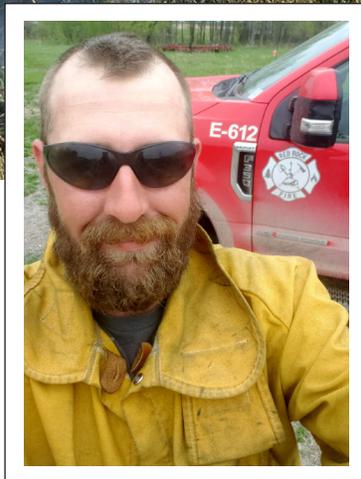


NRCS prescribed burns revive habitat



Statewide plan, 5-year contract center on Wetlands Reserve Program easements; crews maintain 7,520 acres this fire season

Prescribed burns that maintain Wetlands Reserve Program and WRP/RIM easements' habitat continued this month as part of a five-year contract made possible by \$3.3 million in dedicated Farm Bill funds from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Red Rock Fire crews started site preparation work in fall 2019.

Left: Mark Plantz is director of fire operations for Otsego-based Red Rock Fire and its parent company, Minnesota Native Landscapes. Depending upon the size of the project, Red Rock Fire crews include eight to 11 people. Two crews work on burns related to the NRCS contract.

Photo Credits: Red Rock Fire

About 33,000 acres of wildlife habitat enrolled in federal Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easements across Minnesota will benefit from prescribed burns planned over the next five years. The work is made possible by \$3.3 million in dedicated Farm Bill funds from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Red Rock Fire crews maintained about

7,520 acres involving 64 contracts this season — all at no cost to landowners.

The Otsego-based company started work under its five-year contract in October 2019, preparing for spring burns by scouting sites, writing burn plans and mowing fire breaks.

"It's definitely an advantage. With this system, they're working on getting these lands cleaned up, getting the trees



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removed, getting the burns done, getting better habitat out there. It's very little workload on the SWCD," said Brent Gulbrandson, Grant Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) technical manager who previously worked on Grant County easements through NRCS.

A half-dozen Grant County easements were on this year's list; six to 12 more were planned for next season.

"If NRCS continues this federal contracting and providing the burns at no cost and no headache to the landowner, in Grant County we're going to try to get all of them burnt in the next couple years, or as many as landowners will allow us to," Gulbrandson said.

Grant County's 29 WRP and WRP/RIM (Reinvest in Minnesota) easement contracts total 2,460 acres. The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) administers RIM contracts.

Statewide WRP enrollments total 115,280 acres — including just over 50,000 acres enrolled in WRP/RIM contracts. WRP restores wetlands' functionality and provides habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife.

"If we don't burn these easements on a pretty regular rotation, we're going to end up with a very low-diversity stand of non-native grasses. We're also going to have an excess of trees," said Ryan Antholz, the Fergus Falls-based NRCS district conservationist who manages the contract.

Burning a prairie every four or five years suppresses trees and jump-starts native grasses

“ You're going to get taller grasses for other wildlife, deer. Over time grasses kind of stunt themselves. ... You burn it, and your big bluestem and Indian grass will reach 5, 6 feet tall and provide a lot more habitat.

— Brent Gulbrandson, Grant SWCD



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and forbs smothered by the thick layer of dead grass.

Few landowners have the ability or knowledge to do the work themselves. Hiring a burn crew can cost as much as \$200 an acre. Some landowners aren't willing to pay up to \$10,000 to maintain land that no longer generates income. Landowners receive a one-time WRP easement payment. Their operational maintenance agreement centers on noxious weed control.

"A lot of burns were not getting done in a timely manner or just not getting done at all," Antholz said.

The five-year burn contract was an extension of a successful NRCS pilot project in 2019.

Previously, NRCS field staff across the state worked with SWCD staff and landowners to identify easements in need of maintenance. NRCS staff scheduled prescribed burns as time and money allowed. SWCDs handled the paperwork. Statewide, about

15 burns were completed in an average year.

The NRCS contract will more than quadruple the number of WRP easements maintained each year.

"The more you can rejuvenate these grasses, you're going to get taller grasses, you're going to get a lot better habitat for nesting," Gulbrandson said. That will benefit pheasants, ducks and other birds. "You get a lot more protection from hawks and eagles and owls."

With forbs' new growth comes more seeds and more insects for the chicks to eat.

"You're going to get taller grasses for other wildlife, deer. Over time grasses kind of stunt themselves. You'll get to the point where grasses won't get more than 2 or 3 feet tall. You burn it, and your big bluestem and Indian grass will reach 5, 6 feet tall and provide a lot more habitat," Gulbrandson said.

The maintenance burns have ranged from 15 acres to 450 acres.

Red Rock Fire crews follow the greenup, working from southeast to northwest across the state. Spring burns started in Freeborn

Details

WRP: Federal program, perpetual easement contract, one-time payment

WRP/RIM: After 30 years, the federal program rolls into the perpetual state RIM easement program, managed by BWSR

FUNDS: 2014 Farm Bill

and Steele counties in late March. By mid-May crews were working near Detroit Lakes in Otter Tail County. The northernmost site this season was in Polk County.

"One of the major goals of our company is to heal the earth," said Mark Plantz, director of fire operations for Otsego-based Red Rock Fire and its parent company, Minnesota Native Landscapes.

"With this large number of acres, we are able to move site to site when the conditions aren't right on certain sites," Plantz said. "(We can) treat a lot more acres and do a lot more good work that needs to be done in a season, having the flexibility."

Because Red Rock Fire has enough onsite equipment to contain its burns, it was allowed to continue even as other controlled burns were canceled to minimize the potential need for emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Natural Resources Conservation Service

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