforts began. Photo courtesy of Fox Lake Conservation League



**AFTER:** Grasses and forbs were planted on Rooney Run WMA. This image is from two weeks ago. Wetland restoration is under way. Photo courtesy of FLCL