



**From left:** Dan Steward, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources private forest management program coordinator, and Chris Pence, BWSR board conservationist, stop along the Mississippi River during a July 9 tour of Camp Ripley with Jake Kitzmann, Camp Ripley's natural resources manager.

**Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

# Buffering Camp Ripley

Morrison SWCD forged partnerships that brought nearly \$38 million to the 3-county area. Easements on ag and forest land aid habitat while preserving the National Guard's regional training mission.

CAMP RIPLEY — Conservation easements on Camp Ripley's perimeter are preserving fish and wildlife habitat while protecting the Minnesota National Guard's 52,830-acre regional training center from development that could impede its operations.

A partnership between Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District and Camp Ripley has funneled \$37.9 million into Morrison, Crow Wing and Cass counties over the past 12 years, working with 232

landowners and 27,800 acres.

Thirty-eight more easements are in the works.

The Army Compatible Use Buffer program minimizes infringement within a 3-mile radius of Camp Ripley by purchasing development rights through permanent conservation easements. Landowners receive a per-acre sum and retain the right to continue current land-use — which may include farming and hunting.



Camp Ripley stretches beyond the horizon seen from this overlook during a tour of the state-owned, 52,830-acre regional training facility. The Minnesota National Guard estimated Camp Ripley's economic impact at more than \$294 million in 2017. The estimate includes such things as payroll, projects, local contracts, food and the Army Compatible Use Buffer program.

"The corn doesn't complain at 2 o'clock in the morning when the great big howitzers go off. And the cattle don't complain. And the trees don't complain. The people do," said Dan Steward, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources private forest management program coordinator.

Camp Ripley operates 24 hours a day, training about 30,000 military personnel and civilians a year — including firefighters,

“

**I know that if I die tomorrow, it isn't going to be broken up into little homesteads.**

— Doug John, Morrison County landowner

”

emergency responders, law enforcement officers and snowplow operators.

Housing developments not only bring people closer to the noise of small-weapons

training, tanks, planes and helicopters, and the dust of convoys on gravel roads — they also consume more wildlife habitat.

"These military installations

were becoming islands for threatened and endangered species. So it was really impacting what the military could do on their own lands," said Josh Pennington, Camp Ripley's environmental supervisor.

The Mississippi River defines 18 miles of Camp Ripley's eastern border; the Crow Wing River marks about 11 miles of its northern boundary. Its forest, prairie and wetland habitats support wolves, red-shouldered



