

RIM extends to Crow Wing River



“
Most of the
landowners for
this outreach
have expressed
a very similar
enthusiasm for
keeping these
river areas wild
and scenic.

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— Phil Doll,
Becker SWCD
private lands
biologist

Clean Water Funds make permanent, working-lands easements on high-priority, forested parcels possible; enrollments protect drinking water downstream



By shielding stretches of the Crow Wing River and its tributaries from development, willing landowners and conservation workers in five counties are protecting clean water — including Twin Cities and St. Cloud drinking water supplies.

The Minnesota Legislature’s \$2 million allocation of Clean Water Funds to the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in 2017 expands Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) easements’ forestlands reach. A previous, \$2 million legislative allocation — plus \$250,000 from The Nature Conservancy — focused on forestland affecting the Pine River.

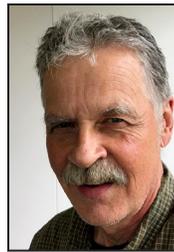


“It seems to be working out well. We have a lot of landowner demand. I think it was a tool that previously wasn’t widely available in the forested parts of the state, and there’s a lot of landowners out there who are interested in permanently protecting their land but keeping it for future generations,” said Bill Penning, BWSR

Top: A view from a RIM easement application site in Wadena County shows the Crow Wing River.
Above: Phil Doll is a private lands biologist at Becker SWCD.
Photos: Courtesy Phil Doll, Becker SWCD

“ People like to be on water. It’s part of the Minnesota identity, and the lakes are getting increasingly built up. Often what’s next are the rivers.

— Dan Steward, BWSR forest stewardship program coordinator, on pressures facing the Crow Wing River



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conservation programs consultant.

The Crow Wing River Healthy Waters Partnership — centered on the Crow Wing, Shell, Straight and Fish Hook rivers — drew a swift response from landowners. By mid-December, easements involving 15 sites totaling nearly 1,070 acres and more than \$1 million were being finalized.

“Almost all of the landowners I’ve worked with have owned their land for decades or it has been in their family for much longer,” said Phil Doll, Becker Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) private lands biologist.

“Some grew up on these lands, and have a strong emotional connection to the land. They want future generations to have the chance to enjoy the natural beauty of the land in the same way they have. And they see RIM as an opportunity to do that,” Doll said.

Doll said this sign-up has generated more interest than any other RIM opportunity with which he’s been involved in the past 10 years.

RIM easements are meant to restore marginal land and protect environmentally sensitive areas to benefit soil and water quality; minimize

damage to flood-prone areas; sequester carbon; and benefit native plant, fish and wildlife habitats.

“It’s a good opportunity for us to protect drinking water that goes to the Twin Cities by putting easements on areas that contribute to the Crow Wing River, which runs to the Mississippi River. These easements provide water quality benefits as well as wildlife habitat,” Penning said.

Preserving wildlife habitat is a secondary benefit of the Clean Water Fund-backed easements.

RIM conservation easements secure legal rights and restrictions on future land use. Payments are calculated based on 60% of the county assessed land value.

Clean Water Funds from BWSR are used to purchase RIM conservation easements from willing landowners. Doll coordinates with local SWCD staff. The state holds the easement.

Initial outreach related to the Crow Wing River targeted sites over 40 acres.

Two-hundred parcels ranked as high priority in a GIS exercise that prioritized parcels affecting the Crow Wing, Shell, Straight and Fish Hook rivers in Becker, Hubbard and Wadena counties. The project goal is to enroll 1,200 acres into

RIM within three years.

“Forest cover has a very beneficial effect on water, whether it’s a lake or a river,” said Dan Steward, BWSR forest stewardship program coordinator.

“There’s already some development on the river, and there’s going to be more. But can we retain the river’s ability to deliver clean water?” Steward said. “Landowners are making the big decisions here. We’re not. They decide whether this is consistent with their goals or not. We call that ‘landowners choose.’ What they’re choosing is what level of conservation is right for them.”

Steward said RIM easements made permanent protection possible. Because they’re working-lands easements, timber management is allowed. Steward views the easements as protection against future subdivision.

“This has a clean-water driving purpose,” Steward said. “Not fragmenting that riverside habitat is a good benefit as well, but it’s not the driver of the overall concept.”

A third, \$3 million legislative allocation of Clean Water Funds will target similar easements involving forestland affecting the Rum River was made available in July 2019. That project is being developed.



Crow Wing River RIM Details

PARTNERS: The Crow Wing River Healthy Waters Partnership involves Cass County Environmental Services; and the Becker, Crow Wing, Hubbard and Wadena county soil and water conservation districts. State partners include BWSR, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. The Nature Conservancy also is involved.

RANKING: Projects are ranked according to the RAQ process, which considers whether a property is riparian, adjacent to public lands and high-quality. “Quality might be something like wild rice. What if you’ve got two easements and they’re the same price and they’re both 80 acres and they’re both on the river but one of them has wild rice in front of it?” Steward said. “We’ll I’d rather have that one. Especially if it doesn’t cost me anything. I call it shopping for conservation bargains.”