

Rum River gains RIM easement option



An aerial view shows the headwaters of the Rum River as it leaves Lake Mille Lacs and Ogechie Lake near Vineland. The Rum, which flows 151 miles from Lake Mille Lacs in Mille Lacs County to the Mississippi River in Anoka County, is a key tributary of the Mississippi, which provides drinking water to more than 1 million Minnesotans.

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In a watershed that spans from Lake Mille Lacs to the Mississippi River, a source of Twin Cities drinking water, voluntary enrollment would benefit water and habitat



The Rum River and its tributaries are the latest focus of an expanding effort to protect clean water and wildlife habitat by targeting environmentally sensitive tracts within the Mississippi River headwaters region — a source of Twin Cities and St. Cloud drinking water, and a critical migration corridor.

Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) and a \$3 million legislative allocation of Clean Water Funds make permanent easements an option for willing landowners within the nine-county Rum River watershed. Letters sent in late February and early March targeted



Taylor



Determan

115 prioritized parcels, all but a handful of them within Mille Lacs, Isanti and Anoka counties. The initial focus centers on the Rum River’s main stem and west branch, plus Lake Mille Lacs.

“The people who want to do this are the people who care about preserving the natural qualities of their property. It’s a big commitment. Even though they’re compensated, especially in Anoka County where development pressure is high, people could get a lot more money (by developing their land),” said Carrie Taylor, Anoka Conservation District restoration ecologist.

Details

EASEMENTS: Pay 60% of the county assessed land value. Minimum parcel is 20 acres, although the Rum River watershed priority parcels are at least 40 acres.

RANKING: The RAQ process considers if a property is riparian, adjacent to public lands and high-quality.

“ This is a front-end protection effort. ”
— Tiffany Determan, Isanti SWCD manager

“This is a gift that people are giving to the public,” Taylor said.

The gift is resource protection. Some landowners view easements as their legacy. Enrolled land remains privately owned.

The Rum River is on the brink of impairment.

Phosphorous levels were within 2% of the impairment threshold, according to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s (MPCA) 2017 Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) report. WRAPS is a once-a-decade monitoring and evaluation of the state’s 80 major watersheds. Phosphorous feeds the algae that can turn waters green.

“This is concerning, as much of the Rum River watershed is experiencing high rates of suburban growth (in the south) and conversion of forested lands to row-crop agriculture (in the north),” said Tiffany Determan, Isanti SWCD manager.

“Without fast action, this watershed will become impaired, which will have devastating effects on public health and wildlife, and will be much more expensive to restore,” Determan said.

The Rum River is one of six state-designated Wild & Scenic Rivers in Minnesota.

Isanti, Anoka and Mille Lacs SWCD staff members are coordinating the RIM program in the Rum River watershed. RIM easements that protect the Mississippi headwaters as a drinking water source were first available in the Pine River and Crow Wing River watersheds.

Rum River watershed RIM funds are available through 2022. On April 13, the



Shaw



Riens



Hall



Schurbon

“ We are really excited about this RIM program because it is such a unique tool, used to protect these pieces of land — high-quality parcels that will be good for habitat as well. ”

— Leah Hall, The Nature Conservancy

technical committee ranked the first round of applications. Quarterly rankings will continue until the money is gone. RIM conservation easements secure legal rights and restrictions on future land use. Payments are 60% of the county assessed land value.

From Lake Mille Lacs to the Mississippi River, the Rum River flows 151 miles through a landscape that includes sought-after lakeshore, sparsely populated wetland areas, farmland, fast-expanding development and urban properties.

“It’s a really diverse watershed,” said Susan Shaw, Mille Lacs SWCD administrator. “You’ve got the lake at the top, which is cabins and permanent residences around the lake. It’s rather densely populated. But then it’s really quite rural (in the middle until Anoka County).”

More than half of the 115 high-priority parcels lie within Mille Lacs County, including a ring around the lake. High-priority parcels attained a score of 5 or higher on the 8-point RAQ scale, which considers if a parcel is riparian, adjacent to public lands, and high-quality (RAQ). Much of

northern Mille Lacs County remains undeveloped.

“RIM is one of those tools that might hold and maintain the land cover,” Shaw said of the potential for easements in Mille Lacs County.

Uninterrupted tracts of wetlands and rivers are important to all sorts of wildlife, from bears to waterfowl to frogs to birds, said John Riens, a Waite Park-based wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

“Connectivity is important. Their travel can be different in a number of ways, but having those wetlands more closely located together diversifies or multiplies functional habitat potential,” Riens said.

The Rum River is a priority watershed for The Nature Conservancy, which sees benefits for both water and wildlife in the RIM easements.

Minneapolis-based Leah Hall, The Nature Conservancy’s headwaters project coordinator, helped Isanti, Anoka and Mille Lacs SWCDs reach landowners within the Rum River watershed. The Rum is among TNC’s priority

watersheds.

“We’re trying to keep our healthy waters healthy. We know it’s going to face continued development pressure,” Hall said.

“There’s a lot of sections of the river that are still intact and have great habitat. That’s pretty shocking, being so close to the Twin Cities,” Hall said. “Great complexes around the Rum within and near (it) are critical for ... having good biodiversity.”

Hall clarified that The Nature Conservancy’s intent was not to stop development, but to protect key parcels.

“There’s been rapid residential development in Anoka County. I think people see that, and they see the landscape changing rapidly. Those people who decide to do conservation easements are probably motivated by what they’re seeing,” Taylor said. “The biggest pressure in our county is just the increased land development to residential and commercial properties. It’s really changing the feel of communities.”

Jamie Schurbon, Anoka Conservation District watershed projects manager, said high attendance at One Watershed, One Plan meetings last summer illustrated residents’ passion for the Rum River. The river not only stirs water quality concerns and provides recreational opportunities in Anoka County; it also defines communities.

“People value very much that they can live in a suburban area and have a quality river, quality habitat, and have that character that’s more than a suburban area. It’s wooded and scenic,” Schurbon said. “It very much contributes to the feel of neighborhoods.”