

RIM grassland easements take root

Outdoor Heritage Fund-backed permanent easements target moderate-quality remnant prairie and surrounding grassland, giving farmers an option for untillable acreage that benefits wildlife. The first sign-up exceeded goals; the fourth round of funds becomes available July 1.

Does the land have a cropping history? Until the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ (BWSR) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Grassland Reserve Program launched, answering no to that question meant soil and water conservation district staff had nothing to offer landowners seeking permanent RIM easements.

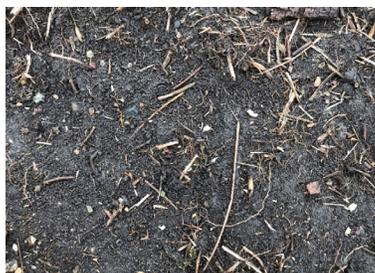
Cottonwood SWCD program technician and Farm Bill assistant Becky Buchholz tucked those names away. Since the grasslands option became available in 2019 with \$2.3 million from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, Buchholz has



Buchholz

worked with six landowners to enroll nearly 332 acres in the program. Three of those easements are recorded; three are being processed. To date, Cottonwood County has the most enrolled acreage among eligible counties — those in the southern two-thirds of the state within Minnesota’s prairie ecoregion.

Across eligible counties, landowners from Cottonwood, Rock, Redwood, Murray and Mahnomen counties have signed up just over 1,520 acres — including about 1,200 acres of native prairie. The initial sign-up



*John Voz, BWSR RIM easements and working lands specialist, adds to the mix in a broadcast seeder at a dormant prairie planting site this winter in Mahnomen County. Hand-collected seed from remnant prairies sown into surrounding grasslands improves the diversity and quality of those grasslands. **Contributed Photos***

Details

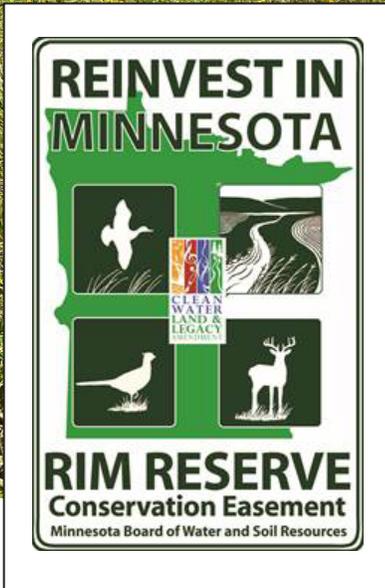
LAND USE: Hunting is allowed on land enrolled in RIM grassland easements, as are temporary deer stands. It remains privately owned, and may be posted. Some existing trails for some uses are allowed. Buildings are not. The grasslands program offers more flexibility for haying and grazing.

MAINTENANCE: Landowners are responsible for long-term maintenance. SWCD staff monitors enrollments. BWSR covers 100% of the cost of seeding an easement, and helps with weed control for the first three years.

PRAIRIE INDICATORS: Among the plants that indicate a remnant prairie: hoary puccoon, ground plum, Flodman’s thistle, prairie blue-eyed grass, silky aster.

WHO’S INVOLVED: SWCD staff members work directly with landowners to sign up and develop a conservation plan. Eleven established Prairie Conservation Plan Local Technical Teams — which include SWCD, DNR, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and landowner representatives — help to identify potential sites and rank projects.

To date, Cottonwood County landowners in the Minnesota River valley have enrolled the most acreage among eligible counties.



Prairie plants bloom in a RIM grassland easement in Cottonwood County, where the easement option has drawn interest from landowners with hilly, rocky remnant prairie in the Minnesota River valley.

Photo Credit: Cottonwood SWCD

exceeded its 500-acre enrollment goal, with five easements totaling 460.4 acres recorded, and two more totaling 156.4 acres in the process of being recorded.

The Legislature appropriated Outdoor Heritage Funds in each of the next three years, making \$3.2 million available in July 2020 with the goal of enrolling 710 acres, \$4.4 million in July 2021 with an 830-acre goal, and \$4.4 million available in July 2022 with an 880-acre goal.

