

New RIM funding to expand easement opportunities



A RIM easement located along the Mississippi River in Aitkin County incorporates native vegetation to enhance habitat and improve water quality.

Photo Credit: Jake Granfors, Pheasants Forever

2021 Clean Water Fund and Outdoor Heritage Fund appropriations from the Legislature that emphasize buffers, wetland restorations and priority watersheds will support new conservation easements statewide



New funding approved by the state Legislature this year will help expand opportunities offered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program.

BWSR received a total of \$44.7 million in state funding this year to support new and existing RIM initiatives. Nearly \$25 million of that total funding (\$12 million from the Clean Water Fund (CWF) and \$12.6

million from the Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF)) will support six RIM initiatives that were approved by the BWSR Board at its September board meeting.

"We're very fortunate in Minnesota to have the Outdoor Heritage Fund and Clean Water Fund," said Bill Penning, BWSR conservation programs consultant. "BWSR and many partners have successfully tapped into that funding to do

great things for conservation that we haven't been able to do before."

RIM is a critical component of the state's efforts to improve water quality and wildlife habitat on private lands. The RIM program — implemented by BWSR in collaboration with soil and water conservation districts and other local government partners — compensates landowners for enrolling marginal and

Targeted area	2021 Funding	Anticipated benefits
Pine River and Leech Lake River watersheds	\$1.6 million (OHF)	Protect approximately 240 acres
Rum River watershed	\$2.5 million (CWF)	Protect approximately 1,750 acres
Kettle River and Snake River watersheds	\$1.4 million (OHF)	Protect approximately 660 acres
Lower Ottertail River corridor habitat restoration	\$2.3 million (OHF)	Protect approximately 410 acres

environmentally sensitive land into conservation easements that are permanently protected. RIM has protected more than 300,000 acres since it began in 1986.

“RIM is really the premier private land program in Minnesota, and it has a reputation for being very good at securing easements,” said John Voz, BWSR RIM easement and working lands specialist.

Penning said the new funding will help open more easement opportunities throughout Minnesota. In recent years, the bulk of RIM funding for buffers and wetlands has been used in the 54 southwestern Minnesota counties eligible for BWSR’s Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP). Landowners participating in MN CREP simultaneously enroll in two voluntary conservation programs: the federally funded Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and BWSR’s RIM program. Landowners receive payments from both programs and enrolled land is protected permanently.

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we’re going to open up buffer and wetland restoration opportunities statewide beyond the MN CREP boundaries,” Penning said.

The new statewide wetland initiative will receive \$3 million in OHF funding and \$5.7 million in CWF dollars; the buffer initiative will receive \$4.2 million from OHF and \$3.9 million from the CWF. BWSR aims to protect and restore approximately 1,540 acres of wetlands and 1,800 acres of buffers with this funding.

In addition to supporting wetland restorations and buffers, the newly approved RIM initiatives will support protection in multiple watersheds including the Rum River watershed, the Pine River and Leech Lake River watersheds,

and the Kettle River and Snake River watersheds (see table for funding totals and anticipated benefits). Funding will also support a habitat and river restoration project in the lower Ottertail River corridor. The Rum River watershed has received previous funding; board action was taken to add funding and continue to focus RIM easements in this area.

The Kettle and Snake river watersheds, now eligible for RIM funding, flow into the St. Croix River —a state and nationally designated Wild & Scenic River. The DNR designates rivers as wild and scenic if they possess outstanding scenic, recreational, natural, historic or scientific value. Both the Kettle and Snake rivers are home to populations of lake

sturgeon, a species that relies on clean water.

“This new funding will bring the successful RIM program to new areas and to landowners who have had very little options for permanent protection,” said Jake Granfors, Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist who works to secure easements in Aitkin and Carlton counties and will be working on the Snake and Kettle watershed protection initiative. “Healthy forests, wetlands and shorelines in watersheds are vital to the water quality downstream, so protecting riparian forestland is critical to fish and wildlife habitat.”

Funds were made available to BWSR in July. The September board action approving the initiatives marked a significant step forward in program planning efforts. Penning said he expects enrollment to begin in 2022.

“RIM provides an important tool in the toolbox for local staff to use when working with private landowners to meet their goals,” Granfors said. “Minnesota is very lucky to have such a great program that provides many benefits to people and wildlife.”