



Winona County
Soil & Water
Conservation District

2025 Outstanding Conservationist ~ Claire Bender & Sue Ramthun ~

Winona County landowners Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun have been named the Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists, distinguishing their long-term dedication to protecting soil, water, wildlife, and natural resources along Trout Run Creek near St. Charles. Claire and Sue were recognized with the Area 7 Outstanding Conservationist Award during the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) Convention in December 2025 (Pictured from left to right: Charles Rau, Sue Ramthun, Claire Bender, and Kevin Schulz). Area 7 includes the following counties: Dodge, Filmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, and Winona.



The award honors landowners who demonstrate exceptional leadership in conservation. Claire and Sue's property include a diverse mix of prairie, woodland, cropland, and a cold-water trout stream, all managed with a strong focus on long-term stewardship and ecological health.

Conservation Through Partnership

Since purchasing the property, Claire and Sue have worked closely with the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Trout Unlimited, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and other partners to implement conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat in the Root River watershed.

One of the most significant projects on the property was a one-mile streambank restoration along Trout Run, a two-mile cold-water trout stream. Prior to restoration, severe erosion caused streambanks to become deeply incised, sending sediment downstream during major rain events. Through a collaborative, multi-agency effort led by Winona County SWCD, the streambanks were stabilized, invasive vegetation was removed, and in-stream habitat features such as root wads, tree trunks, and boulders were installed to support all life stages of trout. The project removed tons of sediment, reduced phosphorus runoff, and preserved the long-term health of the stream.

Protecting Soil and Water on the Landscape

Claire and Sue also addressed erosion on highly erodible cropland by enrolling acres into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with technical assistance from Winona County SWCD. Formerly planted in continuous corn and soybeans, these fields were converted to diverse native prairie plantings designed to improve rainwater infiltration and stabilize soils.

When heavy rainfall created gullies during prairie establishment, Claire and Sue worked with SWCD and NRCS staff to adaptively manage the site. Conservation practices including grassed waterways and grade

stabilization structures were installed, providing long-term protection for Trout Run and reducing sediment loss from the surrounding landscape.

Forestry, Pollinators, and Wildlife Habitat

Since 2011, Claire and Sue have partnered with foresters to assess woodland health, manage invasive species, and improve forest resilience. Beginning in 2020, they worked with a professional service to systematically treat invasive species such as buckthorn, garlic mustard, wild parsnip, honeysuckle, bull thistle, and black locust across the property.

They also participate in the annual Winona County SWCD tree sale, planting tree and shrub seedlings to restore storm-damaged areas and increase species diversity. Recent efforts include planting tamarack seedlings in wetland areas along the stream.

Native plantings and pollinator gardens throughout the property support honey bees, native bees, butterflies, birds, and other wildlife. Trail cameras have documented regular visits from deer, eagles, hawks, foxes, coyotes, and many additional species, highlighting the habitat benefits created through their conservation work.

Sharing Conservation with the Community

Claire and Sue’s commitment to conservation extends beyond their own land. In June 2024, they partnered with Winona County SWCD and the Basin Alliance for the Lower Mississippi in Minnesota (BALMM) to host a Trout Stream Field Day on their property. The event brought together landowners, agency staff, and community members to learn about conservation programs, karst geology, trout stream buffers, and streambank restoration practices.

They also collaborated with NRCS on an educational video, *“Trout Stream Restoration in Southeastern Minnesota,”* filmed on their property. The video highlights best practices for erosion control and habitat enhancement and serves as a real-world example of successful conservation partnerships in Winona County.

Outstanding Conservation Leadership

Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun were selected as Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists for their proactive approach, willingness to learn, and dedication to implementing and maintaining conservation practices over the long term. Their strong partnerships with Winona County SWCD and other organizations continue to protect water quality, support wildlife habitat, and strengthen conservation efforts across Winona County for future generations.