Funds available in 2020 and 2021 have resulted in 15 more pending easements totaling 903.7 acres.

The 2022 funds become available July 1.

“It’s the first RIM program

that we’ve ever offered that’s not (targeted to) cropland, which is really a paradigm shift,” said John Voz, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) RIM easement and working lands specialist. “Most of the non-cropland now — at least the uplands — there’s a reason it hasn’t been farmed. It’s too steep; it’s too rocky. Really that’s the remnant prairies that we’re targeting. A lot of landowners don’t understand the value of remnant prairie. It’s land they never did anything with.”

In Cottonwood County, that untouched land tends to lie within the steep Minnesota River valley where bedrock is close to the surface, making tillage impossible.

“We do have these pockets of native prairie throughout the county — of land that just was never valuable farming-wise,” Buchholz said.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimates no more than 2% of the state’s native prairie remains intact. A [DNR map](#) shows the acreage.

But Voz said that figure is just an estimate.

“Maybe there’s more than 1 or 2 percent. Maybe there’s 3, 4, 5. We’re so caught up in retiring marginal cropland that sometimes we lose that focus,” Voz said. “There may be remnant prairies that we didn’t know about.”

Like the DNR’s [Native Prairie Bank program](#), BWSR’s [RIM Grassland](#)

DNR PRAIRIE PLAN: The DNR’s [Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan](#) lays out a 25-year strategy.

[Reserve Program](#) aims to preserve prairie remnants. One big difference: RIM targets moderate-quality remnant prairies that can be improved with prescribed burns and other disturbance. The DNR targets pristine prairies.

The voluntary, permanent RIM grassland easements can include once-farmed grassland — such as expiring federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage or restored wetlands — that surrounds the remnant prairie. One payment rate applies to the remnant prairie, another applies to the cropland. There is no

minimum acreage.

Payment rates are based on the township's average assessed market value — 90% of the average value for cropland, 60% of the average value for non-cropland. In Cottonwood County, per-acre rates range from about \$5,300 to \$7,800 for cropland, and from about \$3,500 to \$5,200 for non-cropland.

“For a lot of landowners, to get a non-crop payment on a remnant prairie — that’s attractive. A lot of landowners view these areas as just wasteland. But in reality, they’re remnant native prairie,” Voz said. “We’re always preaching that these prairies are so valuable, but there’s hardly any programs that (actually) pay a landowner to put it in a permanent easement.”

Buchholz has worked with seven landowners; six applications were funded. This spring, she’ll visit the sites of a few more potential sign-ups. She and Voz both encourage landowners to carefully consider the ramifications of a permanent easement.

“You need to decide what’s right for you, your family and your land. My job is not to push you to say you have to sign up for RIM,” Buchholz said. “If you don’t think this is right for you, my job is to find a program that is. For some, the permanency of the program is foreboding. I look them in the eye and say, ‘This is



Sneezeweed blooms in a RIM grassland easement in Cottonwood County.
Photo Credit: Cottonwood SWCD

forever. There is no buyout and there probably won’t be.”

Money is only one consideration. Buchholz said some believe in “farming the best and setting aside the rest.” Some see easements as a legacy. Many are hunters who want to preserve habitat.

Deer, prairie chickens, pheasants, songbirds, butterflies and bees are among the critters that benefit from preserving prairie tracts and establishing habitat



FUNDING: BWSR has received four rounds of Outdoor Heritage Funds from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment for RIM Reserve easements that protect current grasslands or buffer native prairie within wildlife habitat complexes not covered by other conservation programs.

corridors. Carbon sequestration is another benefit. An easement that squares up an acreage may make fieldwork easier.

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“The first priority is a moderate-quality remnant prairie. That’s No. 1. You absolutely have to have that,” Voz said. Then it’s looking at building habitat complexes. Generally, when you look at some of these remnant prairies, they’re close to other good permanently protected easements. We can create this bridge of grass between these habitat complexes, which is the main mission of the Minnesota Prairie Plan.”

The remaining slivers of native prairie are irreplaceable. It would take 1,000 years for the mycorrhizae in the soil to build up to the same levels and for the ecosystem to be restored to what it once was.

“Once you lose it, you’ll never get it back,” Voz said.