

NEWS RELEASE

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PILOT KNOB HILL RESTORATION RECEIVES FIRST MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES BIOFUELS FOR RESTORATION GRANT



Great River Greening, a nonprofit regional leader for community-based restoration of natural areas and open space announced today the start of a “radical restoration for oak savanna” with a 3-acre clearcut of middle aged forest at Pilot Knob Hill in Mendota Heights. The project is one of three that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has awarded grant money as part of their new Woody Biomass Project .



Pilot Knob Hill is an important cultural, historic, and natural area. The natural resource plan for the site – which has undergone extensive review - is to reconstruct prairie and oak savanna from the old fields and former home and business sites.

The first step in the 3-acre restoration of a middle aged forest, into an oak savanna is the clearcut of existing ash, box elder, and cottonwood.

Normally, for cost saving reasons, this wood might be piled and burned, but with the DNRs Biofuels for Restoration Grant, this wood will now be sent to the District Energy plant for combined heating and power generation, reducing the amount of natural gas the plant uses.

Other restoration work at the site has included brush cutting, foreign plant species removal, and controlled burns to prepare the site for the planting of native vegetation. These activities are part of a larger ecosystem restoration effort to bring back the prairie and oak savanna on Pilot Knob Hill.

Prairie and oak savanna are the historic vegetation that was present before European settlement and the associated fire suppression and removal of nomadic herds of bison and elk.

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*restoring the land,
renewing communities*

We know this from the original government land survey of the 1840s, the soil types, and accounts from inhabitants at the time.

Prairie and oak savanna are some of the most imperiled ecosystems in Minnesota, and host to a number of rare and endangered species. Prairie and savanna need our help if we are to retain this important part of Minnesota's natural heritage for future generations.

In 2006, the DNR did a comprehensive strategy for wildlife species with greatest conservation need. Pilot Knob Hill is located in a top rated area for wildlife needs and opportunities; prairie and savanna restoration were identified as top priorities to enhance these wildlife species.

Prairie and savanna are predicted to do well in Minnesota's warming climate. By engaging in restoration, the transition to prairie and savanna is done in a controlled manner, and the wood is put to good use. This area may prove to be a seed source for additional prairies and savannas in the future. Prairie and savanna may also be a future source of permanent vegetative grass biofuels, while also supporting wildlife and water quality. In short, prairie and savanna represent the greatest ecological value for the site, while addressing some future concerns.

Funding for this project was recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources from the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

Acacia Cemetery, Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District, Dakota County Capital Improvement, Environmental Partners, Friends of the Minnesota Valley, Lower Minnesota River Watershed District, Mendota-Mdewakanton Dakota Community, Metro Greenways, Minnesota DNR, Minnesota Historical Society, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Pilot Knob Preservation Association, Starbucks, Trust for Public Land are among the many members of a community coalition joining the City of Mendota Heights and Great River Greening in the acquisition and restoration of this important site.

Known to Dakota people as Oheyawahi, "a hill much visited," Pilot Knob at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers is a place of distinctive historical, cultural, and environmental importance, a sacred site, and a landmark of the Midwest's beginnings.

It was from this prominence that the Dakota in 1851 signed a treaty granting the United States 35 million acres of tribal lands west of the Mississippi, forever changing the course of Minnesota's history. The National Trust for Historic Preservation calls Pilot Knob Hill one of the state's most significant historical and cultural resources.

Its restoration represents an historic opportunity to protect a significant piece of cultural history and restore native prairie and savanna that has all but disappeared from the urban landscape.