

For immediate release.

Solving Climate Change by Restoring the Land

Belwin Conservancy Turns Buckthorn Into Bioenergy

Afton, Minnesota — December 1, 2008 — An invasive shrub that threatens to take over natural areas at the Belwin Conservancy's 1,300-acre preserve in Afton will be turned into bioenergy to heat downtown St. Paul this winter with the help of a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) grant. The Belwin Conservancy has joined with the MNDNR and District Energy St. Paul to battle climate change by restoring the land. Utilizing as much as \$100,000 via a grant from the MNDNR, the Belwin Conservancy will restore more than 40 acres of endangered oak savanna and prairie habitat this winter. Many invasive shrubs and trees will be removed as part of this process and rather than simply burning or composting this waste, it will be used in District Energy St. Paul's combined heat and power plant.

For more than 25 years, the Belwin Conservancy has been removing the woody invasive plants that infest the forested areas of its preserve in the Saint Croix Valley. Decades of wild fire suppression and the removal of bison from the ecosystem have allowed these plants to move in and exclude the native species that make up oak savannas. Removing these woody invasive species, such as buckthorn, can be a difficult task; buckthorn grows quickly and densely in the understory, outcompeting native plants and tree saplings. As the name implies, its thorns make buckthorn work unpleasant at best. For the homeowner who has waged a war against buckthorn in their backyard, the battle is winnable. For land-managing conservation organizations like the Belwin Conservancy, which is working on a vast 1,300 acre landscape, the battle with buckthorn and other invasive species requires diligence, strategy, and a significant commitment of resources. This is a huge burden that, unfortunately, means meaningful land restoration seldom occurs.

While buckthorn is becoming more prevalent in this area, biomass energy generation is gaining in popularity. As energy prices increased over the past several years and the specter of global climate change has loomed larger, biomass presents an exciting energy alternative. Biomass from wood waste is a carbon-neutral fuel source. Relying on this resource reduces our reliance on non-renewable fuels such as coal and on foreign sources of energy. For several years, one of the most successful biomass facilities in the nation has been District Energy St. Paul. Long hailed as a leader in efficient community power generation, this facility is recognized as a national model. One of District Energy St. Paul's many innovations is using local urban waste wood to generate the bulk of their energy. Because of our increased energy needs and the new interest in biomass power generation, this once stable source of fuel was in need of supplement.

Sensing that a solution to both problems lies in marrying the interests of commerce and conservation, the Minnesota Legislature gave \$500,000 to the MNDNR in 2007 to

harvest the woody debris generated by the restoration of land as a fuel for biomass energy generation. In 2008, the Belwin Conservancy applied for and received a grant for up to \$100,000 as part of the MNDNR's Woody Biomass Harvest for Habitat Restoration program. This winter, the Belwin Conservancy will be cutting and collecting woody debris from more than 40 acres at the Belwin Conservancy's scenic Lake Edith Site. This work will restore a sensitive oak savanna and prairie to its previous splendor and also provide habitat for many of our threatened native plants and animals.

The Belwin Conservancy has been a leader in conservation and environmental education in Washington County, Minnesota for nearly 40 years. The Belwin Conservancy owns more than 1,300 acres of land on the bluffs of the Saint Croix River and in the watershed of Valley Creek — one of Minnesota's premier trout streams. In protecting and restoring land, Belwin hopes to be an inspiration for others to do the same. Since its inception, the Belwin Conservancy has hosted the Saint Paul Public Schools on its property, which brings over 10,000 students to the Belwin Conservancy every year. The Belwin Conservancy owns and operates the Lucy Winton Bell Athletic Fields. This premier youth athletic complex receives over 70,000 visits annually. In the spring of 2008, the Belwin Conservancy ignited imaginations by releasing a herd of bison on its property to help restore the prairie. The Belwin Conservancy is a nonprofit organization. For more information, please visit our website: belwin.org.

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