

# Working-lands pilot targets grazing lands



Landowners in north-central Minnesota will receive incentives to protect grasslands vital to habitat and water quality under a new pilot program the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) approved early this year.

The Working Lands Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement pilot program’s purpose is to protect and promote perennial vegetative land cover to benefit habitat and water quality in three Minnesota watersheds. The pilot program defines working lands as those where grazing, haying and solar installations are allowed on land enrolled in perpetual conservation easements.

Landowners in the Redeye River, Pine River and Crow Wing River watersheds will be eligible to apply. These watersheds were selected

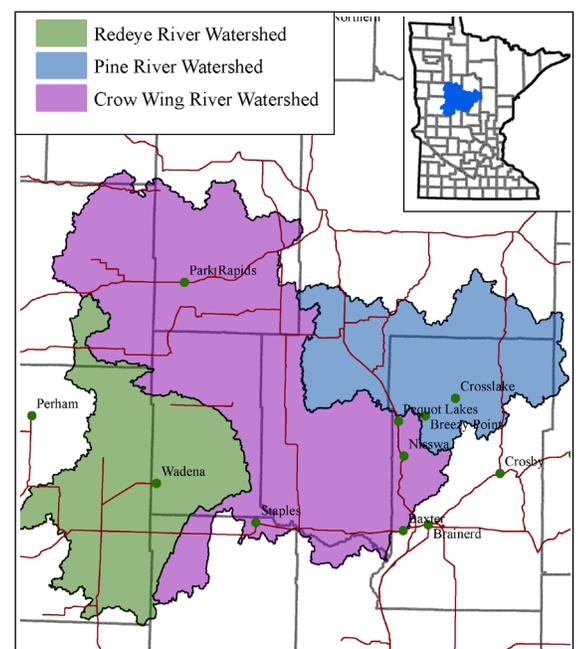
because they contain significant grazing land. The pilot project area encompasses 3,630 square miles.

Bill Penning, BWSR conservation programs consultant, said he expects the program to begin accepting applications this spring.

“From a habitat and wildlife perspective, grass is good. We want to retain the grass we’ve got. The pilot is a way we can help folks stay in business and still protect those natural resources,” Penning said.

The pilot is funded by \$1 million in capital investment (bonding) dollars allocated to BWSR in 2019; easements will be enrolled until that funding is spent. Penning said BWSR hopes to enroll about 400 acres through the pilot program. Landowners can expect an

Cattle graze on a family farm in southeastern Crow Wing County. **Photo Credits:** RedCanoeCreative.com



**Map Credit:** The Nature Conservancy

easement payment of about 50% of the county estimated market land value.

“You want to allow landowners to generate income off the property, yet at the same time you want to be able to protect and improve natural resources,” Penning said. “It’s about finding the balance between economic return and habitat and water quality.”

Over the past five years, BWSR has worked with SWCDs, The Nature Conservancy and other partners to develop modified RIM programs to address specific resource concerns in targeted areas of the state. The traditional RIM program compensates landowners for enrolling environmentally sensitive or highly erodible land into permanent conservation easements. RIM is the primary land acquisition program for state-held easements.

“The story really starts back with the [Camp Ripley Army Compatible Use Buffer \(ACUB\)](#) program,” said Todd Holman, Mississippi Headwaters program director for The Nature Conservancy. ACUB minimizes infringement within a 3-mile radius of Camp Ripley by purchasing development rights through permanent conservation easements. “That is the first place BWSR worked to develop a modification of the traditional RIM program. This allowed a form of working lands on RIM easements for a reduced payment rate, while protecting existing grass and forestlands on the properties.”

The success of the ACUB program — which has enrolled more than 30,000 acres — demonstrated the value of modified RIM



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programs. In 2017, BWSR partnered with The Nature Conservancy and the Crow Wing SWCD to launch the first Clean Water Fund supported RIM Riparian Forest Protection program on the Pine River. Soon after the program launched, key regional watershed-based organizations such as the Pine River Watershed Alliance and Whitefish Area Property Owners Association approached BWSR about the need for a tool to support grazing and working lands initiatives. Those initial discussions led to the development of the recently approved Working Lands RIM easement pilot program.

A local technical advisory committee will form soon to score and rank priority

parcels. Members will represent BWSR, nonprofit organizations and SWCDs within the pilot’s project area (including Crow Wing, Cass, Hubbard, Becker, Wadena and East Otter Tail SWCDs). Penning said the program recognizes the need for long-term management plans that are flexible enough to adapt to market, land value and ownership changes.

Crow Wing SWCD Manager Melissa Barrick said that based on conversations with local landowners, she thinks the pilot program could appeal especially to small cattle operations experiencing transitions.

“There are a lot of farmers who are in the process of handing off the farm to someone else or selling

the farm, and I think this program will be a great tool for keeping the land in the family and keeping that land in pasture,” Barrick said. “This is a really great opportunity for operations to continue to manage their land and get them involved in (conservation) practices.”

Barrick identified technical assistance as another potential benefit to participating landowners. The SWCD will partner with the USDA’s Natural Resource Conservation Service and certified plan writers to help landowners develop grazing plans, plan fencing and alternative water sources for cattle, and connect them with other incentive programs that fit their operations.