

Meet the Morrison SWCD staffer behind 350-plus RIM easements



Above: Lance Chisholm, right, and Justin Knippel, a warrant officer with the Minnesota National Guard, planted culturally significant native plants at Camp Ripley in May 2023. Chisholm grew up hunting, fishing and enjoying the outdoors, which led to an interest in environmental stewardship. **Left:** Shannon Wettstein, left, joined Chisholm at Camp Ripley to plant native prairie plants. **Photo Credits:** Morrison SWCD



Lance Chisholm has worked with landowners on more than 350 Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easements, permanently protecting more than 38,000 acres surrounding Camp Ripley through the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program over the course of his career. Colleagues consider him a RIM superstar.

As of March 2024, Chisholm — Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District's (SWCD) easement and water plan coordinator — had

helped to complete 353 RIM easements, with 18 more in the works. Together, those easements will encompass 38,213 acres. The enrollments were backed by \$45 million in federal funds plus \$17 million in Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) dollars from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Local, state and federal staff worked with landowners to enroll the easements, which protect habitat and preserve the Minnesota National Guard's mission while retaining agricultural land use.

"We've made a lot of progress over the years. To look at the surrounding area with some of the easements we've done, it's pretty remarkable to know that that landscape will pretty much look like that forever. It's real rewarding," said Chisholm, who, after 17 years at the SWCD, plans to retire in August.

The [Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape and ACUB](#) programs resulted from local, state and federal partners working together to maintain compatible land use for

military operations while restricting development and preserving critical habitat and working agricultural lands. The Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape is nationally recognized as the first state sentinel landscape — an area where conservation, working lands, and national defense interests co-exist.

Chisholm has worked closely with BWSR easement staff, Camp Ripley environmental staff and landowners to create one of the most successful ACUB programs in the country. The Department of Defense has awarded the Secretary of Defense Environmental Award for Natural Resources Conservation — an annual award that recognizes exceptional environmental achievements and innovative, cost-effective environmental practices — to Camp Ripley nine times since 2005.

Chisholm emphasized that teamwork has been essential to the program's success.

"I've been real blessed to have good leadership and good partners. Everybody is such a team player," Chisholm said. "That leadership portion is the real key (to success), and having good partners over the years with the neighboring conservation districts, the amazing BWSR staff that I've been able to work with, award-winning Camp Ripley environmental team and — last but not least — ... the landowners that we get to work with that are just trying to manage their lands in a sound environmental manner."



From left: *Wettstein, Bob and Carol Anderson, and Chisholm attended the Camp Ripley Military Museum groundbreaking in summer 2023. The Andersons donated 33.46 acres of land to the Department of Military Affairs to build the new Minnesota Military & Veterans Museum. Photo courtesy of Shannon Wettstein*

Career Highlight:

Known as the Cushing Land Company parcel, the largest recorded RIM easement Chisholm worked on involved 1,464.2 acres and 13 partner-owners. The resulting easement, which borders Lake Alexander Woods Scientific and Natural Area and The Nature Conservancy's Lake Alexander Preserve, is rich in biodiversity, providing prime wildlife habitat. The Cushing Land Company parcel was recorded on March 18, 2022, as two separate easements because the land spanned two townships.

Chisholm is among those who helped to secure \$45 million in federal funds. The ability to complete RIM easements quickly is a primary reason why the ACUB program has repeatedly received federal dollars unspent by other military

installations.

Funding from the OHF targets existing high-quality natural areas within the Sentinel Landscape, such as forestlands and the riparian corridors on the Mississippi and Little

Nokassippi rivers.

"Lance is the type of colleague and friend who everyone enjoys working with. He offers support to partners, landowners and SWCD staff without hesitation and does it with genuine respect to all those around him," said Shannon Wettstein, district manager at Morrison SWCD and Chisholm's supervisor.

