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Winona County conservationists win regional honors

Dec 29, 2025

Winona County landowners Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun have been named the Minnesota Southeast 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 as the 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationists by the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and later was awarded the Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists by the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD). Claire and Sue were presented an award during the MASWCD Convention in December 2025. Area 7 includes the following 11 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 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 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 ponds 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. This video can be found on the Winona County SWCD's website: winonaswcd.org.

Outstanding conservation leadership

Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun were selected as Minnesota Southeast 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.

Property owners Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun received the 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationist award for their work to restore and protect Trout Run Creek. In December, they were named the Outstanding Conservationists for all of Southeast Minnesota.

Claire Bender (center right) and Sue Ramthun (center left) received the Minnesota Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists award at the Minnesota Association of SWCDs Convention on December 3, 2025. MASWCD President Charles Rau (far left) and The Farmer Magazine Editor Kevin Schultz (far right) present the award.

From left, Winona County SWCD Board Supervisor Andy Kronebusch, Sue Ramthun, Claire Bender, Winona County SWCD Resource Conservationist Amanda Gentry, and Winona County SWCD Ecological Conservationist and Outreach Coordinator Abbi Hoffman celebrate at the MASWCD Convention.