

Effort to restore wildlife area earns Koch an award

By NATHAN HANSEN
Editor

For nearly three years now employees at the Koch Industries refinery in Rosemount have given up time on evenings and weekends to pull weeds. A group of approximately 30 core volunteers and others who have come and gone over the years set out to remove non-native plants and restore native prairie land

on 78 acres of wildlife area the refinery owns.

Last month the company received national recognition for that effort.

On Nov. 13, representatives from the refinery went to Washington, D.C., to receive certification from the Wildlife Habitat Council, a group of environmental groups and corporations formed to monitor and improve the way in which companies manage

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the land they own. To qualify, Koch had to document the work they have done in recent years and prove that employees participated.

"You send in a lot of photos and a lot of slides and a written journal about the work that you've accomplished," said Fran Shepardson, Koch's director of community outreach and the person responsible for organizing much of the project. "What this group (Wildlife Habitat Council) does is encourage corporations to do just what we have, to turn over a lot of their land (to natural uses)."

According to Shepardson, Koch first started looking at the

nearly 700 acres around its refinery approximately 3 1/3 years ago. Company representatives met with a number of different environmental groups, and eventually sat down with Friends of the Mississippi River, a non-profit group that works on environmental projects along the Mississippi and elsewhere in the area. FMR helped Koch design a plan to restore rare sand gravel prairie and oak savannas on the property.

Since then, Koch employees and FMR representatives have removed many of the plants that have encroached in the area and planted new native grass seed.

According to Tom Lewanski of FMR, the group has made significant progress.

"The area has really become transformed," Lewanski said. "It looks great."

The project is still in its early phases, though. Volunteers have cleared encroaching plants from only about 10 percent of the total property, and when they are done removing everything that does not belong they will have to maintain the area to make sure it stays natural. Ultimately, Shepardson would like to turn the property into an educational resource, inviting students and scout troops out to look one of the few properties

in the area that looks like it did 100 or more years ago.

Shepardson said she would like to have more employees get involved, pulling weeds, building nesting boxes for birds or any other way they can.

"It's going to be a long-term project with a lot of work," Shepardson said. "We use volunteers in many different ways over here, but there is a certain element that is very interested, and their main interest is the environment and restoring and working on this kind of project.

"It's hard, hard work over there," she said. "To get people to give up a Saturday and go over there – some bring their

children. We have families working over there. It's really pretty neat."

Lewanski said he plans to meet with Koch representative soon to talk about extending the project at least two more years.

The property

Koch owns approximately 700 acres around its Rosemount refinery and along the Mississippi River. Parts of the land have what is called sand gravel prairie, a sandy area that provides a habitat for several species of plant and animal. Such areas are rare in the Twin Cities area, and Lewanski said

preserving what is important for a number of reasons.

"It is a part of our heritage, but one of the Mississippi River's natural corridors," Lewanski said. "Larger stands of prairie are important habitat."

"I think we have a partnership," he said. "Koch is great. We can see that they are sincerely interested in restoring and improving these areas. We are making a positive impact. The area has been transformed. It's an oak savanna area."