McLennan



Steward



Chisholm



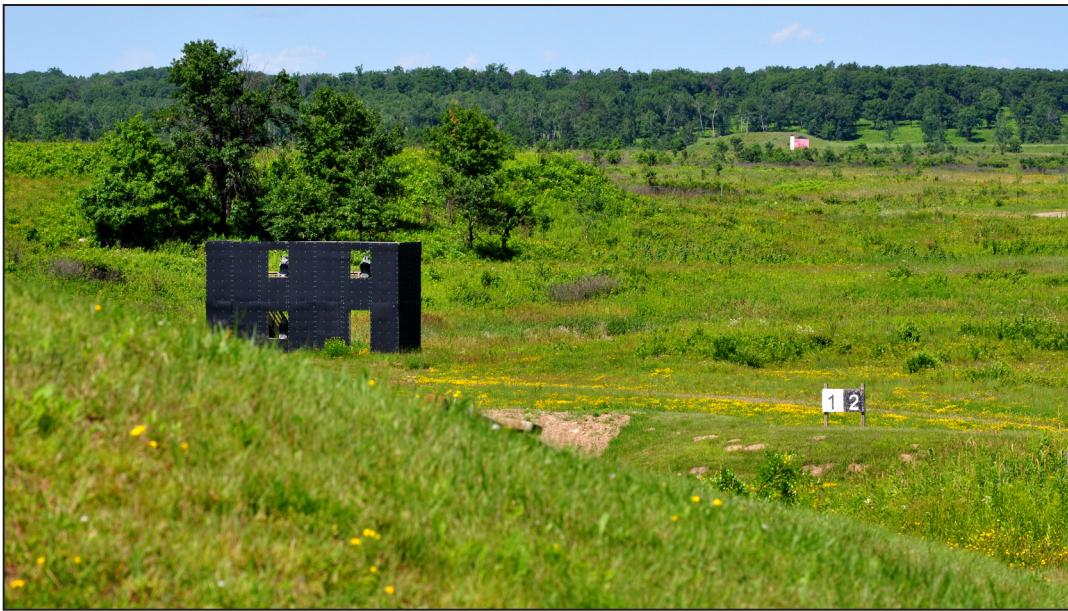
Brezinka



Holman



Pennington



Camp Ripley's firing ranges accommodate training for everything from Bradley fighting vehicles to snipers.

hawks and the threatened Northern long-eared bat. Sixty-five Species of Greatest Conservation Need live within its borders.

"The military goals are to prevent incompatible development. You're starting to see more emphasis on

 "protecting critical habitat so we don't just become an island of diversity," Pennington said.

The U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration program has put nearly \$34 million into ACUB at Camp Ripley.

Nearly 650 landowners have expressed interest since the program started in 2006. A January informational meeting drew 190 people and garnered 80 new sign-ups.

When ACUB was introduced in 2004, suspicion of a state or federal land-grab fueled opposition that nearly

“

**You're starting to see more emphasis on protecting critical habitat so we don't just become an island of diversity.**

— Josh Pennington,  
Camp Ripley environmental supervisor

”

derailed the program.

It took a local contact to work with landowners, and a partner agency to execute easements to make ACUB work. Camp Ripley found them in longtime Morrison SWCD Manager Helen McLennan, and in BWSR-administered Reinvest in Minnesota easements. McLennan retired in late October.

"Helen has been a key to the program. The easement program that we do through BWSR being executed through the local soil and water conservation district has been a massive success — over 25,000 acres to date," said Jay Brezinka, environmental program manager for the Minnesota Army National Guard. "It's a formula-based,

very streamlined program. She's just got an amazing relationship with landowners. They trust Helen; they respect her decisions."

Lance Chisholm, Morrison SWCD's ACUB/water plan coordinator, worked directly with landowners to secure easements.

"Between Helen and Lance, they've been an excellent team and they apparently have the ability to put landowners at ease," Steward said. "The results speak for themselves. That long landowner waiting list speaks volumes about the quality of the service that the district is providing — and they're doing that primarily through Lance and Helen."

ACUB brought the first working-lands easements to

## At a Glance

**WILDLIFE IMPACTS:** Sixty-five species of Greatest Conservation Need — defined by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources as being at risk because they depend upon rare, declining or vulnerable habitat — live at Camp Ripley.

### HOW IT WORKS:

Morrison SWCD works with Camp Ripley Training Center and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources to secure conservation easements. The CRTC ranks applicants. The SWCD approaches landowners. BWSR requests funds. SWCD staff monitors land enrolled in the perpetual easements.

### RATE ADJUSTMENTS:

On land surrounding Camp Ripley, RIM rates have twice been adjusted to fit conditions. To encourage enrollment of parcels bordering the Mississippi and Crow Wing rivers, the rate was set at 60 percent of individual parcels' value. It's the first time county assessed value was used for that purpose. A sharp drop in ag land values last year prompted the SWCD to close out existing easements, and then relaunch with a 75 percent rate.

Minnesota.

Originally designed as compensation for retiring marginal farmland, RIM was reworked by BWSR staff and modified by the Legislature to fit ACUB. Because landowners relinquished only development rights, RIM rates were lower — 50

percent of township average land value, compared with 90 percent for farmland.

The money went further.

"It has stayed strong for Camp Ripley even though now there's over 60 military bases with programs. The reason we've stayed strong is our ability to execute," McLennan said.

Doug John enrolled 278 acres in the program a few years ago.

"I know that if I die tomorrow, it isn't going to be broken down into little homesteads," John said.

While the RIM easement eliminated concerns about paying taxes, John, 72 — a retired clinical psychologist who later managed his parents' restaurant, became a taxidermist, and then a rural mail carrier — said he enrolled primarily to keep intact the Morrison County farm his grandparents had worked to expand over the years.