"He probably walks away from each conversation he has feeling like he's learned more than he's taught them. So, he just has that attitude of utmost respect for the landowners that he's working with," said Wettstein.

Wettstein said Chisholm approaches his work with others with kindness. She said Chisholm is knowledgeable about the technical aspect of easement execution, and has helped neighboring SWCDs by training staff members on the easement process.

"Lance is profoundly reliable and super likeable," said Todd Holman, Mississippi Headwaters program director at The Nature Conservancy, Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape coordinator, and chair of the BWSR Board.

"He works with landowners one on one, and knows what their needs, their vision, their goals are, what they want to do with their property ... he's got just such a talent for knowing and understanding what these landowners are wanting to do. He's got the whole toolbox, the

RIM easement program, but also practices,” said Holman.

Before joining the Morrison SWCD, Chisholm served in the military from 1979 to 2005 as a sergeant first class with the Army National Guard working at Camp Ripley. Chisholm said that experience helped to build trust and establish relationships with local landowners.

“That’s the real jewel about the job, is meeting so many different landowners who just want to manage their lands in a sound manner,” Chisholm said.

Chisholm advises landowners about conservation programs’ availability and requirements, guiding them through the maze of state, federal and local programs.

Camp Ripley Environmental Supervisor Josh Pennington said Chisholm’s understanding of easement programs allowed him to address landowners’ initial concerns. Colleagues also noted his knack for establishing rapport with landowners — remembering details about their lives and operations, and asking about their families.

“I think what makes him so good at his job is that he establishes relationships with his landowners to identify what their needs are and

Advice to Others:

Asked what advice he would give to young conservation professionals, Chisholm said: “Try to be a subject-matter expert on the programs that you are working on with these landowners. If you don’t know the answer, just ask, and then somebody will provide that answer for you. Be upfront and honest with these landowners, and earn their respect. Landowners talk to other landowners, so if you treat a landowner with respect and listen to them, and be upfront and honest, they’re going to tell three other landowners.”

“ If anyone deserves recognition for their work ethic, selfless teamwork, creative problem-solving, and overall stellar attitude, it is Lance. ”

— Destiny McDonald,
Minnesota Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist

then he kind of directs them to what programs are offered based on their needs,” Pennington said.

Katie Retka, Camp Ripley’s natural resources specialist, expressed similar thoughts: “I think one of Lance’s greatest qualities is just how he makes people feel. He is always shining the spotlight of success on others, and he is very humble about taking any personal credit for all of the great things that he does, he’s just always trying to share that. He’s really great to have on a team.”

Minnesota Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist Destiny McDonald has worked closely with Chisholm since she joined

the office staff two years ago. He’s training her to take over some of his easement-related work and event planning.

“Lance has played such an important role in developing my knowledge and career. He is constantly encouraging my growth as a professional and as a person,” said McDonald, who is contracted with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Morrison SWCD.

“He’s an absolutely amazing mentor. From Day 1, he’s just really been focused on making sure that I know how I’m doing, and what I’m doing next. He explains things really well. He’s just an awesome

person all around, and he’s really passionate about conservation, and that comes across clearly in all the work he does,” McDonald said.

Chisholm serves on RIM easement program technical committees related to the Rum River and the Mississippi Headwaters Board. For the past several years, he has worked with the city of Little Falls to host a twice-a-year nitrate testing clinic. Those events typically draw about 225 people. Until McDonald took over last year, he organized the sixth-grade Morrison County Water Festival.

Chisholm received the 2023 Minnesota Association of Conservation District Employees Extraordinary Contribution award during BWSR Academy in October.

“There are many moving parts to everything we do here in natural resources. I just can’t say enough about the people I’ve gotten to work with over the last 17 years, they are all professional, extraordinary people,” Chisholm said.

Chisholm described his upcoming retirement as bittersweet. During his retirement, he plans to travel, and pass on his love for fishing, hunting and enjoying the outdoors to his five grandsons.