

RIM easements protect Minnesota's native prairie



The RIM Grassland Reserve Program aims to protect remnant native prairie such as this Kittson County property. Because grasslands and remnant prairies are more easily converted to cropland, they are more at-risk for development than are forestlands or wetlands. Photo Credit: BWSR



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is accepting applications for permanent conservation easements through the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Grassland Reserve Program.

The program aims to protect and enhance remaining native prairie habitat. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has identified prairie core areas and corridors that act as a tool to identify areas that could benefit from grassland easements.

In 2019, BWSR received \$2.275 million from the Outdoor Heritage Fund to fund RIM Grassland Reserve Program easements. The goal: Enroll 500 acres. This session, BWSR plans to request about \$3.7 million from the Legislature to enroll 800 acres.

According to the DNR, more than 98% of Minnesota's pre-settlement grasslands have been lost to development and conversion to cropland. A true remnant prairie restoration is nearly impossible after these sensitive ecosystems are disrupted by activities such as plowing, making protection essential for preserving remaining habitat.

"This program appeals to landowners because BWSR and local partners are willing to work with them to develop site-specific management strategies that may include conservation haying and grazing, tree removal and prescribed fires," said John Voz, BWSR RIM easement and working lands specialist. "The program targets existing grasslands with remnant prairie, but it will also consider enrolling adjacent cropland as a buffer

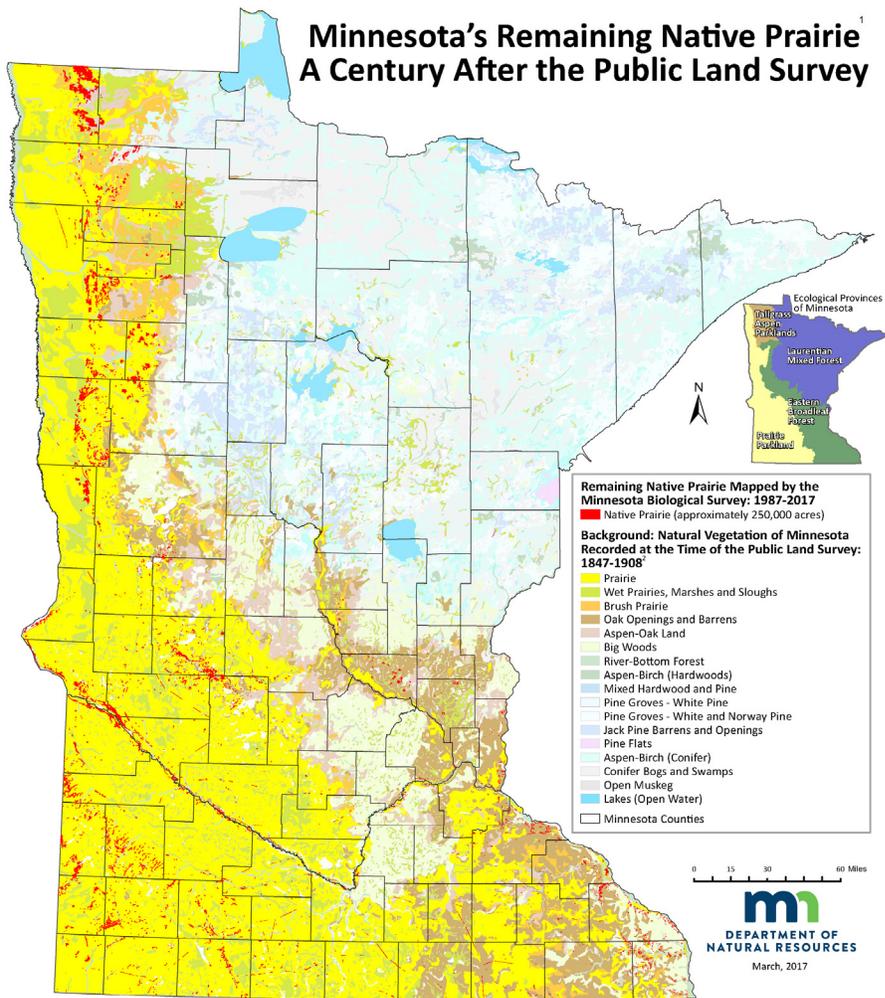
to increase protection of prairie and water quality, pollinator habitats and to protect the genetic diversity of prairie plant species.”

The RIM Grasslands Reserve Program is unique in that it focuses on preserving prairie wildlife habitat not always eligible for other BWSR conservation programs. Grasslands and remnant prairies are easier to convert to cropland. As a result, compared with forestlands or wetlands, prairies are more at-risk for development.

BWSR staff is working on the program with 11 established Prairie Conservation Plan Local Technical Teams (LTTs) in the western half of the state. LTT members work closely with landowners to identify potential projects, determine eligibility, apply for the program, acquire easements, and complete conservation planning and restoration work.

“It is notoriously hard to find programs for landowners that have remnant prairie on their land because most existing programs available focus on lands that have been cultivated,” said Megan Howell, a Murray County-based Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologist who is a member of the Red Rock LTT. “This gives us a tool in our toolbox to help meet the needs of the landowners and Mother Nature. It’s a win-win situation, and I hope we get the continued opportunity to utilize it.”

Howell is working with several interested landowners to develop applications for the RIM Grasslands



The red areas indicate Minnesota's remaining native prairie. **Map Credit:** DNR

Reserve Program.

“From a biologist’s perspective, this program hits the nail on the head because it compensates landowners who fall within a priority area within the wildlife action network and prairie plan for putting remnant prairie and

marginal cropland under easement to provide protection for this rare natural ecosystem,” Howell said.

Program details and application materials are available here. For more information, contact John Voz at 218-846-8426 or john.voz@state.mn.us.



A sampling of species found in native remnant prairie includes, from left: Western prairie fringed orchid, Compass plant, and blazingstar.

Photo Credit: BWSR