John moved his family into the house he built on the 360-acre property about 17 years ago. He rented the fields for a few years, and then enrolled the farmland in the Conservation Reserve Program. He's since planted about 80,000 trees.



Jake Kitzmann, Camp Ripley's natural resources manager, and Chris Pence, BWSR board conservationist, overlook the center range, where an entire platoon can train.

"I have a little forest. I don't want it destroyed. I don't want to sell it to somebody and have them tear up all the trees and plant corn," John said.

John doesn't expect his two grown children, who live in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, will move back.

"But I do foresee, whenever this comes up for sale, I believe the person who's going to buy it after I die will be a person who hunts and fishes," John said.

Many of those who enrolled through the ACUB program sought a way to pass their land to the next generation. Especially for older

landowners with mounting expenses, McLennan said RIM payments could mean the difference between selling or staying.

Since it was modified to fit the ACUB program, RIM has expanded to help protect northern Minnesota wild rice habitat and lands within the 400-mile-long Mississippi River headwaters region.

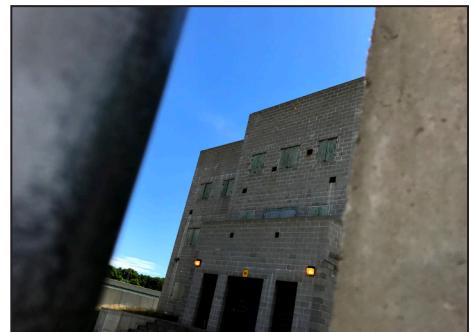
"It's had a ripple effect in allowing us to broaden the tool to fit the forested zone better," Steward said. "One of the benefits of taking the RIM program into the trees, so to speak, is land values are so much lower. The money goes much, much further. Land

values are about one-fifth to one-sixth what they are in the prairie part of the state."

Protecting the forest surrounding Camp Ripley has brought \$5.7 million in Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Fund investments since 2010, buffering about 4,800 acres — including land surrounding the Little Nokasippi Wildlife Management Area and the confluence of the Little Nokasippi River.

"When we take an easement on wooded land with Lessard dollars, we're protecting one of the best small-mouth bass fisheries in the state in the Mississippi River. It's also one of the best muskie fisheries in the state. It's the Mississippi flyway, so it's huge for waterfowl migration. We're protecting that corridor. Also, songbirds follow the Mississippi River in their migrations, so we're protecting that. Perhaps greatest we're also contributing to protection of Minneapolis-St. Paul, St. Cloud drinking water supply," Steward said.

The 480-acre Little Nokasippi River WMA in Crow Wing County was established in 2006 through Camp Ripley's ACUB program,



**Left:** The view from the tower at the center range shows the area where a platoon can train. Camp Ripley's mission is to provide support, facilities and resources that allow training in a realistic environment while maintaining positive community relations. Encroaching development has curtailed training at some U.S. facilities. **Middle:** Camp Ripley's firing ranges double as pollinator habitat. A mix of wildflowers bloomed July 9. Camp Ripley contains three biodiversity zones including prairie, coniferous trees and deciduous trees. **Right:** Camp Ripley's Combined Arms Collective Training Facility gives military and civilian trainees — including law enforcement officers and emergency medical technicians — experience in an urban environment. Tear gas and sound can be piped in. The facility includes a sewer system.



Maintaining a buffer around Camp Ripley minimizes noise and dust complaints. Training occurs 24 hours a day, year-round. Camp Ripley has 45 live-fire and 23 non-live-fire ranges.

in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and The Nature Conservancy.

"Now the wildlife management area is protecting the Nokasippi River, it's a public accessible hunting place, and it's buffered with RIM easements so it's not encroached on. That residential encroachment can have a negative impact on the public resource of a wildlife management area," said Todd Holman of The Nature Conservancy, Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape coordinator.

ACUB's success led Camp Ripley in 2016 to become

the sixth federally designated Sentinel Landscape in the U.S. — and the first at a National Guard facility. Sentinel Landscapes sustain compatible land use for military operations while providing conservation and working-land benefits. The ACUB program now operates within that designated landscape.

The designation brought more federal funds, more partnerships and a broader focus within a 10-mile radius of Camp Ripley.

"How do you do Sentinel Landscape? Camp Ripley is the poster child," Holman said. "How do you do RIM is

the BWSR book, and that's still being written. BWSR was willing to recraft RIM to fit this big, national objective."

In 2017 the Sentinel Landscape partnership received \$2.8 million through the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service' Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

A Baxter-based NRCS forester has been hired. Partnering with the National Park Service could lead to recreational opportunities or cultural resource protection. Collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management, which owns islands in the Mississippi

River, has yet to be explored.

The seventh phase of acquisitions planned for this year would add 440 acres of high-quality habitat through seven easements along the Crow Wing, Gull, Nokasippi and Mississippi river corridors. It also would acquire 117 acres from Tiller Corp. and add that land to the Little Nokassippi River WMA through a fee title transfer.

"Over those 15-some years, they've been able to execute more conservation easements than any ACUB installation in the entire country and in the entire Department of Defense," Pennington said.



*The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' mission is to improve and protect Minnesota's water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. Website: [www.bwsr.state.mn.us](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us).*

# NRCS program helps protect private forests

BAXTER — When Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape partnership received \$2.8 million through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership Program in 2017, the infusion of federal dollars broadened conservation opportunities.

Among them: NRCS' Healthy Forests Reserve Program. Within Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape, it combines a 10-year cost-share program with permanent easements to protect private forestland from development. Ginger Kopp, an NRCS forester specializing in easements, works solely on HFRP within the Sentinel Landscape.

"In assisting Camp Ripley and forming the buffer that they need for their mission, we can also maintain the ecology of the area for all of the other things that make living here really nice — such as clean water," Kopp said.

The Healthy Forests Reserve Program helps private landowners maintain working forests.

"Oftentimes it's kind of hard to hold onto in this area," Kopp said. Development pressure increases both property value and taxes, enticing owners to sell — particularly when their children don't want the land.

Enrolled landowners receive a management plan tailored to their property. For the first 10 years of a permanent

easement, they receive cost-share to carry out elements of the plan — which might include timber harvest, planting, site preparation, brush management, disease and invasive species control.

Easements purchase only the development rights. Landowners maintain ownership and other uses of the property.

Kopp works with landowners from start to finish. She receives applications and determines eligibility. She walks the property with the landowner and lets them know how many acres of forest are suitable for the program. While there is no minimum acreage, larger parcels are ranked higher.

Based on her survey, she writes a separate forest management plan for each stand — defined by species and age. To stay on track plans should be reviewed every 10 to 20 years.

Kopp works with landowners to decide if any property — such as future house sites for family members — should be excluded.

Timber harvesting, snowmobiling, ATV riding and hunting are among the allowed uses — as long as none harms the program's three priorities.

HFRP aims to help endangered or threatened species recover, improve biodiversity, and enhance



Ginger Kopp, a Natural Resources Conservation Service forester specializing in easements, worked on a forest inventory in October 2017. Photo Courtesy of Ginger Kopp

## How it Works

**RATES:** NRCS hires an assessor to determine property values, based on local comparable properties. The payment landowners receive is the difference between the valuation with and without the easement.

carbon sequestration.

The Northern long-eared bat, threatened by the deadly white-nose syndrome, is the species being protected here. Within the Sentinel Landscape, populations exist where Morrison, Crow Wing and Cass counties meet.

Preserving forestland — especially trees with snags and loose bark, which make good maternity roosts — preserves bat habitat.

"Should there be a cure ... at least bats that recover

would have places to go and strengthen their population," Kopp said. "When you're managing for Northern long-eared bats, you're also managing for other species that prefer an older forest — deer, bear, turkeys."

The biodiversity priority excludes plantations from the program.

Carbon sequestration would occur naturally with older forests in the mix.

"It's important for our ecology to keep forests as working forests," Kopp said.

While landowners might prefer the look of overly mature trees, maintaining an even-aged stand isn't the best in the long term.

"We want to see a mosaic of forest cover types (and stand ages) — your oaks, your mixed oak-pines, your aspens — there's a wonderful mosaic cohort that's still here," Kopp said.



USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender. Natural Resources Conservation Service website: [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

